

Editorial

THE THEOLOGY AND PRACTICE OF BAPTISM

UNDER the title *The Theology of Christian Initiation** the report has recently been published by a Theological Commission appointed by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York to advise on the relations between Baptism, Confirmation and Holy Communion. It has the merits of being a short document, and in addition, its findings are presented in an admirably clear and orderly manner. The evangelical representation on the commission was comparatively strong, and it may be due to this that the report reflects a change of theological emphasis compared with certain recent pronouncements on the same subject—notably the schedule *Confirmation To-day*. Evangelicals will almost certainly find themselves in sympathy with the main conclusions reached by the commission. They will welcome, for example, the important place assigned to the ratification of vows in Confirmation when viewed in relation to Infant Baptism, and the consequent deprecation of the proposals to detach the renewal of vows from the rite of Confirmation and to admit unconfirmed children to Holy Communion.

Our concern here is to draw attention to certain important questions raised by the report to which thought and consideration must be given if we are to arrive at a sound baptismal theology, more especially in reference to infants. It is obvious that our practice of Christian Baptism will never be satisfactory unless it is based upon an adequate theology of Baptism.

1. First, there is the question as to what constitutes the Christian rite of initiation. Is it a single rite—baptism with water in the name of the Trinity? Or is it a complex of rites, comprising *in addition* the elements of repentance, faith, chrism, imposition of hands, and first Communion? The report points out that the earliest liturgical evidence in the post-apostolic Church shows the existence of a process of initiation after this latter pattern. “Full Christian initiation should, in our view, be thought of as a process beginning with a request for Baptism, and concluding with First Communion. Within this sequence, if a ‘point’ of initiation must be sought, it is the moment of Baptism. But for Baptism to be received ‘rightly’ (Article 27) there must be repentance and faith, and our Anglican system looks on the acceptance of Confirmation as the evidence of these things” (pp. 17, 18). And again: “The note of personal response is conspicuous in the theology of initiation in the New Testament. The great privileges bestowed in Baptism are inseparable from the ‘hearing of faith’ and the conscious renunciation of the pagan world” (p. 12). Thus Baptism, divorced from this element of personal penitence and trust, cannot be regarded as a complete rite of initiation.

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2. This immediately raises the question of Baptism in relation to unconscious childhood. The report is clear that the Baptism of infants is a scriptural ordinance and is therefore to be retained; but it rightly insists that Baptism in the case of infants cannot bear the whole weight of theological meaning which the New Testament places upon the initiation of the "believer". After noting that by the time of the death of St. Augustine in 430 the practice of Infant Baptism was firmly established in the Church, the report states, "We believe the principle to be sound and defensible, provided that the error is avoided of equating it with the fulness of Christian initiation" (p. 14). "The present-day counterpart to the primitive initiation is not Baptism alone, but Baptism together with Confirmation, followed by First Communion" (p. 12).

This is a consideration of the utmost importance in the formulation of a theology of Infant Baptism. To what extent is Baptism "complete" in the case of infants? In one sense, of course, it is complete, inasmuch as the ordinance is never repeated; but regarded as the rite of Christian initiation in its fulness, such Baptism must be regarded as incomplete apart from the ratification of the vows in Confirmation. "While in the Baptism of an infant, as in every sacrament of the Church, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ is offered, the receiving of the grace is not exempt from the conditions of repentance and faith" (p. 22). For this reason Jeremy Taylor spoke of Baptism being "consummated" in Confirmation and said that "in Confirmation we put our seal to the profession, and God puts His seal to the promise." Confirmation thus has an *initialory* character in reference to Infant Baptism, and for this reason Baptism and Confirmation cannot be separated when considering the theology of initiation. It is doubtless true that "the historical developments connected with the spread of the custom of Infant Baptism and the separation of Baptism and Confirmation in the West are the cause of many of our present problems in doctrine and practice" (p. 13).

3. This brings us to a third question: the meaning of "regeneration" as applied to baptised infants. The controversy concerning baptismal regeneration may be dormant at the present time but it is by no means dead, and there are many who still stumble over the words in the baptism service: "Seeing now, dearly beloved brethren, that this child is regenerate. . . ." The opinion of the Commission on this vexed question is quite clear: "We believe that the idea of regeneration (which is one of a number of images used in the New Testament) is applicable to the Baptism of infants if we here distinguish regeneration from conversion, and regard the new birth, not as the infusion of something into the child, but as the bringing of the child within the Church and Body of Christ, wherein the 'powers of the age to come' are at work. The child is indeed brought from being merely a member of a sinful world-order into being a redeemed member of the order of Christ's creation" (p. 21).

In other words, regeneration in the case of the baptised child is to be regarded as a change of standing rather than as a change of state: a new spiritual position in reference to the Christian Church and

Covenant. This means that the word does not bear the full content normally assigned to it in the New Testament, where the new birth connotes an actual spiritual and moral transformation—the bestowal of a new nature, the infusion of actual goodness. Such a transfiguring experience, inseparable as it is from conscious moral response to the gospel, is scarcely applicable in the case of an unconscious infant. But that is not to imply that Infant Baptism is emptied of all spiritual value—any more than it could be argued in the natural sphere that birth is of no particular value since it brings with it no immediate conscious experience or enjoyment of life. By the act of Baptism the child is admitted into the Divine Society, which is also the family of God; and in this sense he is assuredly “regenerate”. Henceforth he must be regarded as “a member of Christ, a child of God, and an inheritor of the kingdom of heaven”; and as he grows up he must be taught of all that his heavenly Father has pledged to him in his Baptism, so that he may *experimentally* enter into the blessings of the New Covenant. Apart from this subsequent training—in home, church and school—the Baptism of the child can have little meaning, and it is legitimate from a doctrinal point of view to question the propriety of baptising infants where there is little or no guarantee of their upbringing in the life of the Church.

4. This brings us to the difficult question of discrimination in Baptism. The subject is discussed at some length in succeeding articles in the present number of *THE CHURCHMAN*, so that it is unnecessary to extend an already over-long Editorial by dwelling in detail upon the matter here. In his historical study of the Elizabethan reformers, Dr. G. W. Bromiley shows that the Anglican tradition is opposed to any strict discrimination, and this is also defended from the point of view of the parish priest by the Rev. S. B. Latham. On the other hand there are not a few among us—both Evangelicals and Anglo-Catholics—who are deeply dissatisfied with the existing practice of the wholesale, indiscriminate baptism of infants and who are urgently pleading for reform. That point of view is ably expressed in the article contributed by the Rev. P. H. Wood. The same point of view is argued at greater length—and with particular reference to its practical application—by one of a somewhat different ecclesiastical colour in a pamphlet entitled *Why Are Infants Baptised?** The pamphlet may be recommended as eminently worth reading. The writer's plea is for “a return to the early ages of the Church, when Adult Baptism was the normal thing and Infant Baptism the exception.” So he urges the revival of the Catechumenate and suggests that “the normal practice should be the Baptism of those who have come to years of discretion after some years as Catechumens, to be followed as immediately as circumstances permit by Confirmation.” This would mean that the usual rule in every parish would be “to enter the majority of children on the Roll of Catechumens and reserve the Baptism of infants for cases where not only is the ‘atmosphere’ one of encouragement, but where the responses of parents and godparents are ‘conscious, intelligent, and deliberate’.”

* By H. S. Marshall (S.P.C.K., 9d.).

It was not the purpose of the Archbishops' commission to put forward proposals with regard to the actual administration of Baptism, but the report draws attention to a number of suggestions (including the idea of the Catechumenate) deserving of careful consideration on the part of those whose duty it is to make practical recommendations. Admittedly it is by no means easy to introduce changes of a radical nature in connection with an ordinance so firmly entrenched in the tradition of parochial life as Baptism; but something might at least be done in the direction of a more frequent administration of the Sacrament within the context of the Church's public worship—as is the obvious intention of the Book of Common Prayer. It is a grave weakness that at present Baptism is so largely divorced from the worshipping life of the Christian society. What has aptly been called Family Baptism*—usually administered in the course of Divine Service either monthly or quarterly—is of real value in emphasising the essential relation of Baptism to the fellowship of the Church and assigning to the ordinance not only a more sacred character but also a more prominent place in the life of the congregation. FRANK COLQUHOUN.

* See the C.P.A.S. Fellowship Paper of this title, to be published June, 1948 (2d.). The Paper for March, 1948, also deals with the administration of Baptism.

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