

### III

## THE NORMATIVE AUTHORITY OF THE SCRIPTURES

THE CHRISTIAN Churches have practised baptism and observed the Lord's Supper from the earliest times to the present. The New Testament writers provide abundant evidence that water-baptism was universally practised and accepted as the rite by which the believer entered the Church. They can, it appears, assume a general understanding of the meaning of the baptismal rite. The Apostle Paul wrote to the Christians of Rome—a city he had not visited: "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?" (Rom. 6: 3). Throughout the New Testament, baptism is given great significance.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to gathering together for baptism, the early Christian community gathered on the Lord's day for worship in the setting of the Lord's Supper.<sup>2</sup> The New Testament does not give us very much information about the eucharistic worship of the New Testament Church; but the Pauline account of the Last Supper in I Cor. 11: 23–26, and the accounts in the first three Gospels and the reports of "the

<sup>1</sup> The passage in I Cor. 1: 13–17 is not evidence for a depreciation of baptism by the Apostle; on the contrary, the passage presupposes a very high estimation of baptism. The Apostle suggests that using his name as the watchword of a party implies that he had been crucified for them and his name pronounced in baptism. He is grateful that few in Corinth were baptized by him and so bound to him by this sort of tie. In order to avoid the danger that Corinthians should so misunderstand baptism as to think that they belonged to the ministrant of baptism rather than to Christ, Paul declares he was not sent to baptize but to preach the gospel. W. F. Flemington, whose interpretation I have followed, writes: "Interpreted thus, the passage lends no support to the view that St. Paul is here making light of baptism and depreciating its value. On the contrary, it was just because he had so high a sense of what baptism meant that he regarded with such abhorrence its debasement by Corinthian partizanship." *The New Testament Doctrine of Baptism*, 1957, p. 54.

<sup>2</sup> ". . . in the early Church there are only these two celebrations or services—the common meal, within the framework of which proclamation of the Word had always a place, and Baptism." Oscar Cullmann, *Early Christian Worship*, 1953, p. 31.

## THE FONT AND THE TABLE

breaking of the bread” in Acts 2: 42, 46 and 20: 7, are now generally taken to establish the fact that the weekly worship of the Christian Churches centred in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper.

These two acts of worship—baptism and the Lord’s Supper—have generally continued to be celebrated in the Churches through the centuries to the present. In the course of the centuries since the New Testament period much has happened in the history of the actual celebration of these rites and the understanding of their meaning. The historical evolution of the observance of these acts of worship is complex. Sacramental practice and theology in the history of the Church have been characterized by selection, omission, overemphasis on various aspects, and harmonization of the classic New Testament texts and motifs. Practice and teaching have been subject to distortion and correction. The result of the history is that the present practice and teaching of the Churches cover a wide spectrum ranging from those Christian bodies (such as the Society of Friends and the Salvation Army) who reject any sacraments to those for whom baptism and the Eucharist are the central acts of worship. Among the Christian communities which practise baptism and celebrate the Lord’s Supper there is a wide variety of practice and teaching; and often those who practise believers’ baptism deny the rightness of infant baptism and those who hold to one sacramental theology reject that of others. In the western Churches, the sixteenth century reformation, which in one important respect was an attack on the sacramental institution which had developed in the Middle Ages, has left its marks on the present; and the cultural changes which have shaped the modern western world have contributed to the present state of affairs.

To recall, even in such broad terms, the history of sacramental practice and theology is to underscore the important role of tradition—acknowledged or unacknowledged. Whatever may be the authority accorded to the Scriptures and whatever may be the authority assigned to it, tradition, as well as the biblical texts and motifs, has contributed to the shaping of baptismal and eucharistic practice and teaching. We may—indeed, we should—respect the continuing guidance of the Holy Spirit in the shaping of the practices of the various Churches. But we are also impelled by the very fact that our various baptismal and eucharistic practices are both occasions for division and occasions on which we are most aware of the painfulness of our divisions to a fresh examination of our practices and teaching. Merely to recount the New Testament texts and the historical development (including the criticism of the

## THE NORMATIVE AUTHORITY OF THE SCRIPTURES

abuses in the rejected lines of evolution) of one or another tradition is not enough. Something more demanding is required: an examination of baptismal and eucharistic practice and teaching in the light of the gospel proclaimed in the New Testament.

It is not surprising that baptismal and eucharistic practice and theology present the question of Scripture and tradition (or Church) in a very concrete and pointed way. The tap-roots of these observances of the Christian Churches are in history. Their basis is the acts of God in history centring in Jesus to which the Scriptures bear witness. These observances are also actions of the Church. They are acts of worship, reflecting and expressing the aspiration to participate in the divine life. In short, sacramental practice and understanding is an expression of the life of the Church. The observances of baptism and the Lord's Supper by the Churches reflect both their acknowledgement of the authority of Scripture and the recognition of the authority of tradition, which is to say, of the Church. To recognize that both authorities are present is not to equate them; it does call attention to the fact that both Scripture and tradition, Scripture and Church, are interrelated in complex and intricate ways.<sup>1</sup> In sacramental theology, as in theology generally, it is not a matter of Scripture or tradition. Scripture is always understood from within the context of a tradition—from within the life of the Church. Indeed, the Church would deny itself if it denied the guidance of the Holy Spirit in its life in history. On the other hand, the tradition or the life of the Church, just because that tradition or life is anchored in the divine revelation in history, is subject to the norm of the witnesses to the divine deeds in history—that is, subject to the authority of the Scriptures. Jesus, the Son of Mary, crucified under Pontius Pilate, is central to Christian baptism and the Lord's Supper. And the New Testament understanding of Jesus as the Christ, of His atoning death, and of His resurrection and exaltation are central to the understanding of Christian baptism and the Lord's Supper.

The early Christian witness to the rites and their meanings has normative authority. Indeed, the recognition of biblical authority is the necessary condition for a satisfactory theology and practice of baptism and the Lord's Supper.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For a brief treatment of the relations of Scripture and tradition see the author's essay "Scripture and Tradition" in *Where We Are In Church Union*, ed. G. L. Hunt and P. A. Crow, Jr., 1965.

<sup>2</sup> What the Special Commission on Baptism of the Church of Scotland wrote concerning baptism is equally applicable to the Lord's Supper: "It (the study) seeks

## THE FONT AND THE TABLE

Several comments are relevant concerning the import of this recognition of biblical authority. The first is this: Sacramental theology and practice have their foundation in the divine self-disclosure to which the Bible bears witness. The criterion of the practice and understanding of baptism and the Lord's Supper is the whole gospel of God. These observances are, if rightly understood, intrinsic to the proclamation committed to the Church. They are not extraneous or independent components of the Christian message and mission. Thus the recognition of the normative authority of the Bible is not limited to the ascription of authority to those texts which explicitly refer to baptism and the Supper. Professor Donald Baillie had pointed in the right direction when he wrote: "Our reconstruction of sacramental theology must . . . be based on a deeper understanding of the whole Christian message in the New Testament."<sup>1</sup>

As we shall see, baptism and the Lord's Supper are in the first instance forms of proclamation of the acts of God. They set before us in concrete actions the chief theme of the Bible, namely, the faithfulness of God to man. In them, God's gracious actions, revealed through prophets and apostles and fulfilled in Jesus Christ, are declared and become through faith effective in the present by the working of the Holy Spirit. They are the signs of the new divine order, of participation in it, and the anticipation of its consummation. Whatever is specially true of them as particular media of communication, their content is not other than that of the Scriptures or of the Word preached. The corollary of this understanding of the normative authority of the Bible is that a more satisfactory sacramental theology and practice depend on, in Professor Baillie's words quoted above, "a deeper understanding of the whole Christian message."

A second relevant comment is that not only the New but also the Old Testament is significant for sacramental theology. The New

a thorough understanding of the Biblical teaching concerning baptism, and of the place which baptism takes within the Bible as a whole. It is only by a disciplined examination of Biblical tradition and a deep respect for its authority that we can attain a satisfactory theology and practice of baptism.

. . . As a communion within the Church of Christ it recognizes that it approaches the Bible in the conviction that here an authoritative Word of God is to be met. This conviction is not, however, an extraneous principle of interpretation forced upon the Bible from without. It is rather a willingness to hear the Bible writers with veneration because we trust in the same God in whom they trusted and of whose acts they bear witness." *The Biblical Doctrine of Baptism*, 1958, p. 65.

<sup>1</sup> *The Theology of the Sacraments*, 1957, p. 41.

## THE NORMATIVE AUTHORITY OF THE SCRIPTURES

Testament writers—and the New Testament Church—respected the authority of the Old Testament. Its modes and categories of thought and its practices profoundly influenced the New Testament writers and the early Church. On the unrivalled influence of the Old Testament on the New, critical biblical scholarship is agreed. Not only is the Old Testament influence on the New generally pervasive, but it also holds specifically for the understanding of New Testament texts on baptism and the Lord's Supper.

To recognize the unity of the Bible is not to affirm the uniformity of the Bible. The New Testament writers—as did Jesus Himself—combine respect for the Old Testament with freedom. Within the Scriptures themselves there are clearly tensions and historical development as well as varieties of thought. Variety, which characterizes the Bible as a whole, characterizes the New Testament as well; and in the New Testament there are varieties of practice and interpretation of baptism and the Lord's Supper.

Thus the third comment pertinent to our recognition of the normative authority of the Scriptures is that the variety of practice and interpretation of baptism and the Lord's Supper should be honestly recognized.

There is no uniform doctrine of baptism in the New Testament.<sup>1</sup> There is, indeed, a central core of meaning underlying the New Testament statements and allusions concerning baptism. But there are differences of accent and shifts in significance. Evidently, in the primitive, pre-Pauline Christian communities, baptism in the name of Jesus was intimately associated with the gift of the Spirit and the forgiveness of sins. The Apostle Paul not only took over this understanding of baptism, but also added something to it. As his teachings in Romans 6 shows, he interprets baptism as a present salvation occurrence. His emphasis is not on baptism as an act of initiation and a cleansing from sin, but on its meaning as dying with Christ, a certainty of the coming resurrection, and the beginning of a new life. In Colossians 2: 12, Paul's thought is carried farther: the baptized already have been raised with Christ. In the letter to the Ephesians, baptism and the Church, "the body of Christ", are brought into intimate association.

Such examples of varying emphases and associations in the references to baptism may be regarded as deepening of the understanding of the

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Erich Dinkler, "Taufe" in *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 3rd ed. 1962, VI. 635.

earliest meaning of baptism for the Christian fellowship. There is no reason to set these different emphases and associations in opposition. But the variety does indicate an evolution within the New Testament of the understanding of baptism.

More obvious than in the interpretation of baptism is the great variety of practice and interpretation of the Lord's Supper within the New Testament. This variety is evident in the records themselves. It also appears in the historical evolution in the New Testament period of the celebration behind the written records. In summary fashion, the variety appears in the differing accounts in the Synoptic Gospels and in 1 Corinthians; in the differing texts of Luke; in the indirect treatment in the Fourth Gospel; in the various accounts of the Feeding of the Multitudes; in the references to the breaking of the bread in Acts.<sup>1</sup>

The fact of variety in the New Testament records suggests several conclusions:

(1) No one model either of interpretation or practice can be selected as normative. To do justice to the whole teaching of the New Testament specific differences in the New Testament itself must be taken into account. The impulse to selection, omission, overemphasis, and too facile harmonization of the New Testament texts and motifs, characteristic of post-New Testament baptismal and eucharistic practice and theology, is understandable. But a more satisfactory practice and understanding requires the effort to overcome such partiality of appropriation.

(2) The basic hermeneutical task is to penetrate behind the variety of practices and interpretations to the underlying reality—God's action in Jesus Christ. To that action the baptismal and eucharistic texts refer; those texts throw important light on the divine deed. But those texts are to be understood and filled out (for the New Testament texts referring to baptism and the Lord's Supper are fragmentary) by the whole New Testament message. A fuller understanding of baptism and the Lord's Supper depends upon a fuller apprehension of the Gospel.

Such an understanding of the basic hermeneutical task does not entangle us in legalism. It recognizes that our practice of baptism and the Lord's Supper does not rest on a *legalistically* understood command of Christ. It recognizes that there is more to the task than the attempt to discover what were the precise acts and words of the historical Jesus, important as that effort is.

<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to an unpublished paper by Professor Amos Wilder for this succinct statement.

#### THE NORMATIVE AUTHORITY OF THE SCRIPTURES

There are two important aids for carrying out the task. One is historical method, honestly and intelligently used. The other is the witness of the Churches as the Holy Spirit has guided and instructed believers. The norms of sacramental practice and theology are the norms of Christian practice and doctrines generally: the gospel as it is proclaimed in the New Testament and read in the context of the Old, and the Holy Spirit who shows us the things of Christ. These are the norms by which sacramental practice and teaching, influenced by different modes of thought and outlook (as they were in the New Testament as well as in the post-New Testament Churches), are to be tested again and again.

SAMPLE