

EDITORIAL

BAPTISMAL TRENDS

This time the Bulletin takes the form of a symposium on the issue of baptism. The two main papers which follow were both read at a joint meeting of the Doctrine and Biblical Theology Group of the Tyndale Fellowship, meeting at Tyndale House, Cambridge, in July 1988. David Wright, chairman of the Doctrine Group and Review Editor of the Bulletin, supplies an editorial.

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Hard on the heels of Michael Green's *Baptism: Its Purpose, Practice and Power* (Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1987) comes another evangelical Anglican contribution, *Believing in Baptism*, by Gordon Kuhrt (London, Mowbray, 1987; 186 pp., £5.95; ISBN0 264 67088 4). From this careful and irenical survey, which interprets baptism in covenantal terms, I learned that 'far more adults (i.e. those over 18) are being baptised each year in the Church of England than in the Baptist Union of Churches [in England]' (p. 6). This piece of information prodded me to unearth the Scottish statistics, which present a similar picture. In the last few years roughly 1600 adult baptisms have taken place annually in the Church of Scotland, while about half that number of believers have been baptised in Baptist churches. It would not be too wide of the mark to claim that national churchmen in both England and Scotland have a greater interest in believers' baptism than their Baptist brethren – for it cannot be denied that adults baptised on profession of faith are baptised as believers.

There is more to this curious statistic than a predictable consequence of the much greater size of each national church than the corresponding Baptist Union. For baptism, however understood and administered, holds a place never far from the cutting edge of the church's impact upon the wider community. In a society like Scotland in which a steadily declining proportion of the population has been baptised in infancy, the number of believers or adults being baptised is one critical measure of the Kirk's success in winning people to faith and membership later in life. The statistics are worth a closer look.

Baptisms in the Church of Scotland have decreased alarmingly, from 49,607 in 1957 to 42,720 ten years later, 22,545 in 1977 and 18,794 in 1987, although a decline in the birthrate partly accounts for the slide. In recent years roughly 8 per cent of the total baptismal count have been adult baptisms. This percentage is approximately double that of the 1930s when baptisms year by year totalled about twice the present number and adult baptisms about the same. But if we compare the recent position with the 1950s – the high-water mark for the Kirk in the

twentieth century – a different story emerges. During that decade, adult baptisms averaged well over 10 per cent of the total, which itself averaged over 45,000 annually. In 1955 very nearly 15 per cent of baptisms were of adults baptised on profession of faith. They numbered 7,490 – a figure not too far short of half of all baptisms in 1987.

The baptismal statistics for the 1950s remind us that a large number of people currently outside the Church of Scotland were once baptised. In those ten years almost half a million persons were baptised in the Kirk, over a tenth of them on profession of faith. The other 90 per cent will now be in their thirties, and the majority of them will be unchurched. Does their baptism constitute a hopeful point of contact in our attempts to win them back or, on the contrary, does it count only negatively? Will it have effectively immunised them against a genuine mature encounter with the Christian faith?

An urgent plea for discrimination in administering baptism is part of Gordon Kuhrt's message. This aspect of baptismal practice is one in which the magisterial Reformation did little to correct, and perhaps too much to reinforce, a centuries-old tradition. The literature of the recently formed Movement for the Reform of Infant Baptism (M.O.R.I.B.) unhesitatingly identifies indiscriminate infant baptism in past decades in the Church of England as one of the gravest contemporary obstacles to the evangelisation of England. (It also carries helpfully honest accounts of the costly transition to a disciplined baptismal policy in some rural Anglican parishes.) Viewed from this perspective the fall in infant baptism in the Kirk may be read as a healthy trend, but a surer sign of a reform to ecclesiastical health will be an upturn in the number of people being baptised on coming to faith in adult years. For this statistic is a clear pointer to the church's ability to reach the increasingly unbaptised mass of the population with the gospel.

If at the same time requests for rebaptism increase, we could do worse than note Kuhrt's firm but not neurotic approach to it. I would class as neurotic the New Zealand Presbyterian Church's authorisation of a (non-baptismal!) rite of washing or immersion as a 'confirmation' of an earlier baptism for those who find the latter difficult to acknowledge as their true baptism. This is territory in which the sixteenth-century Reformers have little direct guidance to offer us. Indeed, it has taken four centuries for the churches to begin to recover from the baptismal polarisation bequeathed to Protestantism by the Reformation disputes. If *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (World Council of Churches, 1982) may be faulted for bridging 'the waters that divide' too easily, it surely points in the right direction. As Kuhrt notes, 'the Church of England does not insist on its members baptising their infants'. He seeks a higher profile for the present availability of two different patterns of baptismal administration, broadly along lines suggested by *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*. On this occasion the Kirk would be wise to learn from her southern sister.