

Editorial

THE first three articles in this issue of THE CHURCHMAN deal with various aspects of the Pastoral Ministry. The articles by the Principal of Ridley Hall, Cambridge, and the Bishop of Liverpool contain the substance of the papers they read at the Islington Clerical Conference in January last. The article by the Rev. F. C. M. Musgrave-Brown is a revised form of his paper at the Conference of Evangelical Churchmen held at St. Peter's Hall, Oxford, in April.

The theme of this year's Oxford Conference was "Baptism To-day," with particular reference to the Convocation report of that title, and the subject was surveyed in turn from the theological, historical and pastoral points of view. The formal "findings" of the conference are printed at the end of this Editorial; but it may be well to admit that the conference arrived at no very satisfactory conclusion, and at the end of their discussions the members were chiefly conscious of the further ground that still needs to be explored. In particular, it was felt that before any serious attempt can be made to improve the administration of baptism or to revise the baptismal service, it is essential to gain a deeper understanding of the doctrine of baptism in its widest range. Any radical baptismal reform must be preceded by a lot of clear thinking and be based on definite theological insights.

The report *Baptism To-day* frankly recognises that a good deal of our present difficulty and confusion arises from the fact that when in the early centuries infant baptism took the place of adult baptism as the normal practice of the Church, no essential change took place either in the theology or in the administration of the rite. As a result the Church is still attaching to baptism in the case of an unconscious infant the full theological significance which the New Testament reserves for the baptism of a responsible believer. The change from adult baptism to infant baptism should have involved, as Dr. Oliver C. Quick points out in *The Christian Sacraments*, "a shifting of emphasis from the instrumental to the symbolic aspect of the sacrament" (page 169); for, as he says further, "Baptism symbolises much more than what at the moment it effects" (page 173).

There are, in fact, a number of deeply important questions to be thought out in arriving at a fully scriptural doctrine of infant baptism. For example, What is the place of infants—and more especially the infants of believing parents—in the visible Church? Have they a real right to membership by reason of the faith of their parents and godparents, or does their inability to repent and believe exclude them from the Israel of God? Closely allied with this is another question: What precisely is the relation of baptism, as the sign and seal of the new covenant, to circumcision, as the sign and seal of the old covenant? Are we right in drawing the deduction that little children are as capable of entering into covenant-relationship with God now under the Gospel

as they were formerly under the Law? If this be so, we must pursue our inquiries along another line. For example, inasmuch as one of the symbolical values of baptism is that of cleansing, how far is it proper to administer the sacrament to innocent babes? Does "original sin" include any element of "original guilt," and in what way is infant baptism related to such ideas? Again, what do we mean when we apply the term "regenerate" to baptised infants? That there is in the New Testament a connection between baptism and regeneration we cannot doubt; but does regeneration in the case of an infant bear the same significance as in the case of an adult? In reference to the former must not the term indicate a new standing (*viz.* membership in God's family) rather than a spiritual transformation? In that case, ought we not to recognise that "baptismal regeneration" is not the same as conversion and does not preclude the necessity of personal faith in Christ?

These are questions which demand the most careful consideration from a biblical point of view. Once we have reached a true understanding of these matters we shall be in a far better position to reform our baptismal practice as well as to revise our baptismal service. Perhaps a future Oxford Conference will undertake such a line of investigation. Meanwhile we print below the findings of this year's conference as summing up the conclusions already reached.

1. Christian initiation, which is one threefold process, comprising baptism, confirmation and first communion, is the act of, and the means of admission into, the whole Church. In each part of the process God takes the initiative by bestowing the Holy Spirit.
2. Infant baptism, following naturally from the admission of children into the old covenant by circumcision, also fully accords with the principle of the new covenant of grace.
3. The Church of England has transferred to the time of confirmation the probation and instruction originally required of catechumens. This change, while preserving the New Testament emphasis on repentance and faith, demands a more radical examination of the theology of infant baptism than has yet been undertaken.
4. This theological investigation should precede any revision of the baptismal service. Meanwhile, in order to secure a sincere and intelligent use of the sacrament, it is essential that as a normal rule baptism should be administered only after careful preparation and with due regard to the requirements of the canons and rubrics.
5. In order to complete a true baptism, and to avoid the danger of indiscriminate confirmation, the clergy, and others responsible for preparation and presentation, should do their utmost to ensure the personal response of candidates to the claims of Christ as Saviour and Lord.