The General Necessity of Baptism:

Testimony of Richard Woodman.

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THE sacramental quarrel of the Reformers with Rome centred mainly around the so-called sacrament of the altar, the presence, transubstantiation, the sacrifice of the mass; but not a little attention was also paid to the primary sacrament of the Gospel, baptism. Here, too, the theology of the Reformation, whilst it avoided the decisive break of Anabaptism, broke away at many points from Papist teaching. In general, Rome, building upon the assertion of Augustine, insisted upon the absolute necessity of the sacrament to salvation. Faith in the recipient, and the regenerative work of the Holy Spirit were tied to the sacramental act. The effects of baptism were limited to allow scope for penance. In baptism original sin only, and actual sins done prior to baptism, were forgiven. But these effects were the effects of the act itself. To be baptized meant to be forgiven and saved. Not to be baptized meant wrath and damnation.

Quite naturally the Reformers could not accept this position. Salvation to them was the work and the gift of God, appropriated to the individual by faith. The sacrament was the sign and seal of forgiveness, regeneration, salvation, a means of grace, but not salvation itself.[1] There could then be faith and salvation even where baptism with water was not available, and there could also be baptism where there was neither faith nor salvation.[2] As an ordinance of Christ, baptism ought to be observed where possible, and is generally necessary, but there is no absolute necessity, for God is not bound by His own general ordinances.[3]

These issues are raised, and a clear lay witness is given to the Reformed position, in the examination of Richard Woodman, a martyr burned at Lewes in the Marian persecution, whose story is chronicled by Foxe.[4] Woodman was not of course a trained theologian, but his witness is in a sense all the more valuable on that account. He was an ironmaker of the parish of Warbleton, Sussex—Sussex was at that time a centre of the older English iron industry, which was dependent upon charcoal—about 30 years of age at the time of his trouble. The first offence of Woodman was to rebuke the curate of the parish, one Fairebanke, for his forsaking of reformed doctrine at the accession of Mary. Clearly Woodman was a man of independent judgment, well read in the Scriptures, and the two-faced conduct of Fairebanke did not deceive him. He was arrested, committed to the King's Bench, and later removed to the notorious coal-house of Bishop Bonner, where Philpot was at this time a prisoner. In December of that year (1556) Philpot was burned, and Woodman and four others were released.

1 *Cf.* Jewel (Parker Society) i p.1105.
2 *Ibid.* p.1107; Bullinger (Parker Society) iv. p.372.
3 Jewel *Ibid.* p.1107.
4 Foxe Acts and Monuments (Townsend edit.) Volume VIII. pp.332 ff.

The birth of a child seems to have been the occasion of further trouble, and after some weeks of hiding he was re-arrested, the charge being that he had baptized the child himself, and refused to allow it to be baptized in the parish church. He was again committed to the coal-house, and underwent six examinations, before Dr. Christopherson, Bishop of Chichester, Dr. Story, and a certain Dr. Langdale, Parson of Buxsted and chaplain to Lord Montagu. Woodman himself has left an account of these interviews, reproduced in Foxe. It was at the third, before Dr. Langdale, that the question of baptism was discussed, and reformed teaching opposed to the papistical notions of Langdale. No doubt Woodman's account, written by one of the contestants from a definite point of view and under very unfavourable circumstances, is biased and puts Langdale in a not very creditable light, but even allowing for such bias, one thing is clear, that Woodman had a far greater command of the Scriptures than his opponent, and that with this Scripture knowledge he was quite a match for his opponent in dogmatic subtleties. It is also clear that Woodman had a good understanding of the general principles of the reformed doctrine of baptism. A summary of the argument will help to underline these principles.

Langdale began by reiterating the double charge brought against Woodman (p.355), that he himself had presumed to baptize, and that he had tried to prevent the baptism of the child in church. The implication (not a very clear one) was that Woodman was an Anabaptist, a name universally feared and abhorred since the Munster tragedy. Langdale warned him that "if the child had died, it had been damned, because it was not christened". Thus Langdale asserted an absolute necessity of the sacrament, and opened up the way for the main discussion.

Woodman first defended himself against the charges brought against him. He denied that he had baptized anyone. The Reformers, it will be recalled, insisted upon a lawful calling of those who minister in the congregation. He denied also that he had refused to have the child baptized. The truth was that he had been absent from home when the child was born, and that in view of the fear of non-survival, it had been christened at once by a mid-wife. Later Woodman seems to have resisted an attempt to bring the child to church for re-baptism or the confirmation of the private administration. Did Woodman allow then of baptism by midwives? On this point the Anglican reformers were divided, some holding for the custom, or at any rate not condemning it, as Whitgift[1], others demanding its prohibition, as Hooper.[2] The 1552 Prayer Book provided for private baptism, but by a minister lawfully ordained, as opposed to the 1549 book, which allowed private baptism by anyone ("one of them"). Woodman does not himself defend the practice, although he asserts the validity of such baptism. He disclaims all responsibility. What is probable is that Woodman preferred this expedient of private baptism by a midwife in his own absence to a public Roman baptism with all its added ceremonies, (salt, cream, spittle and the like, universally con-

[1] Whitgift (Parker Society) ii p.540 I suspend my judgment for baptizing by women, yet I am out of doubt for private baptism.

[2] Hooper (Parker Society) p.131 It is a profanation of the sacrament and not to be suffered.

demned by the Reformers), and in a language which was not understood and could not edify. The Reformers did not of course dispute the validity of Roman baptism, so long as water was used together with the Triune formula,[1] but they did object very strongly to the ceremonies added by man to the ordinance of God.[2] When questioned by Langdale whether he would willingly have brought his child to baptism Woodman significantly hedges, " That is no matter, what I would have done ", and he asks Langdale (p.356) whether the baptism already administered by the midwife is not sufficient. Langdale, bound by Roman teaching, cannot but admit that it is.

Having defended himself against the charges, Woodman goes on to challenge the bold assertion of Langdale, that if the child had died unbaptized it would have perished. These are words " uncomely to be spoken ". He demands of Langdale that he should prove them by the Word of God. The reply of Langdale is surprising and illuminating. He does not produce the usual text from John 3, but points to the words of institution in Mark 16. Had he used these words merely to urge a general necessity of baptism in obedience to the commandment of Christ, Woodman would have agreed. But Langdale, abusing the text on the one side as Baptists abuse it on the other, sought to prove by it an absolute necessity, " Whoso believeth and is baptized shall be saved, and he that believeth not shall be damned. These be the words of Christ, which are my warrant ". It is worth recalling at this stage the Baptist use of the same text. Infants ought not to be baptized because, not having self-consciousness, they cannot believe. Logically it would follow from this that all infants are damned, not because they are not baptized, but because they do not believe, although no doubt the Baptist would plead that the infant cannot receive or reject Christ, cannot believe or not believe, and thus does not come within the scope of the text at all. Langdale, however, equates believing and baptism, as Woodman is quick to perceive. He concludes that all who are baptized also believe and are necessarily saved (except they fall into mortal sin). He further concludes that those who are not baptized do not and cannot believe and are, therefore, inevitably lost. Woodman is horrified at this blatant misinterpretation, and he has the acumen to fasten on the weak point : the fact that Christ does not say " He that is not baptized shall be damned ", but " He that believeth not ". This Scripture Woodman compares with the text of John, that he that believeth not is condemned already, by and for the simple fact that he does not believe.

At this point Langdale seeks to retort with the accusation that Woodman denies baptism and is an Anabaptist. Woodman refuses the charge. He denies indeed that there is such necessity of material water that without it damnation is certain. But he does hold fast to the general necessity of the sacrament, for it is the ordinance of God and ought in all ordinary cases to be observed. What he objects to is the identification of baptism and belief, and the conclusion that

[1] Ridley (Foxe VII p.420) All the substantial points which Christ commanded to be done are observed.

[2] *Cf.* any of the Reformers. The answer of John Denley to Bonner (Foxe VII p.334) states the position ' The chamberlain in Acts viii we do not read that he called for any cream, nor oil, etc." So too Robert Smith to Bonner.

baptism is the cause of faith (p.357). The charge of Anabaptism was of course irrelevant and designed only to bring Woodman and his views into disrepute, but he was able to keep the discussion to the point at issue, whether faith is so tied to the sacrament that where the sacrament is, there faith must be also; where there is no sacrament, there faith also lacks. Woodman asserts against Langdale that faith is prior to and therefore independent of the sacrament, even in infants, and in answer to Langdale, who confidently states that "the child hath no faith before it is baptized; and therefore the baptizing bringeth the faith", he cites the example of Jacob, elect and therefore a believer before his circumcision (Romans 9). It is not the outward ceremony which produces faith, but the working and grace of God according to His purpose and election.

Langdale quibbles at this example because it is taken from the old law: "I speak of baptism, and you are gone from baptizing to the time of circumcision". Taking up the argument from election, he seeks, astonishingly enough, to foist upon Woodman a twofold heresy, that of denying original sin,[1] and that of denying free-will, a strange combination. The reasoning upon which this accusation is grounded is as follows: Baptism avails for the putting away of original sin. Unless original sin is put away a child cannot be saved. To say that a child can be saved without baptism is then to say that there is no original sin. To charge Woodman with a denial of original sin, and also of free-will, is of course nonsensical, since Woodman has a far stronger view of original sin than Langdale himself: that is why he does deny that the will is free. Woodman cannot admit with Langdale that original sin is destroyed and the freedom of the will restored by baptism and the obedience of Christ. He cites against him Paul groaning under the thorn in the flesh, and the constant need for the all-sufficient grace of God. But Woodman profits from Langdale's view of free will to this extent, that he secures from his opponent an admission that it is the death of Christ rather than the ceremony of baptism which puts away original sin. "You say in one place, it is not without baptism; and in another place you put it away quite, by the death of Christ; and in very deed you have spoken truer in the matter than you are aware of. For all that believe in Christ are baptized in the blood of Christ that he shed on the cross, and in the water that he sweat for pain and for the putting away of our sins at his death." It is this baptism alone which is absolutely necessary. An outward dipping in water is the sign and seal, necessary as a useful ordinance of Christ, but dispensable where extraordinary circumstances forbid its use.

The accusation of Langdale having been refuted, Woodman now goes on, with his opponent's permission, to prove his own main point, that faith is before baptism (p.358). In passing, he denies that any guilt attached to the child for the fault of a parent in neglecting baptism, citing Ezekiel, "The father shall not bear the child's offences, nor the child the father's offences". He then returns to the example of Jacob, and maintains that baptism and circumcision are one, for "circum-

[1] The Anabaptists had very real tendencies in this direction, but ordinarily they held to free will. Langdale meant, of course, a will freed by faith in Christ and baptism, which destroyed original sin. The Reformers maintained that original sin persists even in the regenerate, although it is forgiven.

cision is the figure of baptism ".[1] To the example of Jacob he adds that of the Flood according to the text of Peter, for at the Flood, another figure of baptism, it was faith, not the water, which saved Noah, " Water had not saved Noah and the other seven, no more than it saved all the rest, if it had not been for their faith, which faith now saveth us ". The teaching of Peter is thus " clean against " the assertion of Langdale, who claims that all infants dying before they attain to years of discretion are saved if they are baptized, but who denies that such infants have any prior faith. Peter shows that it is faith alone (the consent of a good conscience towards God) which saves. Therefore " if they have not faith, none shall be saved, although they be baptized. The argument of Woodman is a little laborious at this point, for he is building upon the assumption of Langdale that infants cannot have faith. What he seeks to show is that faith alone and not baptism, the outward sign and seal, can save, so that if infants have not faith, as Langdale says, then they are lost.

The dilemma is one which presses far more heavily upon those who deny baptism to infants than it does upon Langdale and Papists, for these latter could reply, with many reformers who also hesitated to ascribe a personal faith to infants, that children are baptized in the faith of the church.[2] The Baptist, however, denies that the infant has any faith either individually or corporately. But if there is no faith, then there is no salvation. Yet the Scripture undoubtedly regards infants as amongst the members of the Kingdom. Even when it is alleged that the text in Mark means only by unbelief a conscious rejection of Christ, which is reasonable enough, the general truth remains that all are concluded under sin and that without faith it is impossible to please God. Deny to infants all form of faith and either original sin is denied or infant salvation. But grant that they have some form of faith and their right to baptism is also granted, provided that steps are taken for their instruction in faith as they grow to years of self-conscious life. The root error of Baptism seems to be twofold : first that it makes of faith something intellectual only, whereas in the Word of God the working of the Holy Spirit is not restricted to those who have self-consciousness ; second it envisages faith as something too purely individual, whereas in the Word of God it is something corporate as well as individual—the faith of Abraham is the faith of the family of Abraham, and the early Christians believe and are baptized as households. These are points which the Reformers well grasped in their refutation of the Anabaptists and their defence of the immemorial custom of the baptism of infants.

Langdale, confronted with this dilemma, sees only a perverseness in Woodman, and confidently replies that children are baptized in the faith of their godfathers and godmothers (p.359) : " That faith is the good conscience that St. Peter speaketh of ; and the christening is the keeping of the law. Like as circumcision was the keeping of the old law, so is baptism the keeping of the new law." Woodman smiles at Langdale's readiness to bring in the old law (previously discounted) when it helps him to prove a point, but he is not impressed by the

[1] *Cf.* Philpot (Parker Soc.) p.277 Baptism is come in the stead of circumcision.
[2] Nowell's Catechism p.209 ascribes to infants the faith of the church, Becon ii pp.211-214 a personal faith by the Holy Ghost.

argument. It does not take account of the fact that children can have faith in themselves, as the examples of Jacob and John Baptist prove; for these children were chosen of God and filled with the Holy Ghost from the mother's womb, and therefore must have had faith. Again it does not take account of the fact that many godparents, indeed the majority, are not in any true sense believers themselves, and if that is the case, " in what faith is the child then baptized? In none at all, by your own saying ".

Had Langdale been a more adept theologian he would have given the reply which many of the reformers themselves would have given, that the child was baptized in the faith of the church,[1] but the Papists at this time seemed to hold rather to baptism in the faith of godparents as such, and he entered upon a defence along the lines that amongst three godparents there was sure to be one believer, " for the flock of Christ is not such a very little flock ", and that Woodman was guilty of judging others. Woodman had of course no difficulty in shewing from the New Testament that the flock of Christ is and always will be comparatively a little one, and Langdale could only reply by abusing the martyr, whose superior knowledge of the Scriptures was no doubt very provoking. At this point the discussion was interrupted by the entry of Master Gage, and after a few more words on original sin, shifted at Gage's instigation to the all-absorbing topic, the sacrament of the altar.

The main evangelical propositions which emerge from the discussion and from Woodman's assertions, are as follows : Baptism is generally necessary to salvation, and ought not to be despised or neglected. Water and the word of institution are alone essential to a proper administration, and non-scriptural ceremonies ought not to be added, nor the sacrament be administered in a foreign tongue which does not edify. There is no such absolute necessity of baptism to salvation, as that any dying without it would inevitably be lost. Baptism is the sacrament of salvation appointed by Christ, but it is Christ Himself who saves, in and through or without the sacrament. On the part of man nothing is required absolutely but faith in Christ.[2] Baptism does not give or produce faith. Faith is the working of the Holy Ghost, who renews the soul according to the divine election. The dipping in water is a sacrament of this work and of the work of forgiveness, and a means ordinarily used to further it, but it is not itself the work.

Two questions are not clearly resolved in the discussion. Both concern the assertion of Woodman that infants have a right to baptism because they have a prior faith. The first is, whether it is not better to maintain the more cautious view of many of the reformers, that infants are baptized in the faith of the church only, coming to a personal faith, or the confession of it, on the hearing of the word. To say

[1] The usual answer of martyrs to the third of the articles generally administered by Bonner. *Cf.* Christopher Lyster and others " They were baptized in the faith and belief of the catholic church ". Bonner wished to prove that they had departed from the faith of their infancy, that held by their godparents, but the martyrs claimed that they were baptized in the faith of the true as opposed to the Roman church.

[2] Even Rome, following the Fathers, was willing to grant that in the case of martyrs prevented from being baptized by death, the baptism of blood would avail instead of that of water.

categorically that infants have faith is a little bold. On the other hand it is equally bold to deny that they have faith, since from Scripture examples they clearly have the Holy Spirit. The second is, whether Woodman would assert that all infants have faith, some losing it with growth to years of discretion, or whether only some infants have faith. To judge from the use of Romans 9 the latter would be his view. The elect only have faith as infants (those who die in infancy would probably be reckoned as of the elect). The elect child is baptized and also has faith due to the inward working of the Holy Spirit, a faith which at some point (conversion) comes to consciousness with a decision for Christ. On this view it is not wholly correct to identify regeneration and conversion, for regeneration, as the work of the Holy Ghost, begins with the first movements of the Spirit, the new life coming to self-awareness at conversion. In the case of the child not elect baptism is also administered, but it is a ceremony without inward significance, for there is no faith, and with the growth to maturity Jesus Christ is rejected, and the way of ungodliness preferred to that of righteousness. The children of believers only are baptized because to them only the covenant promise is given. If the children of the heathen are of the elect it will appear at their receiving of Christ or at the last judgment—for those dying without profession of faith in Christ are to be left to the judgment of God.[1]

Whether this understanding of baptism would meet with the approval of many Evangelical Christians to-day is doubtful. Even those who accept the broad fact of election would perhaps prefer to see in conversion the beginning of the new life, ascribing to baptism a prophetic significance—for with God time is of little account and the time lag between confession and baptism or baptism and confession is of this world only—or granting to all infants, as infants, the common faith of the church, with the need for a personal decision with the advance to maturity. But whatever the reaction, this understanding does represent one view of the inter-relation of baptism which has no little support in the facts of the situation and the general teaching of Scripture, and which merits the closest consideration.

[1] Upon these points see especially Becon (Parker Society) ii pp.211 ff.