

Introduction

The impression has sometimes been gained that the Anglican Reformers had no great interest in the doctrine of baptism. Their concern about the eucharistic question is evident, for it was largely over the “sacrament of the altar” that the decisive battle of the English Reformation was fought. And there can be no doubt, of course, that it was the second sacrament which did attract the greater notice. Yet it must not be supposed that they entirely neglected the first sacrament, or that they took over the traditional teaching with very little change. It is true, no doubt, that a comparison of the baptismal office with the parallel service in the Church of Rome will reveal not a few points of similarity, but the fact that there is an inevitable agreement in certain matters must not blind us to the fact that the Reformers themselves may have been conscious of fundamental cleavages at others. Such a consciousness arose out of a detailed consideration of the whole question.

In point of fact, the baptismal question was forced upon the Anglican no less than the Continental reformers by extraneous circumstances, and they had no option but to think out the doctrinal questions involved. For one thing, the very discussion of the doctrine of the Lord’s supper carried with it inevitably a study of the parallel sacrament of baptism, for although the two sacraments were seen to differ in nature, and purpose, and application, they were also seen to correspond closely to one another in their general character and operation: to be, in fact, identical in constitution and principle. This point emerges clearly in Cranmer’s *True and Catholic Doctrine*,¹ in which he illustrates his teaching on the one sacrament by generally accepted views in relation to the other.

But again, as the sacrament of remission and regeneration, baptism was very closely connected with justification. As Luther’s *Sermon on Baptism* makes clear, it was because he had won through to an evangelical understanding of justification that he came to a new study and a deeper apprehension of the meaning of baptism. It was no accident that Romans 6

1. Cranmer, P.S., I, p. 64.

formed an integral part of the great epistle of justification. And the relationship between baptism and justification was clearly perceived by the Anglican Reformers too: indeed, it could hardly be otherwise when a traditionalist like Stephen Gardiner asserted bluntly that we are all justified “in the sacrament of baptisme before we could talke of the justification we strive for”.² At this point the sacramentalist and evangelical conceptions confronted each other in all their starkness. The maintenance of a Reformed doctrine of justification depended upon a rethinking of the meaning and efficacy of baptism.

The question pressed even more acutely. The emergence of Anabaptism, which insisted that baptism is merely a sign of individual conversion and the new birth, made it imperative that the Reformers should either accept this more radical view or give good reasons for its rejection. The challenge was a serious one, for in Wittenberg the Zwickau prophets were carrying all before them prior to the return of Luther,³ and in Zürich Zwingli was at first a friend of Grebel and Manz, and sympathized with their teaching.⁴ But although much of the opposition to the Anabaptists was on social grounds, and because of their uncomfortable ideas of church and state, in the long run the Reformers had to oppose them because they could not agree that their crucial doctrine of adult baptism was well founded either biblically or theologically. In a word, the Anabaptist attack did involve a profound and serious wrestling with the whole meaning and efficacy of baptism.

Now it is true that during the Reformation period Anabaptism never assumed any serious proportions in England. It was confined almost exclusively to the Eastern counties, and those convicted of the error were mostly of Dutch or German extraction. A first proclamation was issued against Anabaptists after the Münster tragedy of 1534,⁵ and quite a number were arraigned in 1535, of whom some were pardoned, some executed.⁶ A commission was appointed to root them out in 1538, and their books were proscribed in 1539, but there was no serious danger. During the reign of Edward, Ridley and Latimer were sent to Kent to deal with more Dutch Anabaptists. Some English adherents also appeared, notably Joan Boucher, who held the common Anabaptist view that Christ did not take flesh from the Virgin;

2. Letters (ed. Muller), p. 407.

3. D.C.R., pp. 94 f.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 450 f.

5. Smith, *The Anabaptists*, p. 192.

6. Foxe, V, p. 44.

the courtier Robert Cooke, who “denied both baptism and original sin”;⁷ and a certain Michael Thombe, who claimed that “the baptism of infants is not profitable because it goeth without faith”.⁸ It was suspected that the Papists employed emissaries to spread the heresy.⁹ Great pains were taken to refute it, both in the 42 Articles and in various individual writings, mostly translations from the Continental reformers.¹⁰ The proclamation against the Anabaptists was revived under Elizabeth. A few were expelled in 1562, but their numbers must have been small, for in 1567 Jewel could claim that there were none at all in England. There was a fresh outbreak, especially of Familism, during the period after 1574. It must be remembered, however, that in the later sixteenth century the term Anabaptism was a useful term of abuse applied indiscriminately but quite wrongly to the Separatists¹¹ and even the Puritans.¹² It has still to be shown that the number of native Anabaptists was ever very large.

But while the fewness of English Anabaptists may be admitted, this does not mean that the Anglican Reformers could ignore the Anabaptist menace. The zealous protagonists of the new doctrine had constantly to be watched and their propaganda encountered. Persecuted in all countries and by all parties,¹³ they were always on the look-out to effect an entry. Although the arm of the State could be called in to check their activities, a theological bulwark was also needed against their teachings. The Anglicans had in fact no option but to examine and refute the Anabaptist doctrine of baptism, and this necessarily involved a consideration of baptismal doctrine as a whole.

For these three reasons, then, the Reformers were forced to reckon radically and seriously with the subject of baptism. And even on the surface there is a sufficient unanimity of opinion to make possible a general survey and presentation of their teaching. That there should be a certain amount of minor disagreement was inevitable, for the questions involved were both complex and difficult. But in spite of the variations

7. Strype, *Cranmer*, II, p. 96.

8. E.M., II, 1, p. 111.

9. Strype, *Cranmer*, II, p. 192.

10. E.g. Bullinger's *Holsome Antidotus* and Calvin's *Shorte Instruction*.

11. E.E.D., I, pp. 41 f.

12. Cf. Whitgift, P.S., III, p. 576.

13. Smith, *op. cit.*, pp. 168 f.

in detail, it is still the case that, when the baptismal doctrine of the Anglican Reformers is considered, it does form a most definite and by no means negligible whole. It forms a whole which may be related without difficulty to the larger whole of Reformation teaching in general. It forms a whole which stands over against the traditionalist whole in sharp and uncompromising hostility.

SAMPLE