

The Doctrine of Baptism and Confirmation.

AN EVANGELICAL ANGLICAN INTERPRETATION

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THE syllabus provided for this paper includes "The value and limitations of the historical approach; the adequacy of scripture as a basis for the doctrine of baptism and confirmation; current Anglican practice in relation to doctrine and a critical examination of the theology of *Confirmation Today*." That is a wide field and I cannot hope to cover it adequately. The width and indeed its complexity may be illustrated from a quotation from *Confirmation To-day*, "The freedom which the church has used in connexion with Confirmations is indeed remarkable; for there is diversity as to the form of words to be employed; diversity as to the outward sign; diversity as to the minister authorized to administer the rite; diversity as to the stage in the Christian life at which it ought to be administered; diversity as to its relation to Baptism; diversity as to its relation to Holy Communion; diversity as to teaching about the nature of that gift of the Holy Spirit through the rite, which all nevertheless agree is given." And to this multiform diversity we may add the diversities of interpretation of the practice of Infant Baptism to which, in the Anglican Church, we have to relate the rite of Confirmation. All I can therefore hope to do is work through the syllabus given me, picking out what seems to me most relevant and indicating what seems to me to be the most fruitful lines of interpretation.

We must begin, so it seems to me, at the very beginning. Christianity consists in a personal relationship to God in Christ, dependent essentially upon what God in Christ has done for men. The initiative was and is with God and the ways of God's self-disclosure and self-communication are of his choosing, not ours. The Incarnation is the starting point of our doctrinal quest because it makes clear to us that God's way with men is personal confrontation in which God is apprehended as infinite succour and infinite demand. God meets men in the person of Jesus Christ where they are in order that He may bring them where He is, conforming their character to His will, in Christ-likeness, through the loving activity of His Spirit. This is commonplace, but it is perhaps not unfitting to insist that all our thinking must therefore be in personal terms and more especially when we use words like "grace" and "faith" which even in the first century could become depersonalized—witness the refusal of the fourth Gospel to use them.

Having said that, we have then to recognise that personal relationships do not mean merely individual relationships, though these are included. Personality has been not unworthily defined as the capacity to enter into relationship. God, may we not reverently say, is the perfection of personality just because of the infinite range

of his relationships; and therefore in relationship with Him we are ourselves, however unconsciously, widely related; and more particularly to those who with us form the Body of Christ, the Family of God and the Temple of the Spirit. This implies that in all our thinking on this subject, we are concerned not simply with a person baptized or confirmed, but with the Church of God.

The third fundamental point of departure is that Jesus, clearly in the institution of the Lord's Supper, and less clearly in the ordinance of Baptism, expressed His personal activity by means of significant action. He not only called bread and wine His Body and Blood and commanded their continued use with that meaning, but He gave them to His disciples with the imperatives, "Take, eat"; "Drink ye all of this." Interpreted simply as "prophetic symbolism", what Jesus did in the Upper Room was linked by the Lord's own word and action with the historical events of the crucifixion and resurrection and with all which those events accomplished for men. There can, I think, be little doubt that the early church so understood Him and believed that in and through what we call the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, the Risen Lord was active in the hearts and minds of those who in faith received them. Moreover, it was supremely the efficacy of His death and resurrection which was thus made operative by the Lord Himself in the lives of His disciples. The implication for all our thinking, so it seems to me, is that the sacraments are never to be conceived as mere signs but as "*efficacia signa*", "*instrumenta*", means by which Christ works.

The fourth fundamental for our thinking must now necessarily be introduced. From the initial preaching of the Kingdom of God in Galilee, repentance and faith are claimed to be the conditions of participation in blessing. But these are not man's natural powers inherent in his very humanity. As I read both the Gospels and the Epistles, they are themselves the fruit of the activity of the Spirit of God. In the Gospels men came to faith and repentance face to face with Jesus. "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord"; "Lord, I believe, help thou my unbelief". When therefore we think of the sacraments we must postulate an activity of God which enables the response by which the gifts of God are received, and we shall therefore lay our primary emphasis on the Divine initiative; or in more well-worn theological terms, we shall only speak of faith in the context of grace.

With this introduction, we can turn to our subject of Baptism and Confirmation, and in the New Testament I, personally, do not find any insuperable difficulties. Baptism is everywhere regarded as initiation into the Christian community which is the Body of Christ and the organ of His activity with the world. That clearly does not mean that Christ's self-disclosure to the soul is *begun* in baptism. Paul went back again and again to the experience of the Damascus road (itself surely the climax of a long process) and he ascribes faith in his converts to the hearing (or preaching) of the Word. In one sense the decisive moment has come when faith is born in a man by the operation of the Spirit who takes the things of Christ and shows them unto us. But in another sense the decisive moment has yet to come both in the open profession of faith and the willingness to be

incorporated in the Christian community. Belief in the heart must lead on to confession with the mouth: relationship to Jesus Christ is only actualized and fruitful in relation to His Body. That incorporation St. Paul speaks of as the Work of the Holy Spirit, "for by one Spirit were we all baptized into one Body"; and it is always of this dual relationship to Christ and His Body that St. Paul is thinking when he speaks about faith or baptism. Thus in Galatians iii. 26, 27, "For ye are all the children of God by faith in Jesus Christ, for as many of you as were baptized into Jesus Christ did put on Christ". With this is consonant St. Paul's teaching about the Church. "For as the body is one and hath many members and all the members of that one body being many are one body: so also is Christ"; on which Calvin commented, "He calls Christ the Church."

Being made thus one with Christ and His Church, the Christian shares in Christ's death and resurrection, in His priesthood and His mission. In case I am misunderstood, I had perhaps better make it clear that I do not lose sight of the fundamental distinction of the Saviour and the saved, nor of the unique High-Priesthood of our Lord. What the Christian or the Church is, they are only by derivation and in the power of the Spirit, but what I am concerned to state is that "in and through baptism" or, if you like, "in and through justification", all the privileges and duties of sonship to God are covenanted to men. Their status, their title, their calling is secure. "He who spared not His own Son but delivered Him up for us all; how shall He not with Him freely give us all things?" That is the assurance which underlies Luther's "*baptizatus sum*" and it is a true New Testament insight.

Having said all that it is equally clear that the Christian's state, or for that matter the Church's state, does not coincide with his status. The fundamental principle of the New Testament ethic is that we are called "to become what we are". We are given our status, we are ἀγιοι but we have to become ὁσιοι in dependence upon that Holy Spirit of God who "helpeth our infirmities", in dependence upon whose leading we become the Sons of God in a sense deeper than at our baptism we ever knew. It is as the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit that we know the ever increasing demands of true love, in responding to which our own love is kept fresh. Transformation into Christ-likeness is a process and in New Testament language is the fruit of "grace upon grace". And yet, this sanctification is implicit in our baptism. "We died, and our life is hid with Christ in God; and when He shall appear, we also shall appear with Him in glory". The end is implicit in the beginning. Baptism covers the whole of Christian life; its eschatological element may be transmuted but it is not removed by the passage of the centuries.

That, I fear, is all that we can find time for in the realm of Biblical doctrine concerning baptism. But two questions arise and must be answered. Can we rule out the possibility of infant baptism, even in New Testament times? Vernon Bartlet in his E.R.E. article on "Baptism in the New Testament" insists that in the ancient world a child's solidarity with its parents was universally assumed. In Colossians ii. 11, 12 St. Paul appears to regard baptism as closely

related to circumcision spiritually understood, and we know that he regarded the children of Christians as ἀγτοί. The argument can cut both ways but the probability is high that Christians would inevitably ask for baptism for their children. Polycarp we know must have been baptized in childhood and therefore in the first century. Argument from silence is dangerous, but personally I think that infant baptism probably does go back to the first century and that it would primarily be interpreted as initiation into the fellowship of the Church and as effecting also (on the basis of Mark x. 16) a real relationship with Christ in the Spirit.

The second question which must be raised is the relation of the laying-on of hands to baptism. It seems to me incontrovertible that St. Paul laid hands on the newly baptized men at Ephesus and the apostles on Philip's converts at Samaria. What I fail to see is that there is sufficient evidence for us to regard the rite as additional to baptism in the sense of conferring anything which baptism did not itself confer. On the other hand, it may well be regarded as part of baptism and as appropriately symbolizing the solidarity of the Christian community with its new members. The ceremony is interpreted by Lowther Clarke and many others as effecting *transference*, presumably of the Holy Spirit; and reference is made to the ordination of Joshua and even of the Goat for Azazel. But the more normal sacrificial annotation of the act, the laying of the hand upon the sacrificial animal, is surely *identification*. The laying-on of hands used as part of the baptismal rite, I take, therefore, to symbolize incorporation with the Church. It is the final act, and therefore in days when ecstatic utterance was common, if not normal, would immediately precede this manifestation of the Spirit's presence. This would account for Philip's omission of the act in the special circumstances of a mission to Samaritans, such a significant step requiring the assent of the Church in the persons of the apostles. If this is accepted, the direct inference is that the corporate aspect of the baptismal rite must be taken seriously and incorporation into the Church regarded not as of secondary but of primary significance.

I pass on now to the value and limitations of the historical approach. Here I can be brief and shall not attempt to go into detail, for the essential facts are comparatively few. The laying-on of hands (or unction) was universally, in the early Church, part of the baptismal rite and, except in Syria, followed it. If, as has recently been suggested, we regard the Syrian rite as primitive it would seem to follow that confirmation has no direct connection with the Apostolic laying-on of hands, and is therefore without scriptural authority. But we may safely follow *Confirmation To-day* in refusing to accompany Dom Gregory Dix down his liturgical by-paths and accept the main tradition both of the anti-Nicene and post-Nicene fathers in regarding the laying-on of hands—or of the hand—as the essential rite of which anointing with the thumb dipped in chrism is an Eastern variant and to which it is a Western addition. Unction in itself is best taken to symbolize consecration to the priesthood of all believers, which is an essential meaning of the whole baptismal rite. "*Sacerdotium laici id est baptismum.*"

The really significant historical fact is the dying out of the cate-

chumenate as infant baptism became the norm, together with the retention of the fully developed adult rite (including the ceremonies of the catechumenate) in the Mediaeval baptismal service for infants. The catechumenate, whatever we think of its accompanying ceremonies of insufflation, exorcism and the "*effeta*", was a real safeguard against any magical view of the sacrament. It was a solemn period of devotional preparation; it laid a solid basis of doctrinal instruction. All this was lost and nothing took its place until the Reformation. That fact is of cardinal importance.

Second only in importance is the dominance of the Augustinian doctrine of original sin involving guilt. Once this was accepted infant baptism became necessary to secure salvation and any hope of heaven. Is it unfair to suggest that, more than any other factor except that of the sheer weight of tradition, it was this doctrine, shared by the Reformers, which made the continuance of infant baptism a necessity in the 16th Century? The doctrine remains to this day clearly stated in the service itself.

Thirdly, comes the separation of confirmation from baptism in the West, necessitated by the retention of Episcopal confirmation. That retention is, I should hold, the survival of the primitive and important principle that admission to the Church of its new members is the function of the father-in-God. We have already seen that in the New Testament the laying on of hands is the effective symbol of admission to the Church, but this meaning is obscured when confirmation is separated from baptism, and it is not surprising that with the passage of the centuries it disappeared and the rite was otherwise interpreted. But the resultant doctrinal difficulty goes deeper, for as soon as Confirmation becomes a separate sacrament one of two things happens. Baptism must either be regarded as incomplete—an inference which the Middle Ages refused to draw—or Confirmation must be given a significance of its own which the Middle Ages found it exceedingly difficult to define. From that dilemma we have not yet recovered. We have divided what is indivisible—the operation of the Holy Spirit.

But the historical approach is fruitful in a negative direction. Confirmation was deferred for one, three or seven years. The Mediaeval schoolmen begin to talk of an age of discretion, but necessarily never once of spiritual maturity. The idea that Confirmation means ordination to the Priesthood of the laity finds no place in Mediaeval or Reformation theology, and it is difficult to see why *Confirmation To-day* makes it a dominant conception unless the whole rite is to be administered to the spiritually adult.

Lastly, despite episcopal efforts to check the practice, admission of the unconfirmed to Holy Communion was widely practised. Maclean quotes the Magdalen Pontifical in which, if the Bishop is absent, communion follows directly upon infant baptism; and Archbishop Peckham's regulations show that the practice was common. This is a departure, not only from primitive practice but also, surely, from sound doctrine, and reduces the significance of the other sacrament of the Gospel. To this we must return in the last section.

This brings us to the Anglican doctrine and I only wish I could be clearer than I am in suggesting a true way of approach. Some things

are, however, to me quite clear. First that the distinctively Anglican contribution is the deferment of confirmation to years of discretion and the provision of adequate instruction in the interval. The evidence as to what constitutes years of discretion is conflicting and meagre in the Reformation period. Twelve years was apparently the Elizabethan and Caroline minimum, but it must be pointed out that in that period confirmation was as disgracefully neglected by the Episcopate as in the 18th Century. The Puritan, Robert Cawdry, protested to Lord Burghley in 1587 that the bishops "themselves, for the most part, these twenty-nine years have not observed it" and Hooker speaks of "the deep neglect of this Christian duty". Our Anglican precepts were better than our practice. But the deferment of confirmation was not merely to provide an adequate interval for instruction. That instruction was to lead to the personal acceptance of the vows made "in the name of the child" by his godparents in baptism. In this way confirmation became not as in the Middle Ages a separate sacrament, but the complement of Baptism and the necessary preliminary of admission to Holy Communion. The Baptismal office looked forward to Confirmation. "Wherefore, after this promise made by Christ, this infant must also faithfully for his part, promise by you that are his sureties (until he come of age and take it upon himself) that he will—renounce, . . . believe, . . . obey". In a very real sense baptism is only given *upon this condition*, and its completion in confirmation is therefore, in the same sense, part of baptism itself. This, we may well claim, is a great step forward and if we could agree to regard the two services as parts of one rite we could, without great difficulty, produce a theology of "baptism-confirmation" consonant with the teaching of the New Testament. We should, however, have to refuse to dogmatize as to exactly what happens to the child in the incomplete rite.

But, even so, difficulties would remain so long as the wording of our baptismal office remained unaltered. First there is the language about original sin. As long as this remains (and presumably it still represents the teaching both of Catholics and some Evangelicals) then the corresponding language about regeneration must remain. For if sin involves guilt then either it must be dealt with in baptism or we must logically refuse to assert the salvation even of the baptized infant dying before conversion. But the English are never logical. If, however, we refuse to believe that the infant is guilty before God let us alter the language—and the sooner the better.

But granted that this difficulty is removed, what are we prepared to say is the rationale of infant baptism? The rite as it stands in 1662 administers baptism to infants on the basis of their promised repentance and faith—of their own promise, though in fact the godparents speak the words in the name of the child. But it is noteworthy that *Confirmation To-day* does not take this view. I quote (p.10) "Repentance and faith are indeed operative in bringing the candidate to Baptism, his own in the case of the adult, the Church's in the case of the infant." This means that baptism is based on the vicarious faith and repentance of those with whom the child has natural solidarity as a member of the family. This could be defended on New Testament grounds—*e.g.*, the palsied man borne of four, the

epileptic boy. But it is not the language of the Prayer Book. Are we prepared for the change involved? It is true that the principle involved is already stated in the Gospel of the baptismal office upon which much of the service is built. All that would be needed would be the explicit statement that it is this faith of the Church represented by the godparents which is the ground on which the child is baptized. The questions in the service should then be asked of the godparents.

But if this takes place, we shall really have changed our doctrine. The truth seems to me to be that the present office is not self-consistent. The language about original sin and regeneration imply a change both in the child's status and state, as the result of baptism; but the language about promises made by the child, implies that a gift is given on conditions which it is assumed will be fulfilled; and so, since the end of the 18th Century, Evangelicals have normally interpreted baptism as a covenant rite in which the gifts covenanted and sealed become actual as and when the conditions are fulfilled. Not unnaturally they have been uneasy about the language of the service which implies that regeneration has taken place. A final way out is to regard "regeneration" as used in something other than its full New Testament sense and there is surely a measure of truth in this. An infant cannot have regeneration in exactly the same sense as the repentant and faithful adult.

All this, I would insist, is the result of the unrevised use of a service which essentially is an adult baptism transferred *en bloc* to the conditions of infancy to which it does not apply. Is not our truer wisdom to re-think the whole question? We believe that our Lord will receive and bless infants, that in so doing He establishes a real relationship with Himself. If we call this regeneration, we can say so. The basis for this reception is two-fold, His love for men, and His honouring of the faith of those who bring the child. If we hold this we can regard baptism, like Holy Communion, as instrumental. But we shall not, I think, baptize indiscriminately.

We shall further believe that the relationship with Christ begun in Baptism, will be deepened by the activity of His Spirit both in the soul of the child and through the Church, which includes the family of which the child is a member, and we can pray expectantly for that repentance and faith which is essential to the fulness of personal relationship with God.

Can we call a service which includes all these things, setting forth the promises of God and stating the conditions of confirmation, "Holy Baptism"? If we can, our major problems are solved and Confirmation will be, as in traditional Anglican theology, not a separate sacrament but the fulness of life of which Baptism is the origin and earnest; and, I would add, itself instrumental.

For it, we need a much longer period of instruction than we are at present in the habit of providing. The Lutheran norm is two full years of weekly instruction, and I believe, if we are to produce really adult and instructed Christians, we need at least a full year.

This leaves only the final section of my syllabus, the criticism of the theology of *Confirmation To-day*, in which I can include all I want to say about the age of confirmation. The fundamental thesis of the whole report is that (p.11) "at confirmation the Christian,

who is already a member of the people of Christ, is solemnly consecrated and commissioned by the laying-on of hands with prayer for the exercise of that ministry which his membership entails. Confirmation may be truly described as 'the ordination of the laity'. The comment I would make upon this is that historically this was in the primitive Church the function of baptism and was more particularly symbolized by unction. It is not represented either by mediaeval or Reformation theology but is not therefore invalidated as a principle. The Report insists that Confirmation in the 20th Century (which is neither the 1st, 13th, 16th, or 19th) may be differently administered by the Church, and provided we agree with the principle we shall only be concerned with congruous administration. So far we can be prepared, I think, to admit that this particular aspect of baptism is best emphasized at Confirmation. But can we also agree (p.32) that the laying-on of hands involves a delegation of authority and responsibility in both priest and layman? Is not that an importation from ordination which has no historical precedent whatever? This, however, is a small point compared with the statement of p.43. "The ratification of vows, though in itself salutary and desirable is not essential; failure to make it does not invalidate confirmation nor call into question any confirmed person's right to communicant status". Now that, I should hold, is a betrayal of the whole Anglican position. It is true, of course, that the Report looks to such a ratification at a later stage. In practice, I believe this would be difficult. After a so-called confirmation and admission to Communion a candidate would with difficulty come forward again, and Bishops could hardly undertake the work involved; but it is not the practical difficulty which matters. What matters is that confirmation is virtually to be made a separate sacrament with no direct link with baptism. This is, in effect, to restore the pre-Reformation position, especially if confirmation is administered to young children or is preceded, as is elsewhere suggested, by admission to Communion. The ratification of vows is then made into a separate service (normally for eighteen year olds) but, as a glance at p.63 will show, without any real significance, since everything that can be given, done, or promised, has already taken place in confirmation and admission to communion.

But the final condemnation of this strange proposal is that it flatly contradicts the fundamental principle of confirmation enunciated by the Report—that of ordination to lay priesthood. Children who are too immature to renew their baptismal vows are to be solemnly consecrated and commissioned by the laying-on of hands for the exercise of their ministry as members of the Church. This is theology gone mad. If this so-called ordination had been attached to the renewal of vows at the age of eighteen it would have been understandable though not perspicuously clear doctrinally, but this is never even discussed.

The truth is that only one suggestion really fits the proposed doctrinal basis of confirmation, namely, that the whole rite be reserved for mature age seventeen to eighteen. This however is, in the Report, coupled with admission of unconfirmed children to Communion, after due preparation, at the age of twelve. It is admitted that this breaks up the almost unbroken tradition of the Church; the only significant

exception being Roman, and predominantly modern Roman, custom. But it is defended on the ground of the value in experience of early-formed habits of communion and the help given by the sacrament in the difficult years of adolescence. Some of us will, I think, be prepared to hold that faith which receives the Body and Blood of the Lord must be faith in the New Testament sense of the word, and where it is present confirmation is also possible. Where it is absent communion should not be contemplated. This at least is where I believe we ought to be prepared to stand—that in confirmation and before communion faith and repentance must have become realities. We shall not dogmatize about the age, for children greatly differ in their spiritual development, but we shall insist that only in confirmation so conditioned is baptism truly completed.