

Martyn & Bethan, Infant Baptism and Church Membership: A Warning

When D.Martyn Lloyd-Jones became a minister in Aberavon, South Wales, in the 1920s, the Presbyterian Church Secretary was E.T.Rees.¹ Although Mr Rees was a member of the church, and a church officer, he was unconverted. He knew absolutely nothing of regeneration, nothing at all – neither in theory nor in practice. It is said that he ‘believed in a type of evangelical religion, but he was later to feel that he had been as ignorant of the doctrine of regeneration as Nicodemus’.²

I say this is an example of the inevitable outcome of the practice of infant baptisers. I fully acknowledge that Baptist churches can have unregenerate members and officers. I unreservedly accept that. I deplore it, but I cannot, I do not, I dare not, deny it. I do not claim that Baptist churches are completely pure. Not at all! I go further. I say again that even the New Testament churches were not perfect in this respect; I know that even the apostles were deceived at times. Jude complained of those who ‘crept in unnoticed’ (Jude 4).

But there is a world of difference between that and the knowing connivance at unregenerate members. I hope I have made myself clear – I am not throwing stones at infant baptisers from the vantage of a Baptist position which supposedly produces flawless churches. Not for a minute. But – and this is the point – the practice of infant baptism itself actually encourages and produces and justifies churches which have unregenerate members. Infant baptisers fully expect to have unregenerate church members and they try to cope with it. Robert Lewis Dabney was quite prepared to own it when he

¹ For this article, I have lightly edited my *Infant Baptism Tested* pp289-295.

² Iain H.Murray: *D.Martyn Lloyd-Jones*, Vol. 1, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1982, p164.

asked this rhetorical question: ‘Cannot that which is worldly, in the true sense, be in the visible church?’³

Mr Rees must have been one among hundreds, must he not? The church at Aberavon was not the only Presbyterian Church that had unregenerate members in the 1920s, was it? Reader, I put it to you, his experience was a direct result of the system. But, and in stark contrast, the New Testament churches did not cope with this sort of membership. They disciplined, they excommunicated in order to keep a regenerate membership, a membership which behaved consistently with that regeneration. Churches must not *expect* to have unregenerate members. They must not even tolerate them. ‘By their fruits you will know them’ (Matt. 7:20). There should be no unregenerate church members. It is a contradiction in terms.

To proceed with the experiences of Lloyd-Jones who, of course, became a minister in the midst of all this. As I have implied, E.T.Rees was not alone; Mrs Lloyd-Jones was in exactly the same spiritual condition. She, too, was a member of the Presbyterian Church, but she was unregenerate. What is more, she did not understand that she needed to be regenerated! What a condemnation of the system. It is said:

Having attended church and prayer meetings from childhood, Bethan Lloyd-Jones had always believed that she was a Christian... in a sense she had always feared God; her life was upright, and yet she knew that she had no personal consciousness of the forgiveness of sins, no sense of inward joyful communion with Christ.⁴

³ R.L.Dabney: *Systematic Theology*, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1985, p785. A visible church is a church knowingly containing both the regenerate and unregenerate, invented by infant baptisers to try to cope with the fall out of infant baptism. See my *Infant* pp237-276. The Westminster Confession, Chapter XXV, puts it this way: ‘The visible church... consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; and of their children’ (*The Confession of Faith* and other documents of the Westminster Assembly, The Publication Committee of the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland, 1967, p107).

⁴ Murray p166.

That is a tragic though honest statement. But it should cause no surprise. It is not to be wondered at if Mrs Lloyd-Jones always believed she was a Christian. Notice the words ‘from childhood’. She had been treated as a Christian from birth. Is this not exactly what many in the Presbyterian Church think they are supposed to do – tell their children that they are Christians from birth? This, they think, is the right way to deal with what they like to call ‘covenant children’. It is no idle question, therefore: What if baptised children actually do believe what their teachers and parents keep telling them? Bethan Lloyd-Jones did! What is more, for membership, the Church merely demands an appearance of soberness, and so on. Can infant baptisers wonder if sober, steady and respectable but unregenerate people do become church members, church officers, or even ministers themselves? Their very own system has produced it.

But as if these cases were not enough to prove what I am trying to say, what of Lloyd-Jones himself? When he reached his teens, his minister in the Calvinistic Methodist (Presbyterian) Church suggested – *suggested* mark you! – that the young man and his two brothers might like to join the church. So that is what he did. He professed faith and became a communicant member of the church. Then at the age of eighteen he became Sunday School Superintendent at the Charing Cross Road Church. In what spiritual condition was he? He had been baptised as an infant. He had been brought up in ‘the pale of the Church’. He had professed faith. He was outwardly decent and respectable. He was developing into a useful Church officer, showing signs of promise. In short, he was an ideal member of the Presbyterian Church. It has been written that ‘he was certainly conditioned to think of himself as a Christian... [seeing it] as a God-appointed process in virtue of which we become Christians by family ties and by church connections’. The truth is, however, ‘he had never been a Christian at all’.⁵

⁵ Murray p57.

I pause at this point just to emphasise the words, ‘at the suggestion of the minister’, ‘certainly conditioned’, ‘in virtue of’, and ‘family ties and by church connections’. I repeat the point I am making. No church can infallibly claim to be free of deceivers and the deceived, but admitting that is a far cry from what I am criticising. The Presbyterian infant baptism system encourages church membership by unregenerate men and women who are conditioned to think of themselves as Christians by virtue of their birth – their family or church connections. It is actually part of the deceiving process, deceiving unregenerate sinners. And it is wicked.

To proceed. Many years later, when he was giving a series of lectures on preaching, Lloyd-Jones referred to this time in his experience and confessed:

For many years I thought I was a Christian when in fact I was not. It was only later that I came to see that I had never been a Christian and became one. But I was a member of a church and attended my church and its services regularly. So anybody assuming, as most preachers did, that I was a Christian was making a false assumption. It was not a true assessment of my condition. What I needed was preaching that would convict me of sin and make me see my need, and bring me to true repentance and tell me something about regeneration. But I never heard that. The preaching we had was always based on the assumption that we were all Christians, that we would not have been there in the congregation unless we were Christians. This, I think, has been one of the cardinal errors of the church especially in this present century.⁶

⁶ D.Martyn Lloyd-Jones: *Preaching and Preachers*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, reprinted 1973, p146. Here we meet that bewitching preoccupation, ‘one of the cardinal errors’ – inclusivism! That is, believers and unbelievers all mixed together in the life of the church, with unbelievers made to feel at home with the regenerate, engaged in what is supposed to be spiritual life in the *ekklēsia*. Today, inclusivism seems to be the determining policy of most evangelical churches. Everything has to bow down at its altar. Nothing must be said and done in any way to cause the slightest offence to the unregenerate, to ‘drive the fish away’. Quite the opposite! Judging by their discourses, many preachers treat all and sundry as believers. From the opening remarks of a service – often bright and breezy – to

These words carry far more weight than any of mine. Their criticism is far more powerful. Some may dismiss my criticisms of the infant baptism system as coming from one who stands aloof. Be that as it may, the words I have just quoted come from one who was right at the heart of it. Look at what it did for him. It would seem fair to say that he was converted in spite of the system, not by means of it. This is what ‘presumptive regeneration’ comes to.⁷ He was presumed to be a Christian – by his family, by the church and by his ministers; above all, by himself! It was tragic.

But he was not an isolated case. I urge you, reader, to give due weight to his criticisms. For Lloyd-Jones went on to say that it was not his experience alone, but he had met it many, many times in his ministry. In truth, it was the ‘most common experience in conversation with people’ who approached him after hearing him preach, he said. He had discussed this, and other associated matters, with an old man many years before – how had the church in Wales got like it? How had the spirituality of the church become so poor? The old man referred to the 1859 revival and said:

Before that there had been a distinction between ‘the church’ and ‘the world’. The tests of admission to membership had

the closing chat (often about yesterday’s football, the latest shopping bargain, or last week’s holiday; rarely about spiritual matters) over a cup of tea, what used to be called ‘divine service’ has been reduced, in many cases, to little more than ‘man service’, a cheery social gathering tinged with religion. And if anybody dares to question it....!!! ‘Don’t you believe in evangelism?’! ‘Evangelism’ – a non-biblical word – has become the god of the age. Reader, if you should think that by expressing such sentiments I have no concern over sinners and have no interest in seeing them converted, read my *The Gospel Offer is Free* and *Amyraut & Owen Tested: And Found Wanting*, or listen to my sermons.

⁷ Some infant baptisers sprinkle babies because they are convinced that they are already regenerate, the infants having been born to a parent (or grandparent...) who is (or was) ‘in the covenant’. Others do it because they are convinced that the sprinkling actually regenerates. Others presume one or the other. See my *Infant* pp228-229.

been very strict, with the result that prior to 1859 there were always a number of people attending public worship and preaching who were listeners and adherents only and had not become members of the church.

As Lloyd-Jones put it:

This is a most interesting and important point. How rarely does one find this in the church today... The change took place partly as the result of the great movement of the Spirit in revival, and the increasing tendency to regard the baptised children of church members as Christians. The result was that the preachers regarded all the listeners as Christians and stopped preaching evangelistically... It was assumed that everyone was a Christian, and the ministry was devoted entirely to edification, with the result that a generation grew up that had never known the power of the gospel, and never really heard preaching which was likely to convict of sin. As I have said I personally belong to that generation... I was received into the church because I could give the right answers to various set questions; but I was never questioned or examined in an experimental sense. I cannot reprobate too strongly this tendency to assume that because people come to church that they therefore must be Christians, or that the children of Christians are of necessity Christians.⁸

Lloyd-Jones clearly – and rightly – looked back upon his experience with horror. When preaching on Ephesians 4:4-6, he said:

A work of preparation is absolutely essential in us before we can be parts of the church. Much has to be done to the natural man before he can become a member of the body of Christ... Failure to realise this and to remember it accounts for most of the problems in the life of the Christian church today, as it has always done throughout the centuries. The visible church, alas, is composed of many who have never undergone this work of regeneration... There are many and varied ways in which people become members of the visible church. It is sometimes a pure accident of nationality... In other instances it is often a pure accident of belonging to a certain family or to a certain tradition. These are the factors that so frequently operate.

⁸ Lloyd-Jones: *Preaching* pp147,151-152.

Many of us have known what it is to be made a member of a church, not because the Holy Spirit had done anything in us, or to us, but simply because of one of these accidents. When I was personally received as a full member of the Christian church in which I was brought up, I was asked one question only. I was asked to name the brook which our Lord and his disciples had to cross while going from the upper room to the place of trial. I could not remember the answer to that question; nevertheless I was received into full membership of the church. That literally is what happened to me at the age of fourteen. And similar things have happened to many others. Perhaps at a given age the minister or clergyman had a conversation with your parents, suggesting it was time for you as an adolescent to become a full member of the church. You may in addition have attended an instruction or preparation class, or confirmation class. You had no living experience; you did not really know what it was about fundamentally; it was ‘the thing to do’. That is what so often happens in the visible church... You can become a member of the visible church in that way; you will never become a member of the body of Christ in that way. Before we can become members of the body of Christ the Holy Spirit has to do a work of definite preparation.⁹ As you are by nature you cannot be bound to the Lord in all his glory and his purity, because by nature you are ‘a child of wrath, even as others’, ‘dead in trespasses and sins’.¹⁰

If ever there was a condemnation of the notion of ‘visible churches’, this is it. But even so, Lloyd-Jones persisted in thinking and speaking in terms of the ‘visible’ church. There is no such thing in Scripture. Grievously, many today think and speak in terms of visible churches when they actually belong to churches which are supposed to be based upon the New Testament pattern of church membership. This loose talk must

⁹ I would express this differently – bearing in mind the connotations of ‘preparationism’. You have to be born again. But Lloyd-Jones’ thrust was right.

¹⁰ D.Martyn Lloyd-Jones: *An Exposition of Ephesians 4:1-16. Christian Unity*, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1980, pp60-61.

be stopped. If we use wrong words based on mistaken notions today, we shall have the wrong practice itself tomorrow.

These quotations from the experience of Lloyd-Jones express what I have tried to say and they have put it far more eloquently. Reader, please do not dismiss my words as coming from a man with an arrogant, critical spirit – I realise that Baptist churches have their faults; indeed they badly need reform in many of these very areas, including preaching. The discipline, too, in many churches which practise believer's baptism is unspeakably weak or non-existent in these days, and it must be put right as a matter of the utmost urgency. But my contention is that the infant baptism system itself tends to produce the terrible results you have just read about. And do not forget, the one who made the assertions was a minister of the Presbyterian Church. I urge all my readers to ponder what he said.