

The Sacrament of Infant Baptism

K. C. MATHEW

WHAT IS BAPTISM ?

Many Baptists believe that 'it is the outward sign of an inner change which had already taken place in the believer'.¹ In the words of another Baptist, baptism 'is the testimony of the person to the fact of salvation'.² The above meaning of baptism raises three questions.

First, if baptism is only a testimony, why not one repeat this testimony as often as one could? Perhaps, it would not be a bad idea to set apart one day a year for this dramatic testimony by every believer in each local congregation. Our contention here is that the universally accepted position of 'One Baptism' does not rest on the above meaning of baptism. In order to maintain this position one has to look for some other meaning.

Second, if baptism is only a symbolic witness, why should one worry so much about the quantity of water used as symbol? A symbol is that which appeals to the imagination of the mind which puts meaning into it. Moreover, one needs previous education to use the mind in this fashion. Take the 'meaning-giving' function of the mind away, the symbol ceases to be of any value to the observer, however perfect the mode may be. For a previously instructed mind, one drop of water on the head has as much symbolic value as an ocean of water. In both cases, one is under water from the symbolic point of view.

Third, if baptism is exclusively the witness of the person who is baptized, how can it be an act of the Church? Why should the minister dip him in water? Does not the minister's action destroy the symbolism relating to faith? If baptism is the testimony of the believer and nothing else, it should be completely his own act. In other words, it should be the 'self-dipping' of the individual into the baptismal pool and his rising up before the congregation to which he testifies to the fact of his salvation.

¹ Mullins, E. Y., *The Christian Religion in its Doctrinal Expression*, p. 384.

² Kenneth S. Wuest, *Treasures from the Greek New Testament*, p. 78.

preventing grace. The efficacy of this grace is anticipative and forward-looking as the efficacy of the general baptism was anticipative and forward-looking. The entrance of the child into the Church through baptism does not mean the possession of all the riches in Jesus Christ. Early baptism 'does not remove the requirement of faith either in the parents who bring the child or in the child himself who must exercise it, on coming to years of discretion, to claim its inheritance'. 'The full meaning and the full blessing of the sacrament can only be entered into when the child comes to years of understanding and maturity, and of his free will actively appropriates these blessings and ratifies or confirms the relationship.' Without this it is obvious that the anticipation is not fulfilled in the life of the individual.

ARE CHILDREN DEBARRED FROM THIS GRACE ?

How can anyone deny this grace to a child ? Children were not debarred from the 'covenantal' grace of the Old Testament (Gen. 17 : 17 ; Acts 2 : 39). If the New Israel is the fulfilment of the Old, children should have their place in it too. If they are excluded, it is only fair to ask why did the New Testament writers fail to point out the change in the religious standing of children in the New Israel ? When children were brought to Jesus, He had the opportunity to draw the attention of His disciples to this fact. But His blessing of them, in spite of the disciples, only confirms the religious standing of children in the New Israel as in the Old.

The Bible of the New Testament community was the Old Testament. As their religion was grounded in the Old Testament it was natural for them to regard children as included within the New Covenant as it had been to regard them as included within the Old Covenant. Therefore, the question, 'By what authority ?', should be put to those who refuse to admit children to the Body of Christ through baptism.

Moreover, the Baptists in their refusal to admit children into the Body of Christ violate the unity of what the Germans call *Heilsgeschichte* (salvation-history). They sever the unity between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant, between the Old Israel and the New Israel, when they distinguish the Old and New Covenants, by setting a natural and racial succession determined by birth over against a supra-racial succession determined by human choice and divine election.

'The mystery of salvation is the mystery of a child.'³ We are reminded of this every year by the most impressive of our festivals, namely Christmas. One of the affirmations of Christmas is that children are also included in the plan of God's salvation. Since 'that which is not assumed is not redeemed', Incarnation did not bypass 'childhood'. Thus children are also the objects of the redemptive act of God in Christ. If so, how can children be

³ Tillich, *The New Being*, p. 95.

excluded from the 'Body of Christ'—the extension of His Incarnation? Incarnation affirms the fact that every child has a right to be incorporated into the 'Body of Christ' through the door of baptism.

No one equates infant baptism with 'Believer's Baptism'. No paedobaptist believes that a child by virtue of its baptism attains to the religious standing of an adult believer. The dress of a six-foot-tall man does not fit a six-month-old child. This does not mean that the child should have no dress. A six-month-old child cannot digest all that a six-foot-tall man eats. This does not mean that the child should starve. A six-month-old child cannot believe as a sixty-year-old man. God does not will that we should try to force upon little children an adult type of experience. Neither does He desire to keep children outside the Church for conditions they cannot meet. The most logical and natural procedure should be to accept children into the Church on terms which fit them, namely the faith of its parents and the Church. Faith should be required only from those who can believe. 'Repent and be baptized, every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins' sounds like baptismal regeneration. But the true meaning is 'Repent and be baptized . . . in the state of your sins forgiven'. A sinner is incorporated into the Body of Christ in the state of his sins forgiven. But for a child who is not guilty of any actual sin, this condition is superfluous and meaningless. Incorporation into the Old Israel through circumcision was not a guarantee that one was eternally saved. Similarly incorporation into the New Israel through baptism involves no such guarantee. It is clearly taught in the Old Testament that only a *remnant* of the Old Israel was saved. No protestant paedobaptist believes that infant baptism is a *ticket* which guarantees their eternal right of admission into heaven. Incorporation of a child into the Body of Christ is an immensely responsible act on the part of the parents and the Church. 'A child is real and not yet real, it is in history and not yet historical.'⁴ Similarly a baptized child is Christian and not yet Christian, it is in the visible Church but not yet consciously and actively part of the visible Church. In fact no baptism lacks its proleptic element. As we have mentioned elsewhere, every baptism points forward for its completion and fulfilment. By the teaching, preaching and worship of the Church, the baptized child should be led to a conscious appropriation of the grace which follows the sacrament of baptism. The efficacy of infant baptism is not tied to the moment of its administration but continues to work through faith as one looks back. The validity of baptism depends on something which is objectively given, the *general baptism* of Jesus. The efficacy of infant baptism does not depend on what we do, but on what God has done for the child. 'Christ's death upon the cross, the baptism of the human race, was not the result

⁴ Tillich, *op. cit.*, p. 103.

of men's believing. It created our faith; it did not result from it. So, too, the baptism of the individual, by which he appropriates to himself the benefits of Christ's death and resurrection, theologically precedes the awakening of faith and is not the consequence of it. Baptism is the sacrament and effective symbol of justification and, especially at the baptism of infants, it powerfully proclaims the antecedent love of God by whose prevenient grace all the virtues, including that of faith, are imparted through the gift of His Holy Spirit.⁵

In baptism the main thing is not what men do, but what God has done. It is a sign that Christ claims all men as His own and that He has redeemed them to a new way of life. That is why we baptize children . . . The water of baptism declares that they are already entitled to all God's mercies to men in the passion of Christ. Your own baptism ought then to mean much to you. It ought to mean all the more because it happened before you knew, or could know, anything about it. Christ redeemed you on the first Good Friday without any thought or action on your part. It is right therefore that as He acted in the first instances, without waiting for any sign of faith from you, so baptism, the sign of the benefits of His Kingdom, should come to you without waiting for any faith or desire on your part. Every time we baptize a child, we declare to the whole world in the most solemn manner that God does for us what He does without our merits and even without our knowledge. In baptism, more plainly perhaps than anywhere else, God commends His love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.⁶

The canonization of the New Testament, the organization of the ministry, and the formulation of the creeds by the early Church were intended to guarantee the purity of the Gospel messages. The early Church was very heresy-conscious. Any teaching which did not have the apostolic origin could not gain entrance into the early Church without protest. If infant baptism had no apostolic origin it would not have been accepted by the early Church without any resenting voice. The conspicuous absence of such a resenting voice in the early Church shows that the practice of baptizing, in infancy, the children of Christian parents began with apostolic authority. Origen said, 'The Church received a tradition from the Apostles to administer baptism even to infants.' Alan Richardson thinks that 'objection to the practice of baptizing the infant children of Christian parents arose rather from the rationalistic and individualistic attitudes of renaissance humanism than from a right understanding of New Testament teaching about faith and justification'.⁷

⁵ Alan Richardson, *An Introduction to the Theology of the New Testament*, p. 363.

⁶ B. Manning, *Why Not Abandon the Church*, pp. 47-48.

⁷ Alan Richardson, *op. cit.*, p. 358.

In Col. 3:20 and Eph. 6:1 St. Paul addresses children in such a way as to suggest that they are members of the New Testament Church. Both these epistles are addressed to the 'saints and faithful'. When he elaborates this phrase and names the groups which are embraced by it, he mentions children also. If children could thus be regarded as members of the Church, it would be justifiable to conclude that they had entered the Church through the door of baptism—the only way the Apostle knew of entering the Christian community.

There is good reason to believe that the 'household' mentioned in the New Testament included children also. The reality of the 'solidarity' of household experienced by the New Testament community is foreign to the modern man who is highly atomistic and individualistic. According to the Biblical thinking whatever the head of a 'household' did was binding upon every member of the house, including slaves. We read in the Old Testament that for Achan's sins, his sons, daughters, oxen, asses and all that he had were stoned and burnt with fire. Paul told the Philippian gaoler, 'Believe on the Lord Jesus, and thou shalt be saved, thou and thy house . . . he was baptized, he and all his, immediately.' What had happened to the gaoler happened also to 'all his'. Therefore, when the Bible, which knows no modern individualism, says that so-and-so with his household was baptized, it means that all members of his household including children were baptized. Since the New Testament mentions the baptism of four households, we can safely conclude that the New Testament Church included baptized children.

We have attempted in this paper to show that the practice of infant baptism is theologically, scripturally, historically and practically a sound one. The other day a Baptist professor in a Theological College said to me, 'I must admit that there is a Biblical basis for infant baptism. But many Baptists are not aware of this and they think that their view is the only Biblical one'. Paradoxically enough, in the final article of a book recently written in defence of the Baptist's position, the author concludes by the assertion that he is unwilling to dismiss infant baptism as 'no baptism'. He further adds: 'For no baptism can lack its proleptic element, and every baptism points forward for its completion and fulfilment . . . An unqualified denial of infant baptism could be theologically justified only if accompanied by a willingness to "un-church" all paedobaptist communities and to uphold separation at this point in the name of the One True Church. Can we, in this day and age, follow our forefathers to so radical a conclusion?'⁸

We hope that the confessions of the above nature in the light of recent New Testament scholarship and the understanding of the theology of the apostolic Church by Baptists themselves will serve to open the eyes of those who spend most of their time and

⁸ A. Gilmore, *Christian Baptism*, p. 326.

energy in the name of 'evangelism' to re-baptize those who have already received infant baptism and to help them engage themselves in the right evangelism of taking the Gospel to the ones who know not Christ.