

The Elizabethan Puritans and Indiscriminate Baptism

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The problem of a discriminating use of baptism, so much to the fore at the present time, is not by any means a new one. It is one which constantly recurs in nominally Christian lands. It comes up with particular acuteness in ages of religious decline, when the majority of baptisms appear to be and probably are formal and ineffective. One such age in England was the latter part of the sixteenth century, the age of the Reformation Settlement under Elizabeth, when evangelical religion was formally established, but had not yet won its way into the hearts of the people. Strong arguments were then brought forward by the rigorist groups against the granting of baptism more or less indiscriminately to all, arguments which those who are now concerned about the same problem would do well to ponder, together with the answers advanced by the main Anglican leaders.

A first form in which the problem was raised was this, whether baptism could rightly be granted to the children of Papists. The followers of Calvin debated this matter, and contradictory answers seem to have been given. Hooker quotes a letter from Calvin to Farel in which such baptism seemed to be forbidden; but if this truly represented Calvin's attitude he later modified it considerably. The classic discussion of the matter is in the reply of Calvin to Knox when the Scottish reformer raised the general question of discrimination in admittance to the sacrament. Calvin laid it down as a principle that the covenant of God extends not only to believers and to their immediate offspring, but to all the descendants of a believer, even to a thousand generations. A wicked, apostate or heretical generation could not abstract the virtue and efficacy of baptism. "The progeny of holy and pious ancestors, although their grandfathers and parents may have been apostates, belong notwithstanding to the body of the church" (Knox, *Works*, VI. p. 96).

This did not mean that Calvin advocated the administration of the sacrament to all and sundry with no adequate safeguards. He certainly claimed that wherever "the profession of Christianity has not wholly perished or become extinct," infants—even the infants of papists, idolaters and the excommunicate—"are defrauded of their right if they are kept from the common symbol." But Calvin insisted that sponsors—parents or relations—must be forthcoming to pledge their faith and to be responsible for Christian instruction. Otherwise the sacrament would be reduced to a farce, and baptism "profaned." Broadly speaking, this solution did not differ very greatly from that proposed by the Romanist theologians with respect to the problem of the baptism of Protestants. So long as there was a willingness to allow the infant to be instructed, and a proper provision could be made, no discrimination was exercised against those who enjoyed a Christian descent. Calvin added that the wicked and idolatrous who presented infants ought themselves to be sharply reprov'd. Beza reiterated the judgment of his predecessor when he stated that "the children of persons excommunicate, abiding yet in the church, can by no right be debarred from baptism, in case a meet surety be had" (Whitgift, Parker Society, III. p. 144).

In England a considerable controversy arose between the official Anglican group on the one side, and the Puritans and the Separatists on the other. Cartwright, the Puritan champion, stated the view of the rigorists plainly and firmly. Exercised no doubt by the admittedly low

state of religious life under Elizabeth, he went far beyond Calvin in his strictness of discrimination. There can be no doubt that he aimed ultimately at the establishment of a proper discipline in the church, and that his call for discrimination in the sacrament had its place in the wider purpose and policy. This emerges in Cartwright's central contention, that to baptise indiscriminately destroys the true nature of the church, making it "an inn for passers-by rather than a household" (Whitgift, III. p. 137).

The main points made by Cartwright are as follows. Baptism belongs properly only to the children of believers. Naturally only an external test of belief could be imposed, and Cartwright was quite willing that a profession of faith which was not invalidated by notorious wickedness should be accepted. If one parent made an open profession and was neither a drunkard nor an adulterer, the child might be baptised. Cartwright was even ready to concede that if both parents were sinners, yet not obstinately so, baptism might be given. The children of unknown parents might also be baptised so long as sponsors were forthcoming. If both parents were papists or condemned heretics, however, the child ought not to be received. Similarly, the children of the completely wicked ought to be treated as those of Jews and Turks. Cartwright did not deny that they might come to faith with growth in years, but then they could be baptised upon profession like any other converts from heathenism. Baptism ought not to be administered "unless their faith doth first appear by profession" (Whitgift, III. p. 137).

The Separatists went a step further. They denied baptism to the children of all notoriously wicked persons, the Brownists to the children of all open sinners, the Barrowists to the seed of whores and witches (Rogers, pp. 265 ff.). The Separatists aimed, of course, to erect "pure" congregations of Christians, rather after the Anabaptist pattern, but without denying baptism to the children of true believers. In that respect they must be sharply distinguished from the Puritans, who desired a presbyterianised and disciplined State Church on the Genevan model. The stricter discrimination demanded by the Separatist groups derived logically from their conception of the church.

Against both the Puritan and the Separatist views Rogers, Whitgift and Hooker were the main champions of Anglican orthodoxy. Rogers stated the Anglican case and condemned contrary opinions, but he made no attempt at argument (pp. 265 ff.). Whitgift brought to the discussion several weighty arguments well worth studying at the present time. He denied, first, that the iniquity and hypocrisy of the parents could harm an infant. Second, he challenged his opponents to judge the inward and spiritual state of the infant recipient. He argued further that it was illogical to accept as valid the baptism given by heretics and to refuse baptism to the children of the excommunicate, who still kept their baptism. He concluded by quoting Continental Reformers: Zwingli: "that when we only add external signs and administer only the external doctrine, we must also be content with external confession"; and Beza as already quoted. Hooker discussed the matter largely in the light of Calvin's statements, which he carefully compared. He concluded with the Genevan master that "we may not deny unto infants their right by withholding from them the public sign of holy baptism, if they be born where the outward acknowledgment of holy baptism is not clean gone and extinguished" (*Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, III. 1: 12).

Now that an age of religious apostasy has again brought this question to the fore in England, largely under the sponsorship of rigorists who are poles apart from the Puritans in doctrinal and ecclesiastical sympathies, thinkers can ill afford to ignore the thorough discussions of the sixteenth century, in which the points at issue were so clearly distinguished and basic

principles in accordance with which a settlement must be reached were laid down. The points at issue were twofold: the rights of the child which is born within a Christian tradition, and the rights of the church, which demands and ought to demand guarantees of a full and proper instruction in faith and morals. So long as even the most nominal profession of Christianity continues, any child born of baptized parents has a claim to the privileges of the sacrament, irrespective of the reality of the convictions, or the standard of life of the immediate parents. But the church has also the duty to see that the sponsors provided in any and every particular case satisfy certain minimal requirements. The question, after all, seems to be not so much one of indiscriminate baptism as of indiscriminate sponsorship. This means that it is a question of church discipline.

The principles which must be borne in mind in tackling the problem are also important. First there is the principle of the national church. Those who take the way of discriminating in the administering of the sacrament necessarily abandon that principle and take the Anabaptist way of setting up a particular church of “true” professors. If it is argued that apostasy may reach such limits as to make this inevitable, then obviously it is going to be very difficult to decide exactly when apostasy has reached those limits. Second, there is the principle of discipline. If discrimination is exercised in respect of sponsors—and this would probably involve in practice a certain discrimination in respect of baptism too—then the practical problem of standards arises. Obviously no church can decide ultimately upon the inward fitness of sponsors—only God knows the heart. At the most, then, only outward standards can be exacted. The standards could hardly be more although they ought not to be less—than a profession of faith in baptism (and confirmation?), an agreed minimum of attendance at Christian services, and freedom from condemnation as an open and notorious sinner. Now the Anglicans themselves provided in the Prayer Book, and later in the Canons, a machinery of discipline of this kind which only needs to be applied. The Puritans did not think this machinery sufficient. Perhaps some today would agree. But at least the application of such discipline as there is would be a beginning. It would eliminate the worst abuses of indiscriminate sponsorship, and clarify the position as far as members of the church are concerned.

In the light of sixteenth century discussions we may well ask whether there is any more justification now than then for the restricting of baptism to, say, the children of regular communicants, and the treatment of all others as sub- or post-Christians (to use the new phrase). The early Anglicans hesitated even to forbid baptism to the children of open unbelievers and evil-livers. If baptism is desired, if opportunities of Christian instruction still exist, if sponsors are forthcoming or can be found, then there seems to be no case for this excessive discrimination. What is required is a far more careful and zealous application of the necessarily outward rules with regard to the sponsors who do come forward together with the clear and dogmatic insistence that the church’s requirements must be satisfied, and the proviso that if necessary the church itself will provide or will act as sponsor. It was this latter course which Hooker envisaged when, arguing for natural children and the children of the accursed, he pertinently asked: “Were it not against both equity and duty to refuse the mother of believers herself admittance, and not to take her in this case for a faithful parent?” (*Laws*, V. 64 :5).

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