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Baptism as a Pastoral Problem

BY THE REV. F. C. M. MUSGRAVE-BROWN, M.A.

WHILE it is only during the last few years that the administration of Holy Baptism has become a matter of general anxiety and concern throughout the Church, we must not forget that the minds of many clergy have been exercised about it for a very much longer period. While the attractiveness of the Baptist view point has been mainly felt on the conservative wing of the Evangelicals, and the prevalent slackness in the administration of the Sacrament and the low estimation in which it was held has rendered it difficult to put up an adequate defence, anxiety over the administration of Baptism has been by no means confined to that section of the Church. A quotation from the *Prayer Book Dictionary*—Article "Godparents", by the Rev. C. F. Rogers, M.A., Lecturer in Pastoral Theology at Kings College, London—published so long ago as 1912, will indicate how gravely concerned others were even so long ago as that. "Canon 29 enjoins that only Communicants are to be accepted (as Godparents). An extraordinary laxity has prevailed in this matter, both on the part of the clergy who baptize without the full number of godparents or even with no godparents at all, and without enquiry accept as sponsors men and women of another communion, or even of no religious belief and practice at all, and on the part of the laity who make promises which they have no intention of fulfilling and solemnly profess beliefs which they do not hold. Clearly the work of reform in this matter must be a slow and gradual one; but the first step is to require due notice of baptisms with the names of the godparents, so that they can be previously visited or written to, and can have, if necessary, the elements of their duties explained to them, or, if they prove quite unsuitable, be rejected, and the sacrament postponed till proper sponsors can be obtained." The quotation is reminiscent of much that is written in *The Theology of Christian Initiation*, in *Baptism To-day*, and even in the Lambeth Report.

Quite recently a Bishop said to me in conversation before a Confirmation Service, "I think if we can only see it, that we have a greater evangelistic opportunity in these Confirmation Services than in any mission. People attend these services who would never come to any other". I believe the same thing can be said of the service of Holy Baptism. 67% of the babies of this country are brought to be baptised, and with them a very much larger percentage of the people must, at some time or another, attend the administration of the Sacrament of Holy Baptism. It is not the sad fact that so few of the baptized come forward for Confirmation, and even fewer become faithful members of the Church, that is the most alarming feature of the figures published in *Confirmation To-day*. It is the fact that though the Church contacts through the Sacrament of Holy Baptism the vast majority of the people of this country, the impression then made upon them is such that, in most cases, they are not inspired by any desire for closer contact with her. Perhaps they are not con-

siously repelled by their experience of the administration of Holy Baptism, but certainly they are not attracted by it.

I

It is easy to blame the clergy and to say that the slipshod conduct of the service is responsible for this state of things. Indeed, the continual emphasis on the great pastoral opportunity that Baptism is said to afford inevitably suggests that this explanation of the present failure is in the minds of many. While none of us would venture to suggest that our practice is beyond criticism, nor could we honestly say that we have never known a case where slipshod administration of the Sacrament has repelled people, yet when we consider that the most careful and saintly clergymen that we know are hardly more successful in attracting people into the fellowship of the Church through the Sacrament of Holy Baptism than ourselves, we are bound to seek the explanation of the present failure in some other factor than the slackness and lack of spirituality of the clergy. Is it not possible that the very conditions under which the Sacrament is so often administered to-day are such that failure is likely, if not certain, before the Service has begun?

This is, I believe, frequently the case. In the 25th Article, in contradistinction to Confirmation, Penance, Orders, Matrimony, and Extreme Unction, Holy Baptism and the Holy Communion are accounted "Sacraments of the Gospel": that is to say that these two Sacraments embody and portray the salvation that the Gospel offers to mankind. The Homily of Common Prayer and Sacraments expresses it thus: "They should be considered according to the exact signification of a Sacrament, namely for visible signs expressly commanded in the New Testament, whereunto is annexed the promise of free forgiveness of our sin and of our holiness and joining in Christ". This portrayal of the Gospel in the Sacraments can only be understood in the context of the whole Christian Faith. Will not the administration of the Sacrament therefore to children whose parents and godparents are ignorant even of the main facts of the Creed,* and who certainly do not consider that they have much need of forgiveness or of union with Christ, produce in those parents and godparents, if intelligent, a sense of bewilderment and irrelevance, or else among less intelligent people the belief that the Sacrament is a matter of form in which neither intelligence nor sincerity matters greatly? If a simpler form of Baptismal Service should be successfully devised—and I would add the provision of such a service really expressing the doctrine of the Sacrament is a very much more difficult task than is commonly supposed—it would not alter this; for it is not so much the phraseology that puzzles people as the unfamiliar ideas that underlie both the Sacrament and the Christian Gospel.

If we turn back to the formularies of the Book of Common Prayer, and the Canons of 1604 which were enacted at no very different time, we find that our Reformers never contemplated the administration of

* "Over half the young conscripts entering the Navy at Portsmouth during the War did not know what happened on the first Easter Day" (*Children Adrift*, p. 8).

the Sacrament under the circumstances which normally obtain to-day. They legislated for a nation that outwardly at least was Christian, and even then took the precaution of requiring that godparents should have received the Communion. We have abandoned their safeguard, and continued their practice, although the nation has been growing steadily less and less Christian in outward observance, and have consoled ourselves with the idea that though the nation might be wrong in practice it was right at heart. The result is that the less intelligent people have come to regard the Sacrament as a piece of incomprehensible and doubtfully necessary magic, while the more intelligent are not attracted to a Church which requires them to take vows which either they do not understand or else see that they are in flagrant contradiction to their lives, and apparently does not set a high enough value on their sincerity to take any steps to ascertain and secure it.

This is not an inspiring introduction to the Faith. We rightly condemn evangelists who use emotional pressure to induce men and women to make a profession of conversion, regardless of whether or not they really understand and mean what they are doing. Those who have been so misled are much harder to win for Christ as a result. We should condemn also missionaries who for the sake of numbers baptized people without any thorough instruction in the Christian Faith. But has our practice of Holy Baptism been much better? May it not be that this is one of the major factors conditioning our people against the Gospel?

II

It is right to say that no section of the Church is really happy about the present state of things. The least unhappy are those who hold a doctrine of the gift of grace in the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, at any rate in the case of infants, that I can only describe as Tridentine. Believing that to every infant baptized there is imparted a gift of grace virtually *ex opere operato* they hold that "the refusal of Baptism is an intolerable responsibility". Such a view is strongly contradicted by the Church catechism. "Why then are infants baptized, when by reason of their tender age they cannot perform the promise of repentance and faith?—Because they promise them both by their sureties, which promise, when they come to age, themselves are bound to perform." They are not exempt from these requirements. This view would hardly be worth mentioning if it were not for the fact that it is held by some who are reckoned Evangelicals. Of course, if it is true, we are bound to practise something like indiscriminate baptism. We may try to obtain the best terms that we can regarding the instruction and Christian upbringing of the child, but in the last resort we dare not deprive him of the gift of grace that is in our power to confer. I thank God that the Church is not tied to this view and that it has been abandoned in some circles where up to a few years ago it was dominant.

Others are more gravely concerned at the situation and seek a remedy in the abandonment of Infant Baptism, and the postponement of the Sacrament until the age of discretion, which may be interpreted as considerably younger than the usual age of confirmation to-day, viz. about 8 or 9. The main grounds for this suggestion are : (i) that

Baptism and Confirmation would then be reunited as a single service of admission to the Christian Church ; (ii) that the significance of Baptism is that of the remission of sins, which is hardly appropriate to infants ; and (iii) that " Christian initiation in the New Testament is described and conceived of solely in terms of conscious adherence and response to the Gospel of God, that is, solely in terms of adult initiation ".* There is a great deal to be said for this solution, and while I personally feel the weight of scripture is against it, it might be less harmful than the practice of indiscriminate Baptism.

The desire for the postponement of Baptism to years of discretion will, I believe, receive reinforcement from the attitude towards Original Sin and Original Guilt that is ably set forth in Canon Tindall's paper in the appendix to *Baptism To-day*. In connection with the recent Proctorial Election I had some correspondence with a Theologian on the subject of Baptism. He wrote to me : " Changes are essential if the Baptism of infants is to be redeemed from unreality. The references to the forgiveness of sins, in their case, should come out ". In my reply I pointed out that in that case I did not see how we could continue the practice of Infant Baptism. The washing of Baptism could only mean, in some sense, cleansing or forgiveness, and if there was nothing to cleanse or forgive the sacrament would become inappropriate until the age of conscious sin. That, however, would make sin a condition of salvation ! In his rejoinder he said : " I must agree that there is a difficulty in separating washing from the idea of remission of sin . . . The only real solution is the restoration of Baptism, Confirmation and First Communion as parts of one impressive initiatory rite . . . ".

It is hardly necessary here to develop the argument very far. The analogy of the Sacrament of Circumcision is, I believe, decisive against this suggestion of the postponement of Baptism. If the Church of God is one in every age, and by God's command the children of His people were admitted as infants to the Old Covenant through the Sacrament of Circumcision, then while there is no express commandment as to what we are to do with the children of God's people under the New Covenant, it is no rash inference that they are to be admitted to the New Covenant in infancy by the corresponding Sacrament of Baptism. Such an inference is supported by St. Peter's words in Acts ii. 39 and St. Paul's in Acts xvi. 31; while every argument against infant Baptism applies with equal force to infant Circumcision, which we know was ordained of God.

The sphere of the Sacrament must, I believe, be co-extensive with the sphere of salvation, and unless we are to deny salvation to infants, as did apparently the first baptists, the Petrobrussians, I cannot see how we can deny them baptism. At the same time I must indicate my view that it is urgent that a doctrine of original sin, if not of original guilt, should be retained that would give some meaning to the washing of Baptism in the case of an infant. St. Paul's words in Romans viii. 7, " The carnal mind is enmity against God : for it is not subject to the Law of God, neither indeed can be ", no doubt describe the state of adults ; but if that state exists in embryo in an infant,

* Dix, *Theology of Confirmation in relation to Baptism*, p. 31.

then while it would not imply guilt in any full sense of that word, but only something that might be regarded as quasi-guilt, yet it would seem to be well, if not absolutely necessary, that God should in some way indicate His willingness to enter into covenant with so corrupt—albeit unwillingly corrupt—a creature ; and washing would not appear an inappropriate method. When I say necessary, I mean for the child's assurance in the dawn of self-consciousness, and also for that of his parents.

III

I find it difficult to treat the "waiting position" described in *Baptism To-day* as a serious alternative to the two to which I have already referred, or to the other position to which I must now turn ; not because I do not consider that the theology of Infant Baptism urgently needs thinking out, but because the incumbent of a large industrial parish cannot wait. In such a parish you must join the ranks either of those who will, or those who will not, refuse baptism. The point at which you draw the line between baptizing and refusing to baptize may vary, but I cannot see how in a parish of any size the decision can be evaded. You must act on this issue as though your mind were made up. Admittedly this may involve ignoring the plea made both by the Lambeth Committee, and in the outline of the "Waiting Position" in *Baptism To-day*, that reform should not be introduced by individual incumbents, but only by and under the direction of the Convocations and Synods. That plea, however, overlooks (i) the letter of the Church's law in Canon 29, which is operating in quite a number of parishes to-day, and I would add, so far as my own experience goes, that it is by no means unworkable in a modified form. Certainly after six years of this discipline I have won the strong support of a number of laity. (ii) That the only way in which general reform under the direction of the Convocations and Synods will or can come, is as the result of the experiments of individual incumbents. There is no other way in which the Convocations can obtain the information to guide them in making their decisions, and I doubt if any reform has ever been carried through in the Church except as the result of a movement that began in the parishes and finally captured the councils of the Church. To postpone action until victory in the Convocations is assured, would be to postpone reform to the Greek Kalends ; while to expect the Convocations to legislate without the information that comes from practical experiment is unreasonable. It may, however, be necessary for the Convocations to define the limits of experiment.

Most Evangelicals, including those who adopt the Waiting Position, would dissent both from the position of those who would never refuse baptism and from that of our new Baptists. To quote from a recent article, they would agree that "in spite of their age certain infants may be recognised as covenant members, and thus have a right to (Baptism) the sign of the covenant benefits". They would go further and add : "Infants may be outwardly recognized as covenant members by virtue of the fact that they are born into a family or social group in which there is assent to the Gospel and the possibility from early infancy of

real instruction in Christian truth". The difficulty arises, however, when it is realized that to act upon this would mean discrimination, and that a certain number of children in this country would have to be denied baptism as infants. While account must be taken of all the agencies for the proclamation of the Gospel which the Church and nation provide, and the willingness of parents to allow the child to be put in touch with these agencies, their unwillingness to allow the child to go to Sunday School, etc., must also be considered, for often a firm stand over Baptism will bring children into Sunday School. I do not believe, however, that the solution of our present difficulties is to be found in stressing again the dignity and meaning of the Sacrament, or in improved pastoral methods; for both of these are valueless so long as those whom we invite to make vows know that we set little store on their sincerity.

My own policy has been to enforce the conditions of Canon 29 regarding godparents and to insist that they shall have taken communion, but to baptize where necessary with only one godparent. The difficulty I have had has not been that of securing a communicant godparent, but of refusing to admit as godparents others who have not taken communion and frequently do not even attend a place of worship. Certainly some people have been offended and have left the church—mostly in the sense that they now stay away from another church—but the Sacrament of Holy Baptism has been raised in the estimation of our church people, and they have begun to set a higher value upon their membership of the Church since they have seen that communicant status is required before godparents will be admitted.

This necessitates the demanding of a week's notice for every baptism, apart from cases of sickness. Time has to be made for a visit to the home and a talk with the father and mother to explain the Sacrament, and to enquire into the qualifications of the godparents. The utmost sympathy must be shown over any difficulties that may arise owing to unconfirmed relations having already been asked to stand as godparents. Usually such relations can be allowed to attend as witnesses of the Baptism, while the actual vows are taken by the parents and duly qualified godparents. On any baptismal card such witnesses are clearly distinguished from the godparents. Only rarely will parents demand that an unconfirmed person shall be admitted as a godparent, and of course in such a case the law of the Church must be adhered to whatever the consequences, even if it means that children are taken away from the Sunday School. It is not merely a family that is at stake, but the souls of a whole district, and a single weakness will destroy the witness of years. Such cases, however, are exceedingly rare. Equally rare are those cases in which one is permitted to find a godparent from among the congregation.

More recently I have been making the experiment of celebrating the Sacrament only when there is a congregation present and endeavouring to hold one service of Holy Baptism in the month to which all will come. I vary the time and it takes place at Morning and Evening Prayer or at the Bible Class in the afternoon in successive months. So far there has been little opposition to this attempt to obey the rubrics.

As a long term policy I believe we should strive to secure that a

child's right to Baptism should depend upon his parents, or guardians, or one of them, being practising members of the Church: for that secures the best guarantee possible of his Christian upbringing. God-parents might be retained as an additional luxury, but should not be insisted on.

IV

I believe our present difficulties are only temporary. The line of demarcation between the Church and the world in an industrial parish at least is becoming more and more definite. Already parents who do not have their children baptized because as they say frankly they are not interested and have no faith, are to be found. The present social insistence upon Baptism will not continue, unless either the tightening up of the Church's discipline makes people desire what is no longer seen to be cheap, and suspected to be valueless, but is precious and difficult to obtain; or else we have, what we all desire and long for, a God-given revival in our land. I do not think, however, that that can come unless in some way we can get the challenge of the Gospel over to the masses of the nation. In the Report on Evangelism a footnote (page 3) says, "It is open to question which is the more alarming feature, the failure of the Church to attract, or its failure to repel". The nation may be indifferent to our efforts at evangelism, but to a kindly and firm discipline that seeks to secure sincerity over the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, there is a reaction. A whole district is challenged and recognizes that the Church is making a legitimate demand of them. I do not say many are converted as a direct result, but I have found by experience over a period of years that the Church is strengthened, worshippers increase in numbers and strangers are frequently in the congregation. The experience of other parishes where a stand has been taken to maintain the discipline of the Church regarding Baptism is similar, though at present too short to form a judgment of what effect the same discipline would have if it were widely or universally adopted by the Church of England. Nevertheless, the experience of those who have tried it seems to indicate that such discipline would strengthen the Church not only spiritually but in numbers also, and remove from the Church a deadly taint of insincerity that is alienating far too many from her.

The present state of things in this country cannot continue for long. Either the Church must triumph and win the nation back to Christ, or she must decline still further in numbers and influence. She is not getting the Gospel over to the people, and her practice of Baptism is encouraging them to believe that they are all right. That is one reason why the Gospel has lost its challenge. The loving but firm requirement of Baptismal discipline will do something to dispel this complacency, and be felt as a challenge from the Church to the nation to respond to the Gospel. Some will be offended; but more, the soul of the nation may again be won for Christ, if only we have the courage in God to make the venture.