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## **Biblical Truth for Today's Church**

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### **LATIMER COMMENT 28**

#### **BAPTISMAL POLICY AND BAPTISMAL DOCTRINE**

The baptism of infants, although the historic practice of the Christian church and of the Church of England in particular, and though deliberately retained by our Reformers as 'most agreeable with the institution of Christ' (Article 27), has since the Reformation become problematical for many. There are two main reasons for this.

#### The Link with Repentance and Faith

The first reason is that baptism is linked in New Testament teaching with repentance and faith (Acts 2:38; 19:4-5; Gal. 3:26-27; Col. 2:12): for infants, however, it is necessarily separated in practice from repentance and faith by a period of years. Evangelicals, in particular, lay great stress on the necessity of repentance and faith, for they follow in the tradition of the 18th century Evangelical Revival, which was a reaction against negligence and formalism, and emphasised that a merely formal observance of the Christian sacraments was useless. Repentance and faith are a response to the ministry of the word - to the law and the gospel; and though those who bring the child to baptism may well have responded, by repenting and believing, and though the one who baptizes the child may well have done so too, this is no substitute for the child himself doing so, and he is too young to do so as yet. At this stage, others have to act temporarily as his proxies. Infant baptism, therefore, is unlike adult baptism at least in this respect, that, from the candidate's standpoint, it precedes instead of following the ministry of the word, so that the faith and repentance on the candidate's part which it implies are future not present - something which we can rightly pray for, but not something of which we can have actual evidence. The gospel is certainly proclaimed at infant baptism, but the proclamation is primarily symbolical, and the audience is not the candidate but those who bring him.

This means that the lofty statements which the New Testament makes, and which the traditional Christian liturgies have echoed, about the benefits of baptism as a means of grace, need to be understood in a qualified sense if the candidate is an infant. Ought they then to be made at all? No, says the Baptist, for the ceremony is a mere symbol, and the benefits have not yet been received. This, however, is claiming to know more than we do. If infant baptism is true baptism, it is not a mere symbol but a divine symbol, and what God may have begun to work in the infant through it is known to him alone. He will, however, only have begun; for the sacrament is not meant to be permanently isolated from the ministry of the word, which teaches explicitly what baptism symbolises; and our prayer in administering the sacrament is, that the Holy Spirit will use the two means in combination to evoke, in due time, that repentance and faith which are the conscious beginning of the Christian life (though not, perhaps, its unconscious beginning).

Ah! says the Catholic sacramentalist, so you admit that infant baptism may be the unconscious beginning of the Christian life? Why, then, do you complicate matters by bringing in the ministry of the word, and not let the seed of sacramental grace develop of its own accord as consciousness dawns? It is tempting for the Evangelical to reply to this that experience is against it, for only a proportion of those baptized as infants grow up to be practising Christians,

and the less Christian teaching they receive, the less opportunity they have of doing so. A more theological answer, however, is to point out that it is contrary to the New Testament. The New Testament makes faith the outcome of the ministry of the word (Jn. 17:20; Rom. 10:17; Eph. 1:13), and not, at least primarily, of baptism. The regeneration which the New Testament attributes to baptism (Jn. 3:5; Tit. 3:5) it also attributes to the ministry of the word (Jam. 1:18; 1 Pet. 1:23-5), and in each case it is speaking of Christians in general, which implies that they need both means of grace, not just one or the other. Sacraments are symbols, which only draw their meaning from the ministry of the word, and graciously operate in combination with it, not independently. To make room for the ministry of the word is not, therefore, an arbitrary complication of the doctrine of grace, but an essential requirement for expounding it faithfully.

While speaking of sacramentalists, one should add that we have today the curious phenomenon of a group of Evangelical sacramentalists in our midst, who are propagating an essentially unreformed doctrine of the church, by making the sacraments the sole marks of the church visible. How far this is from the teaching of the Reformers may be seen from a glance at Article 19, but the biblical passages that we have just quoted show that it is equally far from the teaching of the New Testament. The Christian is one who has not simply been baptized but who has also repented and believed, in response to the ministry of the word. The marks of the church visible are therefore not just the ministry of the sacraments but the ministry of the word (including the outward profession of that faith which the ministry of the word evokes). The Evangelical sacramentalist, ignoring the ministry of the word, argues that baptism (without confirmation) is complete initiation into the visible church; that infant baptism is true baptism, and is therefore likewise complete initiation into the visible church; and that membership of the visible church implies a right to receive communion. By this knock-down argument he attempts to prove that not just baptism but the holy communion ought to be given to infants. The fallacies here are that, even if baptism were complete without confirmation, it would not be complete without the ministry of the word; and that, even within confirmation, a distinction ought to be drawn between the ceremony (the laying on of hands) and the profession of faith. The latter element is the one on which the Reformers laid their emphasis, and that element belongs inseparably with the ministry of the word, so baptism is not complete without it. The profession of faith could, of course, be made in other contexts than the laying on of hands, but since the latter is the historic Anglican way of admitting people to communion, it is the most appropriate context.

In practice, many of this group of Evangelical sacramentalists (though not the most doctrinaire . of them) lack the courage of their convictions, and only contend for communion to be given to children of about 7-9, not to infants -as if 7-9 were the age of baptism! But people who are the captives of false logic frequently act illogically, as here, in attempting to deliver themselves from the consequences of their own arguments.

A grotesque appendage to these ideas is the proposal that, if a child does not remain a regular communicant when he grows up, he should be excommunicated (as if he were a notorious evil-liver), and that only the children of regular communicants should in future be admitted as candidates for baptism. How much further would it be possible for sectarian bigotry to go? No wonder the chief proponents of these views are now campaigning for the Church of England to be disestablished!

Putting aside this strange aberration, therefore, orthodox Evangelical Anglicans will maintain, against the assertions of both Baptists and sacramentalists, that the baptism of infants is neither ineffective nor complete in itself. The authority for it lies in the sovereignty of God's grace, in his gracious dealings with families (not just with individuals), in his promises to Abraham and his seed, in his institution of infant circumcision, and in the household baptisms of the New Testament; and, having this authority, they will trustfully continue to practise it, patiently looking for God to vindicate their action, when the ministry of the word has done its work, and those baptized can declare their own repentance and faith, and be fitly admitted to the other sacrament.

### The Decline in Churchgoing

In recent times, infant baptism has become a problem to many for a second reason, which has caused it to trouble people who would otherwise be happy with the practice. The reason is that, in a period of low churchgoing like the present, many of the parents who ask to have their babies baptized are not themselves regular churchgoers. This arouses the fear that their child will simply be brought to church

on this one occasion, and will not receive the subsequent teaching on which his future faith depends. It is true that godparents, and not just parents, will take responsibility for him at the service, but parents who are not regular churchgoers often choose godparents who are like themselves, and are not regular churchgoers either. In any case, the godparents are not the ones who will have most to do with the child's upbringing, but rather the parents.

It is a situation in which we hear horror stories of parents asking baptism for their children just to bring them good luck. We also hear horror stories of clergy refusing baptism to the children of dying mothers. And both kinds of horror story may, one fears, be true.

The official response of the Church of England to this problem is laid down in the new canons, which, having been agreed by the Convocations and received the royal assent, are now part of the ecclesiastical law binding the clergy. Canon B22 says,

'Due notice, normally of at least a week, shall be given before a child is brought to the church to be baptised ... No minister shall refuse or, save for the purpose of preparing or instructing the parents or guardians or godparents, delay to baptise any infant within his cure ...'

This may seem not to go very far, but when one compares it with the old Canon 68 of 1603 which it replaces, one can see the difference:

'No Minister shall refuse or delay to christen any child according to the form of the Book of Common Prayer that is brought to the Church to him upon Sundays or Holy-days, to be christened ... And if he shall refuse he shall be suspended by the Bishop of the diocese from his ministry by the space of three months.'

Under the old canon no notice is required, and a severe penalty falls upon the minister if he does not baptize the child forthwith. Under the new canon, a week's notice is normally required, and though the minister may still not refuse baptism, he may delay it, presumably beyond the week, if the parents or godparents need much preparation and instruction. Of course, a delay could be so long as to be tantamount to a refusal, and in those circumstances another part of the new canon gives the parents a right of appeal to the bishop.

The readiness of the old canon to insist on the minister baptizing every child without delay is worth pondering. This is a reformed canon! Of course, it was drawn up at a time when churchgoing was universal, and the national profession of Christianity was matched by outward practice. Yet it is still striking. The Puritans were even then demanding that only the children of Christian parents should be baptized: this did not mean that other parents were not churchgoers, but that the Puritans were dissatisfied with the established church's 'charitable presumption' that people's Christian profession was sincere, calling for a 'credible profession' instead. This attempt to put 'windows into men's souls' was seen by the leaders of the established church as essentially sectarian, and so it proved in its results to be. Those Anglicans who are today calling for none but the children of Christian parents to be baptized need to be sure that they are not pursuing the same sectarian ideal.

It will no doubt be said in reply that the situation today is quite different from what it was in the seventeenth century. England is much more like the missionary world of the early church, in which parents were often godparents to their own children, than like the post-Constantinian Christendom, in which this practice was abolished. When the Puritans wanted to revive the practice of making the parents godparents, the old Canons forbade it (Canon 29), but the situation is now quite different, and the new Canons do revive the practice (Canon B23). In conformity with this, the ASB Baptism service provides for the parents to make the baptismal professions at the same time as the godparents.

We so commonly hear such statements made today that we are apt to accept them unthinkingly. Yet they deserve to be scrutinized more carefully. A nation which has declined from its former Christian profession may superficially look like an unevangelised people, but it is in fact profoundly different, as experience constantly shows, and it calls for a different sort of evangelistic policy, which builds upon its Christian past. In the early church, parents were normally godparents to their own children, but not always: other relatives were also acceptable, as the evidence of Hippolytus (c.215 AD) proves. The Puritans wanted to insist on parents being godparents, which was not the practice of, the early church. Nor is the Puritan policy endorsed by the new canon, which permits parents to be godparents, without requiring it, and, when they are godparents, requires another godparent in addition. This shows that the rubrics of the ASB service are in some danger of being misunderstood: if interpreted in conformity with the canon, as they should be, they do not mean that the parents must make the baptismal professions with the godparents, but only

that it is appropriate if they do.

Even if this is so (the rigorist will doubtless answer), the covenant theology underlying infant baptism demands a stricter policy and the direct participation of the parents. The Puritans, of course, were arguing from covenant theology, but so were their opponents, and it is interesting to see how Hooker and Whitgift replied to them. They pointed out that God's covenant with Abraham and his seed was with a family which grew into a nation, professing the same faith as Abraham. Moreover, other families and nations could be converted to the profession of the true faith, and, under the Christian dispensation particularly, they have been. The immediate parentage of a child was not, therefore, its only title to baptism. With suitable godparents, infants more remotely related to believers could be baptized, and even the children of heretics and excommunicated persons could be baptized. Provided the Christian profession was not completely extinct among them, the wider family to which they belonged gave them this right. And if it did, who is to say that it does not give them the right still?

In actual practice, of course, it is nearly always the immediate parents (or at least one of them) who asks for a child to be baptized. This raises the question whose responsibility it is to decide whether a child is baptized or not. It is frequently assumed that the minister is to decide. We have seen that canon law does not in fact give him this right, since it forbids him to refuse baptism to any infant within his cure. But does Holy Scripture give him the right? The answer is No. The command to circumcise Abraham's seed was laid upon Abraham (Gen. 17), not upon Melchizedek! The context in which the circumcision of infants took place was, until well into the Christian era, the home and not the Temple or synagogue. We see an example of this in the New Testament account of the circumcision of John the Baptist, where it is the 'neighbours' and 'relatives' who come to circumcise him, not the priests or elders (Lk. 1:58-59). If infant baptism corresponds to infant circumcision, as covenant theology argues, then it is the family who decide whether a child is baptised, and the minister is, in effect, simply asked to act as their agent. And how can he refuse, if the decision is rightly theirs?

A final consideration is that, if the parents want to bring their child to be baptized, this very fact shows that they are not non-churchgoers but occasional churchgoers: and on what sound theological grounds can it be asserted that the children of occasional churchgoers may not be baptized? Their churchgoing is only occasional, it is true, but the disciples of him who 'did not break the bruised reed or quench the smoking flax' (Matt. 12:20) should maximise the fact, not minimise it. If the parents had more light than they have, they would certainly appreciate the privilege and responsibility of regular churchgoing: but does the fact that they do not appreciate it mean that they have no light at all?

The minister may, of course, need to teach them much about the meaning of their decision, about the meaning of baptism, and about the meaning of Christianity, and the Canons permit him to delay the baptism, if necessary, so that he can do this first. He will want to do all he can to persuade the parents to bring their child up in the fellowship and faith of the church. The charge of 'indiscriminate baptism' could rightly be levelled at him if he did not avail himself of the opportunity thus offered. But beyond that the Canons do not allow him to go. And theology seems to be on the side of the Canons.

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