

Second Baptism: An Historical Note*

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The problem confronting the C.N.I., of the action to be taken in the case of a person desiring, or submitting to, 'Second Baptism' within the C.N.I., or under auspices outside it, is essentially a new problem in the life of the christian Church; and therefore historical analogies should be treated with caution. The situation arises from the decision of the Pachmarhi Conference of 1965 to delete from the *Plan of Church Union* the statement which had been included as 'Appendix B' in the 3rd Edition (p. 42), and to amend Section VI paragraph 4. 'Appendix B', in the 3rd Edition, had stated that "the Church holds that there is but one Baptism which is therefore unrepeatable in the life of any one person, no matter by which practice it was administered" (paragraph 2); and laid down certain procedures to be followed in the case of a person sincerely convinced that, though baptized in infancy, conscience required him to be baptized as an adult believer. Paragraph 7 suggests that in such a case Believer's Baptism would be permissible, after reference to the Bishop of the diocese, although contrary to the generally accepted mind of the Church, and only to be resorted to in the most exceptional cases. The revised Section VI (paragraph 4) of the 4th *Plan* merely states that "both Infant Baptism and Believer's Baptism shall be accepted as *alternative* practices in the Church of North India". The word 'alternative' in this context rather seems to suggest 'either . . . or' in the case of each individual member of the C.N.I., while both forms of Baptism are acknowledged and held in equal regard by the Church as a whole. The purpose of the new paragraph was clearly to recognize and accommodate both views and both practices, even at the risk of anomaly, in the expectation (Section IV paragraph 4) that such anomalies would be swallowed up and lose their sting in the greater Unity achieved in the formation of the C.N.I. Other anomalies (in regard to the Ministry, sacramental practice, the details of Church Order etc.) were recognized, and postponed in faith.

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Apprehensions were expressed at the time (cf. *Church Union News & Views*, May 1965) that the removal of 'Appendix B' would lead to problems; but it was accepted in anticipation that such problems could be met on the basis of mutual charity and accommodation within the new context arising after the consummation of Union. The fact that a case of 'Second Baptism' has now arisen provides an opportunity for the C.N.I. to think through the problem together, no longer as separate negotiating denominations but as one Body in Christ.

It must frankly be recognized that the real point at issue is not really the question "May Baptism be repeated?", but rather, "What is Baptism?" To those who practise Believer's Baptism, Baptism in infancy is not truly Baptism at all, and therefore the phrases 'Second Baptism' or 're-Baptism' are meaningless. On the other hand, those who equally sincerely practise infant Baptism naturally regard the 're-Baptism' of a person baptized in infancy as inadmissible. Many of the arguments traditionally use for and against 're-Baptism' in the Early Church and at the Reformation are therefore irrelevant, since they were used in a context not of Unity but of plurality.

Biblical Evidence

It has to be admitted that no very clear picture of baptismal practice among the first generation of christians emerges from the pages of the New Testament. Many of the texts cited by earlier controversialists (e.g. St Cyprian, St Basil, St Augustine; and the Reformers) lose their cogency when examined in the light of modern standards of Biblical scholarship. Reference may however be made to the following:

Acts 8: 13-24 It has sometimes been argued that Simon, though manifestly baptized with a wrong intention and defective faith, was not expected to be re-baptized by the Apostles. Rather, he (?) along with others received a laying-on of hands intended to make up what was lacking or anomalous in the previous Baptism.

Acts 19: 1-7 The Baptism received by John's disciples was, by their own admission, so manifestly inadequate by christian standards, that Paul treats them as if they had not been 'baptized' in any meaningful sense at all; and under his auspices they undergo the complete rite of christian initiation (i.e. Baptism and the laying-on of hands).

Heb. 6: 1-8 This passage has always provided a happy hunting ground for opponents of 'Second Baptism'; and Hutchinson, the 16th century Anglican divine, roundly states "St Paul [sic]

in this place forbiddeth all iteration of baptism". The passage deals with the problem of post-baptismal sin and apostasy, rather than Baptism; but the resounding string of aorists in v. 4 certainly seem to suggest that Baptism was regarded by the author as a once-for-all event in the life of a believer.

The Early Church

Practices, and the justification given for them, varied very widely. It is known that the Marcionites re-baptized their converts. Athanasius regarded baptism administered by Arians, Montanists, Manichaeans and Paulianists as void. Didymus is said to have re-baptized Eunomians and Montanists; and Cyril of Jerusalem was apparently prepared to re-baptize all whom he regarded as 'heretics'. St Basil of Caesarea distinguished between 'heretics' and 'schismatics', re-baptizing the former but not the latter. Eusebius followed the Roman custom of not re-baptizing either heretics or schismatics; and St Augustine, in North Africa, regarded baptism by schismatics (e.g. Donatists) as 'valid' but ineffectual until such time as the persons in question re-joined the Catholic fold. Several of the 4th century Fathers distinguished carefully between different varieties of heretics and schismatics, re-baptizing some, anointing some, and laying hands on others. In general, the accepted test of 'valid' Baptism was immersion/affusion in water in the Threefold Name, accompanied by an 'orthodox' profession of faith.

The best known controversy was of course that between Cyprian of Carthage and Stephen of Rome, in the 3rd century. Cyprian based his argument for re-baptism on the statement that outside the visible Catholic Church there can be no true sacrament. Stephen (and his successors) insisted that since it is God who Himself acts in the sacrament of Baptism, the status of the Minister who administers the sacrament does not affect its validity. (This, in embryo, is the Roman Catholic doctrine of *ex opere operato*, affirmed at the Council of Trent in the 16th century.) 'It is noteworthy that some of the supporters of the 'Roman' (as opposed to 'African') view, argued that since the gift of the Holy Spirit is not bestowed in Baptism, but rather in the complementary rite of Confirmation, subsequent laying-on of hands by a Bishop within the Catholic Church would supply what was believed to be defective or lacking in heretical/schismatic Baptism. At the Council of Arles in 314 it was laid down in Canon IX that if a heretic is found to have been baptized in the Threefold Name, then "hands shall be laid upon him, and no more". This was specifically intended to exclude the African practice of re-baptism, and it has remained normative in Catholic practice to this day.

These precedents and arguments, drawn from the early Church, should be used with caution. The Church of North India is not called upon (at present) to consider the case of heretical Baptism; and the question of 'schismatic' Baptism arises in a very different context today, compared with the situation in the 4th century. The only direct analogy lies in the case of a person (a) who, having been baptized, either in infancy or as an adult, outside the C.N.I., now desires to take Believer's Baptism within the C.N.I., or (b) who, being a baptized member of the C.N.I., takes Believer's Baptism outside the C.N.I. and then wishes to remain within, or seek readmission to, the C.N.I. In each of these cases, the impetus comes not from a hierarchical Church seeking to regularize anomalies, but from the side of the individual christian who desires to satisfy his conscience. Nevertheless, the following two principles, which emerge from the Patristic controversy, may be found useful:

1. By the laying-on of hands, or an equivalent sacramental/ ceremonial act, the defects in the previous Baptism may be remedied. This is the principle which also underlies the Unification of the Ministry of the Church of North India.
2. It is God who 'baptizes', and God may be trusted to overrule the defective or misguided or inappropriate intention of the Minister who performs the Baptism, and of the individual (whether infant or adult) who receives it.

The latter principle provides an argument against 're-baptism' and the former suggests a possible remedy for those who conscientiously believe that the 'Baptism' they received in infancy was defective, but who do not wish to disrupt the fellowship of the Church or offend the consciences of their fellow members by taking Baptism a second time.

The Reformation

The arguments used by Paedobaptists and Anabaptists in the 16th and 17th centuries are already well known; and since the views of both parties, sincerely and conscientiously held, are reflected directly in the present situation within the C.N.I., it is pointless to repeat them. Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, Knox and Melancthon are all on record as rejecting 'Second Baptism' in the circumstances of their own time and situation. Knox and Penry, in the Calvinist tradition, specifically state that re-baptism of Roman Catholics who leave the Roman obedience is not necessary or desirable. The Elect are truly baptized, no matter when or by whom. The Anglican Church has always rejected the practice of re-baptism, and the words of the usually eirenical

Richard Hooker, 'father of Anglican theology', may be quoted:

" Iteration of baptism once given hath always been thought a manifest contempt of that ancient apostolic aphorism 'One Lord, one faith, one baptism'. How should we practise iteration of baptism, and yet teach that by baptism we are born anew? "

He goes on to observe that in his experience those who wish to repeat their Baptism " must always invent some pretext for denying the baptism which they already have ". (*Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, V. 62.4)

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It must be recognized that the present situation is essentially new, and cannot be directly paralleled in the previous history of the Church. By uniting in the Church of North India, christians of different denominations and traditions frankly recognize anomalies and differences of conviction, but have already expressed a determination not to allow such differences again to break the greater unity to which they have felt themselves called.

On the one hand it is acknowledged that the practice of administering Believer's Baptism to one already baptized as an infant must appear highly offensive and repugnant to some, since it implies that the Baptism practised by a large section of the C.N.I. is really no Baptism at all. There is thus here a transgression of the rule of charity.

On the other hand, it is equally acknowledged that some persons, in seeking Believer's Baptism after having been baptized in infancy, sincerely feel that their previous Baptism was defective. To deny a remedy to such persons would equally be a denial of the rule of charity.

Where such wide divergence exists in the interpretation of *what Baptism essentially is*, accommodation can probably only be achieved by free discussion over a long period. There is, however, one aspect of Baptism which (it seems to me) should be stressed in any such discussion. It has been the conviction of many who practise infant Baptism, and the view is not entirely absent among those who practise Believer's Baptism also, that Baptism in itself is not a completed act, but rather the beginning of a process which is God's saving and reconciling activity in an individual human soul, in the fellowship of the divine community, the Church, and in the context of the society and culture in which the individual lives; and that this process extends throughout the earthly lifetime of the christian, and indeed perhaps far beyond, into eternity. (Cf. Oscar Cullmann: "the *complete* baptismal event extends throughout the whole of life". Cf. also Martin

Luther, who when oppressed by a sense of sin, reassured himself time and again with the phrase, "*baptizatus sum*".) This insight is summarized in a World Council of Churches document, *One Lord, One Baptism*, thus: "Baptism effects in a single symbolical act the death to the flesh and the resurrection to life in the Spirit, through union with Christ, which is to be unfolded by the action of divine grace throughout the whole course of christian life in this world and hereafter" (p. 65).

If this view of Baptism is rightly understood, it might help to allay the scruples of persons baptized in infancy who later come to feel that such baptism was in some way defective, and it would of course be admissible to seek the further grace and help of God through some act of laying-on of hands. This has always been the Catholic understanding of Confirmation, originally part of the unitary procedure of 'Christian Initiation', but later separated from it in the Western Churches. On the analogy of the procedure used for the Unification of the Ministry at the inauguration of the C.N.I., a suitable form of words might be devised to accompany the laying-on of hands, with prayer, either by the Bishop of the diocese, or by the Presbyter as the representative of the local congregation. As with the rite of Unification, it should be made clear that this is not a repetition of something already done previously, but a seeking of God's fuller blessing and grace within the context of that muddled, anomalous, sinful, but also glorious community which we call the Church here on earth.

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