

Baptism at the Westminster Assembly

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INTRODUCTION: BAPTISM'S NEGLECT

The choice of subject may surprise readers. Baptism did not provoke any of the Westminster Assembly's momentous debates—although, as will be seen, it did give rise to some lengthy and divisive discussions. Nor can the Westminster divines be said to have made any remarkable contribution to the church's understanding or practice of baptism.

Yet a reaction of surprise that baptism should enjoy a paper of its own in a conference commemorating the Westminster Assembly may have more to do with a wider neglect or devaluation of baptism, at least when compared with the Lord's supper. Modern ecumenical conversations have paid it little attention—and the section on baptism in the landmark Faith and Order statement *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (World Council of Churches, Geneva, 1982) has been judged the least accomplished of the three. We have no history of Christian baptism nor a comprehensive account of baptism in the Reformation. The magisterial Reformers' differences from the Old Church on baptism were relatively slight, and both joined in scornful dismissal of the Radical Anabaptists' protest. Compared with the mass and the inner-Protestant 'supper-strife', baptism was very small beer. One has only to reflect on the massively contrasting weight of preoccupation displayed over the proper minister of baptism on the one hand and of the Lord's supper on the other.

Whether this relative depreciation of baptism faithfully reflects the witness of the New Testament is a large question for another occasion. Let me simply affirm my judgment that it would be far truer to the apostolic testimony to portray the church as a baptismal community than as a eucharistic community, as it is commonly called today. The conviction grows on me that the devaluing of baptism, in much of British evangelical church life, for example, cannot be understood in detachment from the predominance of infant baptism and its largescale failure - its failure, that is, in such a high proportion of cases measured on any realistic assessment, actually to initiate people into the church. Inevitably, if paedobaptism is so often ineffective, it cannot sustain grandiose theological pretensions. Inevitably, the focus shifts to some later occasion of confirmation or admission to communion or to full membership. Inevitably, reductionist treatment is meted out to the New Testament presentations of baptism, to make them fit our experience of the administration of infant baptism on the ground.

Such contemporary concerns may help to sharpen our investigation of baptismal deliberations at the Westminster Assembly. After all, the Westminster documents have to a major degree shaped baptismal understanding and practice in the Reformed churches in the West. And the very fact that our instinctive initial reaction at the pairing of baptism and Westminster suggests that its approach to the sacrament has been assimilated among our churches without much controversy may point up the special value of bringing to it the harder questions of the present - the kind of questions, for

example, that the dissolution of Christendom in the western world poses to the practice of baptizing infants. For, as Karl Barth well recognized, Christendom and paedobaptism go together.¹

THE WESTMINSTER DOCUMENTS AND MINUTES

Four of the Westminster documents deal with baptism: the Confession of Faith, the Directory for Public Worship, and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms. The minutes of the Assembly record next to nothing of the discussions on the contents of the Catechisms, and, as far as baptism is concerned, very little of those on the Confession. The only extended minutes of baptismal debate relate to the Directory for Public Worship.

Not that the extant minutes are a high-quality record. This is the verdict of the late Robert Paul:

[T]hese manuscript 'Minutes' are something of a misnomer, since they appear to be little more than the hasty notes of a scribe, probably written in preparation for a fuller account to appear at some later date. The speeches are often cryptic to the point of being almost meaningless, there are frustrating gaps in the text where the scribe had possibly intended to insert summaries of the speeches to be obtained from the notes of the speakers themselves, and the whole is written in an execrable seventeenth century hand of extraordinary abstruseness and complexity.²

Fortunately, not least for the purposes of this paper, the Library of New College, Edinburgh holds an invaluable manuscript transcript in highly legible copper-plate script of the original manuscript minutes (which are in Dr. Williams' Library, London). The transcript was made in the late 1860s and early 1870s under the auspices of a Church of Scotland committee.³ The published copy of

¹Cf. *The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism*, translated by E.A. Payne (SCM Press, London, 1948), 52-4; "the really operative extraneous ground for infant-baptism, even with the Reformers, and ever and again quite plainly since, has been this: one did not want then in any case or at any price to deny the existence of the evangelical Church in the Constantinian *corpus christianum* - and today one does not want to renounce the present form of the national church (*Volkskirche*)?" (52).

²Robert S. Paul, *The Assembly of the Lord. Politics and Religion in the Westminster Assembly and the 'Grand Debate'* (T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1985), 72-3; cited henceforth as 'Paul'. See also his Appendix IV, 'Interpreting the "Minutes"', 562-4. Among the oddities of the manuscript is the misspelling of names. George Gillespie, one of the Scottish commissioners, commonly appears as 'Gelaspi'.

³On these matters see Paul, 73, with notes. In June 1867 the Church of Scotland's General Assembly appointed a committee to obtain a transcript of the manuscript minutes held in Dr. Williams' Library, London (*Principal Acts of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland ... 1867*, 60). This committee, convened until his death by Professor Alexander F. Mitchell and then from 1899 by Thomas Leishman, until it was discontinued by the 1904 Assembly, arranged for the completion of the transcript (on the difficulties of this task see *Principal Acts ... 1868*, 63-5), and subsequent annual reports to the Assembly), which it presented to the 1875 Assembly which deposited it in the General Assembly Library (*Principal Acts ... 1875*, 85). The committee also secured the publication of most of volume III of the minutes, in 1874 (see next note), and in 1892 also of *The Records of the Commissions of the General Assemblies of the Church of Scotland holden in Edinburgh in the Years 1646 and 1647*, ed. Mitchell and James Christie (Scottish History Society, 11; Edinburgh, 1892; see *Principal Acts ... 1890*, 82; 1892, 78), but failed despite years of effort to find adequate funds for the publication of the rest of the Westminster Assembly's minutes (*Principal Acts ... 1881*, 64; 1904, 68). The completion of this task of publication I hope to achieve in time for it to stand as a commemoration of the 350th. anniversary of the Assembly. Further investigation is called for to clarify some of the General Assembly reports on the progress of the project (e.g. *Principal Acts ... 1870*, 75; 1871, 69; 1872, 76; 1887, 68).

The transcript secured by Mitchell's committee was largely, if not wholly (see next note), the work of Edward

part of the minutes, edited by Alexander F. Mitchell and John Struthers in 1874, presents this transcript.⁴ This volume covers the Assembly's proceedings from November 1644 to March 1649 and hence does not include the debates on the Directory for Public Worship and contains little about baptism.

The minutes can be supplemented, and sometimes corrected, from the accounts of participants, especially the *Journals* of the noted Hebraist, John Lightfoot, covering July 1643 to December 1644, and the *Notes* of George Gillespie of debates from February 1644 to January 1645, together with the briefer general comments in Robert Baillie's *Letters and Journals*.⁵ Both Lightfoot and Gillespie are of value in supplying some of the deficiencies of the minutes in relation to the sessions on baptism.

Maunde Thompson, of the Manuscripts Department of the British Museum. On Thompson (1840-1929), later Principal Librarian of the British Museum 1888-1902 (with title of Director from 1898), see *Dictionary of National Biography 1922-1930* (1937), 834-6, although this tribute by F.G. Kenyon does not mention Thompson's transcript of the Westminster Assembly's minutes. On the Church of Scotland's General Assembly Library see briefly John Howard, 'New College Library', in Wright and Badcock (eds), *Disruption to Diversity* (*op. cit.*, n. 58 below), 187-202, at 192-3. The transcript appears in the printed *Catalogue of Books, Pamphlets and Manuscripts in the Library of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland* (Blackwood, Edinburgh, 1907), 441: 'Minutes of the sessions of the Assembly of Divines at Westminster, August 4, 1643 - March 25, 1652. 3 vols. in 5. folio.' In the preparation of this paper I have been wholly dependant on the New College transcript, which, following Paul, I cite as 'TMs.', and not on the original manuscript. In manuscript the minutes extend from August 4 (erratum for September 4), 1643 to April 24, 1652.

⁴*Minutes of the Sessions of the Westminster Assembly of Divines, While Engaged in Preparing their Directory for Church Government, Confession of Faith and Catechisms (November 1644 to March 1649), From Transcripts of the Originals Procured by a Committee of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland*, Edited for the Committee by Alex. F. Mitchell and John Struthers (William Blackwood & Sons, Edinburgh, 1874, reprinted, Still Waters Revival Books, Edmonton, Alberta, 1991), cited hereafter as 'Mitchell and Struthers'. On Mitchell, see briefly Nigel M. de S. Cameron *et al.* (eds), *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology* (T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1993), 594, and on Struthers, *Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticae*, 2nd. edit., I (1915), 391. Only further research will clear up some uncertainty over Struthers' contribution to the transcripts published by Mitchell and Struthers. According to the General Assembly record, E.M. Thompson (see previous note) transcribed volume II, and Struthers an important part of volume III (*Principal Acts ... 1868*, 64; the Assembly Acts give no more detail). Mitchell and Struthers, ix, state that the transcripts of volume III were made by Thompson and Struthers, but also that 'the Minutes throughout stand in [their published] text as, after repeated and careful revision, it was fixed by Mr. Thompson'. Furthermore, the five folio volumes of the transcript in New College Library appear to be all in a single hand. Paul, 73, with n. 5, if anything compounds the confusion. It may well be that the transcript we now have is wholly Thompson's production.

It should be noted that where Mitchell and Struthers insert an ellipsis (...) in their text, it does not indicate omission of material in the minutes but merely gaps in the transcript itself, nearly always immediately evident from parts of lines or several lines at a time left blank. Here the transcript faithfully reproduced the original: see Paul, 73, cited above. Mitchell and Struthers might have obviated any misunderstanding of their practice had they been fully consistent, but cf. 180, 'Her '; 182, 'Debate of '. The present essay uses ellipsis (...) to indicate only my omission of material from the source. I have modernised the spelling of the manuscript minutes only in giving 'that' for 'yt' and 'and' for the copula.

⁵Lightfoot, *The Journal of the Proceedings of the Assembly of Divines, from January 1, 1643, to December 31, 1644 ...*, ed. John Rogers Pitman (*The Whole Works ...*, XIII; J.F. Dove, London, 1824), cited as 'Lightfoot'; Gillespie, *Notes of Debates and Proceedings of the Assembly of Divines and Other Commissions at Westminster, February 1644 to January 1645*, ed. David Meek (Robert Ogle and Oliver and Boyd, Edinburgh, 1846), cited as 'Gillespie'; *The Letters and Journals of Robert Baillie, A.M., Principal of the University of Glasgow, M.DC.XXXVII - M.DC.LXII*, ed. David Laing, 3 vols. (Robert Ogle, Edinburgh, 1841-2), cited as 'Baillie'.

THE CONFESSION OF FAITH AND THE GRACE OF BAPTISM

The Second Committee appointed to work on the Confession of Faith, whose assigned subjects included the sacraments, brought its report on baptism to the full Assembly on December 29, 1645.⁶ Debate is recorded as having taken place on nine days in January, possibly ten, and again on September 11, 1646, with the chapters on the sacraments (27) and on baptism (28) winning final approval on November 10, 1646.⁷ But apart from some tantalizingly brief indications (for example, a small group was instructed on September 11 to consider 'what children are to be baptized'),⁸ the minutes record nothing of the debates except on January 5, one of several days on which 'the grace of God in baptism' (so January 9) was on the table.

The Assembly on January 5 began with a phrase which was presumably in the Second Committee's draft but did not survive into the Confession itself, "the grace of God bestowed sometimes before." Let us recall the statement in the Confession as approved:

The efficacy of baptism is not tied to that moment of time when it is administered; yet notwithstanding, by the right use of this ordinance, the grace promised is not only offered, but really exhibited and conferred by the Holy Ghost, to such (whether of age or infants) as that grace belongeth unto, according to the counsel of God's own will, in his appointed time (28:6).

We can only presume (for we have no way of knowing) that it was a draft something like this which elicited some disagreement on January 5, 1646, between Jeremiah Whitaker and a more prominent member of the company, Herbert Palmer, who was the first divine to be nominated by parliament to the Assembly and later on one of its assessors (roughly, deputy chair) and the Master of Queen's College, Cambridge. Whitaker declared

That it doth confer grace I do not find, but our divines do hold it. When they oppose the Papists, they say it is more than a sign and a seal. Chamier saith the grace that is signified is exhibited, so it is in the French Confession; it doth *efficaciter donare*.⁹

Whitaker takes his stand on Scripture:

That which the Scripture ascribes to baptism we are to ascribe. Baptism is an ordinance to effect these ends ... Baptism saves, 1. Accompanied with the sign and thing signified, it is a saving ordinance. For without grace none of these things can be.¹⁰

Palmer's response is not easy to follow with entire clarity. He asserts that "What the Scripture speaks of efficacy of baptism, it speaks of those that are grown up. We must suppose the person to

⁶Mitchell and Struthers, 164, 173. For the composition of the Second Committee see Paul, 555-6.

⁷Mitchell and Struthers, 173-82, 280, 299. The uncertainty concerns January 19, 1646: 'Ordered - Report of that Committee concerning Baptism (be taken) be made on Wednesday morning' (*ibid.*, 180).

⁸Mitchell and Struthers, 280; cf. 175, 'Debate of Baptism. Debate about dedication to God' (January 2), 'Debate upon Baptism; "the grace of God bestowed sometimes before"' (January 5).

⁹Mitchell and Struthers, 175.

¹⁰*Ibid.*

be baptized to be a believer.”¹¹ He certainly denies that the sacrament is a naked sign—“there is no nakedness in a seal”—but he apparently envisages baptism as conferring its gifts on those who already enjoy grace. He seems to reject the notion that baptism imparts the grace of conversion; “he that is without the first grace hath nothing to make him in a capacity of receiving; he is dead.”¹² But Whitaker is not satisfied: Palmer has not answered the Scriptures he quoted. “The Scripture speaks more about conferring than it doth either of signing and sealing.”¹³

Such is our intriguingly brief glimpse of a debate that must have engaged weighty theological considerations. On my reading of the minutes, the draft before the Assembly at this point did not contain the language now present—“not only offered, but really exhibited and conferred”—but the text is not lucid enough to allow certainty on this question. Whitaker not only advances the word ‘exhibited’ but also evinces awareness of its Latin original—“*in conjuncta exhibitione*, Ursin[us].” The verb was widely used in Reformation disputes on the Lord’s supper, especially by Martin Bucer, but its currency in this context goes back at least to Aquinas.¹⁴ Its pairing with ‘conferred’ reveals its meaning, which is stronger than ‘exhibit’ in modern English. The word ‘convey’ comes near to the double reference of *exhibere*, as does ‘present’ itself.

BAPTISMAL REGENERATION

What then about the efficacy of baptism according to the Westminster Confession? Its central affirmation seems clear: ‘the grace promised is not only offered, but really exhibited and conferred by the Holy Ghost’ (28:6). It is true that a variety of qualifications to this assertion are entered in the chapter on baptism: efficacy is not tied to the moment of administration (*ibid.*), grace and salvation are not so inseparably annexed to baptism that no person can be regenerated or saved without it (28:5) or that all the baptized are undoubtedly regenerated (*ibid.*). But these qualifications serve in fact only to highlight the clarity of the core declaration, which is set forth as follows in the preceding chapter on sacraments in general:

neither doth the efficacy of a sacrament depend upon the piety or intention of him that doth administer it, but upon the work of the Spirit, and the word of institution; which contains ... a promise of benefit to worthy receivers (27:3).

The Westminster divines viewed baptism as the instrument and occasion of regeneration by the Spirit, of the remission of sins, of ingrafting into Christ (cf. 28:1). The Confession teaches baptismal regeneration. We should note also that while the Catechisms use the language only of

¹¹*Ibid.*, 176.

¹²*Ibid.*, with n. 1.

¹³*Ibid.*

¹⁴*Ibid.* On *exhibere*, cf. D.F. Wright, ‘Infant Baptism and the Christian Community’, in Wright (ed.), *Martin Bucer: Reforming Church and Community* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994), 95-106 at 99-100; W.I.P. Hazlett, ‘Les entretiens entre Melancthon et Bucer en 1534: réalités politiques et clarification théologique’, in M. de Kroon and M. Lienhard (eds), *Horizons Européens de la Réforme en Alsace ... Mélanges offerts à Jean Rott ...* (Librairie Istra, Strasbourg, 1980), 207-25, at 223 n. 40.

'sign and seal',¹⁵ the Directory for Public Worship has the following passage in the model prayer before the act of baptizing:

That the Lord ... would join the inward baptism of his Spirit with the outward baptism of water; make this baptism to the infant a seal of adoption ... and all other promises of the covenant of grace: That the child may be planted into the likeness of the death and resurrection of Christ.¹⁶

But if the Assembly unambiguously ascribes this instrumental efficacy to baptism, it is not automatically enjoyed by all recipients: it contains 'a promise of benefit to worthy receivers' (27:3), who from one point of view are 'those that do actually profess faith in and obedience unto Christ, but also the infants of one or both believing parents' (28:4), and from another, 'such (whether of age or infants) as that grace belongeth unto, according to the counsel of God's own will, in his appointed time' (28:6). But it would surely be a perverse interpretation of the Confession's chapter on baptism if we allowed this last allusion to the hidden counsel of God to emasculate its vigorous primary affirmation.

PROFESSION OF FAITH

I have been struck, in re-reading the Confession and Directory for Public Worship and scrutinizing records of the debates, at the Assembly's relatively muted concern with faith as a prerequisite for baptism to have effect. The key stipulation is, of course, present: baptism is for 'those that do actually profess faith in and obedience unto Christ, but also the infants of one or both believing parents' (28:4). Westminster provides no support for a tendency observable in recent years for the requirement of sincere and credible Christian faith on the part of at least one parent to be transposed into an emphasis on the faith of the receiving congregation. While heightened congregational involvement is to be welcomed, this shift is motivated to some measure by a desire to accommodate the baptism of children whose parent or parents cannot with any honesty be acknowledged as believers or church members. Increasingly, indeed, granny is the one pressing for the baptism. From other angles also infant baptism is becoming a more tangled pastoral issue as the norms of marriage and family disintegrate.

In the light of these present-day concerns, it is instructive to note the absence from the Directory for Public Worship of any provision for the parent(s) to be called upon to profess their faith afresh at the baptism, or to undertake any vows or commitments in relation to the child. The question was one which occupied the assembled divines on two occasions, in July 1644 (July 12 and 15) and again on October 9-11 later that year. For the second debate we have invaluable reports by Lightfoot and Gillespie. The latter records that the Assembly voted by 28 to 16 to include a parental profession of faith, in the form of affirmative answers to credal questions.¹⁷ The deletion of such a

¹⁵Larger Catechism A. 165: 'Baptism is a sacrament of the New Testament, wherein Christ hath ordained the washing with water ... to be a sign and seal of ingrafting into himself, of remission of sins ...'; Shorter Catechism A. 95: '... a sacrament, wherein the washing ... doth signify and seal ...'

¹⁶The words 'join the inward baptism ... with the outward' did not win immediate acceptance from the Assembly on July 19, 1644, according to TMs. II, 261-3. Whitaker declared the child to be as capable of the working of the Spirit in baptism as afterwards, Stephen Marshall was sure that, as a sign, baptism fulfilled all three functions of a sign, viz., to signify, to seal (*obsignare*) and to exhibit, and Palmer affirmed that, since God baptizes through ministerial instruments, 'if he doe it he doth it inwardly as well as outwardly' (263).

¹⁷Gillespie, 91.

section from the Directory was the work of the English Parliament in early 1645.¹⁸ What the Commons and Lords dropped was the following paragraph:

It is recommended to the parent, to make a profession of his faith, by answering these and the like questions:

Dost thou believe in God the Father, Son and Holy Ghost?

Dost thou hold thyself bound to observe all that Christ hath commanded thee, and wilt thou endeavour so to do?

Dost thou desire to have this child baptised into the faith and profession of Jesus Christ?

All that Parliament added by way of compensation was the phrase 'requiring his [the parent's] solemn promise for the performance of his duty'.¹⁹

The minutes together with the reports of Lightfoot and Gillespie enable one to follow with reasonable confidence a quite surprising range of arguments batted to and fro on the desirability of recommending such a profession.²⁰ The Scots, with Alexander Henderson to the fore, 'did urge it mightily, because of the use of it in all reformed churches'.²¹ Citing Calvin's exegesis of 1 Peter 3:21, Henderson reckoned a profession in the form of questions and answers 'as ancient as the baptizing of infants and taken from that practise used in baptizing of adults'. It added to the solemnity of the occasion.²² For others like Thomas Wilson and Philip Nye, the usage of the Reformed churches and Scotland was inadequate ground, if it did not satisfy the criteria of Scripture or prudence. 'We may pray reformed churches may be reformed more than they are.'²³ The Scots were clearly not of one mind, for Samuel Rutherford opposed it as lacking warrant in Scripture, and he wanted nothing in the Directory that could not command full uniformity.²⁴

¹⁸*Journals of the House of Commons* IV, 70; *Journals of the House of Lords* VII, 264.

¹⁹For the text, *Journals of the House of Lords* VII, 264 (March 5, 1645) and Gillespie, 91; and TMs. II, 493, in part only. See A.F. Mitchell, *The Westminster Assembly. Its History and Standards* (Nisbet & Co., London, 1883; reprinted, Still Waters Revival Books, Edmonton, Alberta, 1992), 218-19. The omitted paragraph would have appeared immediately after 'if he be negligent', i.e. where the inserted phrase is now placed. Lightfoot, 314-15, includes an earlier form of the questions proposed to the Assembly by its committee:

1. Do you believe all the articles of faith contained in Scripture?
2. That all men and this child are born in sin?
3. That the blood and Spirit washeth away sin?
4. Will you have, therefore, this child baptized?

This came forward for discussion on October 9, 1644, according to Lightfoot. The manuscript minutes contain neither this set of questions nor the form that later failed to secure Parliament's approval.

²⁰TMs. II, 251-3 (July 12 and 15), 479-93 (October 9-11, 1644); Lightfoot, 314-16 (October 9-11); Gillespie, 88-91 (October 9-11).

²¹Lightfoot, 315.

²²TMs. II, 489, 481; Gillespie, 91.

²³TMs. II, 483-4.

²⁴Gillespie, 90; TMs. II, 481, 486.

George Walker reminded his colleagues that they were constructing a directory, not 'an obligatory'.²⁵

Taking a stand on the Bible proved no easy matter. No parental profession had been required in circumcision, Stephen Marshall pointed out, and Thomas Valentine concurred.²⁶ For Samuel Gibson the conversion of the Philippian jailor was decisive; neither he nor his family were baptized until he made a profession of his faith.²⁷ William Bridge was unmoved by this precedent, for it would place members on the church on a par with non-members.²⁸ Strong support was raised by Edmund Calamy, for whom 'the parents' profession is the ground of the admission of the child',²⁹ which unnerved William Bridge, lest this argued that the federal holiness of the parent was not the ground of baptizing his offspring.³⁰ More than one divine was worried that the requirement of a profession would look like a concession to the Anabaptists. As Bridge put it,

This confession must be either in regard of the child, and that holds out the necessity of actual confession in baptism, as the Anabaptists hold; if in regard of the parent, then it is a wrong to the parent.³¹

The questions and answers at baptism were indeed very ancient, conceded Charles Herle, who followed William Twisse as prolocutor in the chair of the Assembly, 'but in those times the Anabaptists were not risen in the world'.³²

Fear of seeming to appease 'the Anabaptists' surfaced on other occasions in the baptismal debates, as we shall see, for 'Anabaptism' was no merely historical threat. Robert Baillie's letters from the Assembly years sound the alarm at 'the great increase and insolencie, in diverse places, of the Antinomian and Anabaptistical conventicles'.³³ Such apprehension in relation to a parental profession of faith added a further complication to the difficult task of reaching a consensus when the criteria - scriptural warrant, antiquity, uniformity as a feasible goal, etc. - were inadequate. Jeremiah Burroughes of Stepney thought it ironic that 'this explicate profession' should be urged by those who regarded the church covenant as a human intervention, for it was equally so.³⁴

The silence of the Directory on the need for a profession of faith - after, that is, Parliament had dispensed with it - contrasts starkly with the first attested adaptation of the early church's baptismal liturgy to accommodate children who could not answer for themselves. When a child was brought forward, parents were asked by the minister 'Does he/she believe?', in this direct third-person

²⁵TMs. II, 487.

²⁶TMs. II, 481; Gillespie, 91.

²⁷TMs. II, 483; Gillespie, 90.

²⁸TMs. II, 485.

²⁹TMs. II, 485.

³⁰TMs. II, 480.

³¹Gillespie, 90.

³²TMs. II, 480; Gillespie, 89.

³³Baillie II, 215; cf. 218, 224.

³⁴TMs. II, 480.

form.³⁵ The procedure could not have attested more unambiguously that infants were being included in a rite devised for faith-professing candidates. The outcome of the Westminster Assembly's tortuous deliberations reflected many centuries of practice, undisturbed by the mainstream Reformation, in which infant baptism, not faith-baptism, had been *de facto* the norm.

IN PUBLIC OR IN PRIVATE?

Two other issues likewise kept the assembled divines busy for days during consideration of the Directory's draft section on baptism. One was whether dipping, i.e. immersion, should be mentioned, and if so in what terms, and the other was what emerged eventually in the Directory as the stipulation that baptism was not to be

administered in private places, or privately, but in the place of publick worship and in the face of the congregation, where the people may most conveniently see and hear; and not in the places where fonts, in the time of Popery, were unfitly and superstitiously placed.

'Here', records John Lightfoot, 'began we to enter into the ocean of many vast disputes'.³⁶ They spent all of July 11, 1644, on it, and returned to it on October 9, when the location of the font was on the table. The Scots, as Gillespie tells us, claimed that there was 'no place so fit for seeing and hearing of the people as the pulpit ... the pulpit is chosen for the fittest place'.³⁷ Not surprisingly they did not prevail, but Scottish practice reflected their plea, with basins affixed to the outside of the pulpit and bairns held up aloft by parents to ministers to sprinkle with baptismal dew from above.³⁸ The height of the pulpit determined how hazardous the elevation was.³⁹

The prior question - in private, or only in public? - implicated weighty considerations of theological import. Robert Baillie's letter expresses his relief.

We have carryed, with much greater ease than we expected, the publickness of baptisme. The abuse was great over all this land. In the greatest parosch in London, scarce one child in a-year was brought to the church for baptisme. Also we have

³⁵Cf. J.C. Didier, 'Une adaptation de la liturgie baptismale au baptême des enfants dans l'Eglise ancienne', *Mélanges de science religieuse* 22 (1965), 79-90.

³⁶Lightfoot, 297.

³⁷Gillespie, 89; Lightfoot, 315.

³⁸See the present writer's article in Cameron (ed.), *Dictionary* (*op. cit.* n. 4 above), 57.

³⁹Pædobaptism in other forms has occasionally afforded an unwitting recollection of the etymological and symbolic links between baptism and death by immersion in water. According to the *Financial Times* of March 2, 1996, President Boris Yeltsin was nearly drowned by a tipsy priest when being baptized in a Siberian village as a child. I recall a story that used to go the rounds of the Anglican theological colleges. What should a vicar do if he accidentally dropped a baby into a deep stone font? Replace the lid on the font and turn in the Prayer Book to the service for Burial at Sea! Karl Barth commented scornfully on the loss in dramatic vividness as complete immersion yielded to affusion which itself was reduced from a real wetting to a sprinkling and eventually to the 'mere moistening with as little water as possible' of 'the innocuous form of present-day baptism'; *The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism*, 9-11.

carried the parents presenting of his child, and not their midwives, as was their universall custome.⁴⁰

Edmund Calamy made the same point more sharply: 'great abuse in the city [of London: he was vicar of St Mary's, Aldermanbury], in 2 or 3 yeares none baptized in the church'.⁴¹ For centuries in the medieval West the majority of babies may well have been baptized by midwives or other lay persons. The custom rested, of course, on the Augustinian premise of the necessity of baptism for eternal salvation. The Westminster Confession and the Directory for Public Worship trod delicately in eschewing this notion with its abusive consequences but without relaxing the reins irresponsibly. Thus the Directory:

[O]utward baptism is not so necessary, that, through the want thereof, the infant is in danger of damnation, or the parents guilty, if they do contemn or neglect the ordinance of Christ, when and where it may be had.

And so 'to propound the case of sickness' as justification for private baptism 'is to go too near the tenet of the absolute necessity', as Thomas Wilson put it.⁴²

The argument between public and private baptism again reveals the company of divines searching in vain for decisive scriptural guidance. Was not circumcision done in private houses? Gillespie was not convinced, and in any case 'circumcision and baptism differ, because of the wound and plastering it'. No blood on the synagogue floor!⁴³ 'All the nation was baptized, when they were to come out of Egypt; but this could not be done in a congregation', retorted John Lightfoot.⁴⁴ Stephen Marshall could cite 'reasons a man may give many why in the publique congregation, but noe instance of it in the new testament'.⁴⁵ Lazarus Seaman added that it provided 'noe instance... in a private place by any ordinary minister either'.⁴⁶ The quest for precise scriptural precedent threatened at such junctures to issue in absurd minimalism.

A more substantive aspect of this question was the child's relationship to the church. Calamy is credited with asserting that 'Baptisme properly is noe church ordinance/Baptized and then added to the church', but Samuel Rutherford retorted: 'It is admission to the church; *ergo*, it must be in the face of the church.'⁴⁷ It was left to Seaman to supply another word of sanity: 'If the church go to the child, when the child go to church, this is not to be thought private baptism.'⁴⁸ Amid the ebb and flow of conflicting opinions, in which one reluctantly admires the ingenuity of the assembled minds more than their sweet reasonableness, it is astonishing to find on this issue no forthright

⁴⁰Baillie II, 204-5.

⁴¹TMs. II, 244.

⁴²Lightfoot, 297; TMs. II, 244-5.

⁴³Lightfoot, 297; TMs. II, 245.

⁴⁴Lightfoot, 298.

⁴⁵TMs. II, 245.

⁴⁶TMs. II, 249.

⁴⁷Lightfoot, 297; TMs. II, 244.

⁴⁸Lightfoot, 297; TMs. II, 245.

appeal to the principle of holding Word and sacrament together. One might have expected it to clinch the argument, so that baptism could only properly take place when and where the Word was ministered. The divines too easily lost sight of the theological wood amid varied individual trees of New Testament baptisms.

DEBATE OVER DIPPING

At times when one eavesdrops on the Assembly's deliberations, one can only marvel at the providence that produced such a majestic outcome from such an astonishing pot-pourri of discussion. This is nowhere more keenly felt than in the protracted altercations over whether the Directory should mention dipping. Herein, says Lightfoot, 'fell we upon a large and long discourse',⁴⁹ on which they spent at least three days, July 21 and August 7-8, 1644, according to the minutes. Lightfoot was absent on August 7. In the end, the Directory kept silent. To baptize the child,

which, for the manner of doing of it, is not only lawful but sufficient, and most expedient to be, by pouring or sprinkling of the water on the face of the child, without adding any other ceremony.

As Lightfoot commented, 'it was thought fit and most safe to let it alone'.⁵⁰ Later the Confession would be explicit, 'Dipping of the person into the water is not necessary' (28:3), but the course of reasoning that led to this change of mind is hidden from us.

On August 7 the company voted and split down the middle: 24 were for keeping a mention of dipping, 25 were against. And this was after a re-count: 'it was voted so indifferently that we were glad to count names twice', wrote Lightfoot. 'And there grew a great heat upon it: and when we had done all, we concluded upon nothing in it.'⁵¹ The arguments were truly wondrous in their variety and virtuosity:

if dipping is needed to depict burial, 'what must answer dying?' (Francis Woodcock);⁵²

if we say dipping is necessary, 'we shall further anabaptisme' (John Ley, and John Lightfoot);⁵³ what was the 'proper native signification' of the Greek verb *baptizo*? (Gillespie);⁵⁴ how could 5000 be dipped in a day? (George Walker);⁵⁵ what happened in Jewish proselyte baptism, which was followed by John the Baptist and the disciples of Jesus? (Thomas Coleman and Lightfoot gave different answers);⁵⁶ Lightfoot was in his element citing the rabbinic commentators; others

⁴⁹Lightfoot, 299.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 301.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 300.

⁵²TMs. II, 265.

⁵³TMs. II, 265, 275.

⁵⁴TMs. II, 267.

⁵⁵TMs. II, 266.

⁵⁶TMs. II, 271 (Coleman: proselytes went in up to their necks and dipped themselves all over), 272 (Lightfoot: sprinkling attested by Rabbi Solomon).

reported what was the practice in Muscovy and Spain, or registered that 'those that incline most to popery are all for sprinkling';⁵⁷ the Hebrew host 'baptized into Moses' were not immersed (John Arrowsmith);⁵⁸ the meaning of Hebrew words was ventilated and Latin terms flew to and fro.

And early on Lazarus Seaman posed one of the Assembly's dilemmas: we must follow the mind and institution of Christ, but if that turns out to be dipping, we will be hard put to it to persuade parents to have their children baptized.⁵⁹

1 CORINTHIANS 7:14: HOLINESS, FEDERAL OR REAL?

With some relief, we turn to some contested exegesis. In one of his letters from Westminster Robert Baillie wrote home as follows:

We have ended our Directorie for baptisme. Thomas Goodwin one day was exceedinglie confounded: He has undertaken a publicke lecture against the Anabaptists: it was said, under pretence of refuting them, he betrayed our cause to them: that of the Corinthians, our chief ground for the baptisme of infants, 'Your children are holy', he expounded of a reall holiness, and preached down our ordinare and necessare distinction of reall and federall holiness. Being posed hereupon, he could no wayes cleare himselfe, and no man took his part.⁶⁰

The Directorie ended up with the statement that the children of believers 'are Christians, and federally holy before baptism, and therefore are they baptized'. John Lightfoot was unfortunately absent from the Assembly on July 16, 1644, when the meaning and implications of 1 Corinthians 7:14 were rehearsed at length and in depth. We may judge it one of the company's better days. The minutes are ample but not clear at every point.

Goodwin kept up his end from first to last.

It is such a holynesse as if they dy they should be saved/whether a holynesse of election or regeneration I know not; but I thinke it is they have the holy ghost.⁶¹

Lazarus Seaman spelt out the alarm that others showed: 'all agree that this holynesse is the ground of baptisme... except he can make out this, the baptizing of infants is gone as touting his

⁵⁷TMs. II, 270, 276.

⁵⁸TMs. II, 266. John Macleod in his *Scottish Theology in Relation to Church History since the Reformation* (Publications Comm. of Free Church of Scotland, Edinburgh, 1946), 253,5, relates Neil Macmichael's exposition of 1 Corinthians 10:1-5:

1. The Israelites were baptised, both adults and infants; for the Apostle declares it. 2. They were not immersed, a fact which Moses and other inspired writers testify. 3. The Egyptians who pursued them were immersed. 4. The Israelites had baptism without immersion, and the Egyptians immersion without baptism. 5. The baptism of Israelites was salvation, and the immersion of the Egyptians drowning.

I owe this reference to Donald Macleod, 'The Free Church College 1900-1970', in D.F. Wright and Gary D. Badcock (eds), *Disruption to Diversity: Edinburgh Divinity 1846-1996* (T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1996), 221-37, at 231-2.

⁵⁹TMs. II, 265.

⁶⁰Baillie II, 218.

⁶¹TMs. II, 256.

judgment.⁶² Goodwin in effect denied any distinction between real and federal holiness: the holiness predicated of the children of a single Christian parent by Paul is the same as that of 'I will be your God and you shall be my people. Therefore be holy.' If 1 Corinthians 7:14 speaks of any other holiness, then baptism is the seal of some other holiness than the holiness of salvation.⁶³

But saving holiness is what infallibly saves, commented Stephen Marshall anxiously.⁶⁴ As Rutherford put it, 'wher ther is reall and inherent holynesse ther must be a seeing of god, and being in the state of salvation'. But 'the Lord hath election and reprobation amongst Infants noe lesse than those of age'.⁶⁵ This emerged as the main objection to Goodwin's interpretation, which was alleged to imply that all such infants would indubitably be saved (so Marshall) and that the decrees of election and reprobation could not stand (Rutherford).⁶⁶

So argument ensued on the difference between an indefinite proposition and a universal proposition. Goodwin's case rested on the former: 'an indefinite faith founded upon an indefinite promise'.⁶⁷ Herbert Palmer could not concur: Paul's answer to the 'inconvenience' to a child from one parent's infidelity must be 'a universal proposition and *de fide* we are bound to believe it *de omnibus et singulis*'.⁶⁸ To be sure, Goodwin did not entertain every notion that some divines read into his position. He denied that he was speaking of a holiness received by the child by traduction from the parent, as Richard Vines had supposed ('and so they shall be borne regenerate and really holy')⁶⁹, but only of a holiness by way of designation.⁷⁰ Calamy came back at Goodwin: 'he judges of the reall holynesse of the infant by the reall holynesse of the parent'. But this is how we all proceed, rejoined Goodwin; it is the children of believers that we baptize.⁷¹

The combined learning and piety of the Westminster theologians did not resolve the exegesis of 1 Corinthians 7:14. The verse had inevitably engaged the attention of previous generations of expositors, and had found the early Fathers and the Reformers of the sixteenth century espousing a

⁶²TMs. II, 258; cf. 256: Goodwin's interpretation removes the 'common and ordinary' ground of infant baptism and lays new ground.

⁶³TMs. II, 275: 'that which you call federal holynesse and that which I call reall doe both coincidere in this'.

⁶⁴TMs. II, 257.

⁶⁵TMs. II, 256.

⁶⁶TMs. II, 256, 257.

⁶⁷TMs. II, 258: the 'terminus' of human judgment is to be the infant's salvation, but the minister is not to have an infallible judgment of it, but 'such a judgment as answers the promise'. But at 260, if the minute is reliable, Goodwin apparently accepted that the verse in some sense embodied 'a universal proposition': 'if the children are by a warrant from the apostle accounted holy soe as to be brought into the bosome of the church/then the unbeliever must needs be sanctified to the believers bed'.

⁶⁸TMs. II, 260.

⁶⁹TMs. II, 258.

⁷⁰TMs. II, 259.

⁷¹TMs. II, 261.

variety of theories that, if not universally comprehensive, was at least indefinite.⁷² But whereas earlier exegetes had been especially preoccupied with avoiding the attribution to the children of a holiness which they could not comfortably credit also of the unbelieving partner, the dominant concerns of the divines at Westminster led in other directions. The irony lay in their very captivity to this verse in the first instance, for at least one thing can be incontrovertibly deduced from it - that the children in question who are declared 'holy' had not been baptized, nor, if the parallel with the unbelieving spouse extends this far, is their imminent baptism implied. This is, I think, the only place in the New Testament where children are in view of whom we know for certain whether they have or have not been baptized. They have not - but are said to be already 'holy'.

INFANT BAPTISM AND FEDERAL THEOLOGY

The sentence that eventually appeared in the Directory for Public Worship - 'they are Christians, and federally holy before baptism' - appears to owe the inclusion of 'federally' to Goodwin's opposition. If the minutes can be trusted, the wording before the Assembly at the outset of this discussion was 'they are Christians and holy ...'⁷³ This is not the only statement in the Westminster documents' deliverances on baptism that ventures explicitly into the special language of covenant theology. This latter species of theology is in no way my territory, but I raise a question for others to ponder and adjudicate upon. It was a comment by Sinclair Ferguson on the renewed interest displayed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in the Bible's teaching on the covenant that set me thinking

[I]t was given fresh impetus by the Anabaptist accusation that the mainstream Reformers had thoughtlessly acquiesced in the 'unbiblical' practice of infant baptism. In response the Reformers argued that God had made one covenant with men with Jesus Christ at its heart, administered in two dispensations, the 'old' and the 'new'. Since the children of believers received the initiatory sacrament of this covenant in the restricted administration of the 'old covenant', they must also receive the initiatory sacrament of baptism in the 'new covenant'.⁷⁴

Was it the case, as this statement suggests, not only that covenant theology afforded a strong defence of baptizing infants, but also that the imperative to defend the baptizing of infants enhanced the attractiveness of doing theology covenantally? I find the implication - or is it my inference? - intriguing. There is no doubt in my mind that infant baptism was the single most substantive constitutive element of the church that the Reformers perpetuated from the Old Church without explicit biblical authorisation. In vindicating it they displayed immense versatility, but it was no easy task. Does the pressing necessity of doing so help to explain the shift towards the federalization of theology? Can it be shown that the apologia for paedobaptism was a significant organizing centre in the structural elaboration of covenant theology?

⁷²My paper '1 Corinthians 7:14 in Fathers and Reformers' is forthcoming in a volume edited by David Steinmetz based on an Arbeitgespräch held at the Herzog August Bibliothek at Wolfenbüttel in March 1994 on the Fathers in sixteenth-century biblical exegesis.

⁷³TMs. II, 255, at the beginning of session 254 on the morning of July 16, 1644.

⁷⁴Sinclair B Ferguson, 'The Teaching of the Confession', in Alasdair I.C. Heron (ed.), *The Westminster Confession in the Church Today* (St Andrew Press, Edinburgh, 1982), 28-39 at 37.

CONCLUDING ASSESSMENT

It is no part of the purpose of this paper to enter into critical engagement with Westminster's presentation of Christian baptism in the light of more recent theological viewpoints. It should probably be faulted, for example, for not relating church baptism to Christ's own baptism, or perhaps to his whole work of identification with us understood as his baptism for us.⁷⁵ More serious would be a demonstration of internal inconsistency, such as that hinted at by George S. Hendry in reporting hypothetically a contention that 'even the definition of the sacrament given in the Confession implies conditions which cannot be literally fulfilled in the case of infants.'⁷⁶ He gives no more detail than this, but we might well ask whether baptism can be 'unto [the party baptized] a sign and seal of the covenant of grace ... and of his giving up unto God through Jesus Christ, to walk in newness of life' (28:1) if the party is incapable of discerning the signification or walking in newness of life. But that may be too harsh a judgment. If it is guilty of deep-seated inconsistency, the Westminster Confession would be in good company, according to Karl Barth, who finds serious incoherence between John Calvin's treatment of baptism in general and defence of infant baptism in particular.

One may read the 15th and 16th chapters in Book IV of the *Institutio* one after the other and convince oneself whether the great Calvin was sure of his subject and where he obviously was not sure, but visibly nervous, in a hopelessly confused train of thought, abusing where he ought to inform and when he wants to convince, seeking a way in the fog, which can lead him to no goal, because he has none.⁷⁷

Barth here points up the continuing dilemma of church and theology in seeking to defend infant baptism from a Bible - or at least a New Testament - which knows only the baptism of converts.

Yet there can be no respectable future for paedobaptism which does not treat it fully as Christian baptism. In these terms, its hopes lie in being made more central and fundamental to Christian education and nurture. One of the gravest scandals attending the practice of infant baptism is that too often baptized children growing up are unaware of their baptismal identity. From time to time young adults coming forward for full membership turn out to be unsure whether they were baptized as babies. One major answer to this ignorance is the 'improvement' of baptism inculcated explicitly by the Larger Catechism (*Q/A* 167), and indirectly by the Directory for Public Worship, both in the home and in Sunday school and Bible class. According to the New Testament, baptism, not conversion, is the locus of our acquiring Christian identity. As the Directory puts it, in baptism children are 'received into the bosom of the visible church, distinguished from the world, and them that are without, and united with believers'.⁷⁸

⁷⁵Cf. George S. Hendry, *The Westminster Confession for Today. A Contemporary Interpretation* (SCM Press, London, 1960), 225: 'The sacrament of baptism rests ultimately on Christ's own baptism, in which he became "ingrafted" into us, to bring us the benefits of the covenant of grace (Matt. 3:13-15), and which he consummated by his death (Mark 10:38; Luke 12:50).'

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, 226.

⁷⁷Barth, *The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism*, 49; cf. 48, where he accuses Calvin in 4:16 of forgetting what he wrote in 4:15.

⁷⁸Cf. Confession 27:1, on sacraments in general: 'instituted ... to put a visible difference between those that belong unto the church and the rest of the world.'