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The Centrality of Baptism in Pastoral Strategy

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THIS ARTICLE is written by an Anglican who has in mind primarily the problems which the administration of Baptism in a semi-Christian community poses for many of the parish clergy. Although this discussion is conducted with the Anglican situation mainly in view, it is hoped that it may be found not entirely irrelevant for other churches confronted with similar problems.

Baptism in Anglican teaching is a sacrament "generally necessary to salvation"; and perhaps it is still not altogether unnecessary to point out that in the Prayer Book Catechism the word "generally" has not the modern and inaccurate sense of "usually, but not always," but the strict sense of "for the genus, for the whole race." Baptism belongs to God's purpose for all men. Although it is sometimes called one of the "occasional offices," this phrase must not be taken to imply that it is of minor importance. On the contrary, the purpose of this article is to make the plea that Holy Baptism should be given a much more important place than it often has in the work of the parish; that the administration of Baptism should be the starting-point of the larger part of the parish priest's work; that in the larger parishes where a single-handed priest, faced with the question of priorities, has the difficult task of deciding which among his many duties simply have to be left undone, his strategy ought to be to make the administration of Baptism the centre of his work; and that even in smaller parishes Baptism ought to be the parish priest's very special concern.

I

Many of the clergy are greatly perturbed by what is called "indiscriminate baptism," the practice of baptizing all children who are brought to the Church, even though parents and godparents may not be members of the Church or even practising Christians at all. In such cases the children are rarely brought later to the Sunday School or for preparation for Confirmation; the parents never attend the Church. It would seem that Baptism is regarded by them as a social convention, or even as a piece of superstition which it is wise to invoke for one's children. To administer Baptism in these circumstances appears to condone this view. Some, therefore, are wondering whether the Baptist Church and other Christian bodies which oppose infant

Baptism altogether are not in a stronger position, and one which is closer to the New Testament teaching on Baptism.

Another article would be required if we were to attempt to discuss the question of Infant Baptism with any completeness. Anglicans adhere to the practice of baptizing infants. Here it can only briefly be stated why they do so. They maintain that it is justified both by the theology of the New Testament and in the long tradition of the Church.

Its scriptural justification is based on the doctrine of the Covenant. According to the Old Testament, Israel, by God's initiative, became his elect people, and through its representatives entered into a Covenant relationship with God. The seal of this Covenant was circumcision, God's sign to each member of the nation that he was brought within the Covenant, and made heir to its privileges and responsibilities. In accordance with the strong Hebrew sense of the solidarity of the family, as well as of the whole people, children were included. Male children were circumcised a week after birth. In the New Testament the Church is presented as the New Israel. There is a wealth of language, both direct and allusive, which identifies the Christian Church with a reconstituted Israel (e.g., John 15:5; Rom. 9-11; Gal. 3:7, 9, 29; James 1:1; I Pet. 1:1-2; 2:9-10). The Church, through Jesus Christ, has entered into a new Covenant with God (Heb. 9:15; 13:20-21). The seal of this Covenant is a "circumcision made without hands," or Baptism (Col. 2:11-12); a seal not in the flesh, but in the Spirit (Rom. 2:29; II Cor. 1:22; Ephes. 1:13; 4:30). The close parallelism with the doctrine of the Old Covenant makes the conclusion that children were to be included well-nigh inevitable.

Anglicans also regard it as significant that from very early times the Baptism of infants was normal. Early Christian literature says nothing of any controversy within the Church on this matter (though Tertullian in his Montanist days argues against the practice). This indicates that there was no consciousness of innovation on the part of the Church. It is strong support for the view that the Baptism of children was normal practice in New Testament days, and gives substance to the interpretation of the references to the baptizing of households (Acts 16:15; 17:33) as including children.

The instances of Baptism given in the Acts of the Apostles show that an expression of penitence and a profession of faith was required. These instances all relate to adults, for the Acts is describing a missionary situation in which adults were naturally the first to receive Baptism. Anglicans do not deduce from this that Baptism cannot be administered to those who are incapable of any such profession (among whom, be it noted, would be not only children, but also the mentally deficient of any age). The Church, being entrusted with the administration of this Sacrament, must as part of its binding and loosing authority look for proper dispositions in all who seek Baptism. In adults penitence and a profession of faith are clearly called for. Infants are not capable of these things. But the Church

has never held that this is a reason for denying to them (or to adult imbeciles) membership of Christ's visible Body on earth. On the contrary, it has held, in complete accord with the whole New Testament idea of the Covenant relationship, that there is good reason to bring the children of believing parents into the family of Christ's Church. The faith of parents and of others who have brought, and the faith of the Church which receives, the child has been held as a guarantee that the child would be nurtured in the Christian faith and life.

It is the comparatively recent practice by which unbelievers and nominal Christians bring their children to Baptism which causes most of our modern perplexities. This situation is never envisaged in the New Testament, and therefore it may be expected that it will pose problems. But there are some who see no problem here and who hold that Baptism must be administered in all circumstances. This position is usually based on a doctrine of original guilt, and a view of the Sacrament of Baptism as a piece of machinery for removing such guilt. Every baby inherits original sin, it is argued, and is therefore involved in guilt. Baptism remits sin, and must be administered to children as quickly as possible, for if they die without it they will be excluded from heaven. This argument is used to justify the practice of baptizing unborn babies within the womb if there is a danger of immediate death; and in the past forcible Baptism has been similarly justified. Such a doctrine and such practices do not attribute to God even "common sense," still less justice and mercy. All men from birth undoubtedly have an inherited defect for which the theological term "original sin" is used. But this does not imply the *personal guilt* of every infant. Article 9 of the Thirty-Nine Articles ("on original or birth sin") though strongly Augustinian, just avoids, by its use of impersonal language, asserting a doctrine of personal guilt for "original sin." It ought to be remembered that "original sin" is not a Scriptural phrase; and that when the adjective "original" is attached to the noun "sin," the connotation of the latter is changed. It cannot here mean a state of wilful disobedience to God which is the strict meaning of the word "sin." An original defect in man (i.e., at birth) is clearly not a matter of his *personal* guilt.

The administering of Baptism to infants cannot rightly be based on any such idea. It rests rather on our Lord's will expressed in his words, "Suffer the little Children to come unto me and forbid them not," and on the New Testament teaching that Baptism is the way in which people normally come to him. This is entirely consonant, as we have seen, with the biblical concepts of the Covenant and of family solidarity. But does this mean that we must baptize all children who are presented, whatever the circumstances? Some priests in England, gravely perturbed by the harm done both to the Church and to the families concerned by baptizing the children of those who apparently have no intention of bringing them up to be faithful Church members, have taken a stand by refusing Baptism in these circumstances. This is an unpopular line to take. It is possible to sympathize with

their concern and to admire their moral courage without believing them to be entirely right. It cannot, for instance, be right to deprive children of the benefits of Baptism if the main motive is to give careless parents a sharp lesson. But it is contended that it is wrong to dispense holy things when there is no guarantee and apparently no likelihood that those holy things will be rightly used. The present writer would agree that if a priest were absolutely certain that the motives of parents in bringing a child to Baptism were wholly superstitious, and that the child would be given no opportunity of living a Christian life, he would have to act on our Lord's injunction not to cast pearls before swine, and refuse to baptize. But how often can we have such certainty? Motives are often mixed. There may be a streak of superstition, a certain wish to conform to what is thought to be a respectable social pattern; but at the same time, ill-thought-out as it may be, there is usually the belief or hope that God will give a blessing to the child. Do we dare to assume that God will not, or cannot, with his grace build on the gifts of Baptism? Are we to be committed to a position which implies that careless parents can ultimately thwart God's purpose for a child?

The situation we are envisaging should be viewed as offering a splendid pastoral opportunity which has too often in the past been lost: an opportunity to ensure that the parents do not remain careless; an opportunity to begin to build up into Christ another immortal soul. If this opportunity is to be seized, two things are needful. There must be a solid background of teaching in the congregation at large about the supreme importance of Baptism; and we need to set up a practice and discipline which comes into operation as soon as there is a request for Baptism.

II

Let the parish priest ask himself, "When did I last preach a sermon about Baptism? Have I *ever* preached a sermon about Baptism? Have I ever arranged a teaching course for my congregation which includes instruction about Baptism—why it is a sacrament, and what a sacrament is, what Baptism means, and what God does thereby, and why the Church thinks it important?" If these things have not been done, or have been done only half-heartedly, it is not surprising if members of the congregation have an inadequate conception of the importance of Baptism. Even regular Church people will regard it as something appropriate for children, but otherwise as having little significance for the life of an individual or of the Church. Quite clearly those who are not regular Church people will have an even more casual attitude. And this will be the parish priest's fault. Each parish priest should have two or three sermons for the general congregation on the meaning and importance of Baptism, and should preach one of them every year. If they are good sermons they will bear repeating. He ought also to work out a short course of instruction which will teach the

same things at greater length; and every two or three years this course should be given on week-day evenings in the fall or during Lent, and the congregation should be encouraged to be present as a matter of importance. If this is faithfully done, there will not for long be room for doubt in the minds of the congregation that Baptism is of very great importance for the life of the Church; that it is the way of entry into his Church ordained by Jesus Christ; that it confers the status of "Christian" on the one who is baptized; that, therefore, those who bring a child to Baptism should be made fully aware of what they are doing; that Baptism is the starting-point of a life which God desires to enrich continually with grace; that, therefore, the child must be nurtured in the Christian life, and taught to look for God's grace. When these truths are grasped by the congregation, there will be a greater likelihood that the parish at large will begin to understand the significance of Baptism.

When the congregation thus comes to know, and other people are beginning to realize, the meaning of Baptism, it will be generally understood (and indeed expected) that a great deal of care must be taken about the Baptism of every child. The following suggests a scheme by which in every parish such care can be shown.

(a) *Notice of Baptism.* Adequate notice, at least a fortnight before the proposed day, must be given of the desire for Baptism. This must be insisted on against all attempts to evade it. The parish priest will sometimes be told that if the Baptism cannot take place when the family want it, perhaps in only two or three days' time, then it cannot take place at all, or must be postponed indefinitely, or that Baptism will be sought elsewhere. The plea will be made that a close relative is coming from a great distance, and has to return within a few hours, and the ceremony must be at a time to suit his arrangements. All this must be resolutely resisted. People are accustomed to give adequate notice about weddings, and Baptisms are no less important than weddings. For a priest to surrender in this matter is to let it be known that he too thinks that Baptism may well be accommodated to personal and family convenience.

(b) *Instruction of Parents.* On receiving notice of a request for Baptism, the parish priest will arrange to meet the parents at an early opportunity. Usually this will have to be at their home in evening. But if they have a reliable baby-sitter, it can well be at the church, the parish hall or the rectory. Instruction will be given, possibly over a cup of coffee or tea. If the parents are churchpeople, they will already have heard sermons on Baptism on church, and there need be no more than a reminder to them of its significance, and possibly a discussion of any questions they have to raise. If the parents are not regular churchgoers there should be a simple and short instruction about the meaning of Baptism, and a straight but courteous reminder that the Christian life of the child depends greatly on the Christian life of the parents. There should be no hint of any threat

that unless they promise to attend church the baby will not be baptized; nevertheless it can be made clear that they are expected to become responsible members of the Church. There may well be a discussion about ways and means by which parents may take a responsible part in the life of the Church when they have a young family.

In a parish in which there are many Baptisms this plan will mean that the parish priest will need to set aside one evening of the week for the instruction of parents with some regularity. The instruction need not be long, and indeed the whole interview should not be allowed to exceed an hour. But the time so spent on one evening a week, or as often as the number of Baptisms makes necessary, has a high priority on the parish priest's time.

(c) *Instruction of Godparents.* Whenever possible godparents should be included in the instruction given to the parents. When they come from a distance this may not often prove possible. In such cases they should be sent a carefully prepared letter containing or accompanying a short and simple guide to the responsibilities of godparents. But in a parish where there are likely to be enough Baptisms to enable baptismal services to be held regularly, e.g., once a month, or every two months, it may be possible to profit by the experience of a large parish in London, England, and hold a gathering of all godparents on the Sunday before the Baptisms. This presupposes that the parents have received instruction in the way already described. The parish referred to is that of Southwark Cathedral. Its baptismal practice is described by the Provost (the Very Reverend George Reindorp, now Bishop of Guildford) in an article in the *Church Times* of February 26, 1960, and the part of it which relates to the instruction of godparents is reproduced here. The first item is a sample letter to godparents:

We are glad to know that you have undertaken to be godfather to —, who is to be baptized on Sunday —. So that we may have the pleasure of meeting you and, of course, going through the service together, we invite you to come to our hall on Sunday —. We will have a cup of tea at 3.45 p.m. The whole meeting will be over by 4.45 p.m.

We feel sure that you will want to do your best for your godchild, and that you will make every effort to be present at this important meeting.

Unless we hear from you by — we shall look forward to welcoming you.

Yours sincerely, ———, Vicar.

This is the letter sent a fortnight beforehand to every person who has entered his name and address on a baptismal form as a godparent to a baby in our parish.

The Provost goes on:

In a central London parish the chances are that godparents may live outside London. And although a godparent sometimes lives so far off that a visit to town on two Sundays running would seem out of the question, we were surprised to find how much more rarely this in fact happened than we had expected. For although, because of the numbers involved, the actual letter was hectographed, requiring only the filling in of the details and the signature

of whichever member of the staff, priest or woman worker, had done the preliminary visiting and preparation of the parents, the invitation seemed to have a personal nature about it.

At 3.45 p.m. we are there in the parish hall to welcome them. Tea is *ready* (not just coming to the boil as so often happens in the Church of England). Sunday school teachers take off any "stray" children that have been brought with godparents. Church councillors, clergy and workers mix with our visitors, and everything is done to break the ice and make them feel at home.

On a table attractively laid out is a selection of Bibles, prayer books, cards and pamphlets suitable for godchildren—all at a very modest price.

At 4.15 p.m. everyone is invited to sit down, and on the screen is shown the S.P.C.K. film-strip *It Could Make the Difference for your Children*. The commentary by one of the clergy is concise, light-hearted and un-churchy, but carefully bringing home the point of the drawings which show so excellently, in a style that appeals to everyone, the difference between having a baby, choosing a name, the choice of godparents, etc., for Christian and non-Christian parents.

At three points in the showing of the film-strip, three two-minute talks are interspersed.

The first is by a young mother, *not* a parson's wife. The second is by a godfather, and the third by a Sunday school teacher.

It is not so much the content or fluency with which these three speakers put it over that matters. It is their sincerity. And it is quite vital that the on-lookers should feel that the young mother is of the "one-of-us" class, rather than the "too-good-to-be-true" brigade. Indeed, the most effective speech I remember was that of a young mother who got up and said: "I have got three children under five and—er—er—I have forgotten all the things I wanted to say—all I know is—it is a bit of a struggle to get them to church in time—but er—my husband and I manage it somehow, and off we all go together—and er—well, that's it." (How right she was—"off we all go together.")

When the film is over, the Vicar thanks everyone for coming, says how important a day next Sunday will be, and bids them all goodbye. Time limit for the whole performance from start to finish—one hour.

(d) *The Service*. The service itself, like every service, should be conducted with great care and reverence. Whilst it is always important to say the prayers in a clear and audible voice so that the people may follow, it is so especially in conducting Baptisms.

The second rubric for "The Ministration of Holy Baptism" must be taken seriously. In the Canadian revision of 1959 it reads: "It is fitting that Baptism should be administered upon Sundays and other Holy-days at a public service, so that the congregation may witness the receiving of the newly baptized into the number of Christ's Church." In the past this rule has had all too little attention paid to it. Here Anglicans can learn from other churches like the Presbyterian which, maintaining a strong biblical doctrine of Baptism (entry into the Covenant, and incorporation into Christ), attach much importance to the idea of Baptism as an act of the Church and not solely of the minister. Baptism must therefore be "in the face of the congregation." But it may be thought unwise to make the baptismal service part of the regular Sunday service, especially if Baptisms

are frequent in the parish. In this case some other time should be set, and arrangements made to have an adequate representation of the whole congregation present in the persons of a churchwarden or sidesman and chosen members of the various parish groups—men's, women's and young people's organizations, Sunday School teachers and children, and choir. Members of all these groups may well be taught that to take this representative role at baptismal services is an important and privileged part of their function as members of groups which are integral parts of the whole Church.

Whether there can be a hymn or not will depend on circumstances. If there can, it should be at the beginning, and should be some very well known children's hymn. At the beginning of the service (after the hymn if there is one) there should be a very short and carefully prepared talk on Baptism. It should last not more than three minutes. Its purpose will be to recall to the minds of the parents and godparents the things in which they have already been recently instructed. A brief word to the godparents should be added, making clear to them in the Prayer Book or on the service card the part they are to say, and reminding them that they are expected to do so in a clear voice.

(e) *Post-baptismal care.* With the conclusion of the service, the filling in of the register and the signing of baptismal certificates, in all too many cases in the past the contact between the parish priest and the family has ended. This is the main reason why there is so large a difference in numbers between those who are baptized and those who become communicants. The parish priest should, therefore, regularly visit the home, thus showing that the Church is vitally interested in the child, and that the time when the child can begin to take an active part in the life of the parish by attending the Sunday School is eagerly awaited. These visits should not be so frequent as to be bothersome to the family, but frequent enough to keep the parents "on their toes." In some places (it is frequent in the Church of Scotland) the Sunday School, or possibly the Women's Society, has a "Cradle Roll" department or guild which carefully keeps a list of all pre-Sunday School babies and arranges regular visits to their homes.

(f) *Anniversaries of Baptisms.* At each anniversary of the Baptism a card should be sent to the home through the mail. Church publishing firms have such baptismal anniversary cards, differently worded for each year. The "Cradle Roll" guild, mentioned above, would appropriately organize this. At the proper age, the card will be accompanied by an invitation to the Sunday School. The subject of Sunday School will make another discussion with the parents necessary.

If some such system as this is set in motion in the parish, nobody will for very long remain under the impression that Baptism is unimportant, and merely on the fringe of Christian teaching and practice. The congregation as a whole will be drawn in to take its part in this ministry, and as time goes on family after family in the parish will be influenced. Baptism

will come to be honoured, as it should be, as one of the great sacraments of the gospel.

But it will be clear that a lot of time will be demanded of the parish priest. This is especially true if the parish is a large one in which there will be many Baptisms. On the other hand, in a large parish the help of the laity should be more readily available in such matters as the sending out of the letters to godparents and the baptismal anniversary cards, and some of the visiting. But whether or not he can count on much help, the parish priest must consider very carefully what the priorities are. When he comes to a parish a great many things may confront him as urgent, apart from what may be called his basic duties of preaching the Word, administering the Sacraments and attending to the sick. The men's group may need taking in hand; the women's work may need organizing; something may need to be started for the young adults and the boys and girls. And then there is the visiting. There may be six or seven hundred names on the parish list; many rows of houses may be waiting to be investigated. Can the priest do all this? Can he possibly go from door to door of all these houses? He cannot. Let him then begin with the families which bring their children for Baptism. Within a short time he will find this opening out into a sufficiently exacting programme of visitation. Both theologically, and as a matter of pastoral strategy, it is right that instruction for Baptism, the administration of this sacrament, and the visiting which springs out of it, should be the centre of the parish priest's pastoral work.