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As Others See us.

[*A group of Baptists have for some time been investigating the subject of the present attitude of the various denominations to Baptism. A questionnaire has been sent out, and we are glad to be able to publish some of the results. It goes without saying that we do not, in any way, endorse the opinions expressed by our critics.]*

REPORT OF COMMISSION ON BAPTISM.

INTRODUCTION.

SOME few years ago the members of the Baptist Fellowship (now merged in the Free Church Fellowship) undertook to investigate the whole question of Baptism. A questionnaire, suggesting various matters for inquiry was drawn up. A section had reference to the Non-Baptist positions, whether Roman, Eastern, Anglican, or Free Church. As it seemed most urgent and more convenient at the time to gather opinions from the Pædo-baptist Free Churches, another questionnaire was drawn up, and circulated to non-Baptist members of the Free Church Fellowship. Replies were received from ministers and laymen belonging to various churches, Congregational, Presbyterian, Wesleyan Methodist, and the Society of Friends. Some of the replies were very full, amounting almost to treatises on the subject. For the most part the replies were from individuals, but in some cases groups representing different denominations reported the results of their common consideration of the questions.

The questions submitted appear (in italics) in the following report.

I.—THE NON-BAPTIST POSITION.

- 1.—*What is your view as to the number, nature, and significance of the Sacraments of the Church? Do you hold that a Sacrament should be: (a) Related to the experience of those who participate? (b) Of such a form as to represent that experience, the act symbolizing the fact?*

The first part of the question was, in the majority of replies, not dealt with to any great extent. For the most part, two sacraments are accepted, though one Congregational minister would recognise as sacraments, "Baptism, Communion, Marriage,

Burial, also in some sense, Ordination." Two Congregational ministers represent two very different attitudes to sacraments in general. One says : "A great part of the value of any sacrament consists in its fitness to aid the unity and continuity of the life of the Church. Any rite which is merely sectarian or merely the outcome of the circumstances of a particular time has but small value as a sacrament." The other remarks : "The sacrament of the Church is the conscious consecration of the lives of its members to the service of their Lord"—a view that might well be accepted by those who nevertheless value highly what are generally termed sacraments.

The second part of the question is answered in greater fulness. Practically all agree that a sacrament should be related to the experience of those who participate, but most guard against the anticipated Baptist conclusion by reference to the claim that "the parents as Church members" are the participants in Infant Baptism, or they claim that Infant Baptism has a relation to the experience of the child, a future experience which is open to him and desired for him. "In the case of Infant Baptism, the actual experience comes after the rite has taken place" (Congregational minister). "Experience—a result prayed for by parents and the Church" (Wesleyan minister). "The infant participates potentially" (Wesleyan minister). There is thus a tendency, on the one hand, to view the rite as related mainly to the experience of the parents or of the assembled Church, or on the other hand, as related mainly to an experience which might be the child's in years to come. A few feel that the relation of a sacrament to experience is not indispensable. As to the form of the rite, whether it should be of symbolic character, there is some diversity of opinion. It is recognised that if the act is symbolic it will serve a didactic purpose, but there are protests against over-emphasising the symbolic value of the rite. "The detail of the form should not absorb attention to the lessened perception of the spiritual fact" (Wesleyan minister). Four Presbyterian ministers agree as to the desirability of symbolism in the rite, but in anticipation of Baptist conclusions, reject "immersion as not representing common experience, but rare sudden conversions." A Wesleyan minister regards the fact signalled by the act of Infant Baptism as "the fact that the infant is 'covered' by the blood of Christ."

It may be concluded that these replies show that most non-Baptists connect the sacrament of baptism with experience only in a very vague manner, and do not attach very great importance to the symbolism of the service. If there were the same vagueness in relation to the Lord's Supper, as regards the participants and the form of the rite, what strange scenes would result !

In the face of some of the contentions advanced, Baptists must be ready to substantiate their claim that the common form of Believers' Baptism—immersion—is suited to represent more than one type of conversion.

2.—If you practise Infant Baptism, what, in your opinion, is its significance and value to (a) the Church, (b) the parents? Do you think it is of any value to the child? Is it for you merely a dedication service or mainly so?

(a) It is generally stated that the meaning of the service for the Church is that the Church in that act solemnly recognizes the child as belonging to God, and undertakes its part in the child's training. "The Church bears witness to its desire that the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit may be exercised upon the child from its earliest days, and to help the child" (Presbyterian layman). Others emphasise that the service has the significance of a declaration. It declares the "fact of the redemption of the infant" (Wesleyan minister). It is "a reminder of Christ's kingship over every life" (Congregational layman). Glimpses of another attitude are revealed in the following: Baptism is regarded as Disciples' Baptism. The child is baptised "not as one who in baptism is regenerated, not as one who previous to baptism is regenerated, but as one who, being in the Kingdom of God, is to be taught its truth" (Congregational minister). Again, "the Church makes its declaration, 'From this moment at least (pædo-baptists differ as to the state of the soul beforehand) there is potentially in the child a supernatural as well as a natural life'" (Congregational minister).

In the main, therefore, the view held is that the service provides an opportunity for declaring the relation of the child to the gospel and to the Church, and for the Church to express its readiness to surround with all holy influences the child baptised that it may enter consciously in ever fuller measure into the understanding of Christian truth and into the privileges and responsibilities of the Church.

(b) Similarly, it is commonly urged that, as regards the parents, they are "stirred to a deeper sense of their privileges and responsibilities in relation to the child" (Congregational professor). "It provides an opportunity for their reconsecration" (Presbyterian minister). The parents are helped to realise that "they are to act in every possible way as the spiritual as well as the natural parents of the child" (Wesleyan layman). A Congregational minister finds much significance in the act of the parents in giving the child to the Church (represented by the minister), and receiving it back. Here the idea seems to be that it is not simply as parents that they have part in the service, but as parents

in the Church. Their child, too, begins its life within the Church, and the parents are called to be the ministers of the Church to the child. "The Church is a family joining together all ages" (Wesleyan layman). But the remark that occurs over and over again in the replies is that the service is chiefly of value for the parents in that it reminds them of their responsibilities to the child.

As to the value of the service to the child, such value is generally held to be *indirect*, and *conditional* upon the fulfilment of promises by parents and Church. The value to the child is that, owing to the influence and teaching of parents and Church, he becomes conscious of himself as a baptised person. "The child should be brought up with this sense that he is saved, and that he is Christ's, and not with the sense that he must be converted some day"—which latter is regarded as "an unhealthy idea" (Congregational minister). Similarly, a Wesleyan minister finds the value of the service to the child in the faithful discharge of obligations solemnly accepted, and in the child's growing consciousness of the meaning of the rite, which may be of such a character that he may feel it "a serious step to break away from all that the service means." A cautious hint as to the possibility of the direct and immediate value of the service for the child is given in one or two replies. Thus: 'I do not deny that it may have value at the time even for the unconscious infant, while I assert that it has increasing value for it as the years of discretion approach' (Presbyterian minister).

As may be anticipated from the replies given to (a) and (b), there is much diversity of opinion as to whether the service is merely or mainly a Dedication Service. Replies range from a simple affirmative through various stages to a simple negative. "Mainly dedication service" (Wesleyan layman). "Mainly, but not merely, dedication service" (group). Others state emphatically that "it is more than a dedication service" (Congregational minister). Also Wesleyan minister almost in the same words. "More significant than a dedication service" (Presbyterian layman).

These remarks assume that a Dedication Service is a private or semi-private matter, while baptism, being the corporate act of the Church, involves much more. A Congregational minister holds the view that Infant Baptism is more than dedication in that, in the one the child is subordinate, is given; but "in the true meaning of baptism the child is the giver"—a sentence of which the meaning is not at once clear.

Two points for the consideration of Baptists emerge: 1. Is infant dedication with us sufficiently related to the *Church*? Has the congregation any real part in the service? 2. In view of the

justification of Infant Baptism as conserving the view that the child is to grow up a Christian and not simply "to be converted some day," can we hold what is true in this view, and yet believe that conversion "or some equivalent personalizing of religion," to use Starbuck's phrase, is general, and that therefore a solemn rite, such as Believers' Baptism, at this stage of experience is of special value? After all, the choice has to be made, even by the child who has been surrounded by Christian influences from earliest days.

3.—Would you baptize all children, or only those of Christian parents?

Where the chief value of the rite is regarded as its declaration of a general truth of the gospel, we are not surprised to find a willingness to baptise all children. The dividing-line is not denominational. Some Congregationalists and some Wesleyans would baptise all children, whilst other Congregationalists and other Wesleyans are firm in the opinion that only children of Christian parents should be baptised. Others, like one Congregational minister, would baptise "children of those parents Christian enough to wish the child to enter into relation with a Christian Church." Where it is held that the value of the service is in the solemn acceptance of the responsibility to train the child as a Christian, of course, some hope of that obligation being carried out must be present, and the hope must be based upon facts. A Presbyterian minister holds that "to baptise all is to degrade the sacrament." It is notable that no Presbyterian replies advocate general baptism of infants.

The general tendency, as far as may be gathered, seems to be toward the restriction of the rite to children of Christian parents, or at least to those cases in which there seems to be good hope of the child being properly taught and trained in Christian faith and conduct.

4.—Would you immerse those who desired such form of baptism as a general confession of their personal faith: (a) if such had not been baptised in infancy? (b) if such had been baptised in infancy?

(a) In general, we gather that persons *not* baptised in infancy desiring Believers' Baptism by immersion would be sympathetically dealt with in the non-Baptist Free Churches. Replies suggesting this were received from almost every writer. One Congregational minister would "not be willing to immerse except in an emergency," but almost all the Congregational, Wesleyan, and Presbyterian replies lead to the conclusion that if people not baptised in infancy desired baptism by immersion administered

by their own Church, some way of meeting their desire would be found.

(b) But there is a sharp division of opinion as to whether persons baptised in infancy should later be immersed, if they desired so to confess their faith. One Wesleyan minister would refer such apparently unintelligible people to the Baptists! Very many are strongly opposed to any one baptised in infancy being subsequently immersed as a believer. Again the division is not denominational. Whilst one Congregational minister would provide "for immersion to all who desire it," another would immerse only under very exceptional conditions, and neither would on any account allow re-baptism. Similarly one Presbyterian would be in favour of, another Presbyterian against, the immersion of believers baptised in infancy. There is similar division amongst the Wesleyans.

On the whole it may be judged that the replies for the most part are theoretical. Few, if any, cases of persons baptised in infancy desiring later believers' baptism by immersion arise in the Pædo-Baptist Free Churches. Sometimes the question may arise in the mind of an individual who is convinced of the soundness of the Baptist position, but what is regarded as loyalty to his own Church means that he takes no action. If the conviction is very strong he forsakes his own Church and joins the Baptists, or in some rare cases, on his own initiative is baptised in a Baptist Church and remains a member of his own Church. An instance has come to light of a most devoted Presbyterian elder, who, strongly Baptist by conviction, had been himself immersed in a Baptist Church. He refused to have his children baptised in infancy, and later they too were immersed in a Baptist Church, and became loyal members of a Presbyterian Church!

As long as the view abides that Infant Baptism and Believers' Baptism are essentially the same rite, differing only in minor details, and there is a "high" view as to the importance and the implications of the rite, so long will there be a strong objection to the two rites being administered to the same persons. There is no way out of this difficulty except through a realisation that the two services are distinct in *meaning and value*. As far as can be gathered from the replies, some would not find it impossible to make this adjustment.

5.—Is some form of Baptism essential to Church Membership in the communion to which you belong: (a) Constitutionally? (b) In actual practice?

It may be assumed that historically some form of baptism has been regarded as essential to Church membership in all the Free Church communities except the Society of Friends. There

is a great deal of difference in modern opinion and in modern practice.

All the Presbyterian correspondents reply in the affirmative to both parts of the question. So the Presbyterians seem to share with the close membership Baptist Churches in stressing baptism (although differently interpreted and for the most part differently administered) as an essential pre-condition of Church fellowship.

The Congregational replies vary considerably. Some Congregationalists state that both in theory and practice baptism is essential to membership. Other Congregationalists state that neither in theory or practice is this the case! Others believe that baptism should precede membership, but consider that in practice it is often neglected. It is easy to discover where the division of opinion arises. Some Congregational ministers and laymen, holding a certain view of baptism, would like to insist upon its necessity for Church membership. Others, holding a somewhat different view, are willing to leave the matter on one side.

The Wesleyans reply for the most part that baptism is "expected, recommended, but is not regarded as absolutely obligatory." A Wesleyan layman replies in the negative to both parts of the question, but Wesleyan ministers on the whole incline to the view that baptism is expected. Probably baptism is the rule. Whether it is insisted upon or not depends very largely upon local custom or ministerial attitude. Recognizing some tendency not to insist upon baptism, some Congregationalists and Wesleyans deplore the tendency, some others approve the tendency as being in the right direction.

6.—Is your Communion Service in theory and practice confined to those who have been baptised?

In general we gather that in the Free Churches an invitation to the Communion Service is extended either to "members of other Christian Churches," or to "all believers in Christ." Some may assume that all so invited have been baptised, and hold therefore the theory that communion is for the baptised alone. Congregational layman replies, "We ask no questions. I suppose it is taken for granted that those communicating have been baptised." Several correspondents agree that in theory Communion is for the baptised alone, but admit that practice varies; whilst others state that in their view neither in theory or in practice is there any such restriction. One Congregational minister would emphasise as a condition of attendance at the Communion, "faith and love and evidence of regeneration," whilst another would keep the

Communion Service for the baptised unless it were "a matter of conscience to refrain from baptism."

Whilst most of the Wesleyan replies suggest nothing in theory or in practice as to baptism being an essential pre-condition of attendance at the service, one adds, "If I knew of such a person (attending Communion) unbaptised, I would approach him on the matter." There seems to be a greater approximation in practice than in theory as to this matter.

Amongst the Baptists themselves there is variety of opinion and usage. In some a general invitation is given to all Christians, in others to members of "other Christian Churches," and in some—"close Communion" Churches—to members of other Baptist Churches. In the last case, it is assumed that such have been baptised as believers by immersion. The fact of "open membership" Baptist Churches—admitting as they do unbaptised persons to membership—is apparently lost sight of.

7.—*What is the nature and value of any rite you observe to mark the "Personalizing of Religion" or admission to full membership of the Church?*

An interesting contribution from a member of the Society of Friends deals with "birth-right membership." Children, both of whose parents are members of the Society, are themselves regarded as members, no further step being taken to admit them to membership. This suggests the idea advanced by many Pædo-baptists as to the relation of children of church members to the Church. They are regarded as already within the Church. It is interesting to note that a Christian community which has abandoned baptism in any form has yet retained an idea that is certainly enshrined in infant baptism as viewed by a considerable number of those who practise it.

Further, with regard to the procedure in vogue in the Society of Friends, applications for membership are made to the Monthly Meeting. Those received are welcomed at a subsequent meeting of the Society. The correspondent adds, "Many friends feel that there is need of a more definite opportunity for young people to consciously to take upon themselves the responsibilities of membership." In the mission field, the candidates make a statement of their faith in their own words before the Society.

Other communications furnish information as to procedure which is for the most part familiar. With Congregationalists there is usually a catechumen or instruction class, interview of candidates by the minister or by Church members appointed, reception of report and vote of the Church in meeting assembled, and finally the giving of the right hand of fellowship at the Communion Service. Some send in Orders of Service used by them.

In many of them appear questions to candidates and answers given by them at their public reception into Church fellowship. There is evidently a tendency amongst Congregationalists to make the admission to membership a more impressive and solemn act.

Presbyterians have an established procedure: Instruction, inquiry by the session of elders, session follows the minister in giving the right hand of fellowship. At the following Communion Service the names are read, the new members welcomed, and prayer is offered for them.

Wesleyans report an increasing tendency to make use of their service for "The Public Recognition of New Members," a solemn service, in which the new members definitely acknowledge their faith in Christ as Saviour and declare themselves as Christians." Some Wesleyans express regret that the service is not more widely used.

A Welsh group (Congregational, Calvinistic Methodist, and Wesleyan) all mention a "charge" to the new members at the service of reception, whilst the Calvinistic Methodists refer to the custom of public catechizing as being still in vogue.

8.—Does your opinion coincide with that of your communion?

It is of importance to discover, as far as may be possible, whether the opinions expressed upon Infant Baptism, etc., are simply the opinions of individuals here and there, and not the general opinions held in the branch of the Church to which they belong. Both Wesleyan and Congregational correspondents admit that there much diversity of opinion on these matters in their respective communions. Presbyterians exhibit less diversity of opinion, and their procedure is more uniform, not so dependent upon personal preferences. With the Wesleyans there are varying degrees of strictness on all matters of sacrament. "A small minority," one of them states, "approach to Anglicanism." Some of them would "make compulsory the admitted and recommended" service for the reception of members. As for the Congregationalists, it will suffice to quote a brief sentence from the reply of one of their number: "There is too much diversity of opinion within the denomination for me to answer the question with any confidence."