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Calvin's Doctrine of Baptism.

CALVIN'S doctrine of Baptism is probably the best defence of infant baptism from the Protestant point of view. For that reason it is worth examining. If we Baptists can see the best that can be said for a position which we oppose, it may help us to a better understanding of our own, and since in certain quarters we are being asked to show cause etc., a study of Calvin may not be irrelevant.

All the reformers had to elaborate their teaching of the Sacraments over against Roman Catholic theory. They all rejected transubstantiation. Equally they all rejected baptismal regeneration. Yet curiously enough both Luther, Zwingli and Calvin retained infant baptism. It is not easy for a modern Baptist to see the logic of that view, nor do the arguments of Calvin at this point impress one by their logical consistency, in spite of his reputation as a logician. Why the reformers, when going so far in a radical direction, should have stopped short here, is not easy to say, though it is a fact that probably we ought to consider. Was it that the Anabaptists had already drawn their conclusion, and their teaching on Baptism was rejected out of prejudice against their views on other matters? Anyway Calvin completely fails to appreciate the Anabaptist point of view on Baptism. He knew that infant baptism needed defending and he fashions a long chapter to the purpose, but apparently he did not know against what exactly he had to defend it. He argues against the wrong point, and only very cursorily dismisses the real point. In fact as he nears the real point he becomes merely vituperative [1]

By way of preliminary let us endeavour to see what the real point is.

In olden times religion was a national affair, and those born in the nation were by that very fact members in the faith, children of the Covenant, to use the Jewish phrase. They could say "we have Abraham to our father" and that was sufficient. The mark of that in the Jewish race was circumcision. To be circumcised was to inherit the promises—or to put it in another way, circumcision was the symbol (or sacrament) to which the promises of the Covenant were attached. But the qualification was birth—over which the individual had no control.

Then in time the Roman Catholic Church took over this very idea, only instead of the nation as the unit, it regarded itself, the one church, as such. This one church was international. Actually physical birth therefore was no good as a

[1] *Institutes*, Book IV., Chapter xvi., Section 19.

qualification for membership in it. Consequently the new birth, regeneration, was substituted for physical birth. This new birth was by Baptism so that, in any country, by Baptism any child could be grafted into the religious unit, be born into the Kingdom, made a child of God. This is the doctrine of baptismal regeneration. Salvation is linked to the union of the individual with the organised body, and that union is effected simply by a ceremony even when the subject is unconscious of it.

Now the Reformers one and all broke with this fundamental position. Salvation, they maintained in effect, is not by union with the organised body but by union of the individual with Christ, and this through faith. Such a position, in reality, marks the end of all *nominal* Christianity. A person cannot be a Christian by the privilege of birth, but neither can he become a Christian by being engrafted willy-nilly by a ceremony of the Church. Calvin may not have stated the matter thus, but this is the assumption on which his whole doctrine in the *Institutes* is based. Consequently the real point is—what significance is there in infant baptism when both baptismal regeneration and the idea on which it rests are whole-heartedly rejected? How can it have any meaning at all if salvation is by Faith, and by Faith alone?

In working out his doctrine of the Sacraments Calvin obviously has in mind the adult believer. This is so even when he is discussing Baptism until he turns to the particular topic of infant baptism. A sacrament is defined as "an external sign, by which the Lord seals on our consciences His promise of good will towards us, in order to sustain the weakness of our faith, and we in turn testify our piety towards Him, both before Himself, and before angels as well as men". [2] Thus there are two things (1) God's seal and (2) our testimony. Both obviously presuppose the conscious mind. The seal is the seal of a promise. This promise Calvin insists must be proclaimed and understood in order that the rite may be a Sacrament. Thus the Sacraments stand on a level with the word, and are "not accepted save by those who receive the word and the sacraments with a firm faith". [3] Calvin quotes Augustine to the effect that "the efficacy of the word is produced in the Sacraments not because it is spoken but because it is believed". The reformer here is talking of Sacraments in general without thinking specially of Baptism, and he is insistent on this need for belief as the condition of the Sacraments' efficacy. Most theologians draw up their definition of Sacrament with the Lord's Supper specially in mind. And Calvin is not the first to forget his own

[2] *Ibid.*, Chapter xiv., Section 1.
[3] *Ibid.*, Section 7.

definition when he comes to discuss Baptism. How the above definition can find any room for infant baptism it is difficult to see. The reformer himself sensed the difficulty. He stands by his definition when dealing with those of an adult age who hitherto have been aliens from the covenant, i.e. the heathen, but makes a distinction between them and the children of Christian parents. The former are not to receive the sign of baptism without previous faith and repentance; the latter are "immediately on their birth received by God as heirs of the Covenant".[4]

Calvin justifies the inclusion of infants by arguments that have often been repeated. His main idea is that Baptism takes the place of Circumcision. This is buttressed with the fact that Christ called the children to Him and said, "of such is the Kingdom of God", and also by statements in scripture concerning the baptism of families. Since no mention is made of the exclusion of children in these instances, therefore no man of sense will argue that they were not baptised! It is not necessary for us here to do more than mention these familiar arguments. More to our purpose is the answer Calvin gives to the question of how the baptism benefits infants. First, it has a benefit on the parents as they realise that God extends His mercy not only to them but to their offspring; it animates them to surer confidence on seeing with the bodily eye the covenant of the Lord engraved on the bodies of their children.[5] Then, secondly, the benefit to the infants is that first they are made an object of greater interest to the other members of the Church.

Both these points, it will be noted, do violence not only to Calvin's definition of a Sacrament but to every other. The idea that God works on one individual (an infant) to stimulate faith in another (the parent) is something entirely new in the discussion and would require a recasting of the whole section on Sacraments. Also the idea that Sacrament is a ceremony for the good of the church is not ordinary Christian doctrine. Even on Roman theory the blessing is to the subject of the rite and not just to those who witness it. So we are still left with the question—what good accrues to the infant?

Calvin makes two other attempts. When they grow up he says they are thereby strongly urged to an earnest desire of serving God, Who has received them as sons by the formal symbol of adoption, before from nonage they were able to recognise Him as Father. That is to say the Sacrament of Baptism is a sort of post-dated cheque: it will operate when the time comes. But again is this a Christian sacrament?

[4] *Ibid.*, Section 24.
[5] *Ibid.*, Section 9.

In his next answer the reformer sails near the wind. Infants cannot be saved it is argued without regeneration. Calvin agrees. "We confess, indeed, that the word of the Lord is the only seed of spiritual regeneration: but we deny the inference that, therefore, the power of God cannot regenerate infants". That is as possible and easy for him as it is wondrous and incomprehensible for us. It were dangerous to deny that the Lord is able to furnish them with the knowledge of Himself in any way He pleases.[6] So also he argues they are baptised for future repentance and faith, "the seed of both lies hid in them by the secret operation of the Spirit".

Here he is obviously trying hard to fit infant baptism into his fundamental outlook of salvation as the result of a response of man to God. But we can hardly say that he succeeds. He hovers precariously between the magical baptismal regeneration on the one hand and the true idea that Baptism presupposes repentance and Faith on the other. He rides off on the suggestion that the power of God is marvellous and our comprehension limited!

As to his positive teaching on Baptism that is well worth consideration. He defines it as the initiatory rite by which we are admitted to the fellowship of the Church, that being engrafted into Christ, we may be accounted children of God. It contributes to our Faith three things:

(1) It is a sign or evidence of our purification, a kind of sealed instrument whereby God assures us that all our sins are done away and will no longer be imputed to us. The knowledge and certainty of such gifts from God are perceived in the sacrament.

(2) It shows us our mortification in Christ and the new life in Him. Here Calvin quotes Romans vi. 3-4. This exhorts us to the imitation of Christ. Also it symbolises that Christ has made us partakers of His death, so that the efficacy of both His death and resurrection are made sure to us—the one to mortification of the flesh, the other to the quickening of the Spirit. Thus we are promised, first, the free pardon of sins and the imputation of righteousness; and, secondly, the grace of the Holy Spirit to form us again to newness of life. These promises of God the Sacrament seals to us.

(3) Baptism assures us that we are so united with Christ as to be partakers of all His blessings. For He sanctified Baptism in His own body that He might have it in common with us as the firmest bond of union and fellowship which He deigned to form with us.

Comparing these three points with the usual teaching on

[6] *Ibid.*, Chapter xvi., Section 18.

Baptism in our Baptist Churches and creeds we note that, while Calvin allows that Baptism is our witness of our faith, his emphasis is not on that as ours tends to be. For him the Sacrament is a sign of what God has done and is doing. There can be no doubt that in this the Reformer is right, and it might be well if we Baptists of the modern world gave more attention to the positive content of the doctrine. If we ask the paedo-baptist what Baptism does for the infant and look for an answer, we ought to be able clearly to state what, on our theory, it does for the believer. It is not enough to say that it gives him an opportunity to witness. It is a ceremony which has to do with the believer's appropriation of the grace of God given in Christ. There is a real ministry of the Spirit of God upon the spirit of the believer in Baptism. What that ministry is needs careful definition.

In conclusion we may note with gratitude that Calvin broke away from the mediaeval doctrine of baptismal regeneration. He denied that the Sacraments are essential to salvation (though he insists that all Christians require them) and also that unbaptised infants of necessity are doomed to eternal damnation. As to the Form he was indifferent save that he preferred primitive simplicity to the elaborations which characterised the Roman ceremony.

ARTHUR DAKIN.

Devizes in 1699.

A PHOTOGRAPH of the following document hangs in the vestry of the Old Baptist Church at Devizes; and a second photograph has been given by Mr. Henry Tull to the writer.

Of the people concerned. It was not known how John Rede the donor was related to Colonel John Rede, who in 1659 had been chief of a garrison in Scotland, in 1672 had a licence refused to conduct worship at his house in Porton, but obtained one for his house in Idmiston, twenty miles south-east of Devizes. The donor, who was a principal burgess of the town, died 1701. The man who attended the important meeting of the Western Association in 1723 was probably his son. Daniel Webb and John Coleman were deacons of the Devizes church. James Webb appeared in London at the 1689 assembly as pastor of this church; his name appears last in 1701. John Filks is first mentioned in 1704, acting as pastor till 1723, with the help of Thomas Lucas of Trowbridge. Richard Anstie was a grocer