

Reflections on 'Second Baptism'*

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The problem of Second Baptism is closely related to the tension (which has existed in various parts of the Church for many centuries) between two different views of the sacrament of Baptism.

View A: Believer's Baptism. According to this view the taking of Baptism is primarily an individual believer's response to God's saving grace in Jesus Christ. Through the sacrament the believer testifies to his acceptance of Christ as his Saviour and Lord, and pledges himself to be Christ's follower and servant for ever. Secondly, the Church acknowledges the believer's decision of commitment, and admits him to the fellowship of believers.

View B: 'Catholic' Baptism. (I would not wish to advocate this name, 'Catholic Baptism', for normal use, but I am adopting it here as a convenient label to distinguish this view from Believer's Baptism.) According to this view Baptism is primarily the admission of an individual to membership of the Christian Church. If the individual is of an age to make an affirmation on his own behalf, then, before he is baptized, he must openly profess faith in Christ and acceptance of the obligations of Church membership. But in practice the Church (the New Israel) is, like the old Israel which preceded it, a human society continuing from generation to generation, and containing people of all ages; and so, since an early stage in the history of the Church, it has been customary to admit to membership, through the sacrament of Baptism, the infants of people who are already Church members. In such cases the Church authorities, who administer Baptism, should have an assurance that the child's parents, or others who are responsible for bringing him up, will surround him with those influences within the fellowship of the

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Church which will lead him in course of time to explicit personal faith in Christ.

According to both of the above views, Baptism can be administered only once in the life of one individual. According to *View A*, the act of accepting Christ as Saviour and Lord, and being spiritually incorporated into Him, can take place only once in a person's lifetime, no matter what fluctuations of spiritual experience he may have thereafter. And, according to *View B*, a person can only once become a member of the Church, no matter how often he may thereafter fail to fulfil the obligations of membership.

THE PROBLEM IN THE C.N.I.

Sometimes, however, a person who has been baptized in infancy, in a denomination which holds *View B*, later desires to take Baptism as a testimony to his personal faith in Christ, that is, according to *View A*. Naturally, those who believe that *View A* is the right one are anxious that an individual who wants to testify to his personal faith should not be debarred from taking Baptism simply because he was baptized according to *View B* at a time of his life when he had no choice in the matter. During the negotiations for Church Union in North India this was one of the most sensitive issues for the denominations which held to *View A*. The Third Edition of the *Plan of Union* (1957) included an "Appendix B" (pages 42-43) giving guiding principles in regard to Baptism, which sought, among other things, to lay down that a member already baptized in infancy, who desires to take Believer's Baptism, should be helped "to seek the remedy of what he now believes to be a grave lack in his own Baptism, not by re-baptism, but by some other means which effectively re-affirms his Baptism and symbolizes for him his engrafting into Christ." The last paragraph of the Appendix said, "It is further understood that, if a person should persistently maintain that only his Baptism now as a believer will satisfy his conscience, although he was baptized in infancy, the minister concerned will refer the matter to the Bishop of the Diocese for pastoral advice and direction." Many members of the denominations holding *View A*, however, were unhappy about the statements in "Appendix B", which appeared to them to suggest that the liberty of individual members' consciences would be over-ridden by hard and fast Church regulations. So, in the Fourth (and final) Edition of the *Plan of Union* (1965), that Appendix was omitted, and a new section (paragraph 4) closely based on paragraph 4 of the Appendix, was inserted in Chapter IV ("The Doctrines of the Church"). This section refers to "divergence of conviction on certain other matters of faith and practice", and expresses "confidence that in brotherly converse

within one Church those of diverse convictions will be led together in the unity of the Spirit to learn what is His will in these matters of difference."

At this point it should be noted that the problem of Second Baptism is not necessarily confined to cases of a clash between the two above-mentioned views of the sacrament of Baptism. It is also possible for a person who has received Believer's Baptism (according to *View A*) to have a further spiritual experience which makes him feel dissatisfied with his previous Baptism, and wish to be baptized a second time. I myself have never come across such a case, but I am sure it is a real possibility, because it is a well-known fact that persons of a certain emotional temperament may undergo what they call a "conversion experience" several times over, although conversion is essentially a once-for-all event. Such persons feel, on each successive occasion, that their previous experience was not really genuine or complete. So, if such a person has taken Believer's Baptism after his first "conversion experience", but later has a "conversion experience" which he feels is more genuine, he will doubtless desire to be baptized again. But few, if any, christian Churches would agree to baptize such a person a second time.

I know of one instance where a Hindu man decided to become a Christian because a christian girl, with whom he was in love, refused to marry him unless he did so. He received instruction from a christian minister, and, on profession of faith, was baptized (by sprinkling, not immersion), thus becoming a member of the Church; and he then married the girl. After some time he came in contact with a christian sect and was led to a vital experience of conversion. The members of the sect told him that he must now undergo Baptism by immersion, because his previous Baptism was not true scriptural Baptism; and he did so. It is interesting to speculate whether, if his first Baptism had been by immersion, the sect would have urged him, or even allowed him, to go through the same rite again. But in any case the man was spiritually regenerated and became a zealous witness to the gospel. It is a remarkable story, and may even be unique; but I do not think we can regard it as the second Baptism of one who had previously received Believer's Baptism, because his first Baptism was not by immersion and was not the outcome of genuine personal faith.

SCRIPTURE AND CHURCH HISTORY

With regard to Biblical teaching on this matter, it is clear that, for the New Testament writers, Baptism is a single event in the life of a christian believer. The idea of anyone taking christian Baptism a second time would have seemed preposterous to those writers. St Paul, for example, expounds Baptism as

symbolizing a person's participation, through faith, in Christ's dying and rising again, and it would be absurd to suggest that one who was already "risen with Christ" should or could go through the same process a second time. But of course the writers of the New Testament were unacquainted with the problems which have arisen as a result of the practice of infant Baptism. It is undeniable that all the teaching on Baptism which is found in the New Testament takes for granted that Baptism is received voluntarily by the individual concerned, as a testimony to, and seal upon, his personal faith in Christ. But the reason for this is that the books of the New Testament were written in the first generation, before any question had arisen about the admission to church membership of the children born to parents who were already baptized Christians. When the question arose in later generations, there may have been differences of opinion, but it is a matter of history that ultimately the ancient Catholic Church adopted the practice of baptizing the infants of believers.

Modern advocates of *View A* would say that the ancient Church was wrong in adopting that policy; and they support this opinion by quoting the New Testament references to Baptism, which all clearly relate to Believer's Baptism. But they are mistaken if they assume that Biblical teaching is wholly on their side, and that infant Baptism is only a superstitious ceremony, perpetuated through a rigid adherence to ecclesiastical tradition and without any theological justification. The truth is that the policy of the Church towards the children of baptized believers cannot be settled simply by reference to the circumstances prevailing in New Testament times, when the issue had not arisen. The issue has to be considered in the light of the whole Biblical doctrine of the Church as an ongoing community, God's chosen people. There is certainly no universal consensus among Biblical theologians; but there are some theologians, at least, who feel that, by admitting the children of believers to Church membership, the Church is being more faithful to the New Testament conception of its nature than if it keeps such children outside its membership until they grow up and can personally profess faith in Christ.

The advocates of *View B* can point out that the following Biblical truths, which are effectively expressed through infant Baptism, are less clearly shown forth when Baptism is administered to an adult believer who was born and brought up in a Christian home:

- (i) The first steps for anyone's salvation are taken by God, even before that person is aware of his need for salvation.
- (ii) Christian salvation is not purely an individual matter, but is bound up with the person's membership of the Church, the People of God, the redeemed community.

- (iii) The children of christian parents have a real place within the Church of Christ, even while they are still children.
- (iv) The sacrament of Baptism symbolizes the *beginning* of a person's christian life.

It has been pointed out that the only New Testament instances of the baptism of children are the possible cases of children being included in such households as that of Lydia (Acts 16: 15), the Philippian jailer (Acts 16: 33) and Stephanas (I Cor. 1: 16), where apparently the whole household was baptized together. Such evidence is admittedly uncertain and scanty, but it may be significant when contrasted with the total lack of any scriptural evidence whatever for any child of *christian* parents being baptized years later after he had grown up.

PRACTICAL PRINCIPLES

After the above review of Biblical and theological considerations I wish to suggest that the following practical principles ought to be followed by a Church such as the C.N.I., which deliberately includes within its membership both those who accept *View A* of baptism, and those who accept *View B*.

- I. The Church should seek to lead all those who are under its care to put their personal faith in Christ, commit themselves to His service, and have a clear assurance of salvation through Him. When any person has this experience, whether through the influence of the C.N.I. or otherwise, the Church should welcome it and thank God for it.
- II. The Church should also seek to lead all those who are under its care to become baptised and communicant members. (Ideally, it might be assumed that all those who had committed themselves to Christ as Saviour would become communicant members, and that all those who became communicant members would already have committed themselves to Christ as Saviour. But in practice this ideal is not often realized. So it is necessary to set down both the above principles, I & II, separately.)
- III. The Church should be very careful to ensure that its records are accurate and kept up to date, showing whether each person under its care is (a) an unbaptized adherent (either an adult catechumen or a person who was dedicated as an infant), or (b) baptized but not yet a communicant, or (c) a baptized and communicant member.

- IV. The Church should try to ensure that all ceremonies or rites to mark the passing of a person from category (a) (unbaptized) to category (b) (baptized), or from (b) (baptized) to (c) (communicant) should be administered under its own auspices. This means that a C.N.I. member who feels impelled by spiritual conviction to make some public testimony should not seek to do this under any auspices other than those of the C.N.I., but should approach his Presbyter or Bishop, and ask (e.g.) to be baptized (if he has not yet been baptized), or to be received as a communicant (if he is not yet a communicant member), or, if neither of these rites is appropriate in his case, to be given some other opportunity for public testimony.

LINES OF ACTION

If the above four principles are accepted, I should expect them to be applied as follows to the matter of Second Baptism.

1. If a Presbyter or Bishop learns that a member under his care, who has already been baptized (either in infancy or as a believer), desires to take Baptism again, he should have a serious talk with the said member as soon as possible. He should seek to understand sympathetically the member's conviction, and encourage him in his desire to be wholly committed to Christ in accordance with the teaching of the New Testament. But he should point out that if he were to undergo Baptism it would appear like a repudiation of his previous Baptism, which was duly carried out by the Church and acknowledged by it. The Presbyter or Bishop should therefore urge the said member to testify to his faith in Christ by coming forward to communicant membership, or (if he is already a communicant) by making a public reaffirmation of baptismal vows, such as is provided for in the form of service printed in the Book of Common Prayer (1960) of the former C.I.P.B.C. on pp: 331-335. The Presbyter or Bishop should especially try to dissuade the member from undergoing any rite, purporting to be Baptism, under auspices outside the C.N.I., because this would amount to disloyalty to the C.N.I. Accordingly, if, in any exceptional case, the Church authorities finally decide to grant their approval to some rite which involves immersion in water and the use of the Threefold Name of God, in order to satisfy the conscience of an individual member, the rite should be administered within the C.N.I. by a Presbyter or Bishop of the C.N.I. The decision to approve such a rite for an individual member, whose name is already on the C.N.I.'s roll of baptized members, should be taken, if at all, only after very careful consultation between the local Presbyter and the bishop of the Diocese, and, if possible, between the Bishop and other

Bishops; and the form of the rite, with the wording to be used in it, should be so framed as to minimize the danger of its being interpreted, either by the individual member concerned or by others, as a repudiation of the Baptism already received by the said member (and, by implication, the Baptism which many other members received in infancy).¹

2. If a baptized member of the C.N.I. has already taken Second Baptism under auspices outside the C.N.I., the Presbyter or the Bishop, or both of them, should interview the member concerned and try first to find out what is his attitude. For example, does he realize that what he has done appears like disloyalty to the C.N.I.? And, if so, does he intend to leave the C.N.I. permanently? Will he return to its fellowship, acknowledging that he acted without due consideration for his obligations as a member, and resolving to be a loyal member henceforward? Secondly, the Church authorities should try to find out how much effect the member's action in taking second Baptism has had upon other members of the Church. If that effect has been negligible, there will be no cause for alarm. If, however, it is found that other members of the C.N.I. have been led to question the Church's authority, to cast doubt upon its sacraments, and perhaps even to contemplate seeking second Baptism for themselves outside the C.N.I., then the Presbyter or Bishop may have to request the member, who has taken second Baptism, to make some public declaration of loyalty to the C.N.I., acknowledging its authority and the validity of its sacraments, and promising not to instigate any of its members to seek second Baptism. If the member concerned is unwilling to make such a declaration, some disciplinary action may be necessary in order to make plain the Church's stand on these matters; and this will especially be the case if the member concerned holds some office in the Church and is thus in a position to influence other members. Equally there may be some cases in which, even if the member concerned is unco-operative, it may be wiser for the Church authorities to refrain from imposing formal discipline, because this might stir up further trouble in the Church. But, more important than any discipline, and before any disciplinary action is suggested, the approach of the Presbyter and/or Bishop to the member concerned should be a pastoral one — appreciating his spiritual needs and aspirations, endeavouring to strengthen (rather than weaken) his desire to be fully committed to Christ, and, without denouncing him, trying to enable him to understand how his action has harmed the Church to which he belongs.

1. Cf. *Plan of Church Union* (4th Edition), p. 2, Sec. III.A.1, last paragraph, with regard to conscientious convictions of individual members.