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Infant Baptism

in the Church of Scotland

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IN an address to the General Council of the Alliance of Reformed Churches holding the Presbyterian System, Lord Tweedsmuir has suggested that Presbyterianism may "play in the future the part of what the Germans call a 'bridge Kirk' between Churches rich in historic accretions and Churches which lack them, since it has been resolute both to discard and to retain."¹ One may be reasonably confident that he would not disagree if one added that no branch of Presbyterianism seems more likely to fulfil this function than that in which he himself has been brought up, the Church of Scotland.

I wish here to illustrate his suggestion by outlining the historic teachings of that Church on the thorny subject of infant baptism, since here especially it has been resolute both to "discard" the "Catholic" notion that the salvation of infants directly depends on their having been baptized, and to "retain" the practice none the less with singular tenacity. But I shall not apologize for devoting more space to certain preliminaries than to the discussion of baptism itself, since here the shortest way home is quite certainly the longest way round, and one cannot help feeling that the countless special defences of infant baptism which have been made in the Church of Scotland have frequently been very "lame" just because they have passed over these preliminaries so lightly.

¹ Lord Tweedsmuir, *Presbyterianism Yesterday, To-day, and To-morrow*, p. 16.

I

To understand its characteristic attitude to infant baptism, it must first be pointed out that the Church of Scotland is and always has been (apart from the few centuries under the domination of the Papacy) a *national* Church. The first Scottish Reformers, and the Covenanters of the period which succeeded theirs, were all very emphatic on this point. "A National Church," said James Durham, "is not only not inconsistent with the flourishing estate of the Gospel in the world, but is concomitant with it; yea, is a manifest proof of it, and a great ground of rejoicing to God's people and of praise to Him."¹ It is because it has thus emphasized its national character that its teaching on infant baptism is perhaps easier to understand than what is in essence the same teaching when put forward by many other Presbyterian Churches.

This does not mean, however, that the fathers of the Scottish Church attempted to combine the Christian faith with a fanatical nationalism or racialism. Pseudo-scientific cut-and-dried theories about precisely what constituted a nation were unknown to them. They simply took the Scottish nation for granted as a group with a history of its own and a government of its own which therefore formed a convenient unit for the Church's work, and the largest unit practicable at the time. "Kingdoms becoming His, is to be understood as the like phrases used of Cities and Families, their becoming His;"² but if the Church's unity can be made visible in the field of a single family or city, it is better still for it to be shown throughout a nation. They certainly did not deny, but emphatically affirmed, that it would be better still again if expression could be found, through a properly constituted "General Council," for the unity of the Church throughout an even larger field.

It was not with an "inter-national" Church that their "National Church" was to be contrasted (though it was certainly to be contrasted with an "imperial" one), but with a *sect*, in the technical sense in which this word is used by Troeltsch, and more recently by Dr. Manfred Björkquist

¹ J. Durham, *A Commentarie upon the Book of the Revelation* (Amsterdam 1660). p. 511.

² *Ibid.* p. 512.

of Sweden in his contributions to oecumenical discussions. In the "great national Churches," Dr. Björkquist pointed out at the World Conference of Christian Youth at Amsterdam, "the Church" is not conceived as a certain number of people clearly separated from others (e.g. "all those individuals who have submitted to the See of Rome," or "all those who have been converted,") but as a "field" in which certain things occur. "Where the word and the sacraments are rightly administered, there is the Church, for the word cannot return empty." C. H. Smyth¹ has drawn attention to the way in which this conception is reflected in the actual definitions of the Church given in various Confessions of Faith, particularly in that of Augsburg, and in the English Thirty-Nine Articles, which state that "The visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men, *in the which* the pure Word of God is preached and the Sacraments be duly administered."

That the Church of Scotland began with this conception is plain from its first Confession of Faith of 1560. "The Notis of the Trew Kirk of God we beleve, confesse and avow to be, first, The trew preaching of the word of God. . . . Secoundlie, the rycht administratioun of the sacramentis of Christ Jesus. . . . Last, Ecclesiasticall discipline uprychtlie ministred. . . . Whairsoever then these former nottis ar sene, and of any tyme continew . . . thair, but (without) all dowbt, is the trew Kirk of Christ."² Not "The Church consists of those who . . ." but "Where these things take place, there is the Church." If they take place in Scotland, then unquestionably "the Church" has been set up in Scotland, and there is a "Church of Scotland." And this, as should be noted, is true independently of the Church's "establishment."

When this Confession was replaced in the succeeding century by that of Westminster, this mode of defining the Church was unhappily dropped. "The visible church," says this Confession, "consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion." Still more unhappily, when the modern Church of Scotland produced a "Short Statement" of its faith, this definition was taken over essentially unaltered. In practice, however, the idea behind the

¹ In *The Parish Communion*, p. 294

² *The Works of John Knox*, Laing's Edition, vol. II., p. 110.

definition in the 1560 Confession has never been dropped. Even in the Westminster documents it makes itself evident through an addition which fits very badly into the context of the part of the definition so far quoted, but which the Church of Scotland has insisted upon retaining, for reasons of which perhaps it has not always been conscious. The full Westminster definition runs, "The visible church consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion, *together with their children.*" This addition is also in the Short Statement. It is difficult to see what babes in arms can have to do with "professing the true religion." But they may very well be concerned with a Church which always exists "where" the Word is preached, the Sacraments are dispensed, and discipline is administered.

Further evidence that the "feeling" for this form of expression is by no means dead either in the Church of Scotland or in her daughter Churches is afforded by a "Proposed Method of Instructing Young Communicants," based on the recent Short Statement, and put forward by the Rev. J. T. V. Steele, of the Presbyterian Church of New Zealand. In this "catechism" only the "invisible" Church is defined in terms of persons, and the visible Church is defined in answer to the question, "Where is this true Church visible?" the answer being, "The one true Church is visible wherever the gospel is preached truly and sincerely, the sacraments administered according to God's holy ordinance, and wherever a government which is founded on and not contradictory to the Word of God is maintained in decency and in order."¹ During the Westminster period also, the divines of Scotland in practice ignored the Westminster definition, and dealt with the visible Church in terms of God's entering into a "covenant" with nations, cities and families by setting up His ordinances in their midst.

How far this conception is removed from a superstitious exaltation of the nation, may be gauged from the fact that Karl Barth is a very decided "National Churchman" in this sense. In the heyday of the Reformation, he says in his "Dogmatik"² the means by which the Scriptures really

¹ J. T. V. Steele, in *The Outlook* (New Zealand), Feb. 18th, 1925.

² K. Barth, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, pp. 139-40.

became the Word of God to men was the public proclamation of the Church—preaching and the Sacraments. For them, as F. D. Maurice also pointed out, the Bible was first and foremost a “preacher’s book.”¹ The task of theology in this context was to see that everything was in order with the preaching and the Sacraments and discipline, the public “ordinances,” which God had set up in the world. But at a later date the continued power and life of the Bible was conceived in terms of “the knowledge, faith, sanctification and holiness of the individual,” and theology became primarily an attempt to correct, criticize and help the individual’s spiritual life. Barth considers it one of the first needs of theology to-day to revert to its earlier function. “The direct object of a present-day dogmatics must be just Church proclamation.” This line of thought is surely little else but a paraphrase of Björkquist’s “Where the word and the sacraments are rightly administered, there is the Church, for the word cannot return empty.”

It is not unimportant to notice that the definition of the Church which this “national” ideal suggests is of a type which only recently received systematic treatment at the hands of professional logicians. It is characteristic of ordinary definitions that they can be substituted for the term defined in any given sentence, without the rest of the sentence being altered. If “Universal,” for example, is the definition of “Catholic,” then “The Universal Church teaches the validity of infant baptism” means exactly the same as “The Catholic Church teaches the validity of infant baptism.” But there are many words for which definitions of this kind simply cannot be found. Sometimes this is because they have no meaning at all—we really do talk much more nonsense than we realize. Sometimes it is because they are among those simple, ultimate words in terms of which everything else must be defined—for the process of definition must certainly stop somewhere. What such logicians as Bertrand Russell and John Wisdom have now taught us to emphasize, however, is that a word, without being senseless, may be neither definable in the ordinary way nor yet undefinable like a simple “ultimate.” It may be capable of what is variously called a “definition in use,” a “description” or a “reduction.” This is a quite precise process in which one sentence

¹ F. D. Maurice, *The Kingdom of Christ* (1842), p. 84.

about a term of this kind is said to be exactly equivalent to a *different* sentence about other terms ; so that while the whole sentences have the same meaning, no one term in the second can be equated with any one term in the first. Thus a statement about " England," such as " England is at war with Germany," can be exactly equated with a number of different statements about the various doings of individual Englishmen in the war, though " England " can neither be equated with a number of individual Englishmen nor regarded as a kind of enlarged individual itself. We can say " *When* Tom, Dick, Harry and Mr. Chamberlain are doing this and that, *then* England is at war with Germany," and this is a " definition in use," and may be a thoroughly precise and accurate one on which strict and definite arguments can be based and other arguments criticized.

It is plain that not only " the Church " but also " the State " needs to be defined in this way—we might do it by saying, " Where Law is administered in a regular way, there is the State." The same is true, indeed, of most of the key conceptions of the social sciences, including theology at the points at which it comes under this head, e.g. where it discusses the relations between Church and State, between different Churches, and between Churches, States and individuals.¹ Much meaningless discussion and inconclusive argument on these subjects might have been avoided had we not attempted to conceive Church and State either as sums of individuals or as " ultimate " individuals themselves. We might, for instance, have avoided deducing from the fact that Churches cannot persist without Confessions of faith, the falsehood that individuals cannot find salvation without an explicit or " implicit " assent to such Confessions. We might also have avoided inferring a similar necessity of baptism for each individual's salvation from its necessity for the continued existence of the Church. (The salvation of individuals, indeed, is in the long run bound up with the continued existence of the Church, but there is not a direct connection between the baptism of a particular individual, or his assent to a Confession of Faith, and the salvation of *that* individual.)

¹ I have discussed some of the more obvious implications of this fact in the general social sciences in an article on *The Nation and the Individual*, in the Australasian Journal of Psychology and Philosophy for December, 1937.

II

An immediate consequence of this "national" idea of the Church—"territorial" is perhaps a better term—is that when a person seeks to be assured that he is "in the Church" he does not in the first place examine himself to see if he has some peculiar marks separating him as a Christian from non-Christians, but turns away from himself to the "means of grace," and listens to God's Word telling him that he is His. Here alone must he look for "assurance," whether he be in a country which has been counted a part of "Christendom" for centuries, or in one where a missionary has for the first time preached the Gospel in his own tongue.

This is, indeed, the practical meaning of the "freeness" of the Gospel. As soon as God's preached Word places us in the position of raising the question as to whether we are Christians or not, we have the right to answer Yes to it—God *calls* us to answer Yes to it, and it is His call and nothing in ourselves that makes us His children. As for those who have never yet heard of Christianity, those who have never yet had occasion to ask the question, it is not our business to speculate about the answer. "The secret things belong unto the Lord our God; but those things that are revealed belong unto us and to our children forever." It must be confessed that among the earlier Scottish writers this "reserve" was taken in the more grim sense—they emphasized the fact that we have no warrant for believing that such people are numbered among the redeemed, rather than the fact that we have no warrant for believing that they are not. But the essential thing was the reserve, the refusal to speculate about what cannot concern us as Christians. Dr. John Macleod of Govan was not far from the position of earlier writers when he said, "It is at least presumptuous for us to bind ourselves to conclusions relating to the eternal destiny of such as have never heard the Gospel, nor been incorporated into the Church of God. The Holy Scriptures are written to guide us in matters that pertain to the present stage of the Divine dealing—which is that of gathering and perfecting the Church. When that stage is past we shall doubtless know more. Meanwhile, however, we must not allow our apprehensions of what appears to be clearly revealed regarding God's method in bestowing grace upon His people, to be hindered through

speculations as to how He may deal with souls whom these methods do not embrace."¹

On the positive side, no piece of advice is more common in the volumes of spiritual guidance written by the Scottish Reformers and Covenanters, than this advice to seek no "assurance" in ourselves, but to rest on the faithfulness of God in His objective promises. John Knox, in an "Admonition to the Professors of God's Truth in England" written in 1554, compares the waves of persecution which seemed then to be overwhelming these "professors of God's truth" with the waves which began to overwhelm Peter when he attempted to walk across the water to Christ, and says, "So long as Peter had his eyes fixed uppõn Christe, and attended upon no other thyng but the voyce of Christe, he was bolde and without feare. But when he sawe a myghty wynde . . . then began he to feare, and to reason, no doute, in his herte, that better it had bene for him to have remained in his bote, for so myght Chryst have come to hym; but now the storme and rage of wynde was so vehement, that he coule never come to Christe, and so he greatly feared. Whereof it is plain, that the only cause of oure feare that have left our bote, and through the stormes of the sea wolde go to Christ with Peter, is, that we more consyder the daungers and lettes that are in our journey, then we do the almyghtie power of Him that hath commaunded us to come to him self."²

In the Covenanting period Samuel Rutherford similarly complained that "We trust possession on our part, more than the law, and the fidelity of the promise on God's part. Feeling is of more credit to us than faith; sense is surer to us than the word of faith . . . God's law of faith, Christ's concluded atonement, is better and surer than your feeling. All that sense and comfort sayeth, is not canonic Scripture; it is adultery to seek a sign, because we cannot rest on our husband's word."³ The strongest testimony to the prevalence of this way of thinking among the early Scots is perhaps to be found in their fondness for the tenth chapter of St. John, in which Christ's "sheep" are described, not as those marked

¹ J. Macleod, on *The Holy Sacrament of Baptism*, in *The Divine Life in the Church*, vol. I., p. 182.

² Knox, *Works*, vol. III, p. 313.

³ S. Rutherford, *The Trial and Triumph of Faith*, pp. 33-4.

by some brand on themselves which they or others can perceive, but as those who *know His voice*.

Nor did any of these men believe that the Shepherd's "voice" was to be heard anywhere else but at the meeting-place He had Himself appointed—in the Scriptures, and in the proclamation of the Church. Unquestionably the "looking unto Jesus" and away from ourselves which they enjoined upon their readers and hearers, meant concretely a looking unto Him in His appointed Churchly ordinances. No doubt this was the inner ground of their strict Sabbath-keeping. The Scots at their best observed the Sabbath because they knew that they could not live and think as God's people by staying at home and looking for the marks of God's ownership in themselves, and that they had to go to Church again and again and be *told* to Whom they belonged.

III

If we learn to see ourselves as Christians only by looking at God's objective claims upon us and promises to us, made and given in His public ordinances, we will see a certain special significance in the *beginning* of this life in the Church, in the "place where" the Word and Sacraments are set up. And that life visibly begins with God's first visible claim on us—with the first time when He visibly reaches out, lays His hand upon us and names us as His. This beginning can lose nothing of its significance through its having taken place before we were conscious of it—it is still a real claim of God to which we can look back and say, "There God declared me to be of His household and Kingdom."

This "first claim" and "first promise" is, of course, under normal circumstances, our Baptism in infancy. In the whole context just outlined, infant baptism is the most natural thing in the world. If, indeed, the Church is essentially a club of those who do certain things or undergo certain experiences—if the last word is said when we say that it "consists of those who profess the true religion"—then infant baptism is indeed an anomaly. But if "faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God," and the Church exists wherever the Word may be heard, infants may be brought into that "Church" quite naturally. They may be brought into the place where God's ordinances have been

set up and where His saving work goes on, and may quite sensibly look back later to their first entry into this sphere as the true beginning of their Christian life.

That this *was* the context in which the Scottish doctrine of infant baptism was developed and defended, may be easily gathered from a perusal of one of the most vigorous defences of it, Samuel Rutherford's "Covenant of Life Opened." Rutherford here vigorously repudiates the idea, unfortunately suggested to many by the language of the Westminster Confession, that infants should be baptized because their faith may be naturally "inherited" from believing parents—as if faith were a matter of chromosomes. To eliminate this superstition, Rutherford insists that not only the children of believing parents by birth and blood have a right to baptism, but all those who are brought within the reach of the Word of God. "The man's being born where the call of God is, does the task, as much as the faith of the Parent. For by the root is not necessarily meant the Physicall root, the father. For *Abraham* was not the Physicall root and father, nor *Cornelius*, of all the servants and friends in the house" who were circumcised or baptized.¹ This conception of "National Churchmanship" is certainly far removed from racialism.

It is in this context also that we must understand the Scottish insistence that baptism, even that of infants, must, like the Lord's Supper, be accompanied by preaching. This does not mean either that grace can somehow flow into an infant more readily from a sermon than from the sprinkling of water, or that the entire ceremony, sermon and sacrament alike, is more for the benefit of the parents than that of the child. Baptism, like the Supper, is the "seal" of God's claim on us and promise to us, and the claim and promise must first be announced before the "seal" is annexed to it. But in these claims and promises God Himself really meets us and enters into fellowship with us; and that is the only fellowship with Him that is promised to us here on earth. The Church visible is no merely artificial structure quite unrelated to the true Church of God; it is His actual and appointed means of being present to us and active towards us and in us in this life. And we have His promise that in our baptism and the words which precede it He really

¹ S. Rutherford, *The Covenant of Life Opened*, p. 84.

enters into fellowship with us, even though we only realize it afterwards. To quote Dr. Macleod again, "The dates in the Kalendar of our spiritual history, in the accuracy of which we may most trust, are precisely those which mark not what *we have realized*, but what *God has sealed*."¹

If we think in these terms we will not imagine that some kind of magical substance is infused into us at our baptism which will make us fit for heaven (unless we lose it later), and without which heaven's doors will be closed to us. The Church of Scotland since the Reformation has never believed that baptism is so essential to salvation that when it cannot be administered in the ordinary way it must at all costs be administered somehow, even by persons who are not called and appointed to dispense the ordinances of the Church. The true Scottish doctrine is admirably expressed by Willison when he says that "It is not the *Want*, but the *Contempt* of this Ordinance that exposeth to Damnation."² It is the ordinance by which God normally first lays His hand upon us—by which He first says to us that we are of His household. It would be foolish to worry ourselves if through one accident or another He does not first claim us in this way but in some other way, hidden or known—if, for example, through some irregularity which is no fault of our own we have begun to take Communion without having been first baptized; or if a child dies before a minister is available to baptize it. But if parents deliberately hold their children back from this ordinance as it is offered to them, then they are trying to hold back from God, and are themselves turning away from Him, and doing what in them lies to bring about a state of affairs in which His ordinances are taken from their midst, leaving them "strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world."

¹ J. Macleod, *op. cit.*, p. 172.

² John Willison, *A Sacramental Catechism*, p. 42