

GUARDIAN



The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; he leadeth me beside the still waters.

He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

— Psalm 23

The Obligation of Infant Baptism

The Presbytery of the West Coast overtured "the Thirty-second General Assembly to render a decision in the following matter: Does the Constitution of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church permit church sessions to receive into communicant membership those who refuse to present their children for baptism on account of scruples concerning infant baptism?" (*Minutes of the Thirty-second General Assembly*, p. 7). The Assembly elected "a committee of three to consider the matter proposed to the Assembly by the Presbytery of the West Coast" (*ibid.*, p. 101).

It is not a matter of dispute in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church that the baptism of the children of believers is a divine institution and that, therefore, it is the obligation of believing parents to present their children for baptism. This is clearly stated in the subordinate standards (*cf. Confession of Faith*, XXI, v; XXVIII, iv-vi; *Larger Catechism*, Q. 166; *Shorter Catechism*, Q. 95; *The Directory for the Public Worship of God*, IV, B, 2 and 4) and it is the belief and profession of the Church that the position enunciated in these standards is grounded in the teaching of Scripture as the primary and infallible rule of faith and practice.

The only question, therefore, that is posed in the directive given to the committee is the character of the offense of which believing parents are guilty when they "refuse" to present their children for baptism. The consideration of this question requires a study of the place of baptism in the New Testament institution. In addressing itself to this question the committee takes for granted the interpretation given in the subordinate standards as the biblical position, namely, that baptism is the sign and seal of covenant grace, more specifically, the sign and seal of union with Christ, of the remission of sins, and of regeneration by the Spirit and must not be construed as the means of imparting the grace signified. The question then is: what importance is attached to this ordinance in the insti-

This report is one of several articles on the subject of infant baptism which we have printed within the past year (see in Vol. 34, pages 38, 39, 112, 138). The series of Collinsworth Lectures also deals with this subject.

tution of Christ?

It is not apparent that Hebrews 6:2 may properly be appealed to in support of the thesis that Christian baptism is here stated to be one of the first principles of the doctrine of Christ. The precise term used as well as the plural "baptisms" would suggest that other baptisms may be in view (*cf. Mark 7:4; Heb. 9:10*). But other passages clearly show how significant in the esteem of our Lord and of his apostles was this ordinance in that church which Christ came to build and in the kingdom of which the church is the expression.

Scriptural Considerations

The original institution (Matt. 28:19) certifies to us that baptism is basic in and integral to the commission which Christ gave to his disciples on the eve of his departure to the right hand of the Majesty on high. The construction of the text cited indicates that baptism is a necessary part of the process of discipling the nations. But perhaps of greater significance for our present interest is the coordination of baptism with discipling the nations and teaching them to observe all that Jesus had commanded. Recoil from sacerdotalist conceptions of baptism is too liable to becloud our thought and we fail to appreciate the all-important locus of baptism in the commission of our Lord to the church.

It is this lesson that Peter applies on the day of Pentecost when men were pricked in their heart and said "what shall we do?" Peter's reply was: "Repent, and be baptized each one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of your sins" (Acts 2:38). Here again the coordination points to the central place which baptism occupies in the response of the believing heart to God's testimony in the overtures of saving grace (*cf. vs.*

41). The history of the apostolic church and the many allusions to baptism show the continuance and confirmation of the precedent established by Peter on the day of Pentecost (*cf. Acts 8:12, 13, 16, 36, 38; 9:18; 10:47, 48; 16:15, 33; 19:5; 22:16; Rom. 6:3, 4; Gal. 3:27; I Pet. 3:21*).

One Baptism

There is one other passage that should not be overlooked. It is Ephesians 4:5. "One baptism" has been interpreted as referring not to the ordinance of baptism but to the cross of Christ as that to which our Lord referred when he said "I have a baptism to be baptized with" (Luke 12:50; *cf. Mark 10:38*). There is not sufficient reason for this view and there are decided objections to its adoption. It might appear that the context in which the reference to "one baptism" occurs would require something more central to the Christian confession than the ordinance of baptism. The passages already noted show the fallacy of such an assumption. These passages, demonstrating the important place occupied by baptism in the institution of our Lord and in apostolic practice, provide the pattern by which we should be prepared for the coordination found in Ephesians 4:5.

The analogy derived from other New Testament data, while pointing us to the proper interpretation of the "one baptism" of Ephesians 4:5, should not, however, obscure the striking character of the reference to baptism in this context. For this passage, perhaps more than any other, points up the cardinal place of the ordinance in apostolic doctrine. This lesson is emphasized by those tenets of the faith with which it is coordinated — one body, one Spirit, one hope of our calling, one Lord, one faith, one God and Father of all (*cf. Eph. 4:4-6*). What needs to be appreciated is that baptism is the sign and seal, of *God's covenant grace*. It is the certification and confirmation which he adds to his grace, the seal of his faithfulness to the covenant.

As circumcision was God's covenant in the flesh of Israel (*cf.* Gen. 17:10, 11, 13) so baptism is the covenant in New Testament covenant realization. It is this concept of the significance of baptism that alone explains and validates the place assigned to it in Christ's original institution (Matt. 28:19) and in apostolic teaching and practice. It needs to be reiterated that rightful reaction against sacerdotalist conceptions and tendencies must not be allowed so to eclipse our thinking that we fail to accord to baptism its meaning and intent as the seal of God's faithfulness.

A Divine Institution

The question now is: what is the relevance of the thesis propounded above to the directive given to the committee by the General Assembly? In the esteem of the committee the implications should be apparent. Since the Orthodox Presbyterian Church takes the position that infant baptism, that is, the baptism of the children of believers, is a divine institution, it is not proper to make any differentiation in respect of meaning, intent, and obligation between adult baptism and infant baptism. There is one baptism. And the sanction belonging to baptism, established above from the biblical evidence, applies to infant baptism as truly as to adult baptism. It is taken for granted that the person who *refuses* to be baptized would not be admitted to communicant membership and that a baptized communicant member who declares his renunciation of the propriety of baptism would immediately become subject to discipline. It is the judgment of the committee that the question posed in the overture from the Presbytery of the West Coast and passed on to the committee for consideration arises only when the place of baptism in the Christian institution is not duly appreciated and a sharp line of differentiation is drawn, perhaps not explicitly but yet in effect, between adult baptism and infant baptism.

The committee has deep sympathy for those who have been subjected to anti-paedobaptist arguments and who find it difficult to accede to the necessity and validity of infant baptism. It is also aware of the appeal of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church to earnest Christians who for many reasons wish to become members of a denomination which in all other respects bears

a corporate witness to what they believe to be the truth of the gospel. Church sessions should be sensitive to the desires and needs of such persons and be ready to offer them to the fullest extent compatible with our constitution the fellowship of the church including the privilege of participating in the Lord's supper with the communicant members of the congregations over which they exercise oversight.

Danger of Weakened Witness

The committee considers, however, that to admit to communicant membership those who "refuse" to present their children for baptism would constitute a weakening of the witness the church bears to the ordinance of infant baptism as one of divine warrant, authority, and obligation. Of greater weight is the fact that infant baptism is the way in which God continues to remind and assure us of that which belongs to the administration of his redemptive, covenantal purpose. The defect of the person not persuaded of this aspect of God's revealed counsel is not concerned with what is peripheral but with what is basic in the Christian institution. And the person who resolutely refuses to present his or her children for baptism is rejecting the covenant promise and grace which God has certified to his people from Abraham's day till now. It is this perspective that lends gravity to the offense.

It is this estimate of baptism that underlies the statement of our subordinate standards when the Confession says that it is "a great sin to condemn or neglect this ordinance" (XXVIII, v) and the Directory for Worship that the children of the faithful "are holy in Christ, and as members of his church ought to be baptized" (IV, B, 4). It cannot be denied that the person refusing baptism for his children is delinquent in doctrine. It is the obligation of the session (in the case envisioned in this study) to apprise him of this. It is scarcely compatible with honesty, therefore, for such a person to answer in the affirmative such a question or any other form of question of similar purport as must

be asked of those being received into communicant membership, namely, "Do you agree to submit in the Lord to the government of this church and, in case you should be found delinquent in doctrine or life, to heed its discipline?" (*ibid.*, V, 5, 4).

Other Considerations

In support and confirmation of the foregoing position the following additional considerations are offered.

(1) God has revealed his great displeasure with those who refuse or neglect the administration of the sign of the covenant (Gen. 17:14, Exod. 4:24-26).

(2) To refuse the covenant sign to the children of believers is to deny God's covenant claim upon them, and thus to withhold from him those who are rightfully his. Such denial provokes him to anger (Exod. 4:22-26; Mark 10:13, 14).

(3) The riches of God's grace are most clearly seen in his covenant mercies and to deny baptism to the children of the church prevents the grace of God from being seen in all its richness and manifestly detracts from its fulness. This cannot help but weaken the sense of gratitude in both parents and children and consequently rob God of the praise and thanksgiving that is due to him.

(4) Those professing parents who refuse to present their children for baptism thereby deny their solemn obligation to keep God's covenant by raising their children in the knowledge and fear of the Lord, and deprive their children as well as themselves of the comfort of God's covenant promise.

(5) Professing parents who refuse to present their children for baptism withhold from the church of Christ the holy seed which God in his goodness has provided for it, and consequently deprive their children of the nurture and discipline which the body of Christ imparts to its members.

In answer to the objection that the scriptural evidence for the ordinance of infant baptism is not of such clarity as to command our obedience, it may be conceded that there is no express command in Scripture to baptize in-

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phants. Nevertheless, what by good and necessary inference can be deduced from Scripture is to be received as authoritative (*Confession of Faith* I, vi) and the scriptural evidence for infant baptism clearly falls within this category. It may be further objected that in order to establish this doctrine such a closely reasoned and complicated process of inference and deduction is demanded that it is not reasonable to require those to conform to this ordinance who are unable to exert such powers of logic. In answer to this objection, it must be affirmed that the doctrine of the covenant of grace is all-pervasive in Scripture and that it takes no great powers of reasoning to find the rightful place of the children of believers within its fold.

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The committee also incorporates in its report the following qualifying considerations of one of its members.

This member entertains no hesitation as to the importance of the baptism of the children of believing parents. The glory of the unity of the covenant of grace throughout Scriptures must be constantly proclaimed. The privilege as well as the duty of Christian parents to present their infant seed for the sacrament of baptism must often be set forth. The Bible and our secondary standards make this altogether plain. On this there can be no disagreement.

Possible Exceptions?

The question is whether sessions may "receive into communicant membership those who refuse to present their children for baptism on account of scruples concerning infant baptism." The contention of this member of the committee is that our General Assembly ought not to declare that under no circumstances may a session receive into communicant membership one who refuses to present a covenant child for baptism. There may be occasions when a session ought to receive a Christian brother into its fullest fellowship even though that brother be unable in good conscience to appreciate the privilege that is his to present his child in Christian baptism.

A believer belongs in the church. The believer ought to be in the most faithful church to be found. While the Orthodox Presbyterian Church properly insists that its officers subscribe fully to the system of doctrine taught in the Westminster Standards, it has of members required a credible con-

fession of faith in Christ. And has not the ministry of the church been appointed "for the perfecting of the saints . . . for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come in the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ" (Eph. 4:12, 13)?

There may well be situations where it would be highly unwise to receive as communicant members those who refuse to present their children for baptism. It would hardly make for harmony in the church to receive a brother who determinedly opposes the expressed doctrinal position of the church. In a home mission situation the admission of several families refusing to present their children for baptism might represent such a proportion of the entire congregation as to threaten the very character of the church as a Reformed communion.

But one can also conceive of circumstances in which it would amount to undue severity and harshness not to welcome a brother Christian desirous of becoming a communicant member, though unable from the view point of his own convictions, poorly grounded though they be, to present his infant child for Christian baptism. Shall we allow such a believer to seek his fullest spiritual fellowship in a communion less faithful to the gospel than ours? Or shall we welcome him as a Christian brother indeed and trust that the ministry of the Word and the blessing of the Spirit will bring him in time to see that his whole family should bear the sign and seal of covenant grace?

Judgment of the Session

This, of course, indicates that all the circumstances must be taken into account as best we are able to do. This member would refrain from making a blanket statement as to the reception into communicant membership of those refusing to have their children baptized. The decision may in some instances be affirmative, in others not. And this just puts the problem where it belongs, back to the session of the local church. This is not sidestepping the issue but placing the responsibility where, according to the genius of Presbyterianism, it belongs. Historically such questions have been left with the local session.

It is noteworthy that in J. Aspin-

wall Hodge's *What Is Presbyterian Law?* it is asserted again and again that it is the session that must resolve such matters. For instance, on page 143, of the 8th edition we read: "And in 1872 the Assembly asserted 'that the admission of persons to sealing ordinances is confided by the Form of Government really and exclusively to the church Session'." On page 140 of the same volume Hodge says: "Parents declining to present their children for baptism are not to be refused on account of scruples concerning infant baptism, yet in every such case the Session must judge of the expediency of admitting them."

Respectfully submitted,
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LAURENCE N. VAIL
JOHN MURRAY,
chairman

EDITOR'S MAIL BOX

Dear Sir:

The superiority of "constant, individual personal work" to the method of public evangelistic meetings is manifest not only in the church life of Korea, but in that of America as well (see Vol. 35, No. 4, article by H. M. Conn).

During the closing days of the Los Angeles Coliseum Crusade there was a breakfast for ministers at the Biltmore. It was reported that there had been about 36,000 decisions. Imagine, then, the impact of the letter which arrived five weeks after the campaign ended, which stated plaintively that 30,000 of those who had signed cards could not be accounted for as having become associated with any church.

The truth is that the superstructure of any evangelistic effort must rest on a foundation of local, patient testimony. Some of the decision cards which I received were signed by covenant children, who only now are coming to the point of communicant membership. The dinner of herbs, where love is, is in this case better than the fatted ox, where seats are readied for honorable men who in reality are hostile to the gospel, and whose appetite may involve a taste for sheep.

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