

The Sacrament of Baptism¹ by W K Tweedie

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1. Are Infants to Be Baptized?

On what foundation are Christian fathers and mothers to rest the right of their little ones to be admitted into Christ's visible Church? We reply, you are to rest it on the nature of the ordinance itself, taken in connection with the gospel as a system of free grace. There is no express command in so many words for baptizing children; but the very nature of baptism – in the blessing which it figures and holds out – is such that children may be made partakers of all its benefits, as well as the hoary-headed. It is so framed by its Author as to be a medium of conveying grace into the soul, whatever the age of the baptized. In explanation of this, I need scarcely remark that unless God works in the ordinances, man works in vain. Without the blessing of the Spirit, all that we can do is but a ceremony. But let the Spirit of God bless the ordinance; let the unction of the Holy One accompany the outward act; let the blood of sprinkling be applied by Him while man applies the symbol, water – then the infant of a day's existence and the man that has touched the verge of fourscore years may equally be fit recipients of new-covenant blessings. Regeneration of heart, cleansing from the pollution of sin, and freedom in Christ from its guilt may all be imparted to our little ones as well as to ourselves. We are born again, not of the will of man but of God; and surely an infant is capable of being born again from the moment of its first birth. Nay, the Word of God assures us that some infants have been so, for John the Baptist was "filled with the Holy Ghost from his mother's womb". The power that creates can surely make us new creatures – the hand that formed the body or the power that breathed into it a soul can surely quicken that soul as it quickened the body. To question this appears to us to be limiting the Holy One of Israel. Moreover, it is manifest that our infant children can be no parties to our prayers on their behalf. They cannot act faith; they cannot confess sin; they cannot implore forgiveness; they are equally passive as regards both God and man. Are we therefore to restrain prayer on their behalf? Because they cannot unite with us in heart and understanding, are our supplications to be hindered? Are they to be left without a blessing

¹ The first of three slightly-edited extracts from Tweedie's little book *The Sacrament of Baptism*. The author was a prominent Free Church minister, latterly in Edinburgh, who died in 1863.

being implored from the Lord? Affection and religion alike revolt at the thought, and we apprehend that children are as fit recipients of the benefits involved in baptism as of the blessings given in answer to believing prayer. It is true that infants are not capable of being affected by the truths of the Word. The Word is not therefore the medium of their renovation – but, in accordance with it, the souls of our little ones may be blessed by the new creating Spirit. The germ of immortal blessedness, the purity that fits for heaven, the principle that expands the powers of man into full-blown perfection may be deposited in the soul. The letter and the spirit of Scripture (Luke 18:15) unite in support of that opinion; so natural affection and the truth of God are here, in effect, at one; they both sanction the notion that little children may be partakers of the benefits of Christ's redemption. They are exposed to many dangers by their parents' sinfulness or neglect of duty; their souls may be placed in utmost jeopardy by their parents' ungodliness. Surely then it is not beyond the verge of soberness to infer that they may be admitted to many blessings in consequence of their parents' faith (1 Cor 7:14). The child is represented by the parent, and is in one sense holy if the parent is a believer. But an analogy commonly employed for that purpose will make this matter simpler than a mere description. The sacrament of baptism among Christians has been likened to the rite of circumcision among the Jews. At the age of eight days, their children were formally dedicated to God in terms of the covenant made with Abraham, and Peter assured the Jews that the promises of the covenant were made "to you and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call". So the blessings are promised to all – parents and children alike. Infancy did not unfit the young Jew from occupying a place in the visible Church or from coming within the pale of the covenant. He had a soul to be saved; he had original sin to be washed away; he needed an interest in the Holy One of Israel. This therefore was all the qualification that he required, and the God of mercy placed him within the sweep of that covenant, which guaranteed to all His people the spiritual blessings which flow freely to old and young through Christ the friend of sinners: the purifying of the heart, the pardon of sin – in one phrase, the mercy of a covenant God. As far as an outward act or the faith of his parents could make him, the infant Jew became a partaker of the blessings promised to Abraham, in virtue of that ordinance. The Messiah was the great subject of that promise, and incontrovertibly the children of the Jews were admitted to share the benefits implied in the assurance given to the father of the faithful: "In thee shall all the

families of the earth be blessed". When therefore the apostle addressed to Jews the words, "The promise is unto you and to your children", he knew that those to whom he spoke would at once understand him as extending to them and theirs, in their Christian condition, the same privileges as they enjoyed under Judaism; and he gave no warning; he recorded no limitation and no restriction. If any change had been made, this was the precise point at which to announce it. If the children of the Christians were to be debarred from what the children of the Jews enjoyed, it was right that this should be made known in order that the truth might be understood. A spiritual privilege once conferred by God is not to be annulled by any but its Author, and we must have His command before we can strip the offspring of Christians of a privilege which the Jews enjoyed. Yet there is no repeal, no hint to indicate that the blessings were, in spirit, either altered or curtailed. Let us judge here then as dispassionately as we can; let us put away, if possible, the thought that we ourselves were baptized when we were little children. Let us lay aside the character of controversialists and think only as Christians. In that character ask, Is it conceivable that the God who, in mercy, placed the Hebrew child within the pale of the covenant would exclude the Christian child? Does the stream of mercy contract as it flows, instead of widening and deepening? If this were the case, the Christian dispensation falls short of the Jewish, at least in this respect. If every Jewish child was formally dedicated to God when only eight days old, while children in Christendom may not partake of this privilege, the Saviour has limited, not enlarged, our blessings. If so, the Christian Church has one privilege less than the Jewish. And believing parents now are deprived of a rite by which they might solemnly place their little ones, whose hold on existence here is so precarious, under the guardianship of Him who is "the life" – who visited our world, that in Him all the families of the earth might be blessed. But should we not rather conclude that He who brought in a better hope, He who established the covenant with better promises, He in whom all the promises of God are "yea and amen", has secured to believers – and in them to their children – the benefits which flow through His Church? It is true that the little one whose existence has just begun is unconscious of the immortality that may await him in Christ; he can act no faith and manifest no repentance. But it is equally true that the infant of the Jew was as unconscious of the blessings promised to him and as devoid of faith. So we conclude again that, if our children may not be dedicated to God according to the Christian rite, they are less favoured than were the offspring of the Jews. In that case,

the Saviour would have, in fact, repealed – not augmented – our blessings; and whatever leads to that conclusion, appears to be utterly opposed at once to the benevolence of the Redeemer and to the spirit of His religion. In short, baptism is the appointed sign of mercy; and if we interpose between children and it, we withhold from them one of Christ's institutions symbolical of all His benefits. Or further still, those who oppose the baptism of infants confess that infants may be saved. They grant that little children, dying before they become responsible agents, or capable of either moral good or evil in their own conduct, may be admitted to the blessings of Christ's purchase, according to His covenant with the Father. Now is it not strange to confess that children may have the thing signified and yet may not have the sign? They may have all that the deed conveys to them but may not have the seal affixed to the deed! Their names may be written among those of whom "is the kingdom of heaven", but they may not be enrolled among the members of the Church on earth! The reality of glory may be theirs, but the sign of grace may not! But here again should we not rather conclude that the God whose mercy is as deep as floods has admitted our little ones, as well as ourselves, into the pale of the covenant that is well ordered in all things and sure? Since they may have the thing signified, why should they be debarred from the sign? Since they may be members of the Church of the firstborn on high, why exclude them in any sense from the Church planted upon earth? Since parents are permitted the hope that their little ones who are interested in Christ have an abode in the home which He has gone to prepare, how strange to withhold them from a means of conducting them thither! Or even further, it is confessed that children inherit from their parents a sinful and polluted nature. They are exposed to suffering and misery and death through their parents. And may they not, through their parents also, have a title to admission into the visible Church and the blessings involved in it – designed as these are to counteract evil and medicate the soul? If children are included in the covenant with their parents, if the promise is to fathers and children alike, who can forbid water that they should not be baptized, seeing that they are capable of enjoying the benefits purchased by the blood and applied by the Spirit of God? He said to the Jews of old, "Ye stand all of you this day before the Lord your God . . . your little ones, your wives . . . that thou shouldest enter into covenant with the Lord thy God" (Deut 29:10-12), and the same may surely be said of every professing follower of Christ. We are urged therefore to the conclusion that our little ones, as well as ourselves, may partake of the benefits of the well-

ordered covenant. They, as well as we, may be heirs of glory; they, as well as we, are immortal, and yet sinful; they, as well as we, may be interested in the love of Christ, and made partakers of His blessings. Inasmuch as the plan of our redemption is one of free and sovereign grace – as salvation is not the result of works going before to merit or prepare for God’s favour but solely of mercy on God’s part; as we are born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God; and as the Spirit’s power is as inexplicable as the motions of the wind – we are forced to conclude that children may be the objects of His transforming power and saving efficacy, as well as the man that has reached maturity and manhood. Had the notion of merit entered at all into the terms of man’s salvation, we think infant baptism would have been indefensible. But as all is of grace, that is the foundation on which the hopes which we cherish, and the rite which we perform over children, are based. Resting there, we are rooted and grounded in the truth of God.

2. Some Questions to Parents

We would now suggest some questions to parents, to guide them to a sound judgement on their position in relation to baptism and their children. You have sought the outward ordinance, but have you prayed and watched for the inward blessings? You have sought the seal, but have you also sought and prayed for the things sealed? You have obtained the sign, but have you longed as anxiously for the thing signified? You would have felt yourselves aggrieved had you been denied the outward rite for your little ones, but have you been as resolutely bent on seeking for the renewing grace and the cleansing blood of the Saviour to be applied by the Spirit to their souls? You have dedicated your children to God – to the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost – but have you reared, and are you rearing, them for Him? He is, by profession, their Saviour; do you train them to receive and rest upon Him exclusively and alone? He is their Sanctifier; do you teach them that unless they be renewed by the Spirit and made holy as Christ was holy, they can never see God? You have vowed to set before your children a Christian example; have they reason to believe that you have been with Jesus? You have vowed to maintain the worship of God in your family; do the morning and evening sacrifices ascend from the family altar, as in the temple of old? You have declared with all the solemnity of an oath, before God and man, that you plan to bring up your little ones in the nurture and admonition of the Lord; is His Word then your guide, your counsellor and light? Have the maxims of the world been discarded? Are the maxims of Scripture at once your rule and your child’s? If these things are

neglected, while we are under vows to be guided by them, is the ostrich not the emblem of our condition – “which leaveth her eggs in the earth, and warmeth them in the dust, and forgetteth that the foot may crush them, or that the wild beast may break them?” (Job 39:14,15). But if these things are attended to in the spirit of prayer and in dependence upon God, we may expect His promised blessing in the use of His appointed means. No doubt our children may go astray in spite of all our painstaking and prayers; and it has happened that the grey hairs even of godly parents have been brought in sorrow to the grave by the waywardness of unconverted youth. Jehovah is sovereign, and the race is not always to the swift, nor the battle to the strong. None are so exceedingly guilty as they who live in sin under the preaching of the gospel and the enjoyment of spiritual privileges; and none are so hardened in sin, so “desperately wicked”, as the child of many prayers, when he tramples on his father’s warnings or despises his mother’s tears. But still, amid all that is mysterious or sorely trying in this, let it be ours to discharge duty – to use means, to wait in faith and cherish hope. And if our bread is cast upon the waters, we shall find it after many days. It may be given to us to see – if not here, at least from our home in glory – the fulfilment of the promise that there shall be a seed to serve Him while sun and moon endure.

3. The Child’s Eternal Existence

Some holy men have been so much surprised at the neglect with which the human soul is treated that they could account for it only by alleging that men do not believe that the soul is immortal. Looking at the sayings of God’s Word on the one hand, and man’s doings on the other, only one explanation could be suggested. It was that a large proportion of mankind, even while they profess the religion of Christ, do not practically believe that life and immortality have been brought to light in the gospel.

To make this matter plain, language close to the following has been used: A child is born into the world, but who thinks or says, Here is the commencement of an existence which will never end; here is a nature that will suffer no decay through endless ages; here is a being which will outlive the sun, witness the death of time, and retain its consciousness, its moral connection with the supreme Spirit, through untold and unimaginable duration? The birth of such a being rarely leads to the contemplation of the eternity of its existence, the immensity of its suffering or joy. It is thought of only, or chiefly, as a child of time, and we are apt to devote our exclusive

attention to its interests for this life, which nature makes our earliest care. The death of such a being, moreover, in the vast majority of cases, is spoken of only as the loss of human life, the departure of one of the human animals from amidst a teeming population. But the immortal spirit, where is it? How rarely are its worth, its capabilities, and its eternal destiny made the topics of prayerful and heartfelt reflection? In short, the idea of immortality is often buried out of sight amid the griefs or the fascinations which earthly things bring about.

But whether men think of it or not, the child that was born but an hour ago is an immortal being. The spirit which God has breathed into it, is undying as the Godhead – at least nothing could destroy the immortal creature but the fiat of Jehovah. In His Word, however, He most plainly tells that the immortal principle, the soul, shall never die. Unending misery or unending joy will be the doom of every child of the family of man.

This being the case, as unchangeably settled by the God of heaven and of earth, you will at once perceive how important it is for every Christian to entertain right views on this subject – not merely those transient feelings about immortality which satisfy so many, and which would suffice if sentiment was the whole of religion. We need deep, permanent convictions of this unquestionable truth: that every child of Adam will exist, and exist for ever, either in agony or joy. Right convictions on this subject, truly influencing the soul, would drive a nominal religion away from us just as sunrise dissipates darkness.

Now we need not hesitate to say that no man has right views of the soul's immortality until God's Spirit has taught him to believe God's Word. It is the religion of Jesus Christ alone that enables man to realise eternity – as that religion alone can prepare him for it. And till religion does this, while men may not overtly deny the immortality of the soul, they habitually act as if they did not believe it. They put the body in the soul's place and treat the body like an immortal. It is the constant tendency of man to reverse the order of God's appointments – to prefer man's approbation to God's, the interests of time to those of eternity, the righteousness of self to that of the Saviour – and never is this tendency more apparent than in the treatment of the soul. Now, while it is much to be desired that all men should hold Christian views on this subject, it is doubly important that parents should be clear concerning the destiny of souls hereafter. Every child committed to a parent's keeping will live and move

and exist for ever, either in anguish or in joy. And till this is so felt as to influence the very heart and soul, no parent can ever be supposed to do his duty to his child.