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1. An Encounter with Reformed Baptists

Vacation in England.

Before I explain my title let me tell you something. For the last two summers we spent our vacation in Haywards Heath, a town on the railway line from London to Brighton. Anyone acquainted with the South English coastal area will believe that in both these summers, with beautiful sunny weather, we enjoyed the charming, hilly landscape, the beach, and also many things that reminded us of England's rich history. However, there was more to be fascinated by. We had contact there with a certain church group, a less superficial contact than mostly results from vacations abroad. We had heard a few things at home about the Baptist Chapel in Cuckfield, a village near Haywards Heath.

In both vacations we exchanged homes with people who were members of this Baptist church. In Kampen they came in touch with the life of our churches, we in Haywards Heath came in touch with theirs.

What kind of Baptists?

To get a better picture of these English Baptists, we must delve into the book *Credo*, by Dr. L. Doekes¹. The author speaks of two currents among the English Baptists of the 17th Century: one group went in the direction of Arminianism, the other in the Reformed line. The former denied original sin, preached free will, and taught election on the ground of foreseen faith. This persuasion, however, was also opposed. This led, among other things, to the appearance of a confession in 1677 in London, which was in complete accord with the Westminster Confession, except for the chapters on church government and baptism.

Prof. Doekes mentions the date 1677, but this confession is better known as "The Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689." For fear of persecution they did not dare sign this confession -- indeed drafted in 1677 -- until 1689, at a meeting of ministers and other deputies. These Baptists are called the Particular Baptists; in contrast to the General or Arminian Baptists, they cling to a doctrine of unconditional election and particular grace (cf. *Credo p. 134ff.*).

It would be a long story if we traced the history of the Reformed Baptists from 1677 until today. It was a history of prosperity and

¹L. Doekes, *Credo*, Ton Bolland, Amsterdam, 1975.

decline. We only want to mention one name here, that of C. H. Spurgeon (1834-1892) also well-known in Holland. In the bookcases of the Reformed Baptists you may possibly find Calvin, but you will certainly find Spurgeon. It is really remarkable what this great preacher meant to thousands, and what he still means for thousands today. Spurgeon preached and wrote with a freshness and penetration that still strikes us today.

Given the decadent life of the church in England, one cannot but be struck by the great zeal with which this numerically very small group of Reformed Baptists disseminates the old truth at home and abroad. My copy of "The Baptist Confession of Faith 1689" is a copy of the *sixth* edition published since 1958. Every two months I get the magazine *Reformation Today*, copies of which are sent by the Cuckfield Baptist Church to hundreds of addresses throughout the world. One then sees what a privileged position a *small* group also has when they publish in a language spoken all over the world.

However, there is more that could make us jealous. Under the competent leadership of Rev. Errol Hulse, a magazine with substantial material is published in a handy size and modern appearance; there are contributors from England, but also from South Africa, Australia and the United States. True, they do not form a religious community with classical meetings and brotherhood in the world. Averse from all ecumenical organizations (they are neither associated with the World Council of Churches [WCC] nor with the International Council of Christian Churches [ICCC]), they have their own publications, conferences and visitations, which strengthen the bonds. Isolated in the big Baptist world, with which they hardly feel any connection because of important confessional differences, they support each other and also understand the call to spread the gospel. So it comes about that sermons delivered in Cuckfield can be listened to sometime afterwards through a radio station on an island somewhere in the Indian Ocean, if I am well-informed.

During our holidays we have attended some of the meetings of the Cuckfield Baptist Church. One evening I listened to a Bible-reading by a theology student on Hebrews 6:4-6. He did not evade the questions which the passage brings up. Can we speak of perseverance of the saints when a person, who has once been enlightened by and become a partaker of the Holy Spirit, still commits apostasy afterwards? His answer to that question was in conformity to the Canons of Dort. As a matter of fact, the Canons are well known there as the "Five Points".

2. Similarity Between Circumcision and Baptism

"Children of Abraham."

We will gladly explain, also at the request of friends across the Channel, why we cannot follow the Reformed Baptists in their rejection of infant baptism. The book *Children of Abraham* by David Kingdon,² a Reformed Baptist, greatly facilitates a discussion of the differences between us, since it gives a clear presentation of the Reformed Baptist standpoint. One who reads this book is as a matter of course provoked to account for his faith regarding infant baptism in spite of Kingdon's arguments. For Kingdon wants to let the Bible speak. Well then, we will also try to let the Bible speak!

This is not the first time that this book has been discussed in our magazine. Prof. Doekes also paid some attention to it (*De Reformatie*, Volume 48, no. 48 and Volume 49, no. 1 and no. 29). The matter is current enough to write about it once more; besides, Prof. Doekes did not only go into Kingdon's book, but also discussed other publications in relation to infant baptism. We wish to restrict ourselves to Kingdon's book in order to devote more attention to it.

One covenant.

On one particularly cardinal point the explanation of David Kingdon undoubtedly affects us. Anyone speaking to Baptists about the issue of infant baptism will have experienced that our appeal to circumcision in the Old Testament, which has been replaced by baptism in the New Testament, fails to make any impression. For to a great many Baptists circumcision was nothing more than a "carnal" circumcision and an external *sign* that the circumcised belonged to the people of Israel. In the New Testament all this is no longer of any importance. Hence, according to the Baptists, one cannot extend the line from circumcision to baptism. There is no relation between the strictly national affair in the old Testament and baptism in the New Testament.

With such arguments, further discussion appears futile. To us the conviction that baptism has come in the place of circumcision is of decisive importance. If we cannot maintain this, our defense of infant baptism becomes precarious. We see more than just a "national" sign

²D. Kingdon, *Children of Abraham*, Carey Publications Ltd., Haywards Heath, 1975.

and an "external" affair in circumcision, because we do not wish to deny the unity of the Old and New Testaments at any price. For the issue at stake here is the one covenant that God made with Abraham and had him seal to his children with circumcision, a covenant that continues in the New Testament dispensation. We believe that we, with our children, may be called Abraham's offspring, and that therefore not only believing parents but also their children may receive the sign of the covenant. Because our children are covenant children, the sign of the covenant -- baptism, in the New Testament -- may not be denied them.

What is now remarkable in Kingdon's reasoning? He wants to adopt the Reformed standpoint by not cutting the ties between the Old and New Testaments. He wants to speak of only one church, as the people of God of all times and places; of one way to salvation in Jesus Christ; of one destination for all saints, the new Jerusalem. For Kingdon, the unity of the Old and New Testaments is the unity of the one covenant.

Circumcision not so carnal.

What, according to Kingdon, does this imply for the relation between circumcision and baptism? Of course we must listen carefully here! Kingdon frankly says that he dissociates himself from many Baptists who, in reaction to the doctrine of infant baptism, want to speak of circumcision as only an "Old Testament teaching" (p.17). But what does he say himself?

First he explains that circumcision in the Old Testament was not so "carnal." Did not Abraham receive the sign of circumcision as the seal of the righteousness by faith, (Rom 4:11)? Do we not read in the law that the foreskin of the *heart* had to be circumcised (Deut 10:16, 30:6; cf. Jer 4:4)? Does not Paul clearly show who is a Jew and what true circumcision is? For the apostle says that "he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, not is true circumcision something external and physical. He is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart, spiritual and not literal. His praise is not from men but from God" (Rom 2:28ff.). Therefore, Kingdon rightly concludes, circumcision as a rite refers to the necessity of circumcision of the heart. So you cannot say that circumcision refers only to something "natural" (e.g., being an Israelite, owning a plot of ground in Canaan, etc.). Kingdon also rejects Karl Barth's notion of a division between "carnal" circumcision and "spiritual" baptism, and will not hear of such a dualism (p.25ff.).