

Baptismal Disgrace

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I LATELY came upon this sentence in a novel: "She was *a large vague lady*, who seemed to spend her days in forgetting what she had just done, and meaning to do something which she never had time for." It is a sentence that may be applied without injustice and, I hope, without impropriety to the Church of England, not to mention other churches, in regard to the theology and practice of baptism.

In the theological section of a library, with which I have reason to be familiar, there is a whole stack of books on the subject of the eucharist. On the shelves reserved for the subject of baptism there are precisely twenty volumes, none of which was published since 1925, and only two of which were published in this century. This fact is a symbol of the neglect into which the subject has fallen.

I have, however, recently derived some encouragement from the discovery that among the younger clergy there are some—perhaps many—who are determined to think this matter out and, so far as it lies within their power, to bring practice into line with principle. When I was myself a parochial clergyman, my conscience was uneasy on this score.

If we turn to Holy Scripture, as we are bound to do, we are met by the initial difficulty that the teaching about baptism which it contains refers apparently to the baptism of adults, whereas our problem to-day is connected with the baptism of infants. I intend to keep my remarks close to that connection, but I would first observe that the theology of adult baptism is comparatively straightforward and its practice comparatively free from anomalies.

It is when we turn to consider the theology and practice

of infant baptism that the particular problems plainly arise to which I wish to call attention. If infants were baptized at all in New Testament times (which is quite doubtful), it was as members of Christian households. Adult baptism was the norm, and infant baptism was exceptional, and it continued to be so with certain variations of custom until the so-called establishment of the Church under Constantine. But with us infant baptism is the rule, and not the exception, and as a matter of course we baptize children who are born into households which even the most brazen latitudinarian would hesitate to call Christian. What, then, do we believe about baptism? The grace of baptism is said, in the Church Catechism, to be "a death unto sin, and a new birth unto righteousness." How is that so in the case of infants? In the case of adults, the baptized have actual sins for which they are penitent and of the forgiveness of which they are by means of the sacrament consciously assured. But infants have no actual sins, nor are they conscious of any benefits received.

What about original sin? Does that need to be forgiven? Far be it from me to deny that sombre truth about our human condition which the unhappily chosen term "original sin" is designed to assert. We cannot, however, assert it now in quite the same form as our forefathers did. In their view the doctrine of original sin was dependent on an historical fall of Adam, on the literal truth of the story in the Book of Genesis. Christian theology is handicapped by a failure to have reasserted this doctrine in a form that commends itself to the intelligence of those who are willing enough to acknowledge the truth which it expresses. Clearly, there is no shortage of material out of which to reconstruct the doctrine of original sin.

What, however, is less clear is that, when the doctrine has been thus reaffirmed, we shall still be able to attribute to infants sins which need to be forgiven or guilt which needs to be remitted. If new-born infants were guilty before God and in danger of condemnation to hell or only in danger of going to limbo (whatever that may mean), and if baptism were the only means known to us by which that guilt could be remitted and that danger averted, then obviously it would be a duty to baptize as many infants as possible. We ought in that case to baptize infants not only

as indiscriminately as we do at present, but far more indiscriminately. We ought to imitate the curious stratagems said to have been employed by the Jesuits in North America, who, under cover of conversation with the parents, would secretly flick a few drops of water on a child, as they whispered the baptismal formula.

On the other hand, if, as I maintain should be the case, the only children to be baptized were those born into a household or the household of faith, it would still be true to say that baptism is for the remission of sins, but in a somewhat different sense—namely, in the sense that by baptism the infant is admitted into the redeemed community, the community whose characteristic function it is to receive, witness to, and mediate the forgiveness of God in Christ Jesus. Baptism is the rite by which children enter this community, but the rite is significant and its potency becomes effective only if it is followed up by education within the community.

Tertullian quaintly said: "We little fishes, after the example of our great fish Jesus Christ our Lord, are born in the water, nor are we in a state of salvation except by abiding in the water." The Church has no right to allow children to be born in the water unless it has taken every possible step to see that they are going to be kept in the water. Baptism is the supernatural means by which children are declared to be children of God and enabled to live under His kingly rule, but it is this on condition that upbringing in a Christian home or within the Christian family is assured. It is the initiation of churchmanship or it is a sheer anomaly. Divorced from its consequences and treated as a separable rite, it is deprived of its proper significance and effect, and admits of no theological justification. The word "magic" might be applied far more appropriately to the popular attitude to baptism than to any forms of eucharistic devotion, and bishops who wish to regiment their under-shepherds and their flocks would find better scope for disciplinary action here than there.

It is true that the judicious Hooker and the most esteemed Anglican divines of the seventeenth century held, when the question was raised whether the children of unbelieving parents ought to be baptized, that they ought to be. And within the terms of the motion as it then stood they were

right. For, on the one hand, the point then in dispute was whether the regeneration of infants in baptism was dependent on the holiness of their parents—that is, on human merit—or whether it was due to the unmerited mercy of God. And, on the other hand, in those days it could reasonably be assumed that the children of unbelieving parents would be brought up as Christians. If they were not born into *a* household of faith, they were born into *the* household of faith. The national Church with its all-embracing parochial system could be relied upon to do in general what particular parents might fail to do. Those conditions no longer hold good.

I must now turn to consider some of the objections that will be raised against the practical proposals which would result from an endeavour to act upon the theological principles which I have asserted.

First, it may be said that, while theoretically it may be difficult to justify our present practice, yet it is the genius of Anglicanism to subordinate logic to life, and one must be prepared for some anomalies in any church system, and anyhow it is a good thing that people should respect the Christian religion if only to the extent of wishing to have their children baptized. To that class of objection I would reply, first, that I do not dispute the genius of Anglicanism, but just because that is its genius, the abuses to which that sort of genius is prone want watching for all the more carefully. Secondly, I agree that there will be anomalies in any church system, but that is no reason for acquiescing in any and every anomaly, and the question here is whether we have not to do with an anomaly which ought not to be tolerated any longer. Thirdly, with regard to the question of retaining what respect is shown for the Christian religion, anyone who takes the theology of baptism seriously will see at once how derogatory it is to the sacrament simply to use it as a device for retaining respect for the Christian religion. Moreover, if indiscriminate baptism is held to be a good way of making or keeping contact with people who otherwise do not come to church, why should not the holy communion be treated in the same way? I have yet to learn that one sacrament of the gospel is more sacred than the other. Yet there are, I believe, Anglicans who adopt a rigorously exclusive attitude to the admission of devout

Nonconformists to holy communion in *all* circumstances, and who at the same time are willing to baptize children from non-Christian homes in almost *any* circumstances.

Secondly, the objection may be raised that it will be unreasonable to restrict baptism to the children of parents who "communicate at the least three times in the year," if indeed that should be the test, and at the same time to go on marrying non-communicants in church. With this I agree, but I deny that it is an objection. I would add that, if our baptismal discipline is to be reformed, it should be accompanied by a reformed discipline in regard to confirmation as well as marriage.

Thirdly, it will be said: Why make the children suffer because of the sins or shortcomings of the parents? But the child will suffer anyhow from the lack of a Christian home; baptism, so far from preventing that, will only camouflage it. Or it will be said that we have no right to refuse children the benefits of baptism. We should remember the text: "Suffer the little children to come unto Me." This objection springs from sentimentality. There is no benefit in baptism out of the context of churchmanship.

I want in conclusion to consider what prospect there is that action will be initiated on the lines that have been indicated. It may be thought that we ought to wait upon the hierarchy for a lead; if that were given it would probably be more effective than any other course that can be proposed. But the bishops, it seems, are kept much too busy amid many obstacles in keeping the existing ecclesiastical machinery running to take an unprompted lead in radically reforming it, especially at a point where little hard thinking has been done by their advisers and which they may shrewdly and justly suspect would add a fresh hornets' nest to their difficulties.

May we then look to the inferior clergy not merely to talk and to agitate but to act—or even to the laity? The laity at present have little say in the conduct of church affairs, except the few who find clerical company and a clerical outlook congenial. I have been led to suppose that there is a number of the inferior clergy who are giving much thought to this matter and whose opinion is hardening in favour of taking some such provocative action as might force the issue to a head. It is interesting to observe that

keen sensitiveness to this issue cuts across all the older party alignments in the Church, just as all schools of thought have been equally offenders in the past. It may be that we should need to see some clergymen being persecuted or giving up their livings for faithfulness to theological convictions about baptism before the conscience of churchmen would be sufficiently stirred to forward a general reform of ecclesiastical discipline.

It would be the duty of any clergyman, who despaired of being given a lead and who felt impelled to take such action as was open to him in conjunction with others who had a similar determination, not only publicly to explain what he proposed to do and why he proposed to do it, but also privately to interview all parents who sought to have their children baptized. He would try to show them that "baptism is meaningless unless the child is . . . to be brought up in the household of faith," and that in existing circumstances there can be no assurance that this will probably happen unless at least one of the parents is living as a member of the Church. Would it be disingenuous for him to recall that an Englishman is not a hypocrite? He means what he says, whereas apart from this condition the baptism service involves saying what he does not mean.

This would have to be done with a resolute conviction, but also with sympathy and discretion, for it is not the parents who are to blame for the present state of affairs. The whole Church, and not least the clergy themselves, are to blame. It is only as part of a penitent and radical endeavour to reform the discipline of the Church that the abuses connected with baptism can rightly be approached. Such an endeavour would have to begin somewhere.

In one way or another we must assert that the Church depends for its true life not on its popularity, nor on its numbers, nor on the efficiency of its organization, but on its faithfulness to the Word of God. Upon that depends its moral power, which to-day is conspicuous by its absence. A Church which set about taking itself and its principles seriously would be an offence to many; it may be that in the present situation the Church will have either to become an offence to many or to cease to count for anything.