



## Re-Discovering Our Baptism

*H. Dane Sherrard*

It all began with Mrs. MacFarlane. I had just conducted morning worship at a super wee church in one of the tougher areas of Glasgow, a church at which I was serving as Interim Moderator. I was present at worship that morning because, following the service, I was to chair the Stated Annual Meeting of the congregation. I stood at the door and shook hands with all the folk as they came out of church, some to disappear into the community, most, I was glad to see, going into the hall where the meeting would shortly start.

Quickly I went back into the sanctuary to collect my notes and as I did I was accosted by a woman in her forties, a woman I had never seen before but who was clearly waiting for me until everyone else had left so that she could say her piece. It took me all my time to persuade her to stop talking long enough to sit her down, and it was an effort to break into what she wanted to say to introduce myself and to learn that she was Mrs. MacFarlane. All she was interested in was whether I would ‘do her wee one for her’, whether I would ‘christen her wean.’ As I sat and made appropriate noises her story tumbled from her lips – the–‘wean’ in question was not her daughter but her grand-daughter, the result of a chance encounter between her daughter and a ne’er-do-well who was now out of her life and behind bars. Her daughter was staying with her, relying on her for everything – she wasn’t interested in Church or baptism, but Mrs. MacFarlane had made it clear that any grand-daughter of hers would be brought to the font and ‘christened’ and that would be the end of the matter – but now someone had suggested to her that she wouldn’t be welcome. Just because she didn’t come to Church herself, just because she wasn’t a member. What was I going to do about it? That was what she wanted to know – and I suspect that all ministers have all been there.

In the situation I don’t know how anyone could not have responded to such a request – and how much both spoken and unspoken was



encompassed within the request itself, which at its heart held that this baby born into the most difficult of situations, illegitimate by parentage, would be legitimised by being accepted by God and that life would change for her and her family as a result; and that is exactly what happened. Not only her life – but mine as well, for having taken this experience and examined it in a Ministry Experience report as part of my course at Princeton I realised that baptism was climbing my agenda of interests and would now become the centre-piece of my final thesis.

But that's to get ahead of myself. For my ministry experience report I struggled with the Church of Scotland regulations regarding baptism and how they had changed between the early sixties and today; I thought long and hard about the differing attitudes which congregations had towards the baptising of children from the parish whose parents were not within the membership of the congregation; I thought through the debate about adult versus infant baptism and I read several glorious books: Wesley Carr's *Brief Encounters: Pastoral Ministry through the Occasional Offices*<sup>1</sup> written in 1985 but having lots to say to my situation, and David Hamilton's *Through the Waters*<sup>2</sup>, written three years later with real insight into what Baptism is really all about, and many more – one of the best parts of this study programme was the reading it liberated me to engage in. And of course I studied Scripture and listened as several passages spoke to me about Mrs. MacFarlane: and after the pictures of mothers bringing their children to God, one day I found myself in front of the well-known passage from John's Gospel chapter three:

*Jesus answered (Nicodemus), "I am telling you the truth: no one can see the Kingdom of God unless he is born again (or from above).*

*How can a grown man be born again?" Nicodemus asked. "He certainly cannot enter his mother's womb and be born a second time!"*

In the passage above I have added the translation of the word 'anothen' as 'from above' following the Jerusalem Bible. This is Jesus' baptism



of water and the Spirit, and I believe recalls the image of the dove descending at his baptism in the Jordan. Baptism is the sign of a totally new beginning in Jesus, such a new beginning that the only way of describing it is by comparing it with a re-birth.

An inscription on a font from the fifth century illuminated this for me:

*Here a people of godly race are born for heaven; the Spirit gives them life in the fertile waters. The Church-Mother, in these waves, bears her children like virginal fruit she has conceived by the Holy Spirit*

Through baptism we are born into the Church; we become Jesus-people – even to having our human mother and Spirit father – notice what this picture is saying: we don't choose to be born, it is something that happens to us. We are given this new beginning through God's grace. It's not something we can earn or deserve or something which we can claim because we can stand and confess our faith. It is a gift which God offers to us unconditionally through his love, and through his initiative in sending his Son to our world.

Mrs. MacFarlane brought her grand-daughter to receive this new birth, to be born into the community of Easter, and it seemed to me that rather than the great responsibility of faith and prior response being placed on Mrs. MacFarlane, the wonder of baptism is that it is a sacrament of God's grace, goodness and love to us all, his undeserving children. Mrs. MacFarlane may not have known what she was doing, but she knew that God had given her a grand-daughter and it is God who led her to Church on that particular morning to seek baptism.

That child was different from that moment on because she belonged to the community of the Church. Now in the Church she must be taught to treasure her baptism. Now in the Church she must be taught to grow in faith and to become a loyal and devoted disciple of Jesus – but through God's decisive action, she was already a child for whom Christ died. The Church had claimed her as one of its own and has given her the identity of a daughter of God.



The faith which is declared at baptism is not the faith of the parents or grand-parent, it is the faith of the Church represented by the local congregation. But there is a requirement from the parents, too: they must want to share with the Church in the Christian up-bringing and nurture of their child. They must desire the child to grow up learning to love God as a part of the community of the Church. So many parents understand this instinctively when they bring a child for baptism and, almost before anything else is said, they follow up by saying, "And I want him to come to Sunday School."

So my journey through baptism had led me to the conclusion that it was appropriate for the Church to offer Mrs. MacFarlane baptism for her granddaughter. But more followed from this, for my journey helped me to see that baptism is not the event of a moment in time, but is a moment which we carry through the whole of our lives.

In offering baptism to that child, the Church was saying to her, "Here in God's family you find your identity. Here you belong. Here, with us, your discipleship will develop, and in God's strength we will love you, for through God's love we have been born into a community which is for ever new, the community which lives as an anticipation of all that will one day be; a community fed and nurtured by God's Holy Spirit and by the love which each one of us shares with each other; a community made possible through Jesus' incarnation, baptism and resurrection which we celebrate each time we come together.

Let me underline a final realisation that this exercise thrust upon me. The World Council of Churches document *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*<sup>3</sup> discusses the problem caused in the eyes of those who practise believer's baptism by those who they believe are not rigorous enough in the faith they expect from those who bring infants for baptism. My awakening understanding is that the rigour is required not in looking deeply at the faith of the parents (yes, we need their commitment to work with the Church) but in looking at the faith of the congregation. Baptism and faith come from God. We cannot respond to him until he first shows himself to us. Baptism starts our



journey and incorporates us into his risen community and I am sure he has a special place in his community for Mrs. MacFarlane's little granddaughter.

Having completed my ministry experience report (the final one of six which made up part of our course) and completed the third Princeton workshop thoughts turned to my thesis. I was captivated by baptism. I spent time reading the words of the Scottish Reformers and gradually began to think more and more not about when, how or to whom baptism should be administered but what it meant to people to have been baptized.

If baptism is the most wonderful gift from God how do we think of that gift day by day as we go about the business of living? Our Scottish reformers in the line of the classical Reformers of the Swiss magisterial tradition saw only two sacraments as having Biblical warranty. They built their Church on the preaching of the Word and the Sacrament of Holy Communion. The Scottish Reformers understood that an important role of the Church was to nurture the baptism of its children, working in partnership with parents to enable their children to grow in faith. They understood that the Church also existed to care for the baptism of its adult members that they might be constantly aware of God's covenanted love for them.

Most of all, they realised that in baptism we celebrate the unmerited love of God shared with his people. We respond in faith because God first loved us, and a process has begun which will continue throughout our lives.

As I began my thesis, my suspicion was that we have lost this understanding, that members of my congregation did not think about their own baptism at all and often regarded baptism as a pleasant family ritual by which the importance of a new baby is affirmed. I wished to test that suspicion so that, if I discovered it to be correct, part of my ministry following the completion of the project might centre around helping my congregation to rediscover the understanding of the Reformers.

I spent the first months preparing a chapter which traced the story of baptism from the earliest times until the present day in Scotland, starting within the pages of Scripture and ending in the writings of the most recent theologians. I examined baptismal services throughout two thousand years and watched as time and again innovation was introduced only to be discarded after a few years. The scope of that research is totally outwith the limitations of this article but it set me up for all that was to come.

Next I set about learning how to collect data. What was important for me was to be involved in qualitative research interviewing – I had to set up a structure which would allow me to listen carefully to what each person had to say so that I could ascertain his or her baptismal story. This studying of research methods was the counterbalance to the time spent on the study of baptism over the centuries.

Finally, I drew up twenty questions which set out for me the ground to be covered and would be prompts for me rather than a definitive exercise to be carried out. Their presence might also give confidence to those taking part; a survey is something with which most people are comfortable while the thought of an ‘in-depth discussion on my own ideas!’ with a tape recorder present is more threatening.

My purpose in interviewing members of my congregation was to compare what they thought today with what the Scottish Reformers taught that people then ought to think. To help in the analysis I invented for myself an idealized reformer (whom I called John) to enter into dialogue with, or to comment on, what my members shared with me. The thoughts and sentiments which I attributed to ‘John’ had been drawn from the words of John Winram, John Spottiswood, John Douglas, John Row, John Willock, John Knox, John Calvin (you’ll see now why I chose the name John!) as well as from the compilers of the Westminster Confession of Faith, the Directory of Publick Worship and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms. I also made use of the thoughts of the Swiss Reformers of the grand magisterial tradition who so influenced the thinking of our Scottish forefathers.

It was important at the outset that I made very clear the purpose of Reformer John: it was to provide the view of those who brought the reformation to Scotland. This was important because it highlighted the differences which have grown up between belief then and the belief of my members today. It was doubly important when one remembers that it is the views of the reformers which are embodied in the present official doctrinal position of the Church of Scotland.

Please be clear, however, that I was not presenting the words of Reformer John as being the definitive, authoritative response to my members' stories. They may have come across that way – I can't imagine one of these great reformers speaking otherwise! They may also have had the authority of the Church of Scotland's official position behind them – in part that is the value of my imaginary reformer – but in no way were these words presented by me as solutions to the theological problems raised by my members.

Equally important was that people did not read Reformer John's words as being my own views transported back and dressed in the clothes of a higher authority. In each interview three people were present – my member, John and myself. This stratagem enabled me to identify with some clarity exactly what was the baptismal story which my member was sharing with me and prepared the ground for my future ministry based on the views which I developed as a result of this study.

So I conducted the interviews and started on the analysis. My choice of subjects had been extremely fortunate; I learned a lot from each person and each opened up real dialogue with Reformer John. Three of my interviewees even agreed to interview further people to check that the picture which emerged when they had spoken to me was similar to what they discovered. And as the weeks went by I really felt that I had got to know Reformer John as a real person!

I enjoyed listening to the baptismal stories of my members. I may have worried at the start that there would be no stories, but in that I was proved wrong. Mind you, baptism was not near the top of any of



their minds and no one really thought much about *their* baptism today. Indeed I suspect that it was only because I discussed with these people at length that I was able to get into their ideas *about* baptism.

My initial impression was that I would find a huge difference between what my folk today thought about their baptism and what the reformers believed that people ought to think about their baptism and my research proved this to be true, but I wondered if most of all what I discovered was a different view of what the Church is – and that this different view of the Church affected much of the story which I heard from my members.

The Scottish Reformers had no doubt that Church and State were inextricably linked. The local parish Church was set up to preach to and to nurture everyone within the parish. All were subject to its discipline, all were dependant on it for their education, and if they were in need it was from the offerings of the parish that they were fed. The faith of the Church was the faith of the people. The Church and the community were one and the Covenant, which was so important to the Scottish Reformers, was between God and *all* of his Scottish people.

Of course, there were those who were under discipline for misdemeanor; of course, there were those who were less diligent in their faith – the very tone of some of the writing of the time makes this clear – but in general and in principle the ‘visible’ Church existed for everyone and in part this was why the parish system was such a strength. Everyone belonged and every parent knew where to bring his child that he too might take his rightful place within the covenant which was a living continuation of the Covenant established between God and his people in the story of the flood, between God and Abraham, and in other incidents in the Old Testament.

Baptism was so important because, just as circumcision in the days of the Old Covenant, it became the sign and seal of one’s presence within the Covenant of God’s saving love in Jesus’ Christ. Watching a small child carried to the font, one recollected how at his Baptism Jesus was



acknowledged by God as his son, one remembered that in the same way God has claimed each child within this community as now he claimed this child.

But in the later years of the twentieth-century life in Scotland has changed and with it attitudes and beliefs. My survey has covered people of sufficient age to awaken memories of how things used to be. Church and State are now very different. Education, health care and welfare provision are provided by secular authorities – only a small proportion of each parish community is a member of their local Church and an even smaller proportion attend worship. Thus the Church of Scotland has started to see itself as a community within a community. To be sure, it still sees itself as having a responsibility to God for all of the people of Scotland but in practice this is often seen as a desire to bring as many people as possible into this inner community where, through making promises and taking on a Christian commitment, they will in turn work to win others for Christ.

The shift has moved from what God does for his whole covenant community to what we do for God. The emphasis has moved to ‘joining the Church’ and this perfectly explains the emphasis so evident from most of my interviews on the promises which we make at baptism’ – particularly the promises of the parents. Their sincerity (as shown by whether or not they continue to be a regular part of the worshipping community) becomes to some the measure of the efficacy of the sacrament.

But when the reformers prepared their documents so many years ago what was of interest to them was ‘did the parents have faith?’; ‘would they bring their child up in the love and knowledge of God?’ After many years of study our General Assembly introduced a change to this rule in 1964 when, instead of desiring *faith*, the regulations required *membership* and the doctrine of ‘justification by membership of the Church of Scotland’ began.

It is, of course, understandable that those who thought long and hard over the question should have reached this conclusion. We can

understand their thinking, ‘if they are serious about faith, why are they not in Church membership?’ We can understand their conviction that if one is to be baptised into the body of Christ, one should at least become part of the visible form of that body – his Church. But there is also another side to this debate. Recent surveys show that although Church membership is at a low point in Scotland, and while Church attendance in the Church of Scotland is at an all-time low, yet still ordinary people when questioned express their belief in God and say that faith is part of their lives. It is membership of the Church which is the problem, rather than belief in God.

Thus when a new baby is born and wondering parents bring him to Church to receive God’s blessing, to be claimed by God as God’s own, there is immediately a clash of cultures. To non-members, it is hard to understand the Church folk wanting to ring-fence their welcome with requirements such as membership (many already consider themselves members of the Church through their own baptism or because they came to Sunday School) and attendance, and by their treatment as second-class citizens. To those within the Church, those who suddenly appear with a child for baptism seem to be people who just want to use the Church when it suits them, people who aren’t as serious as those who are in Church each week.

*If only we could learn that God’s covenant includes us all – all who respond to his love, of which our baptism is the sign and the seal. A Service of Baptism gives us the opportunity of celebrating God’s claim on the life of a child, of celebrating the faith of the community and of the parents, and of laying the foundation for a partnership of joint nurture of the child as it grows to adult life.*

This brings me to the second point which has hit me hard from listening to Baptismal stories. **God entrusts the nurture of our baptism to his Church.** Instead of making judgements about how other parents are responding to the promises they are asked to make, we must grasp the opportunities and the responsibilities which are placed on us as a congregation every time we take part in a service of baptism. The



stories I have heard have given me examples of real nurture and care, and of the lack of such nurture and care. There is certainly an important challenge here for us – and it needs to be spelled out clearly.

In the past we have seen baptism as the start of a journey which led to ‘confirmation,’ to ‘joining the Church,’ to an adult acceptance of one’s place within God’s covenant. It has been a concern to the Church of Scotland that in recent years fewer adults have come to confirm their baptismal promises. There is more than one reason for this. In part it is explained by the decreasing interest in being part of an institutional Church, in part by sociological reasons – in Scotland at this time all large multi-faceted organisations are in decline whether they be political parties, Churches or trade unions. In part it may also even be due to the increasing understanding that we are already full members of Jesus’ Church through our baptism alone. The Church of Scotland has acknowledged this in recent years by, under certain circumstances, admitting baptised children to the sacrament of Holy Communion.

The absence of this rite of passage into adult membership of the Church does not diminish the necessity of nurture for baptised children, not only until adulthood, but throughout the whole of life. In the days of the reformers men and women were nurtured by daily Bible reading, by systematic preaching, by catechism and by a programme of ministerial and elders’ visiting. *The need for nurture and the need for theological education arises out of what I have heard so far.*

***Almost uniformly I have been told that people do not think about their own baptism.*** Yes, they know something of it, and if they are confronted by it they consider it as an event that happened once but is not to be celebrated every day. Nor did I find by any means a common view of what baptism signified. I have thus identified a need for a way of giving my people a clearer idea of what baptism means and of raising each person’s awareness of what it is to have been baptised, to rediscover the covenant theology of our reforming ancestors. I have also to discover ways of enabling people to nurture their own baptism. It is true that I did not find any concept of nurturing one’s own baptism – but I am also conscious that the writers of the larger catechism when

discussing the duty of improving one's baptism described it as 'the needful *but much neglected* duty.' It is not possible to say that things are different today!

So what has happened since the days of the reformers and now? Firstly, the Church has changed and is now retreating into itself, creating for itself a separate community from the parish community which was its strength in reformation times. Secondly, the practice of family worship, Bible reading, and catechetical instruction have largely disappeared, creating a generation which knows little of the story of God's love through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus – or worse, which knows only a caricature of that story. Thirdly, social mores have changed, making it less important or possible for people to be part of an organized Church, or to look to the Church for education, welfare or even spiritual insight. Fourthly, as a society we have become more individualistic. We no longer think as a community. What matters is what *I* do, and decide to do.

These reasons have led to our becoming less theological. We tend, even within the Church, to see what is described in the Bible in terms of what we do today, rather than the reverse; we miss the theological teaching which is the heritage of the Scottish Reformation, and we fail to be aware of a life which is one of pilgrimage with God rather than governed and controlled by the secular world in which we live and the aspirations which it leads us to adopt.

*Rediscovering our baptism may help us to rediscover our way.* I've already felt that some of those to whom I've listened have begun to take the first tentative steps to rediscovering their baptism just by taking part in this exercise. My initial journey has reached its resting place: my people do not think of their baptism as other than an event in the past and we have lost the concept of our baptism as a gift from God to be treasured and nurtured and carried with us throughout our Christian pilgrimage. Now I am going to set out on another journey – a journey made possible by this initial discovery. It's a journey in which I shall seek to help my congregation to rediscover the wonder of our own

baptisms and through that to experience what it really means to be the Church and a pilgrim people today.

As I listened to the stories of my congregation I invited John to comment on each interview in turn. Now, as I reached this point in *my* journey I imagined what John might have wished to say to me.

“Baptism is the sign of initiation into the society of the Church and of becoming part of the body of Christ and children of God. Because we are baptised our sins are forgiven and thus baptism stands to us as a reminder of the perpetual cleansing which we have through Jesus’ death and resurrection. Thus baptism stands at the start of a process of regeneration which will continue throughout our lives. Indeed, it is because of our baptism that we have the ability to respond to God’s love, to experience God’s promises and to share with Jesus in his death and resurrection.

I believe that all the blessings which we enjoy come to us as a consequence of our being grafted into the death and life of Jesus. Sins and evil may still threaten us, but thanks to God’s forgiveness and his power promised to us at baptism, they cannot overcome us. By our baptism we can know that although our nature is ‘a seed of sin’ God will not condemn us and that full and complete remission has been made both of our guilt and of the punishment we deserve.

You will see that it follows from this that our baptism and all that it stands for is a gift from God and one which demands our response to improve ourselves day by day, year by year – a process which will finally be accomplished when we pass from this life to our Lord. Baptism also stands as our confession before the world. We are our master’s people and the sign of this is our baptism.

I don’t believe that those of us who might be counted among the Scottish Reformers passed a day without thinking of our



baptism and giving thanks for it, but your members today appear to think of their baptism hardly at all. That is not to say that they do not value their Church membership nor their Christian faith but that somehow this has become separated from baptism. Does it matter? Do you think that I am just playing with words?"

I considered his question. The more I thought about it, the more I realised that it matters very much – and just possibly it is because of our lack of thought about baptism that we have developed the view of the Church which we have today and the emphasis which appeared in my interviews on *'our promises'* and *'what we do'*. Of course I am fully aware of all the post-modern and secular pressures which have contributed to this age of individualistic response, but in baptism – the unique and dynamic claiming act of God – we have an antidote to such pressures. As baptised Christians we are different because God has claimed us for his own. He has forgiven us. He has died for us. He has brought us within his own life to enable us to share in the claiming and the nurturing of his people and his world. We are not alone in the world living 'a life of faith': we are part of Jesus' body, living his life. (Thus it is important that we rediscover the baptismal insights of the Scottish reformers.)

So where do I go from here? What have I learned and what difference will this make to my ministry?

First of all, I have learned that I need to help people to understand that baptism is not just an event in the past (something which happened to them when they were too young to understand) but that it is part of life's on-going journey. I find myself lamenting the passing of the old catechisms; very clearly my journey has identified the need for structured teaching about baptism at all levels within the congregation.

But teaching is only part of the answer. I suspect that we absorb at least as much through our liturgy as we do through formal education. In the months which lie ahead I will seek to develop a link between individual responsibility for the care of my people's Baptism and the prayer of confession and forgiveness. We come to Church to ask God

to forgive us for our failure to live as part of his body and to receive his assurance that we remain his forgiven children. This is an implicit act of continual baptismal care which needs to be made explicit.

I suspect that I will have to develop more of a celebration surrounding baptismal services themselves. Our new (1994) order already makes it clearer that baptism depends not on our actions but on God's unmerited love. Perhaps, however, today I have to spell that out in more detail and to celebrate the fact with more love and exuberance than the traditional Presbyterian humour of previous generations encouraged. (Yes, today there are parties – but these are family parties. There is a place for them, but the Church must celebrate too.) And perhaps in our baptismal services I have to remind my congregation that each baptism is there in part to speak to their own baptism. You are not present only to welcome another member into the Church but to be reminded of, and challenged by, what God has done and is doing for you.

Having been on this journey, I want to resist the attempts of those within my denomination to move away from infant baptism, replacing it with a Service of Dedication. I believe in infant baptism; I understand that the sacrament speaks to us precisely because it is while we are so helpless that God himself takes us and makes us part of his Church. Our whole life is a response to this act of love and we can do nothing but in response to what he has already done for us.

I also want to take further the steps which have already begun within my Church to see baptism (yes, even infant baptism) as the entry to full membership of Jesus' Church. Hand in hand with this, however, I will have to create structures to enable my members to express and experience their faith as it grows and develops. It's wonderful to experience the faith and capacity for worship which young children enjoy, so now I will attempt to explore a meaningful service of first communion which builds on our understanding that in communion what we are given in baptism is fed and grows. And I shall make sure that that link is made clear during all our communion services.

I shall prepare a service for those in early adulthood, a service to mark the taking on of the full responsibilities of a developing member within Jesus' Church, not as in some way as a 'completion of the process of baptism' which entitles one to be thought of as a full member of the Church but which is truly an acceptance of responsibilities in response to God's saving act and which we carry with us on the next stage of our Christian pilgrimage, and a service which recognizes fully and celebrates the fact that it is God, and his action through his Church, which has brought us to this point.

I shall make sure that such adult baptismal services as I am privileged to share in stress the saving act of God and the fact that the Service of Baptism is the start of a process rather than its completion and learning from my project, I shall encourage people to think through their own baptismal stories.

Most of all, I shall shout from the rooftops that God loves all his people and through his Church seeks to lay his claim on them. The view of the Church which is developing today is suspect; a rediscovery of our Baptism will help me to correct this view, enabling me to take seriously the reformers' vision of a people educated in their faith for whom daily worship at home, at Church on Sunday, and a new missionary zeal based on claiming the world for God rather than claiming people and withdrawing them into 'private' Churches, is the underpinning principal.

And every day I will celebrate the fact that I am baptised – a gift to be treasured and enjoyed and nurtured with my fellow pilgrims and in God's company for ever.

- <sup>1</sup> Carr, Wesley *Brief Encounters: Pastoral Ministry through the Occasional Offices*, London: SPCK, 1985
- <sup>2</sup> Hamilton, David S M *Through the Waters: Baptism and the Christian Life*, Edinburg:T&T Clark, 1990
- <sup>3</sup> *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982