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Baptism and Confirmation

BY G. W. H. LAMPE

IN the present turmoil of questioning and controversy about the theology and pastoral practice of Christian initiation an excellent way forward towards theological clarification, and towards greater order and uniformity in baptismal discipline, is the publication for discussion and comparison of concrete and detailed suggestions for revised services. These proposed services of Baptism and Confirmation* are a weighty contribution to the debate. They have been produced by two committees of Evangelical clergy, mainly members of the Latimer House Liturgy Group. Both are the result of careful and thorough team work, and since the baptism service has been submitted for criticism and suggestions to a large number of diocesan and parochial groups and individual clergy, it can claim the powerful backing of an important section of Anglican opinion. As the preface points out, 'If Evangelicals are less than enthusiastic about the baptism services prepared by the Liturgical Commission, and are asked what they would like better, this service supplies an answer'.

To draw up a liturgy on paper which will afterwards stand the test of being actually used by a congregation is extremely difficult. Theologians tend to be so anxious to write every conceivable point of doctrine into the service that it becomes difficult and cumbersome, or they take so little account of custom and usage that their work looks artificial when it is translated into actual speech and action; to some extent liturgies have to grow by a kind of natural process, and they cannot be successfully manufactured in a theologian's study. These services look as though they would meet the test. They are clear in outline and concise in language, easy to follow, and close enough to the Prayer Book in their general structure to be acceptable to Anglican congregations. The committees have wisely resisted the liturgist's temptation to draw a line across history and begin all over again from the beginning, or at any rate from the pre-Nicene period. Instead they have followed the precedent of Cranmer and adapted existing services with a view to securing better intelligibility and closer conformity to scriptural teaching. In doing this they have drawn upon a number of Anglican sources: the American and Irish Prayer Books, the 1928 Book, the Church of South India's *Book of Common Worship*, and the service proposed by the Liturgical Commission.

About half of the present volume consists of an introduction which sets out the principles and aims of this revision. This is generally admirable. It includes a brief statement of the present difficulties and controversies concerning infant baptism, and, while envisaging the possibility of a future union with Baptists which will involve toleration of both believer's and infant baptism in a single communion,

* SERVICES OF BAPTISM AND CONFIRMATION (Latimer House Monograph II), edited by R. T. Beckwith, C. O. Buchanan, K. F. W. Prior (Marcham Manor Press) 63 pages, 6s., paperback and 13s.6d., casebound.

it rightly defends the theology, though not the present laxity in administration, of the latter. It is perhaps to be regretted that 'the characteristic possessors of the kingdom of heaven are babes'. This is surely to build too much on Mark 10: 14-15, which says more about entry into the kingdom requiring a child-like disposition (i.e., total dependence, trust and readiness to accept God's gift) as a necessary qualification than about the baptismal status of infants. Instead, it might have been better to emphasise the fact that whatever else may happen in baptism it is plainly an admission into the Christian community. This is not sufficiently brought out, either in the introduction or, more important, in the rite itself; and it needs to be stressed, for it follows from this simple truth that to withhold baptism from a child who is born into a Christian family, and grows into the consciousness of belonging to his natural family and to the Christian fellowship almost simultaneously, is as indefensible as it is to administer baptism to a child whose life is plainly beginning, and likely to develop, wholly outside the society of Christ's people.

An important point of principle is that whereas the Liturgical Commission originally took believer's baptism as the theological norm the present proposals take household baptism as their focal point. It is in this context that infant baptism makes sense, and the service is designed so that infants and adults may be baptised together, though the parts relevant to each may be isolated and employed separately. Another excellent feature is the strong emphasis on the requirement of a response of personal faith to the grace that is effectively set forth in baptism. This is made clear in the rite itself, and especially in the care that is taken to provide explanations at every stage. It is curious that the incorporation of homiletic material into liturgy should be so unfashionable at a time when the constant complaint is that congregations are uninstructed. In these services there is a large amount of such material, but the exhortations or explanations are individually short and they are expressed in plain and straightforward language. It is perhaps questionable, however, whether the requirement of personal faith ought to be expressed in terms of 'the necessity of faith for the reception of grace', and not rather 'the necessity of a full response of faith to grace received'. This is a matter which warrants a good deal of further consideration.

The responsibility for bringing up the baptised child into personal faith is laid, rightly, upon the parents, though it is assumed that godparents will be associated with them as sponsors. The possibility that the office of godparent is now in most cases an anachronism might have been explored. On the other hand, a welcome feature of this service is that declarations are made by the sponsors both in the name of the child and on their own behalf, and that they make further solemn promises concerning their obligation to bring the child up in Christian faith and practice.

The public and congregational character of Baptism is rightly given much emphasis. It is to take place when the congregation is assembled, and they are told the 'we' (collectively) have 'come together . . . to baptise this person (or child)'. Indeed, a baptism which has not taken place in the presence of the congregation, even if it has

happened in church, is treated as a private baptism and followed later by a reception into the congregation. But it is a pity that in the public baptism service nothing is really said explicitly about the need for the congregation to play its part both in welcoming the new member and in caring for him subsequently. This is a serious defect; for baptism, especially of infants, lays a heavy obligation on the local church as a loving, accepting, and caring fellowship. The crisis of infant baptism today is really a crisis for the Church: is it worth joining, and is it strong enough in faith and love to accept responsibility for new members, particularly infants whom, together with their parents, it must incorporate into itself as a genuine household of God?

It would also, perhaps, have been better if a more critical look had been taken at the whole practice of private baptism in emergency, which is here accepted out of respect for Christ's ordinance. This may not be right. A false interpretation of such passages as John 3: 5 has given rise to so much superstition and so much confusion about infant baptism, the root of much of our present trouble, that it might be better to abandon the idea of emergency baptism, which it is very hard to dissociate from a mechanical view of the sacrament such as the compilers of this service rightly wish to repudiate.

A very commendable feature is the absolute centrality that is given to the act of baptism. Signing with the cross is retained, but as an optional ceremony. This should restore a balance that often needs correction. So, too, there is a blessing of the water, but it is made clear that this is a blessing for use, and not a permanently effective 'consecration', and it is not allowed the misleadingly central place that it has occupied in recent proposed services.

Another welcome aspect is the refusal of the compilers to countenance the institution of a pre-baptismal catechumenate or a service of blessing for those not yet ready for baptism. This is done on sound scriptural grounds, and the Introduction is wise to point out that the supposed 'primitive pattern of initiation' to which appeal is so often made, i.e. late second and early third century patristic practice, is not primitive but involves important departures from the earliest teaching and practice. It also asserts the good principle that what matters in the end is not mere primitiveness but edification.

An important theological question which needs further discussion is whether this baptism service is right in taking man's sin and God's wrath as its starting-point. Confession of sinfulness and avowal of repentance precede affirmation of the faith. This is traditional, and it is the order of much evangelical preaching in which conviction of sin is followed by the remedy of the gospel. It is questionable, however, whether it is the pattern of the apostolic preaching, for example in Acts, where the call to repent and the possibility of repentance are consequent upon the proclamation of the good news of the work of God in Christ. Ought repentance and justification alike to follow out of acceptance of the good news (cf. Acts 2: 37-38), or should repentance lead on to acceptance of the gospel? Whatever may be the answer to this question, it might be argued that there is room in the service for a clearer proclamation of what baptism shows forth, namely, the saving work of Christ. Possibly the Gospel and Epistle might be more

profitably concerned with this rather than with the actual rite of baptism.

The Confirmation service follows the Prayer Book more closely. It is good that adults are to be confirmed immediately after baptism, without ratification of baptismal vows, and that, on the other hand, the confirmation of those baptised as infants includes a full and detailed reaffirmation of the baptismal promises in the precise words of the baptism service. The appeal to the example of the apostles is wisely dropped; the prayers are for a strengthening by, and increase in, the Holy Spirit, with no room for the idea that the Spirit is being newly imparted; explicit mention is made in the prayers of preparation for Holy Communion; and, by no means least, the rubric is altered to make it clear that Confirmation is the gateway to Communion for those baptised as Anglicans, but not for visitors who are communicants of other churches.
