

Prospects for Baptism

PATRICK BLAIR

'THE PURPOSE of this book is to state the case for General Baptism, that is the willingness to baptise all, especially infants, who are brought for Baptism, their being brought being the only qualification which is required' (*Forbid them Not*, R. R. Osborn, SPCK, 178 pp., £2.). Mr. Osborn states his purpose with admirable conciseness, and he makes many points in his case with forcefulness and a wealth of learning on the history of baptism and the views of the Reformers in particular. Few Anglicans would disagree with his defence of infant baptism as being based firmly in Scripture, or with his analysis of the evidence that infants were baptised in the earliest days of the church, and of the reasons which led to later doubts about the practice and its acceptance in the Middle Ages as the norm for Christendom. However when he tries to argue the case for the general baptism of infants his interpretation of the requirements of repentance and faith as essential for baptism is distinctly odd. To Mr. Osborn the repentance required of candidates in the New Testament is a national repentance applying to Jews as having crucified the Messiah. Candidates for baptism are thus being required to dissociate themselves from the 'errors and sin of their national leaders in asking for Jesus to be put to death', and this is 'a requirement which no Englishman needs to have extracted from him'. No doubt, but this is surely a very arbitrary exegesis of the New Testament doctrine of repentance. Mr. Osborn admits that John's baptism of repentance required a moral change of heart, but forgets that Jesus took up John's call for repentance (Mark 1: 15), and that the disciples in their mission during Jesus's lifetime (Mark 6: 12) and in their commission after the Resurrection (Luke 24: 47) also stressed repentance. In Acts St. Paul's call to the Athenians (17: 30) though not directly linked with baptism, cannot be dismissed as irrelevant in view of the general nature of his words, nor can the comment in 11: 18 where the issue that is to the fore is the baptism of the household of Cornelius with the Holy Spirit and with water as the

first-fruits of the Gentile harvest; cf. also Acts 20: 21. These references cannot be dismissed with the statement that 'the repentance demanded in New Testament times was not primarily a moral repentance'.

Secondly, Mr. Osborn deals with the requirement of faith in a way that is only partly satisfactory. He rightly emphasises the importance of the parents' responsibility in asking for baptism and sees this as an expression of their faith in parallel with that of a Jewish father bringing his son for circumcision. He rightly emphasises the role of the church as a whole with godparents as the church's representatives standing surety for the infant's faith, and he sums up his discussion with the felicitous assessment that it was 'the peerless spiritual fellowship of the Church' which made possible a general welcome for infants. Yes, but surely this is just what the church today lacks so conspicuously. If each local congregation were truly a peerless spiritual fellowship which extended to all in the parish, there would be no difficulty about general baptism. The present trend away from General Baptism stems from the acknowledgement that many households in this country are Christian only in name and that just as the Old Testament prophets were forced to distinguish between the nation of Israel and the 'godly remnant', and St. Paul to draw a contrast between those who are truly Israelites and the mass of Abraham's physical descendants (Rom. 9: 6ff.) so the church must meet the present situation with a policy which is both theologically true and pastorally acceptable, to guard the deposit of faith and to reach out to all with the living gospel.

Mr. Osborn makes very much play with the supposed opportunities of General Baptism, but he bases this on a somewhat naive Erastianism which sees the residual Christianity of Britain as a direct result of the policy of General Baptism in previous centuries. It is true that there is always the chance to summon those baptised in infancy to 'improve their Baptism', but this does not seem to have been as effective in the past as the preaching of conversion by Wesley and other evangelists. His appraisal of the place of confirmation agrees with the current emphasis on the unity of baptism and confirmation as one rite essentially complete in baptism, and he quotes with approval from A. J. Mason that 'the Holy Ghost . . . is perpetually being given as an ever fresh gift . . .'. But he does not allow any real place to conversion as a valid experience separate from baptism or confirmation, for he sees the need for conversion as being due to the practical failure of the church, and the ministry in particular, to fulfil the obligations of nurture and instruction laid on them in administering baptism.

Finally the summing up of the whole purpose of the book in the last two chapters on apologetic and policy for General Baptism seems to be forced and rather rushed. His usual clarity deserts him as his sentences grow to unwieldy proportions reaching 131 and 151 words in length. This reinforces the impression of the book as a whole that while much of Mr. Osborn's scholarship is sound and helpful, he can

only argue his case by special pleading and by dismissing sides of Christian doctrine, such as predestination, which seem to conflict with his views, in a cavalier fashion.

The case against General Baptism is succinctly put in the third of the Grove Booklets (*Baptismal Discipline*, Colin O. Buchanan, Grove Books, 24 pp., £0.20). Mr. Buchanan presents the current position with regard to the theology and practice of baptism in a necessarily brief but admirably lucid form. He makes the sensible caution that any strict policy adopted by a parish must not be simply the policy decreed by the incumbent, but must be adopted with the consent, support and active participation of the church as a whole. He also emphasises that any changes must be introduced gradually and over an increasingly wide area, through Deanery and Diocese to the eventual goal of a united policy for the Church of England, for all churches in this country and for the Church Universal—an estimable vision!

However your reviewer cannot help feeling that Evangelicals have not really grasped the nettle of relating infant baptism to conversion. Baptism is treated as *sacramentally* complete but necessarily as *spiritually* incomplete. How does this relate to the whole New Testament complex of doctrines and metaphors concerned with Christian beginnings? Is the difficulty caused by confusing the New Testament doctrines of regeneration—which is essentially a developing idea of new birth leading to growth into the new life in all its fulness—and justification—which is essentially a once and for all acquittal? Would a careful review of the evidence show that the traditional Evangelical standpoint that these are inseparable in time is not true to the New Testament? If this does prove to be so, then Evangelicals could hold firmly to a doctrine of baptismal regeneration complete in itself as the beginning of a process, with personal faith as its future concomitant, and also to a doctrine of justification through faith without a feeling of hidden tension. At present this tension seems to lie underneath all attempts to explain the awkward aspects of infant Baptism by saying that the initiation through baptism 'will be incomplete till personal faith is added'.

The fifth Grove Booklet on Ministry and Worship (*A Service of Thanksgiving and Blessing*, C. H. B. Byworth and J. A. Simpson, Grove Books, 21 pp., £0.20) sets out the case for a service of thanksgiving and blessing distinct from baptism, gives a suggested order of service, and looks briefly at the theological issues involved in praying for God's blessing on the children of those who would not seem to be committed Christians. Many features of the suggested service are attractive, in particular the giving of a Gospel to the father of each family, and the practical details such as keeping a register of children blessed at such a service are sensibly discussed. One point made is that such a service could well be used at regular family worship. This would provide a helpful way of introducing 'unchurched' families to

worship, especially if it were made part of an overall baptismal discipline whereby all parents were encouraged to bring their babies to such a service as soon as possible after birth, with baptism itself being deferred until at least six months after the giving of thanks for the birth, and then only administered if the parents had established their family as part of the church. Unless the service of thanksgiving is seen normally not as an alternative to baptism, but as part of the preparation for baptism and intended to lead on to baptism within the first year of life, the impression will be given of an arbitrary division of babies into first and second class 'children of God'.

Taking these three books as a trio it is encouraging to find increasing thought being given to baptism. This must always be vital for the health of the church, but especially so now if the forms of worship in a revised Book of Common Prayer are to be completed worthily, and the present pastoral needs are to be effectively met. If those of Evangelical and of Catholic persuasion within the Church are to come closer together, the process must include facing the theological issues of baptism in a spirit of co-operation and mutual respect. Some signs of this are apparent in these books. Mr. Osborn accepts the idea of prophetic symbolism, put forward by Wheeler Robinson in terms of believers' baptism, as the key to a true grasp of baptism both as a sign and an instrument of regeneration, and seeks to extend it to the baptism of infants. He quotes Schweitzer's treatment of the Pauline emphasis on dying and rising with approval in a way that relates closely to John Stott's exegesis of Rom. 6 in *Men Made New*. The two Grove Booklets are written from a definitive Evangelical standpoint, but with evident appreciation of the convictions and sensibilities of others. Such signs are hopeful and may well be helpful instruments for joint advance in the future.