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“The Ministration of Publick Baptism of Infants”

Two Points of View

I

IN DEFENCE OF THE EXISTING PRACTICE

BY THE REV. S. B. LATHAM, M.A.

THE purpose of the present article is not an endeavour to present a thorough-going defence of the present practice of Infant Baptism in the Church of England, which may fairly be called “Indiscriminate Baptism,” but to suggest certain considerations which the writer feels should guide us in our desire and plans for reform, and which will, it may be hoped, save us from some mistakes, and may be from making matters even worse than they are at present. Like many of my brother clergy of different schools of thought, I am deeply convinced that our present practice *does* call for reform : chiefly, as I believe, because it cannot be justified from the New Testament, nor surely from the Prayer Book. What then are some of the factors to be borne in mind and which should lead us “to make haste slowly”?

We need to remember that our present practice of baptising all infants brought to us for that purpose has many centuries of custom behind it. Thousands of English parents would no more think of depriving their children of Baptism than they would consider depriving them of food. For them, the Baptism of newly born infants is just the natural and proper thing ; to omit it would be a grave departure from decent and proper religious and social standards. It is worth while pausing to seek the underlying cause or causes of such a deeply rooted idea. For my part I feel confident that one, and perhaps the chief, reason for this is the perfectly dreadful thought, inherited from the medieval church and some of the Fathers, that if the child were not baptised its soul would be in danger ; and should the child die in that state it might, and in the minds of some would, incur eternal loss. The practice of Private Baptism of Infants might be understood in support of this idea. The fact that such a ghastly conception ever became prevalent in the church, in view of our Lord’s teaching about children, is alas ! only a further testimony to the darkness and perversity of the human mind (and heart) when traditions are accepted and followed which are entirely out of harmony with the teaching of Holy Scripture. Dreadful as such an idea is, it appears to me to differ only in degree from the generally accepted belief among the clergy, that Baptism is the sure and certain channel for the conveyance of spiritual life, and that all baptised infants are really born from above through the work of the Holy Spirit.

If this idea is true, I personally cannot understand the real objection,

on the part of those who hold it, to baptising *all* infants. If Baptism *always* conveys spiritual life why not in the mission field, for example, baptise the children of heathen and Mohammedan parents? If the practice of Infant Baptism is to be restricted, an honest endeavour must be made to get rid of this idea, and that will certainly be all to the good.

Another notion prevailing in some minds is that "ill-luck" attends an unbaptised child; *e.g.*, it will suffer in health, meet with an accident, or be unsuccessful in life. Hence the desire for Baptism. This, of course, is pure superstition.

Again, with many people there is the vague floating notion that Baptism for the child is somehow "the right thing." To omit this might be understood as a denial of the Christian faith or lack of care for the little one's real welfare, etc., and so "of course he (or she) must be baptised."

However deplorable we may think such reasons to be, the fact remains that they exist, and it is always a great mistake to ignore facts. Moreover these and similar ideas have a very long tradition behind them. We cannot expect to correct the errors of centuries by decisions of the National Assembly, or even resolutions—if they should be forthcoming—of bishops, still less by the subjective workings of the mind of a particular incumbent. If Infant Baptism is to be refused in certain cases, it should only be done *after the issue to the English people of a united Manifesto by all the diocesan Bishops* stating the New Testament qualifications for Baptism, and those to whom it should and should not be administered; the reasons for refusal should be clearly stated, and also the date—after a lengthy notice—when the new restrictions would operate.

The parochial clergy—who should still be allowed some use of their individual discretion—must be in honour bound to carry out the spirit of such restrictions. This should be done in each parish in the country and the widest possible publicity be given beforehand to such a Manifesto. For individual incumbents to refuse Baptism, solely on their own judgment, would only still further alienate people from the church. The refusal would in many cases be misunderstood, and would, I am confident, do more harm than good. If the clergy are to refuse Christian Baptism in certain cases, why should they not also refuse Christian Burial?

Further, it should surely be expected that before the new restrictions became operative, the parochial clergy should *make*, so far as possible, opportunities for instructing their people; nor should incumbents be made to promise, as at present in Institution Services, to seek out unbaptised children with a view to their reception of this Sacrament.

A further matter demanding serious consideration is: How far are we justified, if at all, in refusing the Christian sacraments, the appointed means of grace, to those who, after explanation, really desire to receive them, either for themselves or their children? This is a big question and cannot rightly be decided off-hand; certainly it should not be left solely to the judgment of individual incumbents. Take a somewhat parallel case: that of communicants on Easter Day. A number of these seldom come at other times; many are

indifferent in their church attendance. Yet no one dreams of refusing them Holy Communion, no matter how doubtful we may be as to their spiritual fitness. If one administers the Lord's Supper to them, on what reasonable grounds can we refuse the Lord's other sacrament to their children—or the children of those in like case? Surely the truth is that the question as to whether a person is fit to receive either of the sacraments, or not, must be decided by the person himself and not by the minister, except in very extreme cases. If we act contrary to this we are likely to become Genevans with a vengeance!

Ordinary wisdom here would seem to suggest that a reasonable line of reform would be the requirement that before infants were baptised, notice *must* be given personally to the incumbent or his colleague, and that he shall then take the opportunity of explaining to them what Baptism really means. Of course, such explanations would greatly vary. We all know that! But at any rate the parents would have some idea as to the meaning of the sacrament.

A third consideration is that our present custom, whatever its faults, does bring the parochial clergy into real touch with many families with which otherwise they would probably scarcely ever make contact. This, of course, applies chiefly to large town parishes.

The general baptism of infants is one real means of preserving what is left of the truth, that the Church of England is the National Church, *i.e.*, the Church of the nation. Granted that this conception has been and is being grievously weakened: yet should it not be our earnest concern to strengthen it in every possible way? Anything like frequent refusals of Infant Baptism would, I believe, weaken rather than strengthen the Christian sentiment amongst our people. Even a nominal adherence to Christian faith and practice is surely better than no adherence at all!

Again, Infant Baptism as at present administered does afford us opportunities of evangelism, although the writer must confess he has not fully used them. We can be really friendly to those who come to the service, talk about the church, introduce the parish magazine and invite them to attend the regular services. An excellent opportunity is provided for subsequent visitation to the home which is really fruitful in some cases. Besides this, we are given the chance of getting into friendly relationship with many people whom otherwise we should probably never meet. It is a great asset when the clergyman is looked on as the friend of the people.

In conclusion, the writer desires to state that the writing of this article, faulty as its presentation may be, has strengthened two convictions which he has always held:

(1) The need to disabuse ourselves and others of the unchristian and really shocking idea that an unbaptised infant or child is in great spiritual danger owing to the lack of that sacrament: that if it dies unbaptised it might suffer eternal loss and if it lives, he or she will probably never receive the grace of God.

(2) The truth that the Christian sacraments, while being real means of grace, yet “in such only as worthily receive the same” do they have “a wholesome effect or operation.”

He has also come more definitely to the conclusion that we have no justifiable reason to refuse either of the Sacraments to those who, after due explanation, desire to receive them either for themselves or for their children.

II

A PLEA FOR BAPTISMAL REFORM

BY THE REV. P. H. WOOD, M.A.

SINCE Baptism is the initiatory rite of the Church of Jesus Christ any discussion of this subject, its importance and significance, must start from the standpoint of the Church. Surely it is no mere coincidence that concern about indiscriminate Baptism should come to the fore at the very time when the Church is becoming self-conscious to a degree unknown for centuries.

It should be clear that if the Church is simply vague and nebulous "without body, parts or passions," then the rite initiating a person into such an undefinable community will lack corresponding significance: at best bestowing some unspecified benediction with no obligatory demands, at worst, an "opportunity of contact" with the initiate! (Imagine the Early Church regarding its initiatory rite as an "opportunity for contact" with the subject of initiation!) On the other hand, if the Church of Jesus Christ is a community of people clearly and sharply defined to which a person obviously belongs or equally obviously does not (as, *e.g.*, in the case of a modern Masonic Lodge), then the initiatory rite becomes correspondingly significant and important—not to say sacred. We do not so readily cast our pearls before swine in the mere hope of establishing a contact.

Now much of the writing which has brought the meaning and significance of the Church to our consciousness has tended to ignore what we may call its "utter distinctness" from any other body on earth. The reason for this may be that we have not yet fully shaken ourselves free from the clinging folds of Comparative Religion, concerned, as it is, to eliminate distinction and to emphasise what is common, and that we are still too allergic to the sneer of being "other worldly". An unbiased examination of Scripture, however, cannot but reveal that, while there may be a false conception of distinctness, nevertheless by its very constitution the Body of Christ has an inherent distinctness and even solitariness which belonged to the earthly experience of the One who now constitutes its Head. Indeed, the impact made by the Church upon the world in every generation depends upon its realizing this "utter distinctness." "Walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called." "Ye are the salt of the earth" (and how distinct is salt!); but (significantly) "if the salt shall lose its strength . . ."

What then are the factors which make the Church the Church and which effect this "distinctness" of which we have been thinking?

The first great factor which constitutes the Church as such is that the individual members are indwelt by the Holy Spirit. It is this experience of the Holy Ghost which, in the New Testament, makes an