

Baptism.

THE remarkable feature about Baptism is the wondrously universal desire for its administration among all classes in civilised European communities. Whatever else they do or do not desire of a Church, parents desire Baptism for their children. It is the one rite which all Christian communities recognise as valid, even when it is heretic Baptism, even, in some cases, where it is administered by a layman, not to say a woman. Actually, educated people who refuse to make the Christian profession have been known to request it as conveying a divine blessing, irrespective of any theory as to its origin, and apart from any subsequent nurture or admonition in the Christian sense. The laity are keen and interested; at least, the sacrament binds them to the Church for their children's sakes. The clergy are often quite confused as to its meaning and value, and perfunctory and offhand in its administration. This confusion is part and parcel of a general haziness with regard to Christian doctrine as a whole. Few are found who are sensible of the distinction between speculative tenets and true dogmas. Each feels free to hold his own opinions throughout the field. Those, however, who regard dogmatism as narrow-mindedness stamp their faith as an accommodation of everything anyhow in a sentimental geniality, which may be anything or nothing, and which is usually the easy fruit of intellectual and spiritual laziness.

The result is that instruction on Baptism varies with the individual; indeed, fortunate are they who receive any: while the repercussions of such looseness upon the act of administration are naturally in the direction of disorder. To crown all, the indiscriminate gatherers-in are balanced by those who sometimes refuse Baptism altogether; clearly for them Baptism is no sacrament.

Sacramental doctrine belongs to the third credal division—viz., the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. God in time past revealed Himself in Christ as Almighty Holy Love—so runs the Gospel; and since Christians conceive of themselves as in receipt of the same salvation at the present time, it follows that God still reveals Himself in

Christ through the operation of the Holy Spirit. In other words, we individual persons receive an individual personal intimation of salvation from God, who was in Christ for the purpose of reconciling the world to Himself, throughout the ages, until the consummation. Primarily, then, revelation is to individuals. But no individual stands by himself. Man is a social animal. Those whom personal trust makes free of the divine gift are thereby members of the *Kingdom* of God. They constitute a *Church*, holy and universal, in which they 'believe,' because it is ordered by the Holy Spirit, who institutes it. Such association with an institution is both inevitable and necessary for each of us. God, as the Holy Spirit imparting revelation, creates the Church—the Spirit is one for all of us; and the Church is necessary for the spread of the good news—such is the purpose of its creation. It is both the result of the Gospel and the vehicle of it. We are here concerned with the Church as the vehicle of the Gospel, imparting it personally to 'other sheep' through individual believers, acting thus in virtue of their membership of the institution from which they themselves received it.

As members, then, of the Spirit-guided Church, we are used by God to transmit His gifts of grace; and we now ask, what are the means of grace which the Church uses to this end? She uses them, we remark in parenthesis, not as coming in between God and the human soul. She is His intermediary in the sense that, but for the Church, there would have been no means of grace to transmit, no connection with the historic revelation in Jesus. As it is, in the Church the Holy Spirit continues to act personally upon men in the manner revealed by Jesus in the beginning, as essential to the nature of the Father.

What is revealed is the personal God of Holy Love, and He is revealed to the penitent who trust in love, thus receiving what we may best express in one word, since it stands for one personal experience—namely, regeneration or rebirth. Regeneration thus involves communion; God acts upon man, and man responds to the action. It is *this interaction* that is identical with the experience of the first Christians through Jesus. Fundamentally, revelation is from Person to person; it is a message. And so the main proclamation of the Church, her chief means of grace, is the Word of God, as interpreted by Jesus. We are not to limit the divine operation by denying a manifold effect of the Holy Spirit through many channels;

the example of individuals, art, music, mystical union, even nature, and the like. But the heart of the mystery and the indispensable condition of salvation is the hearing of the Word in trust (or faith). In such faithful receiving of the message the gift also is received. Hence the Word alone would be perfectly adequate, and is always indispensable, without anything else.

But alongside of the Word stand the sacraments, two in number, which under symbols offer the same gift to faith—namely, all the benefits obtained through Christ. That is to say, they offer to those who receive in faith everything that is promised in the Word. Here also there is the movement from God to man and from man to God, precisely as in the hearing of the Word. The complete gift is open to the reception of faith. And while sacraments are not absolutely indispensable, as we saw, they are *exceedingly* valuable and *never* to be despised. Without the Word there could be no sacraments. But the sacraments have an equal validity with the Word for those who receive them in faith. Each is an act, on the one hand instituted by God, in order that in them we may receive His gift through Christ; on the other, a profession of faith to God and before man. They are not, therefore, to be thought of as *merely* a concrete or symbolic representation to our minds of what is contained in the divine message of redemption. They *are* that message, and faith can receive it in them. They are an acted parable, made more impressive by the meaning of the signs. Since our faith is necessary to their proper reception, they do not work magically, *ex opere operato*, though too many seem to think so. But since they are celebrated under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, they hold good for the faithful, apart from any fault either in the administrator or in some of the partakers. Not that faith *creates* the gift given, but it is the condition of the giving.

If we can hold clearly this supremacy of the Word, as distinguished from the sacraments, and yet regard the sacraments, not as conveying a special grace *apart* from what God gives in the Word (which is everything), but as imparting the same fulness, as being the 'Word visible,' then it will not trouble us to try to account for peculiar merits in any of the symbols. We shall not *need* to attribute any special potency to the elements. We have without that the whole gift of God in most in-

sistent and solid form, and our reception of it in the form is the measure of our ingrafting into Christ. Grace comes by the sacrament to the individual, for the same reason that it also comes by the Word, or not at all. Consequently, the sacrament is cheapened if we regard it merely as a human way of making the divine promise in the Word vivid. The sacrament is instituted by God as the means of conveying the promise to the believer.

Thus the sacraments are the work of the Holy Spirit upon us, and there are only two which are clearly instituted—*i.e.*, which contain the *whole* promise for *all Christians alike*. They communicate the entire grace of the Word, and there is no special grace attached, as there is no special result attached to them, apart from the whole promise of the Word. They are the Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

Baptism is the better documented of the two as an institution, and S. Paul in Romans expounds it as the beginning of the regenerate life. True, S. Paul speaks of Baptism "into Christ"; Matt. xxviii. 19, of Baptism into the Trinity. Many varying theories have been based upon these differences. Some have relied for their authority upon the fact that Jesus not only baptised himself (John iii. 22), but in any case professedly carried on the Baptist's work. Others have sought to prove that S. Paul's idea of Baptism was a non-Christian element adopted by him from the mystery religions, though such a conception directly contradicts his central doctrine of faith. But if we take the general sense of Scripture, it must be clear that adult Baptism is *the* divinely instituted sacrament of initiation into the Christian life. In it the Church, as the instrument of the Holy Spirit, receives the candidate into the Body—this is the act of God towards man; at the same time the candidate professes his faith, which is the act of man towards God. And so the communion is complete. Outward act and inward change may or may not coincide in time; that depends on the free act of God, which we must not try to limit (Acts vii. 13, 15; x. 47). But where at the moment of administration there is essential faith in the recipient, the result is achieved simultaneously with the rite, as often in the Mission field.

So far all is plain sailing. The real problem arises when we come to the much later rite of infant Baptism. It were idle to pretend that there is any stated authority for it in the New Testament. There is none. Moreover,

if faith, especially in the sacraments, is essential to the true reception of the divine promise, how can a child be said to have faith? How, then, is he baptised? Again, if faith stands for anything, we *cannot* cut the knot and hold the promise fulfilled *ex opere operato*. Without faith, says the Protestant, nothing happens. To pray that the child may have faith is no guarantee that he will; neither is our *belief* that he will come to it. Sacraments, like faith, produce faith; but in an infant faith is not what it is in an adult. Are there two kinds of faith? To say that regeneration in a child is one thing and in a grown-up another has absolutely no New Testament authority. Regeneration is one specific spiritual change. Otherwise, it would mean that the child's faith is, at one and the same time, faith and *not* faith, that he is both regenerate and not regenerate.

Yet if we describe Baptism as a mere ceremony of reception into the Church, then we are none of us properly baptised, since our Baptism is not the same Baptism as that of the early Church; and, while the Word is supreme, a sacrament—in this case Baptism—is efficacious and not to be despised. At the same time, we cannot deny that infant Baptism has no New Testament authority, and only grew slowly into favour with the Church. On the other hand, if we limit the rite to adults, making it a ceremonial sign of faith made perfect, not only are we in danger of self-righteousness, but we belittle the work of God through the Holy Spirit, and Baptism, even of adults, ceases to be a sacrament.

Doctrinally, what we must do is to be clear and firm in our faith in God revealing Himself as Holy Spirit, leading the Church into all truth. Without doubt the Church has genuinely regarded Baptism as *the* sacrament for the children of Christians; and, credally, the Church is guided by God. And, of course, a sacrament is received from God direct, since He deals with each human being *personally*. We *must* believe in such continual and providential action of God, if we believe in the Holy Spirit at all. We must also say that the human element in the case of an infant does not enter into the transaction, either in the way of faith or in the way of works. But God acts on every person in the same way, therefore in Baptism His grace prevents even a child. True, a child has no faith, and the parents' faith cannot take its place. The child may or may not gain faith in the future.

But the fact of Baptism *guarantees the possibility* of that consummation, and the child will later be told this. God guarantees it. Therefore Baptism will be administered *sacramentally* by the Church as the instrument of the Holy Spirit, Who directly 'touches' the infant therein.

What are the child's chances of attaining to the faith which is necessary to the consummation? The measure is the measure of the Christianity in the community in which he is brought up—*i.e.*, according to the faith of home, of congregation, of denominational Church, is his chance of ultimate regeneration. God's action is the same as upon a man, only the human response differs. If men believe in the Holy Catholic Church, in its guidance by the Holy Spirit, then the sacrament is *God's* guarantee, and it rests largely with the Church and its members to secure its fulfilment permanently in the case of the child. As the Church believes in Baptism, so does each member, at least ideally, for we are all one Body. We therefore believe that Baptism is God's action on each, even a child, and that it guarantees to all individual and personal salvation. And we see how the faith of the community makes a difference.

Recall that the Word is the one unconditional means of grace, though the sacraments convey the same promises in concrete form; and there is no difficulty in leaving certain problems in the air. Is adult Baptism a different sacrament? Is it equal to infant Baptism plus confirmation? Is confirmation a sacrament as much as infant Baptism? Our doctrine of infant Baptism must lend additional solemnity to the admission of catechumens. It follows that their instruction *must* be very careful, making perfectly clear the issues involved. But we can rest serene in the conviction that the gift given can be no greater than the gift in the Word, because the Word is implied in everything else.

Since Baptism, then, rests on the undoubted conviction that God acts upon the individual, this faith, clearly expounded and constantly present to the believing mind, will have a great effect upon the administration of the sacrament.

The congregation will regard it as part of *their* office, as being locally the Church, to attest such Baptism. So far from slipping away from a service before the administration, they will be eager to remain; and the minister will rejoice that their responsibility to God is again and

so solemnly brought near to the hearts of the believers. It follows that normally the sacrament will be administered, not only in Church, but in the face of the members, the Spirit acting upon all. That this may be possible, Christian parents and congregations should be most carefully instructed in the responsibilities which rest upon them, in consequence of what they are to witness in Baptism, given at their own request, and in virtue of the Church's divine mission. Home surroundings must spiritually be such as to help to redeem the divine guarantee. Likewise it should be impressed upon the membership generally that their conduct as Christians, whose faith has responded to God's gift, must never be an offence to the children in the midst. They are to show whether the Holy Spirit in His action finds *them* conscious or unconscious of His continued operation. Only as they feel and respond to His guidance are they true members of the true Church. It must make the moment intensely solemn to think that the promise given to the unconscious infant depends so largely for its redemption upon their example. *Their* faith must rouse faith in the child, since faith is communicated from person to person; and as members of the Church *they* are God's instruments to act upon the child—only the Holy Spirit Himself can make them fit to do so. In the sacrament they should thus feel overwhelmingly the unity of God's spiritual Kingdom. It is within my own experience that the knowledge of parents, that in Baptism God was acting directly upon their child, wrought so upon *their* faith that they obtained from Him the healing of their child, who was mortally ill. So the sacrament can affect the faithful who are already baptised.

And in some queer fashion the most lax of so-called Christians seem to sense that in sacraments 'something happens.' How else should they demand Baptism for their children, and order their Church attendance by the recurrence of Holy Communion? That just emphasises the clamant need for clear teaching upon the subject of the Word itself and its efficacy for salvation.

House Baptism should only be resorted to in cases of illness in parent or child. That is for the minister to decide in particular cases. It may often be difficult to break old habits, but the unity of the church or communion cries aloud for inculcation.

All children should be baptised, no matter what their parents are. If there are none to undertake their Chris-

tian upbringing, let the Kirk Session be sponsor, as a sign that the Church desires the child's spiritual welfare and acts in the name of God.

But it is scarcely right to quote a Scripture reference to authorise the sacrament. Some passages may reveal the not surprising fact that Jesus loved children. But the institution is of the Holy Spirit in His guidance of the Church, and in that good faith and on no other authority the Church has acted and acts. The service of the Book of Common Order is good, and the prayers strike the right note for parents and congregation alike. But they need interpretation; repeated congregational instruction is necessary. Subjoined is a suggested alteration in the form of the "Order for the Administration of Holy Baptism," which order should be generally followed. After Scripture authority for the rite, and its implications, have been recited, the so-called warrant for infant Baptism should be omitted, and the passage be rewritten in the following sense:—

"And although our young children do not understand these things, they are not to be excluded from this holy ordinance. For God, through the Holy Spirit, seeketh unto all men; and under His guidance the Church, as His instrument, giveth in this sacrament, unto all that are brought for Baptism, the guarantee that the promises shall be fulfilled unto them, so soon as they are of age to believe. The Lord doth herein promise to be their God, and they are engaged to be His people, and citizens of His Kingdom. Upon the influences of home, society, and congregation, it henceforth clearly depends whether these children shall ever redeem the grace of God here sealed unto them, whether they shall grow in wisdom as in stature, in favour with God as with man. It is therefore good that those who present the children should be of the faith into which they dedicate them, and should, for the edification of the Body, promise to train them, by precept and example (God helping them), in the doctrine and conduct of the same, our most holy faith.

"I therefore ask you, 'Do you present this child,' " &c.

The whole subject of infant Baptism is most difficult. The greater, therefore, the need for clearness. The clue is to realise the continual operation of the Holy Spirit in guiding the Church and using it as His own instrument for salvation. Baptism should remind Church members of, above all, their unceasing duty to God in this respect,

if they are to prove themselves members of the Church in which we believe. Let ministers make it clear that Baptism is a sign that the Church through the Holy Spirit is fulfilling its corporate responsibilities to God to increase His Kingdom. Nothing can be a greater stimulus to the faith of Christian communities. Baptism is no paragon for the afternoon in a parlour. It calls for everything that helps our consciousness that here God speaks, and speaks through the Body, the Church. The ignorant instinct of the sleeping membership is rightly founded, though inadequately expressed. Were this plain to the active membership, and plainly expressed when Baptism is administered, that ignorance would largely evaporate, and the Church visible would coincide more exactly with the Church of faith.

My greatest debt in the above exposition is to Haering's 'The Christian Faith.'

G. T. THOMSON.
