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Circumcision and Baptism

A Reply to Professor Rowley

BY THE REV. J. A. MOTYER, M.A., B.D.

TO the abundant contemporary literature dealing with the theology of Baptism, Professor Rowley of Manchester has now added a brief quota in the concluding study to his book, published in 1953, *The Unity of the Bible*. One is bound to admit that it is a strange and partisan ending to a book which otherwise evidences a wholesome objectivity in the study of the Bible. Our immediate purpose, however, is to extract from his study of Baptism Professor Rowley's treatment of one single item—the relation of Baptism under the New Covenant to Circumcision under the Old ; not because it is the most vulnerable point of his argument, but because it is clearly a matter which he thinks (rightly) to be of some importance in Baptismal Controversy and to which he feels he has dealt a shrewd blow. To one who has long felt that there is no argument framed against Infant Baptism which is not equally valid against Infant Circumcision, and that therefore there is some real underlying unity of principle, it comes as a shock, and a challenge, to read that "it is surely one of the unsolved mysteries of Christian scholarship why the leap should be made (*i.e.* from Christian Baptism) to what is a completely different and unrelated rite" (p. 156).

This is a sweeping statement. Our first endeavour will be to examine and evaluate the arguments on which it is based.

(a) *Incomplete Analogy*. "It (Circumcision) did not apply to females, and therefore could provide no analogy to the Baptism of girls" (p. 156). The force of this argument apparently is that since circumcision does not provide a complete analogy to Baptism it provides no analogy at all ! We are, seemingly, to take no account of the differing nature of the two Covenants, nor of the totally different attitude to the female sex which the New Testament evidences as against the typical Jewish attitude. In one of its most prized documents, the Pirque Aboth, later Judaism expressed its mind on this point (1. 5): " Jose ben Johanan of Jerusalem said : ' Let thy house be opened wide and let the poor be thy household, and talk not much with a woman'. He said it in the case of his own wife, much more in the case of his companion's wife. Hence the wise have said : Everyone that talketh much with a woman causes evil to himself and desists from the words of Torah and his end is that he inherits Gehinnom." Naturally these words do not represent explicitly any situation existing in the Old Testament, but they undeniably represent the tendency. St. Paul's happy exclamation that in Christ there are "neither male nor female" is singularly pointless unless it declares that the New Covenant gave a new significance to womanhood, and a new place to woman herself in the ordinances of God. One might as well ask Professor Rowley on what New Testament grounds he would defend

the admission of women to Holy Communion, since the New Testament contains no explicit evidence that this was apostolic practice, and if he replied that it is a natural and unexceptionable inference from what the New Testament says about the status of women under the New Covenant, we would feel that he had emptied his first argument against the Baptism-Circumcision parallel of all its scanty significance.

(b) *Indiscriminate Baptism.* "Even if circumcision were allowed to be a true analogy, it would still not justify the indiscriminate baptism of children." There is of course no value at all in this statement. No denomination, and least of all the Church of England, desires to practise indiscriminate Baptism, and therefore does not need to seek justification for such a practice, nor is this the reason why paedobaptists are accustomed to appeal to the rite of circumcision.

(c) *Baptism and Circumcision are not Identical.* "At the Council of Jerusalem the question whether it was necessary for Gentiles to be circumcised was discussed. The question at issue was not whether Baptism was a substitute for circumcision, but whether Gentiles should be required to be both circumcised and baptized. . . . The two rites were therefore clearly seen to be quite distinct in their significance and their subjects. Hence, immediately after the account of Paul's victory at the Council . . . we read that he insisted on the circumcision of Timothy. . . . No confusion between the two rites existed in his mind."

The underlying logic of this quotation seems to be as follows : if any parallel at all is to be drawn between baptism and circumcision, they should be demonstrably applicable to the same candidates and have, for such, the same significance. It cannot be shown that the Council, or St. Paul, thought of baptism as a substitute for circumcision, therefore they have no connexion with each other in any direction whatsoever. We may easily admit most of this, but still find the situation open to a different conclusion from that drawn by Professor Rowley. The council saw that circumcision had no essential place in the New Covenant ; hence they were able to absolve the Gentiles from the rite without mentioning baptism at all. In this the quotation is correct : baptism is not a substitute for circumcision. Likewise, because circumcision was an outmoded convention belonging to a wholly different situation, St. Paul was able to admit it as a matter of expediency (Acts xvi. 3b) even though he had just opposed it bitterly as a matter of principle (Acts xv. 1, 2).

(d) *Unity of Sacramental Principle.* Truly circumcision and baptism are distinct in significance and subjects : for, as regards significance, the one admits to the Old Covenant of Law, and the other to the New Covenant of Grace ; as regards subjects, the one deals with those born under or willingly subservient to the Law of Moses, the other (as we would hold) those born under or willingly subservient to the Law of Christ. There is no question, however, of "confusing" baptism and circumcision, nor have we any desire to do so any more than the Council of Jerusalem or St. Paul or Professor Rowley. But the introduction of this concept of "confusion" betokens some "confusion" in the mind of our learned writer about the real nature of our contention. God forbid that we should "confuse" baptism and

circumcision. But this is not to say that they may not both in their way and place be demonstrations of the same principle of divine working. We will grant all that Professor Rowley urges in refusing to identify Baptism and Circumcision. It still remains that the one was the initiatory rite of the Old Covenant, and the other of the New Covenant ; and the two covenants represent one continuous programme of salvation devised and implemented by the same God ; we will therefore contend, and hope to support the contention, that the sacramental principle involved is the same, and that if the one was applicable to infants of believers, so is the other.

II

New Testament Evidence. Professor Rowley has still one further argument to offer, but since it turns on the interpretation of a key New Testament passage, we will treat it rather as part of the positive side of our argument, as we seek to discover whether the New Testament allows of any unity of theological principle in its discussion of Circumcision and Baptism.

The passage in question is Col. ii. 11, 12. “ . . . in (Christ) ye were also circumcised with a circumcision not made with hands, in the putting off of the body of the flesh, in the circumcision of Christ ; having been buried with him in baptism . . . ” ; and the sequence of thought is as follows : The experience which has come to the Colossians “ in Christ ” is spoken of as “ the circumcision of Christ ” which, in contrast with the old circumcision (a) is “ not made with hands ”, and (b) means the casting off not of a part but of the whole of “ the body of the flesh ”. This experience is theirs as those who have been buried with Him in Baptism. Professor Rowley’s comment on this reveals the “ confusion ” already noted. He says (p. 157) : “ Here there is no suggestion that the subjects of baptism and the subjects of circumcision are the same, or that the two rites are in any way parallel in their significance ”. With this we agree, but the fact remains that even though St. Paul is careful to stress the way in which Baptism can go beyond anything that circumcision could promise—it operates in the spiritual sphere ; “ not made with hands ” ; it touches the whole not the part ; its minister is Christ and no earthly priest—yet he does describe their baptism as “ the *circumcision* of Christ ”. According to Rowley, “ all he is saying is that union with Christ does away with the necessity for circumcision ” (p. 157), but in fact that is not all : he is saying that Baptism transcends circumcision at every point, but yet by the terminology he deliberately chooses he underlines that there is, even so, enough correspondence, presumably in terms of the sacramental principle involved, to allow him to call Christian Baptism the Circumcision of the New Covenant.

III

Relation to the Doctrine of Baptism. Consideration of space prohibits the examination of other relevant Scriptures, such as Romans iv. 11, where circumcision is spoken of as a “ seal ”. It is our contention that the exegesis of Colossians ii. 11 is in fact sufficient indication of the New Testament position, and we must now proceed to consider what

are the implications of such a parallel between the two rites for the Theology of Baptism.

(a) *Faith and Circumcision.* Circumcision began as an adult rite, but the terms of the rite as set out in Genesis xvii. 10f. made inevitable what in fact did happen, that the normal practice became infant circumcision. It is against this background—the knowledge that the vast majority of those about whom he writes were circumcised in their infancy—that St. Paul treats of circumcision in Rom. ii. 24f. Circumcision “profits” if the law is kept, but a life in which the law is transgressed makes circumcision “uncircumcision”. The real Jew is not a man with a specially marked body but a man of a certain moral and spiritual character. We may express this by saying that what made the outward rite of circumcision a real transaction with God, was not any disposition of faith towards God which preceded it, but faithful living according to the law of God following the reception of the outward sign. Only on this basis would it be allowable to admit infants to the rite; and it must be remarked that the infants were those in whose case there was a strong presumption that they would be brought up within the covenant both to receive the blessings and fulfil the responsibilities which circumcision sealed to them. Thus, even in the case of Abraham, as St. Paul expounds it in Romans iv, what circumcision sealed to him was the “righteousness of faith” (v. 11); through this righteousness of faith he received the promise (v. 13); but this was not the completed transaction, as the Genesis narrative shows and as is hinted in Rom. iv. 19f., for there were still to come the years when he had only the word of the promise of God to support him until, as Hebrews vi. 15 relates, “having patiently endured he obtained the promise”, and in this process of testing (Jas. ii. 22) “faith wrought with his works and by works was faith made perfect”. The sign of circumcision received its verification in the life of faith which followed it.

(b) *Faith and Baptism.* Romans vi. 1-11 demonstrates that this is true also of Baptism. The outward sign signalizes burial and resurrection with Christ (v. 3), but the sign looks for verification, not backward to a faith which preceded it, but forward to a “walk in newness of life” (v. 4), to an intimate and progressive union with Christ in His death and resurrection (v. 5). Though in spiritual reality the old nature died on the Cross with Christ (v. 6) the verification of that in personal experience follows—“we should no longer be in bondage to sin” (v. 6), and finds expression in life based on the principle of continually reckoning oneself dead to sin and continually reckoning oneself alive to God in Christ (v. 11); and without this entry into its blessings and responsibilities by faithful living, baptism is as much unbaptism as circumcision in corresponding circumstances became uncircumcision.

(c) *The Sacramental Principle.* This then is the great unity of Sacramental Principle which underlies the initiation rites of the two Covenants—a principle which a thorough study of New Testament evidence proves up to the hilt; that the objective grace signalized by the outward act is the Promise of God. This promise, in the Old Covenant, was first to Abraham and was sealed to his descendants by

the sign of circumcision ; in the New Covenant the promise of Salvation, Sonship and the Gift of the Holy Spirit, was made first of all at the Cross, and is sealed to individuals by the outward sign of Baptism. In each case the essential faith is that which follows the outward sign, whereby the individual enters into the spiritual possibilities of which the sign spoke.

Just as under the Old Covenant, the promise was valid when made to children who, though "unconscious" at the time, had every possibility of being brought up "into faith", so now "the promise is to you, and to your children" (Acts ii. 39), and of those who come to Baptism there is required not a contemporary declaration of faith but "faith whereby they stedfastly believe the promises of God made to them in that Sacrament" (Church Catechism). That which the Sacrament seals to the child is the Promise of God ; that to which the Sacrament looks forward is a life of faith in which this promise will be inherited.

Miraculous Healing : A Pathologist's Comments

BY A. P. WATERSON, M.D., M.R.C.P.

CLAIMS of miraculous cures are nothing new in the history of the Church, but the rising tide of them in the last few years calls for an enquiry into their validity, for they are often bold and sweeping. For example, a recent writer has stated, "Most of the miracles of the New Testament have been happening again in recent years where the words of the New Testament are being acted upon".¹ Indeed, it is upon grounds of Scripture that many base their expectation of miraculous healing, as well as on grounds of Church history and of present-day experience. The arguments from Scripture hang upon surprisingly few verses, and do not take account of the Biblical teaching on God's overruling of sickness for spiritual good, nor of the Biblical view of miracles as unusual, extraordinary, events, whose greatest significance was their evidential value. The view of sickness, crystallized by Robins,² that, "God's will is for our health. That comes first and is fundamental. Everything turns on that cardinal fact," is scarcely a Scriptural one.

The evidence of Church history is not, as is often supposed, that miraculous healing persisted for the first three centuries, and then was allowed to lapse by neglect. On the contrary, as J. S. McEwen³ has shown, the writers of this period (he quotes Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian and Origen) were already looking wistfully back to the miracles of Apostolic times. The evidence for the occurrence of miraculous healing, and of raising from the dead, after the end of the first century is very poor. In the fourth, and particularly the fifth and later, centuries accounts of such miracles became more frequent