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The Sacrament of Baptism and its Relation to Confirmation

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A. INTRODUCTION.

THE Report of the Joint Committees puts forward two drastic suggestions about Confirmation which it proposes should be considered and experimented with by the Church. The second—the separation of Confirmation from admission to Holy Communion—we shall no doubt consider this afternoon. The first—the separation of Confirmation from the renewal of the Baptismal vows—will be very relevant to our discussion this morning; because our opinion of such a scheme must be finally determined by our view of the Sacrament of Baptism and its relation to Confirmation, which is the subject appointed for the present session. One cannot but admire the pastoral concern which permeates the Report, and I for one feel deeply the difficulties which this proposal is designed to meet. I feel uneasy about asking young boys and girls solemnly to promise to “believe and to do” all the things which their godparents promised for them in Baptism, at an age when they cannot have realized, still less faced, the intellectual difficulties of so believing and the moral difficulties of so doing. I feel equally uneasy at withholding from them Confirmation until a later age if it means they are to be denied the Holy Communion in the difficult and yet formative years of adolescence. The idea of early Confirmation and Communion, and a late renewal of the vows is therefore pastorally attractive; and it is with real regret that I, for one, have come to the conclusion that it is based on unsound theology. But bad theology is bound in the end to work out badly in practice, and I would ask you now to consider with me whether we as Evangelicals are not bound in the interests of truth to reject this particular suggestion, not in any negative spirit but with renewed determination to find some sounder solution of the pastoral problems to which the Report draws attention. Let us turn first to the New Testament, and consider first the symbolism of Baptism in the New Testament, secondly the relation of that symbolism to the spiritual experience symbolized, thirdly then, in the light of those, the meaning of Laying on of Hands. From that we will come on to the meaning of Baptism and Confirmation to-day.

B. BAPTISM AND LAYING ON OF HANDS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT.

1. *Symbolism of Baptism in the New Testament.*

The interpretation of Baptism in the New Testament contains four main elements. First there is the thought of spiritual cleansing, the forgiveness of sins, from the obvious analogy of washing. *e.g.* Acts xxii. 16, “Arise, and be baptised, and wash away thy sins”; •Eph. v. 26, “that he might cleanse it (the Church) by washing of water with the word.” Secondly there is the thought of sharing spiritually in

Christ's Death and Resurrection, the immersion representing death to, and so departure out of, the old life where sin is powerful, the coming out of the water standing for rising into newness of life where we share Christ's Resurrection life in which sin has no power to hurt and we are spiritually living with Him in Heaven. *e.g.* Rom. vi. 4, "we are buried with Him by baptism into death; that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life." There is thirdly the thought of being united to Christ and so to His Body the Church. *e.g.* 1 Cor. xii. 12, 13, "As the body is one and hath many members . . . so also is Christ. For by one Spirit are we all baptised into one body." Fourthly there is the thought of receiving the Holy Spirit. *e.g.*, the same passage continues "and have been all made to drink into one Spirit", or Acts ii. 38, "Be baptised every one of you and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost." We might perhaps add a fifth interpretation, that of rebirth, *e.g.*, John iii. 3-6 and Titus iii. 5, "the washing of regeneration"; but this is not essentially different from the thought of entering the Resurrection life of Christ. If these ideas are taken together it is clear that Baptism stands for the whole of what we Evangelicals usually call conversion: it includes both the negative thought of the blotting out of the past evil life and the two positive thoughts of a present new status as children of God, having the "resurrection" life of the Kingdom, and of a new power for the future, the strength of the Holy Ghost to live according to our new status. These things are distinguishable in thought only; they are in spiritual reality one: God does not forgive the past except by justifying—putting the sinner in a positive right relationship to Himself; nor does He justify without also giving the power to live as a justified child of God, endued with the Spirit of His Son. In only one instance (the Samaritans, Acts viii.) is there an interval between baptism and the gift of the Spirit and this is plainly regarded as exceptional. We shall deal with this exception more fully later.

2. *The Relation of Baptism to the Conversion Experience.*

The fact that Baptism symbolises the whole conversion experience suggests that the New Testament writers have in mind adult believers baptism when they write. This is borne out by the fact that they were concerned with a Church in its first evangelistic missionary stage: the primitive preaching would be normally to adults, and they would be the great majority among the converts. Then, as to-day when Christianity faces a hostile world, there is no question of Infant Baptism on a large scale: at the most it would only be applied to the children of convinced converts who themselves first submitted to it. There is, in fact, no direct evidence in the New Testament that any children were baptised, though it is clear that children of Christians were regarded as within the New Covenant and as Church members. *e.g.* 1 Cor. vii. 14, "Else were your children unclean, but now are they holy"; and St. Paul's direct address to children in the letters to the "saints" at Ephesus and Colossae. Nor can we imagine our Lord excluding from His Covenant of grace children admitted by circumcision even to the Covenant of law. The Baptism of households may suggest that infants were baptised, but it is not stated that the

households included young children. In any case, whatever the practice in this regard, the theology of Baptism is always thought out in terms of Adult Baptism—the baptism of converted people. This is clinched by two facts. First, Baptism is often associated directly with repentance and faith, *e.g.*, Matt. xxviii. 19-20, Mk. xvi. 16, Acts passim, Heb. x. 22, “having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.” 1 Peter iii. 21, baptism “not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience towards God,” etc. Secondly, the effects attributed to Baptism are in other passages—and very strikingly sometimes in the same passages attributed not to Baptism at all but to faith, so Gal. iii. 26-7, “Ye are all children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptised into Christ have put on Christ.” Col. ii. 12, “buried with Him in baptism wherein also ye are risen with Him through faith in the operation of God”, and *cp.* Rom. vi. 1-11 with Rom. vi. 18-23. The conclusion from this is two-fold: first, that though children were regarded as in some sense within the Covenant and the Church, to which admission was normally by Baptism, it is impossible to be sure that they were in fact baptised; secondly, that whatever the practice in this respect, the New Testament theology of Baptism has always reference to adult believers who are capable of the full conversion experience.

With this settled, we must now face the problem suggested by what I have just said: if the same effects are attributed to Baptism as to faith what is the relationship between faith and Baptism? First, the New Testament emphasises again and again that salvation (*a*) is a free gift of God, and (*b*) consists in a personal and moral relationship to God. It follows from the former that it cannot be achieved by any human moral effort; from the latter that it cannot be achieved by any human ceremony or ritual. The only possible way of receiving such a salvation is to accept it by a personal act of trust involving the appropriation of God’s proffered forgiveness and friendship and the giving of oneself to Him in gratitude. This is what the New Testament calls faith, or believing, and it is a response that is called out by the proclamation of God’s offer in the preaching of the Gospel. The efficient cause of salvation is therefore always the grace of God, offered to men by the preaching of the Word and received by faith. This is vital and cannot be sufficiently stressed; but it would be foolish and indeed impertinent to labour the point in a gathering of Evangelicals.

But loyalty to the New Testament forbids us to go to the other extreme and interpret Baptism *purely* symbolically; to say that it is only a “badge or token” of our profession as Christians, and has no vital part to play in the reception of salvation. Nor would such a view be consonant with the Articles which assert that the Sacraments are “*effectual* signs” and that through them God “doth work invisibly in us as by an instrument”. Both St. Peter (*e.g.*, Acts ii.) and St. Paul (*e.g.*, Rom. vi.) speak of Baptism as really effecting that which it symbolises. The explanation is, I think, to be found in the fact that Scripture knows nothing of that sharp dichotomy between the spiritual and the material that (perhaps through the influence of Greek thought) is common to-day. It is assumed that if a spiritual fact is a real spiritual

fact it will have its concrete expression. Is it so of morals : St. Paul bases his ethical appeals on the spiritual fact of the believers' status : " you have " he says, " been baptised into Christ's Death and Resurrection, so reckon yourselves dead unto sin and alive unto God, and don't let sin reign in your mortal body ". It is so of Church life : the Church, the fellowship of Christ and His people is the Body of Christ : then " Is Christ divided ? " No : then factions in the visible Church, the expression of Christ's Body, are a monstrous perversion of nature. So the believer who by faith is constantly united to Christ needs to express this visibly in the Lord's Supper, which is not only a symbol but a real communion of Christ's Body and Blood, failure to realise which may lead to physical results of sickness and death. So too the spiritual experience of conversion needs to be made concrete in Baptism. If it remains something purely spiritual and individual it remains " in the air " and is never fully realised : it needs to be brought into the visible context of the Christian community, and there realised and crystallised, and so deepened and completed. This is, I believe, true to Christian experience of Sacraments : first there is the individual experience through faith : then the crystallising and deepening of it through its physical expression in the context of the community ; and both are necessary for a full experience. The unconverted man who comes to Holy Communion usually fails to find in it any real blessing : the converted man finds it not only symbolises his experience, but renews and enlarges it. Unconverted Confirmands usually lapse pretty soon afterwards and find in it little or no blessing ; but converted ones find it a very real spiritual experience, and indeed, very often look back to the day of their Confirmation as the fully decisive stage of their conversion. If this explanation be adopted we may then conclude that first there is the experience of conversion involving all its various elements, received by faith ; then there is the deepening and crystallising of this in Baptism.

3. *The Laying on of Hands in the New Testament.*

There are only three texts which need concern us here : Acts 8 (the Samaritans) Acts xix. 6 (John's disciples at Ephesus) and Hebrews vi. 2. Others such as 1 Tim. iv. 14, and 2 Tim. i. 6, are of uncertain application but probably refer to Ordination rather than to anything corresponding to Confirmation and so cannot be used in this discussion. The immediately striking thing is the paucity of these references as compared to the references to Baptism, from which it is fair to conclude that any system which sets up Confirmation as of independent equal importance to Baptism is unscriptural. The second striking thing is the close connection of the Laying on of Hands with Baptism in all these three passages. In the Hebrews passage it forms the second of three pairs of subjects, each pair apparently consisting of two things closely and habitually linked ; Laying on of Hands must go as closely with Baptism as does faith with repentance and eternal judgment with the resurrection of the dead. In Acts 19 it is implied that the Laying on of Hands followed immediately on the Baptism ; and in Acts 8 though there is an interval of time the connection of thought is clear : Baptism did not produce its normal result, the gift of the Spirit, until to it was

added the Laying on of Hands. This further demonstrates the connection of Laying on of Hands with Baptism: the gift of the Spirit, as we have seen, is normally associated with the latter; in the two cases where the purpose of Laying on of Hands is mentioned it is also the gift of the Spirit; and it is the same gift of the Spirit as is normally received at Baptism, not a different or additional gift. There is no case in the New Testament where there is one gift at Baptism and another at the Laying on of Hands (except where the imposition of hands has a quite different purpose such as ordination). There is one gift and it follows either Baptism directly, or Baptism followed by the Laying on of Hands. What are we to deduce from this? Not that the Laying on of Hands is an exceptional thing added to Baptism when this failed to produce its proper result, though the rarity of references and the tone of Acts viii. might suggest this; because the Hebrews passage makes it clear that the Imposition of Hands is a common practice, indeed probably a universal one, since it is described as one of "the first principles of Christ" and a "foundation"; and the casual way of mentioning it in Acts xix also implies that it is customary. Rather it would seem to be the normal way of completing the Baptismal rite: this is strongly attested by the liturgical practice of the early Church; it will explain its close connection with Baptism in all the references: it will also explain the scarcity of references because normally it is included under the heading of Baptism; it will explain how Hebrews can call a rite not instituted by our Lord as a "foundation" because it comes under the heading of Baptism which has Dominical sanction; and it will explain the symbolism. Laying on of Hands is an ancient and natural way of blessing, *cp. e.g.*, Jacob's blessing of Ephraim and Manasseh. The obvious (and the original) interpretation of the Baptismal symbolism is that of cleansing; the negative thought of the blotting out of the past. It requires the additional sign of blessing to indicate the positive thought that such forgiveness also carries with it the pledge of power for the new life of the future, the blessing and strengthening of the Spirit. True, this can be deduced from the alternative explanation of the Baptismal symbolism in terms of death, burial, and resurrection; but this is a later and secondary interpretation (though equally true and valuable) probably added by St. Paul. Finally, it will explain why the gift of the Spirit is so often directly associated with Baptism; there is nothing in the symbolism of Baptism to suggest this directly, though it does suggest rising to a new life; but it is an obvious deduction from this ancient sign, of blessing, which may from the first have been used to round off the Baptismal service. Acts 8 is clearly an exceptional case. The exceptional thing, however, is not the addition of the Laying on of Hands to the Baptism, but the separation of the two in point of time. The reason for this may well be that Philip is unwilling to refuse Baptism to genuine believers, but feels the necessity of associating the apostles with the admission of Gentiles for the first time to the Church. He therefore administers Baptism but defers its completion until Peter and John can arrive. We may conclude, then, that the Laying on of Hands in the New Testament is part of the Baptismal rite emphasising in particular the gift of the Spirit. It has no standing apart from its connection with Baptism, and conveys no other gift than the Baptismal gift of the

conversion experience. But taken in this connection and only if taken in this connection, it has the same sacramental effect as the Baptism of which it is part : through faith a man receives not only forgiveness of sins, but the power of the Holy Spirit ; and this is crystallised and made full and complete in the sacramental act of Baptism including the Laying on of Hands.

C. BAPTISM AND CONFIRMATION TO-DAY.

In judging present day practice I take it that we shall be agreed that we are bound by New Testament principles ; but that we are not necessarily bound by the details of New Testament practice. Indeed, a slavish observance of New Testament practice may often obscure New Testament principles because we have to reckon with changed circumstances, and the application of a principle cannot but vary according to the circumstances to what it is applied. Our task is to apply New Testament principles to the circumstances of the present day. In certain cases, there has been no essential change of circumstances, and therefore there is no justification for a change of practice ; the principle still applies in the same way. This is so in the case of Adult Baptism. There it still represents the whole conversion experience of a believer, symbolising and deepening it. And the Laying on of Hands only has meaning as completing the Baptism, emphasising the positive side of the Baptismal gift. This suggests two possible modifications of present day Anglican practice. Though it ill beseems one who is not faced with the enormous problems of the mission field to question anything done overseas, it does seem difficult to justify the practice, common I believe in some parts of the mission field, of making a long gap between the Baptism and Confirmation of adult converts. If they are not fit for Confirmation, ought not, on New Testament principles, Baptism to be deferred until they are ? At home, might we not press for a new form of service in which, according to primitive custom, Baptism and Confirmation are united in one service ? It is a real weakness in the present system that the Baptism of an adult is normally a quiet—I almost might say hole-in-the-corner—business, which is often looked upon merely as a formality necessary to qualify for the great act of Confirmation. That reverses the New Testament emphasis ; and no attempt to attribute equal and independent importance to both services would be either pastorally possible or theologically sound. We need one service as in New Testament times to cover an experience essentially one. And I am sure we ought to think very seriously before baptising an adult who is not willing also to be confirmed. It is not possible to make a rule against such a practice, because Scripture does not lay down directly that Laying on of Hands must accompany Baptism ; and because the fault is largely that of the Church which has not sufficiently emphasised the unity of the two rites ; but I am sure we ought not to be satisfied with such cases.

But in the great majority of cases we are faced with a very real change of circumstances : we now have the Baptism of infants, followed by the Laying on of Hands in later years. Unless we are prepared to accept that fact wholeheartedly, and I would add to accept the fact that the Prayer Book services attribute a definitely sacramental character to both rites, we cannot be true members of the Church of England. On what New Testament principles then can these practices be justified ?

First, it is clear that the Baptism of infants is not the same thing as the Baptism of adults. Adult converts have a real conversion experience based on conscious faith. Babies cannot have it. Therefore we cannot apply to Infant Baptism the whole New Testament theology of Baptism which is based on the assumption that this conscious faith exists. The only New Testament justification for Infant Baptism, and it is a sound one, is that (a) the New Testament regards children as admissible to the Covenant and the Church; (b) the only way of entrance to the Church specified in the New Testament is Baptism. Infant Baptism is, therefore, a fair deduction to make, whether or not that deduction was drawn in Apostolic times, just as the Doctrine of the Trinity is a fair deduction to draw from the New Testament statements about the Father, our Lord, and the Spirit, though that deduction was certainly not drawn till several centuries later. But we cannot draw this deduction if by it we are going totally to alter the character of Baptism; we cannot take an Apostolic, even a Dominical institution, and give it an entirely new meaning. That is a clear desertion of New Testament principle. What is permissible is to alter the time and mode of its use so as to include in it a witness to the additional New Testament principle of the admission of children to the Covenant in such a way that the meaning of Baptism and Laying on of Hands is itself preserved in all essentials unchanged. In other words, Infant Baptism *by itself* cannot be justified on New Testament grounds because it cannot have the full meaning of New Testament Baptism and Laying on of Hands; our Church contends that Infant Baptism followed by Laying on of Hands at years of discretion enables these two ceremonies, taken together as part of a single whole even though their administration may be separated by some years, to be justified because *together* they can have the same meaning as Adult Baptism and Laying on of Hands had in the New Testament. Anything which tends to separate the two and make them independent rites tends to destroy the authority of both; they become two human ordinances, impertinently assuming the outward forms but not the inward meaning of the single New Testament rite, and so they lose their Dominical and Apostolic authority and the guarantee of their sacramental efficacy.

How then can the Church justify its contention that though Infant Baptism does not mean precisely the same as New Testament Baptism and Laying on of Hands, yet Infant Baptism plus Laying on of Hands later does bear that meaning? I think the question may be answered in the following way. The essence of the New Covenant is a personal relationship with God which is habitually described in the New Testament in terms of Father and children; and the Church which is the community of covenant members, is the household or family of God. When speaking of adults, St. Paul makes it clear that they are expected to be grown up children of God: enjoying the liberty which is impossible for small children. They are in fact to enjoy with God a relationship like that of good parents and their grown up or growing up children: *i.e.*, love and care by the parents meeting with a response of trust and love by the children. But the New Testament also regards young children as admissible to the Covenant: for them this mutual relationship is impossible: they are as incapable of conscious response to God as they are of conscious response to their own

parents. This can only be explained if we assume that God is as satisfied to have babies in his spiritual family as parents are to have them in their physical families, and that He has with them a relationship similar to that of human parents with their babies, *i.e.*, a relationship in which all the conscious activity comes from Him ; He loves them and cares for them and is with them ; and is quite satisfied that they make no conscious response. That this is so is indicated both by the Epistles, and by Our Lord's emphatic rebuke to those who attempted to keep the children from Him, and His assertion that " of such is the Kingdom of God ". Its basis is to be found in the New Testament doctrine of sin and the Atonement. " Sin " says St. Paul, " is not imputed where there is no law " *i.e.*, God does not hold people morally responsible who in fact are not morally responsible. Babies certainly are not and are, therefore, not subject to condemnation. But nevertheless they have an inherited sinful nature, original sin, which apart from Christ, will certainly lead them later into actual sin. Does this then separate them from the love and care of the Heavenly Father? No : because the Cross of Christ avails for all sin, and His forgiveness is a free gift. An adult receives it by faith, which is not a meritorious work, but as Dr. Dodd puts it " an act which is the negation of all activity, a moment of passivity out of which the strength for action comes, because in it God acts ; the recognition that I do nothing and God does all. Because an adult thinks consciously this must be conscious. A baby does not think consciously, but neither does a baby set any obstacle of his own will against God and His gift ; and it is only self-will that can prevent the reception of God's gift. Infant Baptism is then the assurance that because of the sufficiency of the Cross of Christ the child is accepted with God in a family relationship perfect of its kind ; one of love and care by the Father, pure unconscious receptivity by the child. This is a true sacrament ; the spiritual experience is true for all children ; by baptism it is crystallised and made concrete by the admission of the child to the visible Church, the visible community which represents and expresses God's spiritual family of which the child is already a member. This act in turn deepens the experience because it brings the child into contact with the Christian fellowship, so that by the prayer of the faithful, and the use as childhood develops of corporate worship and teaching, its membership of God's spiritual family may become the more real and effective. That is why Christian parents and godparents are so important : without them membership of the visible family of God may be only formal, and much of the spiritual grace available from it rendered ineffective. But absence of such sponsors is no reason against baptising an infant : he is a member of God's spiritual family and it is better that that should be expressed formally than not at all.

But this relationship is bound to change. The child grows and becomes capable of moral response. In the Divine as in the human family the relationship will either become different and better in kind or different and worse. If the response is not made the family unity will be for the first time broken : the child who goes off into the far country ceases to be in a real sense a member of the family, though the father will still love it. But if the response is made there will be a two way relationship of love and care by the parent, love and trust

by the child, something obviously deeper and more satisfying than the parent-infant relationship, though that was perfect of its kind. This conscious mutual relationship grows out of the old one way relationship ; it may be realised suddenly or slowly, but one day it will reach self consciousness. This stage is what we call conversion, and the child has now developed from being an infant member of the family of God into being a grown up child of God. At this stage he has the full experience which is represented in the New Testament by Baptism and Laying on of Hands. One part of that he has already received : the actual Baptism ; two parts he has not received because they symbolise especially the conscious part of the relationship : namely the confession of personal repentance and faith and the Laying on of Hands in token of blessing and strengthening for the new life to which that confession has committed him. These therefore he receives, and his Baptism is thus completed and corresponds in all points to the Baptism and Laying on of Hands in the New Testament. The form of the confession as a direct renewal of the Baptismal vows, emphasises this fact ; no new gift supplementary to the New Testament Baptismal gift is being received ; rather his Infant Baptism, administered when he could not make the moral response necessary for the full New Testament Baptismal gift, now reaches its fruition and is transformed for him from Infant Baptism into the full Baptism with Laying on of Hands signifying the full conversion experience of the New Testament. This act of Confirmation, being the completion of Baptism, is itself fully Sacramental ; that is, provided there is the spiritual experience already there through the response of conscious faith, it is crystallised and so deepened by the outward act which brings the child into the full assurance that he has received or is receiving and will receive all that the New Testament means by conversion and its consequences, symbolised by the Baptism and Imposition of Hands on those who have faith.

The conclusions I would draw from all this are three. First, that no specific age can be laid down for Confirmation ; the essential condition is a conscious right relationship to God in Christ, whether arrived at gradually or suddenly, and this will vary immensely with the individual. Secondly, that the Sacramental nature of Confirmation depends upon its being the completion of Baptism ; and likewise the justification of Infant Baptism depends upon it being regarded as valid and effective in itself but incomplete until rounded off by Confirmation. Thirdly, that therefore, though the renewal of the Baptismal vows may be as Dr. Chase suggests " an accident of the rite " and a purely Anglican feature, yet the proper place for such a renewal is at Confirmation ; and that some such renewal is most valuable as bearing witness to the essential character alike of Infant Baptism and of Confirmation ; we ought to be thankful that the Church of England has recovered here something which makes plain as nothing else could, the essential relationship between Infant Baptism and Confirmation, a relationship which is essential because, apart from it, neither can be justified, whereas with it they both fall fully into line with New Testament principles ; and therefore we ought to guard for the World Church as well as for ourselves a treasure which has been missed alike by the Free Churches and the Eastern Church, who leave infant baptism incomplete because no integral part of the rite takes place when

conscious faith is reached, by the Roman Catholic Church which virtually treats Infant Baptism and Confirmation as separate Sacraments and therefore has no New Testament warrant for either of them, and by the bodies which practise only Adult Baptism, who have failed to secure expression for the New Testament teaching on the position of children as members of the family of God, a membership which the New Testament declares to be symbolised and made real in the visible sphere by admission to the Church by Baptism.