

BAPTISM AND CHRISTENING

Custom and Practice in Nineteenth Century Lincolnshire

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In an article in *Local Population Studies* of Autumn 1970 Mr. L. Bradley drew attention to the difficulty of establishing a representative interval between birth and baptism which might be valid over a long period in different parishes.¹ It was suggested in this article and in subsequent correspondence that custom might have an effect on baptismal practice.² In this context some of the problems encountered by reforming Anglican clergy in nineteenth century Lincolnshire may throw light on some of the attitudes and customary practices which had developed around baptism. Apart from their intrinsic interest to students of Church life they also show some of the factors which could have an effect on the interval between birth and baptism.

The rubric of the 1662 prayer book before the service for *The Ministration of Publick Baptism of Infants* states the conditions under which baptism is to be administered. 'The people are to be admonished, that it is most convenient that Baptism should not be administered but upon Sundays, and other Holy-days, when the most number of people come together Nevertheless, (if necessity so require) children may be baptized upon any other day.' The conditions for private baptism are laid down before the service for *The Ministration of Private Baptism of Children in Houses*. Here it stated that 'The Curates of every Parish shall often admonish the people, that they defer not the Baptism of their children longer than the first or second Sunday next after their birth, or other Holy-day falling between, unless upon a great and reasonable cause, to be approved by the Curate. And also they shall warn them, that without like great cause and necessity they procure not their children to be baptized at home in their houses.' Only in cases of need is this to be done. After the Private Baptism service the rubric states that 'if the Child which is after this sort baptized do afterwards live, it is expedient that it be brought into the Church, to the intent that if the Minister of the same Parish did himself baptize that Child, the Congregation may be certified of the true form of Baptism, by him privately before used.' The form of this certification is stated and a series of questions is laid down to be asked by the Minister to determine whether a child not baptised by himself has had baptism administered according to the correct form. These questions are followed by the promises of the godparents on the child's behalf and the reception of the child into the Church.

However, by the nineteenth century it seems that the rubrics were no longer adhered to in many parts of Lincolnshire from evidence in correspondence on baptismal custom and practice to John Kaye, who was Bishop of Lincoln from 1827 to 1853.³ The Revd. J. Tunstall Smith of Whaplode Vicarage wrote to the Bishop on 17 January 1845 referring to the problems which the size of his parish brought and the difficulties he encountered in arranging for the prompt baptism of infants as laid down by the prayer book. 'The length of the parish, which is twelve miles, would provide a serious inconvenience to the distant residents when many of the appointed Sundays proved successively inclement. They would be compelled to defer the baptism month after month.'⁴ In the past the practice had been to bring infants to the clergyman's house 'generally on or about the third day.' This promptness was not, Smith suggested, motivated by any desire to promote the spiritual welfare of the children, 'The service and the bell were the real attraction, and they dreaded lest their infants, of whom a vast number die in this parish, should be committed to the earth "like dogs".'⁵ Even in towns, where distance from the church presented no great difficulties, public baptism was neglected. The Revd. T.B. Lancaster of St. Michael's Stamford reported to the Bishop that private baptism was used in all cases. Unless he conformed to the wishes of parents the children would be baptised by dissenters. Some of the parents said that they had no intention of bringing their children to church to have the ceremony completed in accordance with the rubric.⁶

The reception of the child into the Church following private baptism seems to have been referred to as 'christening'. At Waltham, near Grimsby, the Revd. Richard Fenton would only 'christen' on Sundays and Holy-days. His parishioners were said to mistake this for 'an unaccommodating spirit'. He had, he stated in 1828, been obliged 'to baptize children at all hours of day or night whether in case of danger or not' and he had been asked to perform the 'christening' at various times and dates. 'The object of those who make the request I allude to is not a religious one but merely for the sake of having a feast which too commonly leads to excess and gambling.....'⁷

As at Whaplode, in other parts of the county children were brought to be baptised at the clergyman's house. The Revd. W.H. Apthorpe of Bicker described in 1849 how in that area it was 'the normal custom among the clergy..... to have them brought to the house or the church and baptising, without requiring the aid of sponsors.....'⁸ The form of private baptism was also used in church and because it did not require the presence of godparents this raised problems for the clergyman anxious to combat dissent in his parish. Dissenters with objections to the practice of having godparents could dispense with them by only having private baptism administered. The Revd. John Otter's comments on the way this was done at Ranby are also relevant for the light they throw on registration practices, for he found 'that many dissenters have taken advantage of this irregularity to get their children entered in the register without bringing them to be received into the Church.....'⁹, when godparents would have been necessary.

The Revd. George Maule, of South Ferriby, writing to the Bishop on 2 December 1840, attributed the practice of private baptism to the non-residence of the previous curate. It was 'an evil..... necessarily attendant upon such circumstances', which was no longer necessary when Maule regularly occupied the parsonage and was personally available at the proper time to perform baptisms as laid down in the prayer book.¹⁰

The pastoral problems which faced reforming clergymen who wished to end the private baptism of both healthy and sick children provide additional evidence of how widespread the

practice was and the length of time over which it had taken place. In 1844, the Revd. W. Fox of Marshchapel said that he had found in his parish 'a number of individuals now advanced in years who have never yet been, what is commonly called christened. Two middle aged men of this description, have already offered themselves and have been publicly admitted into the Church; and others, I have reason to expect, will shortly follow their examples.'¹¹

The clergyman who wished to take a firm line against dissent could find his position compromised by the laxity of his predecessors, which had also made it easier for nonconformists to gain a foothold in the parish. The Revd. W.S. White of Horncastle found in 1838 that he was being asked to christen a child which had been baptised previously by a Methodist preacher¹² and the Revd. T.B. Wright of Wrangle found himself in a similar position. Here the superintendent 'Ranter' minister had baptised the children of one of his parishioners, and, without any alteration of his religious views having taken place, the father had then brought the child to be christened.¹³ At Dalby, near Spilsby, the Rev. John Cheales said that his dissenting parishioners would only allow their children to be baptised, either at church or at home, because of their refusal to have sponsors.¹⁴

The distinction which was drawn between baptism and christening and the widespread practice of private baptism either at home or in the church, gave rise to a series of customs and practices not provided for by the prayer book rubrics and private baptism conducted in church was completely contrary to their spirit. All these practices are indicative of attitudes to baptism and as such are relevant to local population students. They make the task of formulating a representative interval between birth and baptism more difficult because of the variety of local custom and practice which often took no account of the Church's formularies and could also depend on the attitude of the officiating minister. Such local factors as the distance of the church from the centre of population in areas where church building had not kept pace with land drainage and settlement, as in the Lincolnshire Fens, also seem to be relevant. Further study of registration practice in the light of these local customs could probably throw further light on them and also help to determine whether in fact it was baptisms or 'christenings' which were registered by the clergy.

Notes

1. *Local Population Studies*, No. 5, Autumn 1970, p. 28.
2. *ibid* p. 26 and *Local Population Studies*, No. 6, Spring 1971, p. 55.
3. Deposited at the Lincolnshire Archives Office, Class Cor B5 References to this correspondence given as L.A.O. Cor B5.
4. L.A.O. Cor B5/4/54/1
5. *ibid*
6. L.A.O. Cor B5/4/97/6
7. L.A.O. Cor B5/4/61/8
8. L.A.O. Cor B5/4/64/1
9. L.A.O. Cor B5/4/89/3
10. L.A.O. Cor B5/4/123/4
11. L.A.O. Cor B5/4/115/10
12. L.A.O. Cor B5/4/104/17
13. L.A.O. Cor B5/4/87/2
14. L.A.O. Cor B5/4/73/7