

Review Articles

The Biblical Doctrine of Initiation : by R. E. O. White. Hodder and Stoughton, London. Price 30s.

In recent years there has been much discussion about baptism, and in North India this is a very live issue in connection with the Plan of Church Union. Contributions have been made on the subject by N. P. Williams, Norman Snaith ('Most communities, other than the Baptists, are confused over the whole matter, and those that are not confused are wrong'), O. Cullman, Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, J. Jeremias, and others, but until 1959 there was no substantial contribution from the Baptist standpoint, and this was a very unfortunate gap. In that year a group of Baptists produced a volume entitled *Christian Baptism*, edited by A. Gilmore, and this made important contribution to the discussion. The introduction by Dr. E. A. Payne, General Secretary of the Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland, gave at least a semi-official flavour to the book, and no one who is concerned with the discussion can avoid to ignore it. Unfortunately, the book discussed the matter from an almost purely historical viewpoint, and the final chapter on 'The Theology of Baptism' met a great deal of criticism from amongst Baptists themselves. One of the contributors to that volume, the Rev. R. E. O. White, produced in the following year a much more valuable contribution to the discussion, which is concerned not merely with historical development, but with the theology involved in the problem.

The title of the book indicates a vital point which has been often overlooked, namely that baptism is not an isolated ceremony to be considered in isolation, but is a vital part of the whole process of initiation into the Christian Church, and is tied up with the central theme of the Bible, which is the relation of God to His people. The present reviewer has been regarded as quibbling with the reiterated comment that the fundamental defect in the plan of Church Union in North India, from the Baptist point of view, is the statement that the Church consists of those who have been baptized and have confessed their faith in Jesus Christ, but White's approach entirely supports this comment.

Attempts have been made to connect infant baptism with circumcision (e.g. the Church of Scotland Report) in spite of Paul's arguments in Galatians and Romans, but these have been largely on the basis of a mechanical parallelism, and have not really examined the fundamental basis of circumcision. White starts with the idea of the covenant, since no consideration of

clean would have been insuperable, but servants were only baptized if they were willing, and the children were baptized on the express provision that they might consider their position again later, and could become gentile without apostasy. The second point is that children born after the mother's baptism were not baptized, since they were already in Israel (*see* White's footnote on page 65).

John the Baptist preached 'the baptism of repentance unto remission of sins', and his baptism was clearly intended for Jews. It was therefore not an initiation ceremony into Judaism at all, and its main significance must be seen in the 'Levitical' context of Jewish washings. Its second significance is in its connection with the 'baptism of fire' and possibly 'baptism of the Spirit' with which it is connected, and which clearly point to a context of Messianic judgement. Along with the idea of purification, in preparation for the coming judgement, was the idea of the separation of a new community, and in this context it was a ceremony of initiation into the 'Remnant' who were awaiting the Coming One. In this latter context the baptism of John was unrepeatable, and so is distinguished from Pharisaic and Essene lustrations. When Jesus came to be baptized by John he said that this was the way 'to fulfil all righteousness', and in his question to the Jews he implied that his own opinion was that John's baptism was from heaven. This indicates that Jesus came to His baptism with the conviction that he was doing so because this was the purpose of God for all men, and as a man, it was the purpose for him. It is also clear that the experience of Jesus in baptism involved a new consciousness of his own calling, and a new endowment of the Holy Spirit. Whatever be the theological problems involved, it is clear that the baptism of Jesus radically alters the understanding of the whole ceremony, and henceforth baptism is indissolubly connected with the endowment of the Spirit. Because of this radical alteration in outlook, in Karl Barth's phrase, 'Jesus made himself the Lord of Baptism', and the emphasis, instead of falling on the side of self-dedication, falls on the side of God's promise, and God's willingness to fulfil that promise, which fulfilment begins here and now in the entry into the kingdom.

It is in the light of all these preliminary considerations that we must look at the teaching about Christian baptism in the New Testament, and the first significant point is that Jesus himself said practically nothing about baptism, and the references in the Gospels, even if all are accepted as authentic, are extremely meagre. It can therefore only be understood by an investigation of the whole background of Jesus' teaching about the kingdom and entry into it. The keynote as given in the Gospels is the call to repentance and faith, which is only possible for man through the grace of God. Repentance is an individual experience, but it involves incorporation into a new community of believers. Baptism may be the symbol of this incorporation but for each individual there comes the same call for repentance and faith,

baptism without such a beginning is likely to come to a right conclusion, and he examines the covenant-relationship in the Old Testament. Originally the covenant was a covenant between God and his people, as a people, and circumcision was the seal of that covenant, therefore it was necessary that all the people should bear the seal. (In practice it was only half the people, since it did not apply to women, but I do not think anyone has suggested that only male infants should be baptized!) One of the basic themes of the prophets is the reliance of the people on their outward status as the People of God, without any corresponding inward quality, and this is still the theme of Paul, when he says that circumcision is quite irrelevant, and what was important for Abraham was his faith. In Jeremiah and Ezekiel the basis of the covenant-relationship underwent a radical change. As White says: 'On the one hand, the centre of gravity in religious experience is shifted from the nation to the individual, and membership is not a racial but a moral and spiritual matter.' At the time of the return an attempt was made to revive the idea of corporate solidarity in the covenant-relationship, which was allied to exclusiveness, but this failed, and the result was a community which more and more came to rely on externals such as circumcision, the written law, and Abrahamic descent, and within the community a small nucleus who fostered the individualism derived from Jeremiah. It is important to notice that the idea of 'community' did not disappear, with the rise of this individualism, but the qualifications of the community-membership are no longer ritual and ceremonial, but moral and spiritual.

When the qualifications for membership of the Chosen Community are no longer racial, or ceremonial, but moral and spiritual, it is logically necessary to conclude that they are potentially universal, and this point is brought out in Deutero-Isaiah, and in Zechariah. The actual working out of the practice of post-exilic Judaism led to exclusiveness and legalism, and an almost complete eclipse of the wider vision of the later prophets, but at the same time there was the attitude which 'compassed sea and land to make one proselyte'. This attitude had at the same time the conception of Israel as a light to the Gentiles, together with a very rigid conception of the requirements to be fulfilled by the Gentile in order to receive the light. Since the Gentile was unclean and his very touch defiled the Jew, it was necessary to provide a visible symbol of the removal of this uncleanness, and this was done in the ceremony of proselyte baptism. It is clear that this was not the only type of lustration which was practised; and there are abundant references to cleansing ceremonies practised by the more zealous groups in Israel, so that it is not surprising that such a ceremony should be employed for the reception of proselytes. There are two points about this ceremony which should be noted. It appears that both children and servants were normally baptized with the head of the household, since otherwise the practical problems of living with those who were un-

whatever may be his personal background. This involves two corollaries, the first that baptism can never be a substitute for such faith, and, indeed, that faith is prior to baptism; and the second, that however good may have been the home background of Christian children, they are still faced with the call to repentance and faith as individuals. The practice of baptism without repentance and faith on the part of the person baptized is a reversion to pre-prophetic ideas of solidarity. Jesus' own statement confirmed the prophetic rejection of racial or family solidarity when he said: 'Whosoever shall do the will of God, the same is my brother, and my sister and my mother.' If baptism is 'the expression of man's response to the word and grace of God consciously apprehended and accepted, and the expression of God's response to man's repentant faith' (White, p. 123) then 'to adopt a rite so full of ethical, psychological and religious significance to symbolize a totally different situation is to prostitute its meaning, destroy its spiritual character, and deprive the child of its wealth of grace and blessing when growing faith and obedience would make it appropriate'. Pity is not always a virtue, and not always helpful in theological discussion, but a very large number of Baptists find it difficult not to pity those who by their practice of infant baptism are deprived of a unique experience which we have had.

It is clearly impossible to enter into the details of the argument in this article, but an examination of the Biblical evidence shows that the order of priority is never lost sight of. Paul's teaching about faith superseding the law in Romans, his emphasis on freedom based on faith in Galatians, the exhortations of Peter in Acts, and in the First Epistle, and the argument of Hebrews that faith has superseded the cultus, John's emphasis that baptism must be of water *and the spirit*, that the flesh profits nothing, and eating the bread which is mere bread is useless—in all these the basic truth is maintained. Increasing concern with Biblical Theology, and with the Unity of the Bible, must surely bring the realization that from beginning to end relationship with God is a two-sided encounter, freely entered and fully personal. The initiative is with God, men can accept or refuse, and their response determines their status. In the very beginning the call comes to individuals, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and whilst the corporate idea is strong in the earlier times, the idea of individual responsibility is there. The growing insight of the prophets leading to the conception of the new covenant perhaps goes to an impossible extreme in Ezekiel's isolationism, but the reaction against that leads to the exclusive racialism which Jesus most condemned.

White's closing chapter deals with the Biblical Doctrine in the Modern Church, and discusses very many points which have been advanced in recent contributions. It is not difficult to produce debating points on either side, and sometimes it is essential to indicate the debating points and show their worth, but the

importance of this chapter is that it not only points out the inconsistencies of many paedobaptists, but it makes a serious attempt to consider the value of infant baptism, or some similar ceremony, and it also criticizes the over-statements and wrong emphases of Baptist protagonists. It is because it makes this serious attempt to contribute to the discussion on theological grounds, and not merely by bandying points of exegesis or history, that this book is the most helpful book which has been produced by a Baptist on the subject. There has been far too much skirmishing about positions which are non-essential, with arguments which are like star-rockets, rather than shells—they look lovely to the one who fires them, but they do no harm to the other side, and the light they give is only momentary.

One comment was made to me which I felt was very inadequate—that the book is good, but it is a pity that we could not sort out the matter from within a united church, instead of arguing over the fence. If White's contention is true, then for a Baptist to accept the fundamental basis of the proposed North India Church would be to deny his conviction about the revelation of God in the Bible, so long as the basis of the Church is a ritual first and faith second, whether the ritual is infant baptism or adult baptism. So many of our paedobaptist friends seem quite unable to realize that Baptists emphasize *believers'* baptism, and for them it is absolutely essential that they should read this book, and see what it means.

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