

The Christian Rite of Initiation

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“THE Church can very well afford Infant Baptism” is the conclusion arrived at by a prominent Anglo-Catholic theologian (Dom Gregory Dix, *The Theology of Confirmation in Relation to Baptism*, p. 31), who thus relegates Infant Baptism to the category of a practice which is tolerable only on certain conditions, and for which little or no doctrinal ground can be found. Such a conclusion cannot fail to be painful to many faithful Churchmen; for if it can be justified the entire abandonment of the practice of Infant Baptism must be faced. The present heart-searching can only be set at rest by a thorough examination of the doctrine of Baptism, but it is to be hoped that in the course of this examination the practice of Infant Baptism will be given the consideration that is due to it as a practice which is not without support in the Scriptures; for it stands upon its own doctrinal grounds, and is not merely a development of adult Baptism.

I.

It is surprising that so rarely is Baptism considered as a Sacrament expressive of the New Covenant. This cannot be because the idea of a covenant between God and man is strange to the modern Christian. The title pages of his Bible remind him of it. He can never receive the Holy Communion without realising that our Lord looked forward to His death on the Cross as the inauguration of a New Covenant. Can this idea have been absent from the minds of the first Christians? They were Jews who had been nurtured in a religion which was based upon a covenant made by God with their forefather Abraham and his seed. Into that Covenant relationship with God they had been admitted by the Sacrament of Circumcision, in infancy if they were of the seed of Abraham, or as adults if they were proselytes. The meaning of the Sacrament was different for each class. To the proselytes, as to Abraham, it was the seal of God's approval set upon and confirming an already existing faith (Rom. iv. 11), and their admittance to the privileges of the people of God. To the former it was the seal of the Covenant, a pledge or promise of God on which their future faith in Him had to be built, so that they might take their place as members of God's people, the community of Israel. Until they became adults, however, their membership of that community was imperfect.

In the course of time it was found necessary to have some ceremony to mark the occasion when a boy for the first time took his place as a member of the people of God. To-day the Bar-mitzvah Ceremonial, which consists mainly in the boy's being called up to read the Scroll of the Law on the first Sabbath of his 14th year, is observed. The prayer which is said by the boy illustrates the significance of the ceremony.

“O my God and God of my fathers: On this solemn and sacred day, which marks my passage from boyhood to manhood, I humbly

raise my eyes unto Thee and declare, with sincerity and truth, that henceforth I will keep Thy commandments, and undertake and bear the responsibility of mine actions towards Thee. In my earliest infancy I was brought within Thy sacred covenant with Israel; and to-day I again enter, as an active responsible member, Thine elect congregation, in the midst of which I will never cease to proclaim Thy holy name in the face of all nations" (A.D.P.B., 1929, p. 309a).

This ceremony became a fixed rite in Germany in the 14th century, but the *Jewish Encyclopaedia* gives reasons for holding that the germ of the custom is much older. Whether or not a similar ceremony was observed in our Lord's day, it was at the same age that a Jewish boy would take his place formally as a member of the people of God, having accompanied his parents to the Temple feasts during the previous year. (Aboth v. 24; Edersheim, *Jewish Social Life*, p. 120; Lk. ii. 42). In either case the meaning of the boy's action is clear. It is his acceptance of the Covenant and his entry upon the duties and privileges of an adult member of the Covenant people. Where a boy took this step humbly and with a true faith in God, can we doubt that he would receive a gift of the grace needed for the duties he was undertaking?

II.

The Jewish leaders of the early Church, who had been nurtured in the ideas of a Covenant and a Covenant-people, did not lay these concepts aside when they became Christians. Rather they used them to interpret their new faith, which as their writings testify they came to regard as strictly analogous to that in which they had been brought up. Thus the Church took the place of Israel as the people of God. Its relation to God was defined by the New Covenant, as Israel's had been by the old Covenant. As the two sacraments of Circumcision and the Passover had expressed the Old Covenant, so the two sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper expressed the New.

When we read the New Testament we see how thoroughly they did this. St. Peter speaks of the Church as "an elect race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession" (1 Pet. ii. 9), while St. Paul calls it "the Israel of God" (Gal. vi. 16). The meaning of St. Paul's phrase is clear, while the words of St. Peter apply to the Church almost the exact phrases used of Israel in Ex. xix. 5, 6. As the nation of Israel had looked to Jerusalem as their peculiar city, so the Church looked to "the Jerusalem that is above" (Gal. iv. 26). "Our citizenship," said St. Paul, "is in Heaven" (Phil. iii. 20). When St. Paul thinks of the sacrament of the Old Covenant, Circumcision, he claims its spiritual significance for the Church: "We are the circumcision" (Phil. iii. 3).

Moreover, they regarded the New Covenant as comparable in its scope with the Old. In His speech at Pentecost St. Peter defined the limits of the New Covenant promise. "The promise," he said, "is unto you and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call" (Acts ii. 39). St. Paul went even further and included in its scope all those in the household of a Christian (Acts xvi. 31). This is what we should have expected if the New Covenant were to be explained on the analogy of the Old. In

Gen. xvii. God's covenant is established with Abraham and his seed (7), but it is expressly commanded that Circumcision, "the token of the covenant," is to be given also to every male *in his household*, whether of Abraham's seed, or bought as a slave (12). In Ex. xii. 48 this is extended to the stranger who wishes to join in the worship of Jehovah. He must be circumcised, and then he is to be as one born in the land.

As the two covenants are comparable in scope, we should expect to find the initiatory sacraments, Circumcision and Baptism, administered on similar lines. As Circumcision was given to adult proselytes, and to the children of the covenant people, we should expect to find Baptism administered to adult converts, and to the children of Christians. Not unnaturally there is no direct evidence in the pages of the New Testament of its being administered to the children of Christians, for the first generation of Christians was only being gathered in those days, and Christians of the second generation must have been few; so that the question of their Baptism cannot have bulked largely in the minds of the Apostles and other leaders of the Church. None the less, the presumption drawn from the analogy of the two covenants is that they would be baptised, and therefore if the analogy was *not* to hold good, a definite statement to that effect might have been expected.

If it should be suggested that Circumcision is connected only with earthly blessings, and that therefore the only claim to it was to be born a Jew, but that Baptism was concerned with spiritual blessings and that therefore it would be natural to administer it only to those who had made a spiritual response, such as could not be expected of infants, it should suffice to point out that St. Paul did not so regard Circumcision. On the contrary in Rom. ii. 28, 29 he expounds it as a spiritual sacrament, and states definitely that it is the spiritual reality of the sacrament, the circumcision of the heart, that alone makes a man a Jew.

There remains therefore a presumption that under the New Covenant Infants would be baptized, and there is some evidence in the New Testament that they were. St. Paul's pronouncement in 1 Cor. vii. 14 that the children of a Christian married to an unbeliever were "holy" may have some reference to their right to Baptism. Elsewhere he addresses children as members of the Church without any suggestion that they were less members than others (Eph. vi. 1; Col. iii. 20). In several places we read of the baptism of households (Acts xvi. 33, 34; 1 Cor. i. 16), and there is no suggestion that any children in them were not baptized. When we remember the eager expectation of the return of Christ held by the early Christians, is it not almost certain that the question would arise in parents' hearts, "If Christ should return, can I be sure that my child will share in the blessings of the Messianic kingdom?" A similar question arose concerning those Christians who died before the Lord's return, and St. Paul answers it in his First Epistle to the Thessalonians (iv. 13-18). In the case of the child the answer seems to have been given by St. Peter at Pentecost (Acts ii. 39), when he asserted that the promise was to the believer *and his children*. If that was true, then the child

was within the blessings of the New Covenant, and it would seem but natural to bestow upon him the Sacrament in which the promise of those blessings was expressed.

The early Fathers give no indication that the baptism of infants is a novel procedure. Justin Martyr speaks of persons then aged 60 or 70 who were made disciples of Christ in their infancy (*Ap.* 1. 15. 6). Irenaeus clearly indicates the prevalence of Infant Baptism in his day (*Ad. Haer.* ii. 22. 4), while Tertullian, who pleads for the delay of Baptism in the case of little children, makes no suggestion that the practice was an innovation. (On *Bap.* xviii).

There is therefore some ground for believing that the baptism of the children of Christians is an exceedingly primitive practice, which goes back to the days of the Apostles and certainly does not conflict with their teaching. Let us be clear, however, that this in no way justifies the practice of indiscriminate Baptism. The administration of Circumcision under the Old Covenant was strictly limited, so that only the children of those who were already within that Covenant were circumcised in infancy. St. Peter's words at Pentecost already quoted make it clear that the New Covenant, and therefore its sacrament of initiation, has in the case of children no wider application. There will no doubt be difficulties to be faced in restricting Baptism to the limits prescribed by Scripture, but if the Church is to stand for anything in the eyes of the world it will have to lay down the conditions of its membership.

Our Lord's action in blessing the children (*Mk.* x. 13-16) gives us no wider authority. The passage has no reference to baptism, and it may be regretted that this passage should remain as the Gospel at the Baptism of Infants. It suggests too easily that to bring a child to Baptism is bringing that child to Christ, no matter how much its subsequent Christian upbringing may be neglected. Baptism should be the first step in bringing the child to Christ, but, as indeed Tertullian suggests in the passage cited above, bringing a child to Christ involves much more, *viz.*, a consistent Christian upbringing extending over years. "Let them come then, while they are growing up; let them come while they are learning, while they are being taught whither to come." Can it be right for the Church to administer the Sacrament of Holy Baptism to a child, unless it is assured that the child is going to be brought up as a Christian? If a really firm line were to be taken on this point there is little doubt that the numbers of children baptized would fall, but the number who received a Christian upbringing would steadily increase and in the long run this would prove a great strengthening to the Church.

III.

"John truly baptized with water: but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost not many days hence" (*Acts* i. 5). In these words our Lord indicates what is the essence of Christian Baptism. It is no mere baptism in water, but a Baptism with the Holy Ghost. The events of Pentecost, which fulfilled these words of our Lord's, were in some respects reminiscent of a baptism by affusion, although later in the Acts the Holy Ghost was given through the laying on of hands in connection with Baptism. The imposition of hands appears

usually to have accompanied Baptism in the early Church, and we must enquire whether the laying on of hands is the normal means of imparting the gift of the Holy Ghost. The answer to this question is of vital importance for two reasons. First, until it is answered we cannot be sure whether the effect of the postponement of Confirmation to years of discretion is not to deprive the child who has been baptized in infancy of that which is the distinctive gift of Christian Baptism. Secondly, we can give no opinion as to the effect of Baptism on an infant.

The conclusion of the writer is that the whole salvation of Christ, including the gift of the Holy Ghost, is pledged to the believer in the washing of Baptism, and can be appropriated by him before, at, or after the laying on of hands. This does not mean that the latter rite is insignificant, but it does imply that it is not a part of the sacrament instituted by the Lord and cannot rank, therefore, with the washing of Baptism. Moreover, it entails the consequence that the gift imparted through the laying on of hands will vary according to the degree in which the believer has already appropriated the salvation assured to him in Baptism; but in every case it will re-inforce and confirm on God's part that salvation, so that where it is received with faith it will impart the fullest gift of the Holy Ghost that the baptized Christian is able to receive at the time.

Let us turn to the New Testament to see if it bears out the assertion of the last paragraph. After his baptism the Ethiopian Eunuch (Acts viii. 26-40) was not received, so far as we know, into any local Church, nor does it seem possible that he received the laying on of hands from any of the Apostles or from other Christians. Yet when we read that he went on his way rejoicing—a joy which would seem to be one of the fruits of the Spirit (Gal. v. 22), for it had no cause similar to that of the Samaritans over Philip's miracles of healing (v. 8)—we may perhaps feel that although the additional clause in the Western Text of v. 39 ("And when they came up out of the water, the Holy Spirit fell upon the Eunuch") may be an interpolation, it does not materially misrepresent the facts. The importance of this passage lies in the fact that, exceptional as the incident may be, in this case the Holy Spirit imparted to a believing soul all that was necessary to salvation through the washing of Baptism alone.

The accounts of the baptism of the Apostle Paul (Acts ix. 17-19; xxii. 11-16) make it clear that none of the Apostles laid hands upon him. It is true that before his baptism Ananias laid his hands on him with the words, "The Lord . . . hath sent me, that thou mayest receive thy sight, and be filled with the Holy Ghost" (ix. 17); but commentators appear to be doubtful whether Ananias' laying on of hands was the means of imparting the gift of the Holy Ghost or not. In any case Ananias was neither an Apostle, nor so far as we know commissioned by an Apostle. In the second account the emphasis is markedly laid on the washing of Baptism (xxii. 16), and no mention is made of any laying on of hands.

In the case of Cornelius and his friends (Acts x.) the gift of the Holy Ghost was given even before Baptism. Again the emphasis of the account falls upon the washing of Baptism. "Can anyone forbid

the water that these should not be baptized, which have received the Holy Ghost as well as we?" (47). The next verse seems to show that there was no question of the laying on of hands in this case. "Then he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ." The baptism was evidently administered by some of the disciples who accompanied Peter.

There is no record of the baptism of the first Antiochene converts (Acts xi. 20, 21) who were Gentiles. The mention of Barnabas' seeing the grace of God among them appears to indicate that they had received the gift of the Holy Spirit prior to his coming. It seems clear that none of the Apostles could have laid hands upon them, though some of the other Christians at Antioch might have done so.

In the Epistles of St. Paul we find the gift of the Holy Spirit closely associated with the washing of Baptism. "Ye were washed . . . ye were sanctified . . . ye were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor. vi. 11). Again: "For in one Spirit were we all baptized into one body . . . and were all made to drink of one Spirit" (1 Cor. xii. 13). Moreover, when in Romans vi. he expounds the believer's union with Christ, which he relates closely to Baptism in water, he does not keep this idea separate from that of the gift of the Holy Spirit, as he should have done had he associated this gift with the laying on of hands rather than with the washing of Baptism. For instance, in vi. 4, where in the first half of the verse baptism in water is likened to being buried with Christ, the second half of the verse likens the resurrection of Christ not to the believer's rising from the baptismal waters, or to any preparatory work of grace for the new life of the Spirit, but to that new life itself. Again, there is Rom. viii. 9: "If any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of His". If the gift of the Spirit, without which none can belong to Christ, is imparted through the laying on of hands, and not through the washing of Baptism, it is strange that so vital a rite should be so often passed over without mention, or as in the case of the Ethiopian Eunuch omitted altogether. If, however, St. Paul and the other New Testament writers regarded the gift of the Spirit as one of the gifts of Baptism, this becomes natural.

Finally Heb. vi. 2 indicates that the laying on of hands normally accompanied Baptism in Apostolic days, but the paucity of references to it, and the habitual likening of the gift of the Holy Spirit to a baptism—at a time when as Mk. vii. 4 testifies the word was still used for various Jewish washings—cannot but suggest that the laying on of hands was overshadowed by, and derived its significance from, the major Sacrament of Baptism.

This impression is not altered when the passages that refer to anointing (2 Cor. i. 21, 22; 1 John ii. 20, 27) are taken into account. There is no need to interpret these passages as referring to any anointing that accompanied the laying on of hands, or to any physical anointing at all. In Acts x. 38 the same verb is used of our Lord's enduement with the Holy Spirit, where as in Isa. lxi. 1 there can be no suggestion of any physical anointing, unless the baptism of John was thought of as such. We must therefore interpret these passages accordingly as referring to the anointing of the Holy Spirit which is

given to all who believe in Christ.

In two passages (Acts viii. 14-24 ; xix. 2-6) the laying on of hands appears to be the means of imparting the gift of the Holy Spirit. This is by no means opposed to the conclusion outlined in the second paragraph of this section. In the former passage the converts were the first non-Jewish Christians. It was essential that the Apostles themselves should take the responsibility of receiving them into the Church, and therefore the gift of the Holy Spirit was withheld until the Apostles laid their hands on them. It is noteworthy that St. Luke considers it necessary to mention that the gift was withheld, as though normally he would have expected it to be given through the sacrament of Baptism, even when there was no Apostle at hand to confirm. The latter passage is a more usual case. Here the laying on of hands is so clearly one ceremony with the washing of Baptism that it is only natural that the manifestation of the gift of the Spirit should await its completion.

There would seem therefore to be some ground for concluding that the writers of the New Testament, when expounding the sacrament of Baptism, had in mind water Baptism, and that in so far as they considered the laying on of hands as part of it, it was as a subsidiary rite, used also for many other purposes, which derived its significance from the sacrament of Baptism to which it was annexed, and which served to emphasize the more positive promises of Baptism. To this it may be added that the quotations given by Mason (*The Relation of Confirmation to Baptism*, pp. 53-56, 318) seem to indicate that the references to Baptism in Justin Martyr's Apology, the Epistle of Barnabas, and in the Didaché are susceptible of a similar interpretation.

IV.

We must now pass on to consider the significance of the Sacrament of Holy Baptism as we find it expressed in the pages of the New Testament, always bearing it in mind that the writers are thinking of the adult believer, the usual case in the early Church ; after this we shall be in a position to consider to what extent we can apply their teaching to the case of an unconscious infant. The first and most obvious meaning is that of cleansing from sin. This is clearly brought out in the words of Ananias to St. Paul, calling him to be baptized and wash away his sins (Acts xxii. 16). The same idea appears also in 1 Pet. iii. 21. Secondly, in St. Paul's epistles Baptism is set forth as the Sacrament of union with Christ. We are baptized into Christ. We put on Christ (Rom. vi. 3 ; Gal. iii. 27). By Baptism we are made members of His body, the Church, the sphere of the New Covenant, through the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. xii. 13). Thirdly, Baptism speaks of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the believing Christian (Ac. i. 5 ; ii. 38 ; 1 Cor. xii. 13). Fourthly, lest we should attach undue significance to the physical rite itself, St. Peter (1 Pet. iii. 21) refers to the sacrament in terms which remind us of St. Paul's words about Circumcision (Rm. ii. 28, 29), and emphasizes that the vital thing is not the physical washing but the response of a cleansed heart to God.

To what degree is the foregoing outline of the significance of Baptism applicable to the case of an infant? Cleansing from sin

certainly can not apply to an unconscious infant in the sense in which it can refer to the adult who has repented and turned to Christ for salvation. The child does not share the guilt of the adult, for he has never had the opportunity of committing sin. Even though we may speak of original guilt we can hardly suppose that the word guilt means what it does when we speak of the guilt of an adult. At the same time we cannot suppose God to be indifferent to the corruption of the child's nature that will in time lead him into sin, and no doubt Baptism does pledge to the child that through the sacrifice of the death of Christ God sets that blemish aside, and, so far as it can be said, pardons it.

Equally it is impossible to say that every unconscious child enters into union with Christ through the sacrament of Baptism as the believing adult does, or that he receives the gift of the Holy Ghost, because of any supposed inability to resist the grace of God. The evidence of the lives of the vast majority of persons baptized in infancy gives us no ground for supposing that they have been regenerated, and have received the gift of the Spirit.

It seems much more realistic to approach the Sacrament remembering that it is a rite in which persons are initiated into a covenant with God, the New Covenant of our Lord and Saviour. The case of the adult believer will be similar to that of Abraham : the sacrament will be the seal of God's approval set upon his faith (Rom. iv. 11). The case of the infant who is rightly baptized (see Section II) will be like that of Isaac, who was circumcised when he was eight days old. To him the sacrament could not be a seal set upon his faith, for as yet he had none ; but it could form the foundation pledge upon which his subsequent faith would be built. Similarly the faith of the Christian child will rest upon the promises of God pledged to him in Baptism.

As he is brought up in the community of the Church he will be taught of God's promises by faithful members—his parents to whose care God has committed him, or his godparents to whom the Church has entrusted the oversight of his spiritual upbringing. When as the result of his life in the fellowship of God's people, the first consciousness of sin begins to dawn upon his mind, the relevance of the baptismal promise of cleansing from sin will be perceived. The sad thought, "I have sinned," will be matched by the glorious realization, "God has promised to cleanse away my sin"; and by an act of faith the cleansing will be appropriated. The realization of God's wrath for sin will be met by the understanding of the assurance of His love declared in the gift of His Son and in His death on the Cross, and solemnly pledged to him in Baptism. When the struggle with temptation develops he will find victory by claiming the fulfilment of the promise of union with Christ in his death to sin, and in his new life unto God. When the need of regeneration as a child of God is understood, he will accept the promise of new birth, and the gift of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God's Son (Gal. iv. 6).

Then the time will come for the open confession of the Saviour, Whom he has come to know and trust, by the renewal before the Church of the vows made on his behalf at his Baptism. He will then receive the Laying on of Hands as an additional pledge of the gifts of

Baptism on which his faith has begun to lay hold, and through it he will receive whatever of the gift of salvation his faith is capable of receiving, but has not as yet made his own. Thereafter he will come to understand, not least through receiving the Communion of the Body and Blood of Christ, that his association with the Church is no voluntary one, which he is at liberty to continue or discontinue as he pleases, but the direct consequence of the work of the Holy Spirit whereby he has been made a member of the Body of Christ, of which the Church on earth is the visible expression.

Does then the Baptism of an infant invariably look to a future appropriation of the gifts of God pledged therein? May not the gift of salvation be imparted to the infant there and then? There is no reason to limit the power of God by saying that He cannot regenerate an unconscious infant. John the Baptist was filled with the Holy Ghost from his mother's womb (Lk. i. 15), and what God has done in the past He can still do to-day. From time to time one meets Christians who never remember the time when they did not love and trust God, and whose regeneration therefore must have taken place before the dawn of consciousness. Is it not possible that these happy souls were regenerated in response to the faithful prayers of their parents and godparents when they were baptized? The following is the testimony of such a one.

"I thank God that I was born into this world, and that during my temporary passage through it, I have obtained, as God's free gift, eternal life, by the quickening power of the Holy Spirit 'the Author and Giver of Life'. I have often thought whether, in answer to the prayer of faith, that great gift may not have been bestowed upon me in baptism, since from my earliest recollection I have had a delight in 'the things of God'. Why should it not have been? Prayer was specially offered in the Baptismal Service for my spiritual regeneration; and not only so but in the same service God was thanked, in the language of faith, hope, and love for so great a gift. That is quite a different thing from the *opus operatum* doctrine . . ." (*What Hath God Wrought*, p. 2, 4th ed.; the Autobiography of the late Canon Hobson of Liverpool).

Surely this is what every Christian parent should look for when his child is baptized. The fact that his children are included in the promise of the New Covenant should encourage him to claim their salvation from God. Is not the practice of Infant Baptism the expression of such a faith? The promise of the Covenant is theirs. Who can deny them its sign and pledge, the sacrament of the Covenant?

The doctrine of Baptism and Confirmation set forth above may not be so attractive, because neither so clear cut nor so tidy, as that which assigns to Baptism in water the preparatory work of cleansing from sin and incorporating into Christ, and to Confirmation the imparting of the gift of the Holy Spirit; but it is the belief of the writer that it is more in accord with the tenor of the Holy Scriptures and with the common experience of Christian people. It has, moreover, the advantage of providing a doctrinal basis for the practice of Infant Baptism.