

Two Reformers and Baptism

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At its simplest the problem of Baptism in the Church of England resolves itself into two questions: What was the mind of the Reformers in the matter? How far do their conclusions tally with those of Scripture? It has long been demonstrated what is the true Scriptural position upon the matter,¹ but these two questions have both been shirked and the attempt has been made to show, either that the Reformers spoke with uncertain and confused voice upon the question, or that they still clung to a view contrary to that of the New Testament. It is in the hope of demonstrating that in the work of two Reformers at any rate, the constructive genius Cranmer and the Expositor Rogers, a clear and not unscriptural position is revealed, that this present article is written.

Now only too often it is glibly assumed that in the Infant Baptism Service we have a complete and decisive answer to the two questions. This is true not only of those who champion the views supposedly expressed in that service, but also of those who oppose them (inferring thereby that the Reformers themselves were in error upon this point). There are even those who would use the Article,² interpreted after their own fashion, as a buttress for the view that the Reformers continued to share with Rome a belief in Baptismal Regeneration. One thing is certain enough. The Reformers did uphold and continue the practice of Infant Baptism within the Christian community; almost every shade of Reformed opinion lending its consent to a practice which was believed consistent with Scripture teaching and precedent. But there are others who would have it that the Reformers, or at any rate the English Reformers, went further than this. Building upon various statements in the Baptismal Service, which clearly enough are taken from the corresponding Roman office, they would have us acknowledge at once that the Reformers subscribed the Roman view, not only that infants should be baptized, but that every infant thus baptized was *ipso facto* the recipient of some measure of Divine grace.

Now it is useless to deny that the language of the Prayer Book does convey the suggestion that the Reformers shared the Roman view: "Seeing now . . . that this child is regenerate. . . . We yield Thee hearty thanks . . . that it hath pleased Thee to regenerate this Infant with Thy Holy Spirit. . . ."³ Moreover, it is evident that these words are modelled upon those in the similar Roman Service. But again and again it has been pointed out that liturgical statements must not be treated as doctrinal formulae, unless there is ample evidence of a more solid character to confirm the view indicated by them. Liturgical phrases by their very nature have to be in the most general terms and must perforce be used in the most widely varying circumstances. Again, this service, as was the case with all the services of the Prayer Book, was an amended version of the Roman, and it may well be that, not being regarded as of equal importance as others, it did not receive the same scrupulous attention in revision as, for example, the Communion Service, to the exclusion of every ambiguous phrase. At any rate, if the Reformers did believe in Baptismal Regeneration, then there is need of ample evidence of a purely doctrinal character before the view suggested by the Prayer Book can be expected to gain a hearing.

It is precisely this evidence which is lacking. Doctrinal statements which seem to support Baptismal Regeneration are indeed few and far between, and such as there are data mainly from the early days of the Reformers, when upon this as upon other matters the darkness of superstition and tradition still prevailed. The Article itself seems not to have been interpreted by the first Reformed generation in the sense in which it is now construed to support the implied teaching of the liturgical statement, as we shall have occasion to see more fully later, and in other passages there seems to be confirmation of the fact that a quite other view was customary amongst the leading Reformers. Amongst statements which might be cited as bearing on the Roman view, the most noteworthy and typical is perhaps that of Cranmer:

“That by Baptism (Infants) shall have remission of all their sins the grace and favour of God and everlasting life”;⁴

although even here there is a qualifying clause which greatly amends the bald statement, and which shows that Cranmer was already groping after something other than this mechanical view of the Sacraments, namely:

If they die in that grace which by the Sacrament is conferred.⁵ This pronouncement is not indeed in any way decisive, since it dates from 1538, when it is well known that Cranmer still accepted in substance the Roman view of the Lord’s Supper.⁶ It cannot, therefore, be held as in any way conclusive to the present debate, and merely serves to show that Cranmer, in common with the other Reformed divines, was nursed in Roman teaching, a fact which may go far to explain the retention of odd phrases in the Prayer Book not altogether indicative of the true trends of Reformed thought.

Cranmer himself quickly moved from this early position, and there is ample evidence to show that his own final views were quite different. Cranmer, it is true, never dealt with the matter fully, and it may be questioned whether he ever thought the issue out in detail, but such incidental references as there are, chiefly in his great work: the True and Catholic Doctrine of the Lord’s Supper, give us clearly to understand that Baptism had for him no more superstitious power than the Holy Communion, and that his views upon the one corresponded closely to his views upon the other. Indeed Cranmer is at pains to illustrate his particular view of the Communion by long and closely applied comparisons with the complementary Sacrament of Baptism.

Now with regard to the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper there can be no doubt whatever as to Cranmer’s position at this time. The Romish superstitions, Transubstantiation and Sacrifice, had been put off, and Cranmer, as is now generally admitted,⁷ held the middle position advocated by Bucer and Martyr, and approximating closely to that of Calvin. He retained for the Lord’s Supper a significance rather greater than that of a memorial feast only, but he did not believe in the corporal presence of Christ in the elements, holding rather that where the Sacrament was truly received there was a double feeding, the outward consuming of the bread and wine being accompanied by, and picturing, a hidden partaking of Christ spiritually and by faith in the heart.

It is this latter view in particular which is of such importance in the matter of baptism, since it is precisely this view which Cranmer supports at such length by the example of baptism. He does not deny baptism to children, even though he admits that children have no knowledge of faith and conversion, of which baptism is the sacrament.⁸ He asserts rather the true importance of Infant Baptism, which is, that by it we assume responsibility for the future

faith and conversion of the children baptized. As an authority for Infant Baptism he cites Augustine, tacit reminder of the fact that the Reformers' views upon Infant Baptism were not unrelated to their very decided belief in the Divine Election, a matter of some importance with which we shall have to deal at a later stage.

This first statement, introductory to the main comparison, is, as it were, a defence of Infant Baptism against the charge of uselessness and irrelevance which Cranmer's doctrine, as unfolded later, would seem to invite. It certainly makes clear from the outset two important facts, first, that Cranmer had by this time fully rejected the view that in baptism a beginning of faith and conversion to God is automatically made and, secondly, that he would retain the Baptism of Infants within a Christian community, since by this practice the promises of God are visibly held out before the children, and provision is made for their godly instruction as they advance to years of discretion.

With this introduction Cranmer now proceeds to examine more closely the relationship of baptism to the Holy Communion. In the one as in the other he traces both an outward act and a spiritual meaning behind that act; the eating of bread and wine corresponding with the washing with water as the outward act, the feeding upon Christ to the inward washing with the Holy Ghost as the spiritual meaning. Yet, continues Cranmer—and this is the truly important matter—yet “As in Baptism the Holy Ghost is not in the water, but in him that is unfeignedly baptized,”⁹ so also it is with the Lord's Supper. This is the crux of the whole problem. It is not that in the water of baptism there is a magical property, conveying the grace of regeneration willy-nilly to the persons baptized. The outward washing with water is only the token or pledge of an inner work of the Holy Spirit which is done only in the believing heart, that is, where there is an “unfeigned baptism.”

This clear statement is reinforced by an even more decisive comparison. It is well known from the Article¹⁰ that the Reformers believed it possible for a man to partake of the bread and wine in the Communion without actually partaking of Christ, for the man, that is to say, who eats carnally and without faith. Cranmer himself is of this opinion. Sacramental grace is by no means automatic. It depends upon the inward disposition of the recipient, not upon the outward apparatus of the sacrament. The mere fact that a man partakes of the bread and wine or is washed with the water of the sacrament does not mean that he is necessarily baptized with the Holy Spirit or refreshed with the body and blood of Christ. Therefore, says Cranmer “As in baptism those that come feignedly and those that come unfeignedly both be washed with sacramental water, but both be not washed with the Holy Ghost,”¹¹ so, too, it is with the Lord's Supper.

The importance of these passages cannot be exaggerated for the light which they shed upon the disputed passage in the Prayer Book, and the supposed hesitancy or conservatism of the Reformers in the matter of baptism. The teaching upon the Lord's Supper is too clear to admit of dispute. But here not only are the two assumed to be identical, but Cranmer actually uses the doctrine of baptism in support of his view of the Lord's Supper. It is self-understood almost that not everyone who has been baptized has been the recipient of baptismal grace, but only those in whose hearts there has been the response of faith and conversion to God, either through the pious ministry of praying and believing god-parents in the case of the child, or by other means in that of adults. Cranmer's view of baptism, representative of the general view of the Reformers, is that Infant Baptism must be retained as a pledge of the loving purpose of God to all men, and a guarantee of Christian upbringing; but that the rite itself, without the true prayer of the godparents and their labour to awaken faith, is of no avail for spiritual

washing. It is just possible that the Reformers regarded baptism as a further pledge that no infants would be condemned for original sin, not in itself an unscriptural view, but whether this is so or not admits of no proof apart from the assurance they are at heart to give in the Prayer Book that children which are baptized, dying before they commit actual sin, are undoubtedly saved.¹² For the rest, baptism is an enaction in type of the work which the Holy Spirit in His own time will accomplish when the elect turn to God in repentance and faith, remaining in the case of the non-elect no more than a type, expressive of the good-will of God and His desire to save.

This then was the real position of Cranmer himself, a position quite other than that which some, hastily building upon the phrase of the Prayer Book, would have us imagine. It now remains to be seen whether this was merely an advanced and individual view of Cranmer himself, or whether it was the interpretation of the Prayer Book and Articles common to the Church of England in Reformation days. As the principal witness in this further examination we cannot do better than to cite the earliest expositor of the XXXIX Articles, Rogers, who, writing in 1586 gives us clear indication of the general position of the Church of England in these earliest years of Reform. The objection that Rogers was a Calvinist, and thus held minority views, is trivial, since it is unlikely that an exposition of this nature would issue from so authoritative a source, did it not represent views generally accepted at the time. Indeed it is clear that all the Reformers were to a great extent Calvinists, that the Articles were framed and interpreted "calvinistically" from the very first, and that even the Baptismal Service itself was cast up against a background of Calvinism, as witness the phrase: "That he may continue amongst thy faithful and elect children."¹³ If Rogers wrote as a Calvinist, then his work is truly a faithful witness to the general Reformed interpretation of the Articles, both upon the subject of baptism and upon other matters.

In the case of baptism, Rogers not only expresses clearly and concisely views similar to those already propounded by Cranmer; he bluntly and unmistakably condemns the opposite view that grace is granted to all who are washed by the baptismal water, treating this view as a Roman error. "The Papists," he says, "do erroneously hold that the Sacraments of the new law do confer grace *ex opere operato*."¹⁴

This Roman error, however, is not the view of the Reformers. The practical and spiritual elements in baptism, as in the Lord's Supper, are not bound together, nor are they in any way of necessity conjoined or contemporaneous. "Howbeit this faith (i.e. the faith which we have in baptism) is not necessarily tied unto visible signs."¹⁵

Indeed Rogers, with great common sense and a true Scriptural understanding, goes further, and points out that in probably the majority of cases sacramental grace and the physical receiving of the sacrament are not contemporaneous, even where the Sacrament is unfeignedly, with true repentance and faith, received. "Some," he says, "have faith afore they receive any of the sacraments," and he quotes the examples of the Ethiopian eunuch, and Cornelius, to whom baptism, far from being a means of regeneration, or an agent of believing faith, was a visible pledge of the work of God already accomplished in the heart, and a testimony of repentance and faith. In some cases again there is no spiritual work at all. The sacraments are administered outwardly, but no grace is conferred or received. "Some have faith neither afore nor at the instant nor yet afterward, though daily they receive the sacrament without faith."¹⁶

The sacrament is an outward symbol of spiritual grace. It may be an effective means of grace. Or the grace may be separated from the sacrament. There is no strict binding of the one to the other. A man may find in the Holy Communion his closest intercourse with the Saviour. On the other hand it may be that he feeds daily upon the Lord, the Holy Communion being but an outward momentary picture of the daily continuous act. Or again it may be that he never truly feeds upon the Lord at all spiritually and with the heart, although he makes the sacramental act. So too, it is with baptism. The work of regeneration may be before baptism, it may be after baptism, or there may never be any such work of regeneration at all. There is no exact binding of symbol to reality: only, God has appointed that the Sacraments should be effectual means of grace to those who use them aright. The believer who brings his child to baptism, the saint who comes to the Lord's table, may rest assured that the Holy Spirit is indeed at work either in the child or in himself, as with a quiet and faithful heart he fulfils the Divine ordinance, and he may look forward with confidence to the time when that work of grace will be completed in the conversion of the little one, or manifest in the strengthening of his own spiritual life. Sacrament and grace are indeed connected, but not in the soulless, automatic way of those who insist that all infants baptized are thereby born again into the family of God.

The full ramifications of this doctrine, and its definiteness and clearness, are apparent when Rogers, in accordance with his usual and interesting custom, proceeds to the condemnation of those who oppugn this truth, and here he condemns as error every deviation from the position which he regards as the true position of the Reformed Anglican Church. In the first place he maintains that it is an error to suppose that children dying unbaptized are thereby excluded from the love and mercy of God and finally damned. Baptism is a "seal of the covenant." It is a pledge of the forgiveness of God. It is enjoined by the Saviour. But in itself it is not absolutely necessary to salvation. Although it is our duty to administer baptism where possible, the love of God is operative apart from as well as in baptism. Consequently: "They do err who, supposing that sacrament and grace are inseparably conjoined, teach that they never go to Heaven without the seals of the covenant."¹⁷

In the same way a mechanical linking of baptism with salvation is condemned, Rogers pointing out that "It is an error to teach that the Sacrament of Baptism is the cause of salvation."¹⁸

This is a plain refutation of the view which the majority of churchmen seek to wrest from the words of the Prayer Book, that because the child is baptized, and for that reason only, therefore a work of the Holy Ghost has begun, which will, if accompanied by a real effort on the part of the child, result in eternal salvation. Nothing could be further from the thoughts both of the original framers of the service and of its first users. The language is a little unfortunate perhaps, but the intention is sufficiently clear. In baptism a pledge of the love and interest of God is given, which, upon the prayers of God's people and a corresponding faith in the child, will lead to a work of regenerating grace, but which otherwise is of no avail.

Rogers further develops this theme with a strong assertion that original sin is pardoned in all infants, whether baptized or not, the work of Christ in this respect availing freely for all. This, he maintains, has always been the opinion of the true Church, being disputed only by the Pelagians, "Because (as they believe) they have no such sin in them at all."¹⁹

This statement is particularly interesting as proceeding from so staunch a Calvinist as Rogers, since Calvin himself is often unjustly and erroneously accused of condemning to eternal

reprobation all infants unfortunate enough to die unbaptized. In this connection it must be remembered that at that time the fate of those who died in infancy was no mere academic problem. When not far short of half the total population, and probably more, must have been lost in childhood, the problem was bound to be felt in a way in which it cannot be felt to-day, now that the infant mortality rate, in Western Europe and America at any rate, has been so enormously reduced. To us the matter may seem trivial, and relatively unimportant, but to the men of the Reformation age it was an urgent and a vital matter.

Two further opinions are condemned by Rogers: first, that of the Russes and, secondly a further error of the Papists. The opinion of the Russes was that there is such necessity of baptism as that all that “die without it are damned,”²⁰ but this, as we have already seen, was plainly contrary to the non-mechanical views of Rogers. Rogers rightly and properly saw that in certain cases saving faith may well be manifested where opportunities of baptism are absent, the dying thief upon the cross being a cogent example. It is thus impossible to lay upon the sacrament so tremendous a stress, although certainly Rogers would not deny that Baptism ought to be administered where possible. The further Papist error is that baptism avails for the: “Putting away of original sin only and bringeth grace, even *ex opere operato*.”²²

At root this is still the opinion of those who hold high views of the sacrament, whether within the Church of Rome or any other Church, but to-day it is not usually expressed with this brutal clarity. Baptism is held in itself to suffice for the remission of original sin, a preliminary work of regeneration done by the Holy Ghost in all that are baptized. But then the child is cast back upon its own devices, to live its life in accordance with the principles of the Lord Jesus, to deal with actual sin as best it can, making use of such aids as prayer and Church worship, and always to be faced with the final prospect of at best purgatory, or even eternal perdition. All place for repentance and conversion to God, all opportunity of an act of saving faith, to avail for the full and free salvation which God Himself gives, is thus excluded. A modern statement of this view in theological terms would, of course, be sufficiently guarded, and leave loopholes enough to evade this stark issue, but in practice this is the reality of the situation. Salvation is reduced to an uneasy compromise, a mechanical act of God to deal with original sin, human works and effort to deal with actual. But this, as Rogers clearly sees, is not the teaching of Scripture, nor is it the teaching of the true Church. The ceremony of baptism does not in itself confer grace, nor is baptism, as a pledge, a pledge of the remission of original sin only. Baptism is the outward token of the whole regenerating work of the Holy Spirit in the heart, the seal of salvation to the repentant believer.

Finally, Rogers is at pains to justify the continued practice of the baptism of infants, and in view of the constant doubts expressed upon this point it might be as well to present the reasons which he advances in favour of continuing the practice. The question may indeed be asked by those with high views of the Sacraments: If baptism does not avail for salvation, if no grace is conferred by the outward act, why then persist in the baptism of infants, who manifestly do not and cannot repent or believe in baptism? Or to put the question in a different form: If baptism has no more than a symbolic value, why then continue to exercise it, with all its forms, upon those who by nature cannot be fit subjects for baptism? If Rogers’s exposition be indeed a true statement of the Anglican Reformed position, in contradistinction to the widespread errors which are current in our age, then it is right to call for an explanation upon this matter.

The position of Rogers is simple. He does not advocate the baptism of infants in order to attain any spiritual advantages for children by magic, as it were. He supports it on far more

solid ground. Baptism is the token and pledge of the grace of God which is offered freely to all. It is the symbol of the work of regeneration which the Holy Spirit is willing to accomplish in the heart of any. This grace of God, this regenerating work of the Holy Spirit is not restricted to adults. "The grace of God is universal; therefore the sign and seal of grace is universal and belongeth unto all, so well young as old."²² Particularly does it belong to the children of believers, for whom, in baptism, prayer is offered, and provision made for their upbringing in grace. Thus it is right for the children of Christians to be baptized. Indeed, as Rogers points out: "Christ hath shed His blood as well for the washing away the sins of children as of the elder sort; therefore it is very necessary that they should be made partakers of the sacrament thereof."²³ The token and pledge of the grace of God belongs to them, and prayer is made that one day in true repentance and faith they may enter into possession of that grace by the inworking of the Holy Ghost.

All who oppugn this truth are condemned by Rogers, both those who deny that the Protestants hold it (as the runagate Hill²⁴), those who deny baptism altogether (Pelagians, Heracleans, Henricians, Anabaptists, whereof said some how baptism is the invention of Pope Nicholas and therefore naught, others that baptism is of the Devil); those who hold that none should be baptized until he be thirty years old (as the Servetians and Family of Love); those who refuse to baptize some infants (as the Barrowists, who denied it unto the seed of whores and witches); those who are of the opinion that none are to be baptized that believe not first: Hence the Anabaptists: Infants believe not, therefore not to be baptized: Hence the Lutherans: Infants do believe, therefore to be baptized.²⁵

This then is the clear teaching of the Reformers, not that all infants should be baptized as an automatic means of grace, not that the regenerating work of the Holy Ghost is tied to the washing of sacramental water, but that baptism is a pledge of God's love and grace, and a witness of faith and repentance, a pledge not to be withheld from children when proper provision is made to instruct them in the things of God and to bring them to repentance and faith.

This truth may be unpalatable to those who would substitute for the doctrine of God the traditions of men, but here surely we have a sane and balanced and a truly Scriptural view, which is also the teaching of the Anglican Church. No room is left for a pious agreement to differ. In this question the whole truth for which the Reformers contended is at stake, that the Christian faith is evangelical and not sacramental. Uneasy compromise upon a vital issue of this type is futile. The need of our age is that once again the Scriptural and reformed doctrine should be championed and made known both amongst the deluding clergy and the deluded masses. Where truth is at issue to temporize for the sake of unity and for the fear of giving offence is the way of cowardly evasion. Lovingly, and yet firmly and boldly, the Scriptural reformed truth about baptism must be propounded, and if the way is hard the reward is also certain. For we can do nothing against the truth, only for the truth.

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Endnotes:

- 1) Cf Mozley, *The Baptismal Controversy*.

- 2) Article XXVII, *Of Baptism*.
- 3) *The Ministration of Publick Baptism of Infants*.
- 4) *Remains and Letters of Cranmer*, p. 95, amending the Institutions of Henry VIII.
- 5) *Ut Supra*.
- 6) See Smyth: *Cranmer and the Reformation under Edward VI*, p. 59f for a discussion of Cranmer's views of the Lord's Supper.
- 7) See Smyth: *Cranmer and the Reformation under Edward VI*, p. 59 f for a discussion of Cranmer's views of the Lord's Supper.
- 8) *True and Catholic Doctrine of the Lord's Supper*, p. 157.
- 9) *True and Catholic Doctrine of the Lord's Supper*, p. 196.
- 10) Article XXIX. *Of the Wicked which eat not the Body of Christ in the use of the Lord's Supper*.
- 11) *True and Catholic Doctrine of the Lord's Supper*, p. 221.
- 12) *The Ministration of Publick Baptism of Infants*.
- 13) *The Ministration of Publick Baptism of Infants*.
- 14) *Exposition of the XXXIX Articles*, p. 257.
- 15) *Ibid*, p. 259.
- 16) *Ibid*, p. 259
- 17) *Exposition of the XXXIX Articles*, p. 249.
- 18) *Ibid*, p. 249.
- 19) *Ibid*, p. 277.
- 20) *Exposition of the XXXIX Articles*, p. 278.
- 21) *Ibid*, p. 278. ,
- 22) *Exposition of the XXXIX Articles*, p. 279
- 23) *Ibid*, p. 279.
- 24) *Exposition of the XXXIX. Articles*, p. 279.
- 25) *Ibid*, p. 280.