

THE DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH
IN SCOTTISH THEOLOGY

John MacPherson Chalmers Lectures 1903.

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THE IDEA OF THE CHURCH AND

was not allowed to omit, constituted a member of the visible Church.

→ There is a difference between the earlier and the later Scottish doctrine of Church membership. The difference may be seen in the most convincing and interesting manner when we place side by side the twelfth chapter of Rutherford's *Peaceable Plea*, the title of which is put in the form of a question: "Whether or no do some warrantably teach that Baptism should be administered only to infants born of one at least parent known to be a believer and within the covenant, and who are to be admitted to the Lord's Supper?" and Boston's Sixth Question in the *Miscellanies*, entitled, "*Who have right to Baptism and are to be baptised?*"

Rutherford begins the answer to his question by calling attention to the distinction between an inherent and a covenant holiness, which latter simply gives a right to the means of salvation; and then to the further distinction between those who are in the covenant by faith in Christ, according to the election of grace, and those who are there by profession as hearers of the word and members of the visible Church. He distinguishes a holiness of the nation or people from a holiness of the single person, a federal or covenant holiness *de jure*, such as goes before baptism in the infants born in the visible Church and a holiness *de facto*, a formal holiness after they are baptised. He maintains that the sins

¹ *Miscellany Questions*, 1767, p. 410.

of the immediate parents cannot exclude their children from the mercy of the covenant or from the seals of that mercy. He proceeds further to show how the seed of those who are within the covenant is differentiated from the seed of those outside the covenant by the enjoying of God's promise to be the God of the seed of His people, and by the assurance that the branches will be regarded as holy which spring from a holy root. He argues that the objection that only the infants of those who are in communion with some particular Church or congregation have a right to baptism proceeds from a wrong statement of the difference between Church communion and Christian communion. According to Rutherford, Christian communion carries with it the privilege of baptism. "Baptism," he says, "is not like Burgess freedom in a city. A man may be a free citizen in one town or city and not be such to have right to the privileges of all other cities; but he who is Christ's freeman in one Church hath Christian freedom and right to communion thereby in all Churches." To all, therefore, who have Christian communion, that is, to all who are in the widest sense within the covenant, the privilege of the seal of the covenant belongs. Just as all were circumcised who were born of circumcised parents within the Church of the Jews, so all are to be baptised who are born of Christian and baptised parents professing the faith. The text (1 Cor. vii. 14) which speaks of the unbelieving husband or wife and seems to require believing on the part of one parent if the

children are not to be unclean, he explains by regarding the unbelieving parent as a pagan or an unconverted Jew. The condition of covenant holiness for the children is simply that at least one parent be a Christian by profession, a hearer of the word of the Gospel.

While Rutherford contended for this wideness in the administering of baptism, he was very far from favouring any laxity of practice in regard to admission to the full communion of the Church by participation in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. When it is a matter of admitting to the Communion Table he insists that only those are to be received of whom we judge that they are capable of examining themselves and have actually done so, that they can discern the Lord's body, and in the acting of faith show the Lord's death. This, he observes, at once debars infants and children, ignorant and scandalously flagitious persons, and insane people. The Lord's Supper is a seal of spiritual growth in Christ, presupposing faith and the new birth, so that to the openly profane and unbelieving it is not a necessary nor a possible means of salvation, for the elements are no more nourishing to an unbeliever than bread and wine would be to a dead man. But even in regard to the ordinance of the Supper, Rutherford is careful to declare that he does not make evidence of conversion a condition of admission. And so the Church passes no judgment on any man's spiritual state, but only on his visible profession and outward walk. Church officers may not seek to go beyond Apostles who

received Ananias and Sapphira, Demas, Hymenæus and Alexander, having them for a space in the communion of the Church, until they themselves went out of it, showing that they were not of it.

Turning now to Boston, we find him assuming an attitude utterly opposed to that of Rutherford. In his time a cold formalism had spread widely over the Church. The boundaries between the Church and the world were broken down. Many of the more spiritual men of that age, from among whom sprang the Marrow men, and those who sympathized with them, recoiled from the undisguised worldliness of the visible Church, and applied what had formerly been referred to it to the company of visible *believers*. All who were not Turks or Pagans or Jews had been called Christians, so that Boston could speak of openly wicked Christians, profane and grossly ignorant Christians. Now he raises the question whether those who could claim only the negative qualification of not being Turks or Jews or Pagans should have the right, *in foro ecclesiae*, of baptism for their children. Boston quotes from Zanchius,¹ a distinguished Calvinistic divine of the latter half of the sixteenth century. In his large doctrinal commentary on Ephesians he had maintained that in determining who are to be baptized the impiety of the nearest relatives is not to be considered, but the piety of the Church in which they

¹ ["The first parcel of books I got added to my small library, was in the year 1702. . . . Among these were Zanchy's works, and Luther on the Galatians, which I was much taken with." Memoirs, Period viii., 1700-1707.]

are born, as also that of their ancestors who have lived godly or holily. Bowles, Fullwood, and Baxter had all spoken in a similar strain. Boston summarises their arguments under eight heads. He does this in a style that might serve as an object lesson to modern controversialists. Without note or comment or even a single interjected critical remark he presents the arguments of the ablest defenders of this thesis with all possible fulness and force as though he were stating his own position. In form the arguments are mostly those of English and Continental divines of the strictly Calvinistic school. It is indeed rather remarkable that throughout his long and elaborate discussion of the subject of baptism, Boston does not once name Rutherford, although he shows his familiarity with his writings by quoting him freely in treatises on repentance and forgiveness. But in substance the arguments quoted by Boston are just those relied upon by Rutherford. Having stated them he proceeds to give reasons why he cannot accept them. He argues that on the principles professed by such divines even unbaptized parents may have baptism for their children, as also those whose ancestors for generations may have been known to have been grossly ignorant and profane, so that the God in whose name the infant is to be baptized is a God whom neither they nor their fathers have known. It would give right of baptism to children of some Pagans and Mohammedans whose remote ancestors may have been Christians. If the principle of regarding children from the standpoint

of their remote ancestry be consistently carried out, no children under heaven could be denied the ordinance. From this *reductio ad absurdum* Boston concludes that children derive their right to baptism not from their progenitors, but only from their immediate parents. His own position is expressed in the following propositions: (1) the children's right to privileges *coram ecclesiae* rests in the same person or persons by whom they fall. (2) The children of the promise are those whose parents have repented. (3) God's threatening of punishment to the third and fourth generation of those who hate Him implies that each successive generation is ungodly. (4) That the children are unclean unless either the husband is sanctified by the believing wife or the wife by the believing husband shows that they derive their right to baptism from their immediate parents. (5) Children of ungodly parents as a cursed seed have no right to the seals of the covenant. Having thus cleared the way, Boston proceeds to discuss the question as to what qualifications are necessary in parents in order that they may claim from the Church the baptism of their children. He at once lays down the position that no children but such as have at least one parent *a visible believer* have any right to baptism before the Church. He casts ridicule upon every other interpretation of the phrase "born within the Church,"¹ and

¹["The promise is made to believers and their seed, and the seed and posterity of the faithful, *born within the Church*, have by their birth, interest in the covenant, and right to the seal of it." *Westminster Directory for Publick Worship.*]

adduces an argument in favour of his own position under ten heads.

In carrying on his argument Boston is brought face to face with the question as to whether any difference should be made in regard to the qualifications for the Lord's Supper and for Baptism. We have seen how emphatically Rutherford insisted that a distinction should be made, and that many who must be rejected from partaking of the Lord's Supper might have a right to have baptism administered to their children. Boston, on the other hand, maintains that if the parents have no right to the table of the Lord then their infants have none to the ordinance of baptism. A distinction had been made between a *jus ad rem* and a *jus in re*. Thus Israelites as such had a right to the Passover, but if unclean they were debarred from enjoying the right. So some are habitually scandalous and have never given probable evidence of sincerity, but others have at one time given such evidence, though they have fallen into scandal. To these latter, even although they have not yet given evidence of repentance, Boston was willing to allow the right of baptism. He distinguished a visible state from a visible frame, and attached the right of baptism to the former. It might be said indeed that children have a right of their own; but evidence of that right before the Church is only from the parents. And so, although the child of a profane parent may have the Spirit and thus have this right before the Lord, he has no

visible right, and, therefore, none before the Church until he is able to manifest it by his own life and profession.

Finally, Boston urges the practical advantages that attend the working out of his theory of Church membership. If profane parents, who are often anxious to obtain baptism for their children, are granted the privilege they are likely to be hardened in their impiety, and the Church is mocked by vows taken without serious intention of fulfilling them; whereas, if they are debarred, it may bring them to the performance at least of the external duties of religion, and even to the exercise of true faith and repentance. In regard also to the children themselves when they come to understand how their parents have lived, and that notwithstanding they had obtained baptism for them, they will be inclined to despise religion as an unreal thing; whereas refusal of baptism for their parents' wickedness may lead them to serious thought of God and spiritual things. And even upon others, especially those beginning family life, the effect will be most salutary if they know that it is really expected of those who receive the privilege that they be true believers and so qualified for training their children by word and life for God.

Rutherford and Boston were led to their respective and conflicting theories of the Church and membership in it by their evangelical sympathies and their longings for the salvation of sinners. To Rutherford

it seemed that the hearing of the word was so great a privilege, marking off a highly favoured class from those who did not hear because they had no preacher. Those who availed themselves of this privilege enjoyed therein already the calling of God. When God so favoured them it was surely the part of Church officers, who are labourers together with God, to treat them as within the circle of their care, and by the means of grace to endeavour that that calling should become to them effectual.

Boston's protest was against formalism and indifference. If hearing is not mixed with faith, of what avail is it? It was the agonized cry of a man yearning after reality. Men seemed to lull themselves into security and a false peace, and as mere hearers without faith, they sought to satisfy themselves, and even boasted that they were the temple of the Lord. Boston thought to give them a rude awaking. They are not of God's Church at all. Until they believe their place is with the pagans and the infidels. Was there not a note of impatience here? Rutherford would not shut them out until, like Simon Magus, Demas, the Antichrists who vexed St John, they went out of themselves by doing something that afforded visible evidence that they were not of God.