

Foundations

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Contents

Editorial 1
Ralph Cunningham

**Water-Ordeals of the Seventeenth Century:
Should Baptism Divide?** 5
Derek W. H. Thomas Reformed Theological Seminary;
Minister at First Presbyterian Church, Columbia, SC;
Editorial Director of the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals

**Infant Baptism: Putting Old Wine into New
Wineskins?** 18
John Stevens National Director of the FIEC

**A Covenantal View of Baptism and
Its Relationship to Evangelism** 43
Kevin J. Bidwell Minister of Sheffield Presbyterian Church

The Anglican Doctrine of Baptism 65
Lee Gatiss Director of Church Society; Visiting Lecturer in
Church History at Wales Evangelical School of Theology

**"Let the Little Children Come to Me....
But Should We Baptise Them?"** 90
Mike Gilbert-Smith Minister of Twynholm Baptist Church,
Fulham, London

**Review Article: David F. Wright (ed),
Baptism: Three Views** 111
Jonathan Leeman Editorial Director for 9Marks

**Book Review: Robert Letham, A Christian's Pocket
Guide to Baptism – The Water that Unites** 117
Justin Mote Director of the North West Ministry Training
Course

Foundations

Foundations is an international journal of evangelical theology published in the United Kingdom. Its aim is to cover contemporary theological issues by articles and reviews, taking in exegesis, biblical

theology, church history and apologetics, and to indicate their relevance to pastoral ministry. Its particular focus is the theology of evangelical churches which are committed to biblical truth and evangelical

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EDITORIAL

It is a pleasure to welcome you to Issue 63 of *Foundations*, the theological journal of Affinity. Let me introduce myself as the new editor: I am the husband of Anna and the father of Sophie, Zachary and Jacob. After a seven year career lecturing law at the Universities of Durham and Birmingham, I trained for pastoral ministry at the Wales Evangelical School of Theology (WEST) and Westminster Theological Seminary (London). I am currently Assistant Pastor at Aigburth Community Church, Liverpool and hold honorary research positions at WEST and the University of Birmingham.

This first editorial gives me the opportunity to share with you my vision for the journal as I, along with the Affinity Theological Team and Board of Associate Editors, seek to steer *Foundations* in the years ahead. The first issue of *Foundations* was published in 1978 and since that time it has enjoyed a reputation for providing rigorous theological analysis of contemporary issues of direct relevance to the church. I am committed to that remaining the vision of the journal. As a former lecturer I greatly value academic rigour and as a church pastor I am convinced of the importance of applying such rigour to real life issues arising in the life of the church. For that reason, the majority of contributions will continue to be from serving church pastors and missionaries.

We have decided to introduce a system of peer review for the journal. This is intended to ensure that academic excellence is maintained and that contributions benefit from the input of expert opinion prior to publication. The Board of Associate Editors has also been added to with Bob Fyall (Cornhill Scotland), David McKay (Reformed Presbyterian Church of Ireland), Ted Turnau (Anglo-American University, Prague) and Keith Walker (SIM) joining the team. I am sure the journal will greatly benefit from their expertise in Biblical Studies, Apologetics, Systematic Theology and Missiology. In the years ahead we intend to continue publishing articles and reviews by experienced church pastors and theologians who are committed to the confessional standards of Affinity. We also hope to develop as a forum in which younger pastor-scholars can start out on a writing ministry with the benefit of the rigorous peer review process that is now in place. Although most issues will feature articles from across the spectrum of topics covered by the journal, we will from time to time publish issues dedicated to a specific theme (such as the current one). Since the journal exists to serve the needs of the church, I am keen to hear from you about ideas for submissions or themes for future issues.

Turning to the current issue, I am delighted to be able to present five articles and two reviews examining the topic of baptism. In 1977, Donald Bridge and David Phypers co-authored a book outlining opposing views on

baptism with the title *The Water that Divides*. As Robert Letham has pointed out (*A Christian's Pocket Guide to Baptism* [Fearn: Christian Focus, 2012] p 1), it is tragic that baptism should be viewed in this way since it is the sign of our union with Christ and his church and ought to compel us to unity rather than division. Nevertheless we must accept that throughout the history of the church the topic of baptism has divided, and continues to divide, conscientious Bible-believing Christians. Sadly, debates in the past have often been characterised by more heat than light. Claims that the Bible provides “no basis for infant baptism” or that “Baptists are proof-texters who neglect the redemptive-historical hermeneutic” rarely persuade. In truth, debates have all too often been characterised by an uncharitable ignorance of the opposing side’s view. It is hoped that this issue of *Foundations* will go some way to addressing popular misconceptions.

The distinction between primary and secondary issues is one that has Scriptural warrant (1 Cor 15:3) but which is prone to mislead if taken beyond its original Scriptural context. Baptism is often said to be secondary because it is not a gospel issue – we can hold different views on baptism without denying the gospel of grace. That is true, and something that all Protestants would want to affirm, but describing baptism as a secondary issue gives the misleading impression that it is relatively unimportant or non-essential for the health of the church. This is incorrect because, while not a gospel issue, baptism certainly is an ecclesologically-determinative issue. What we believe about baptism and the proper subjects of baptism necessarily impacts our ecclesiology because baptism is the sign of entry into the church; it determines who we consider to be members of the visible church. Therefore it is impossible to be indifferent about baptism without being indifferent about the nature, constitution, health and purity of Christ’s bride. Furthermore, since baptism is one of only two sacraments given to the church by the Lord Jesus, to treat it as secondary and unimportant is to neglect and show indifference to one of Christ’s most wonderful gifts. One wonders whether contemporary indifference towards baptism is a symptom of the pervasive influence of a super-Zwinglian doctrine of the sacraments which adopts an anthropocentric rather than a theocentric focus. Finally, since most Christians agree that baptism is a biblically-mandated command, whether that be a command to baptise (Matt 28:19) or to be baptised (Acts 2:38), indifference about the nature and timing of baptism is nothing less than indifference concerning obedience to Christ. Thus while baptism most certainly is not a gospel issue it is nevertheless a crucial issue for the life and health of the church. Accordingly, it is appropriate for a whole issue of *Foundations* to be dedicated to it.

In the first of our five articles, Derek Thomas provides a comparative analysis of the doctrine and practice of baptism in the Westminster, Savoy and Baptist Confessions of the seventeenth century. He shows that while the

Baptist Confession conceives of baptism as a sign *of* faith and of the *possession* of spiritual realities, the Westminster Confession and Savoy Declaration see baptism as a sign *to* faith and of the *promise* of these spiritual realities held out in the gospel to those who believe. Thomas shows that there is a fundamental difference between the Confessions in their understanding of the nature, scope and continuity of the covenant of grace between the Old and New Testaments. He also assesses the significance of the Westminster and Savoy statements on the efficacy of baptism, insisting that neither teaches baptismal regeneration effective *ex opere operato*. Rather, he suggests that they reflect the baptismal realism evident in the New Testament itself.

The articles by John Stevens and Kevin Bidwell provide contrasting covenantal arguments defending credobaptism and paedobaptism respectively. Stevens disputes the claim that circumcision was a sign of regeneration, mortification and justification, insisting instead that it pointed to God's covenant-keeping faithfulness and the consequences of apostasy from the covenant. As such, the sign of circumcision was fulfilled and rendered obsolete in the coming of Christ. Christian baptism differs in that it is a symbol not of God's promise of salvation but of the receipt of the blessings of the inaugurated new covenant. This new covenant is radically individualistic in contrast to the typological corporate categories of the old covenant – and therefore baptism is a sign for believers alone. Stevens uses this biblical theological framework as a basis for discussing the timing of baptism, age of baptism, the status of children in the church and the relationship between baptism and church membership.

Bidwell's article seeks to defend the covenantal view of baptism as set out in the teaching of the Westminster Standards. He argues that circumcision was the shadow of baptism in the Old Testament and that both signs point to the shed blood of Christ, circumcision doing so prospectively, baptism retrospectively. Bidwell seeks to respond to three common arguments raised against paedobaptism and challenges Calvinistic credobaptists to consider whether a focus upon baptism symbolising an individual's visible gospel obedience and faith betrays an Arminian tendency in the doctrine. In the final section of the article, Bidwell considers the relationship between baptism and evangelism suggesting that the church needs to rediscover its responsibility towards its members (both adults and children) in building them up in the faith. It is right to distinguish between the children of believers and unbelievers and a return to whole family public worship, regular times of "family worship" and catechising will help to facilitate the Trinitarian discipleship of families in the local church.

Lee Gatiss' contribution examines the theology of baptism as found in the foundational documents of the Church of England. He identifies the Protestant and Reformed nature of the Anglican doctrine but shows that it is

non-Zwinglian, emphasising that baptism is not only a sign of our confession of faith but also a sign, instrument and seal of the grace of God. Gatiss identifies an example of the Articles' dependence on Calvin's *Institutes* and shows that the Articles are not prescriptive concerning the biblical basis for infant baptism or the necessity of baptism. In his discussion of the Book of Common Prayer, Gatiss addresses its language of baptismal regeneration arguing that it is liturgical language, claiming in the judgment of charity and faith what has been prayed for throughout the service. He takes issue with Broughton Knox's relegation of the importance and appropriateness of baptism and contends that there is a need for Anglican evangelicals today to be better equipped to defend the biblical theological basis of paedobaptistic practice.

In the final article, Mike Gilbert-Smith addresses the vexed question of the age at which people should be baptised upon their own profession of faith. He reasons from the concurrence of baptism and church membership that, since the responsibilities of church membership (participating in the Lord's Supper, administering church discipline and maintaining doctrinal purity) are inappropriate for children, baptism as the entry point of church membership should be delayed until adulthood. Gilbert-Smith addresses a number of common objections raised against this view and argues that delayed baptism does not imply that children are incapable of being genuine disciples but rather that the appropriate locus of their discipleship ought to be the family, rather than the church.

Before ascending to heaven, the Lord Jesus told his disciples: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt 28:18-20). May God use the contributions to Issue 63 of *Foundations* to help each of us to be faithful in living out that Great Commission.

Ralph Cunnington
November 2012

WATER-ORDEALS OF THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY: SHOULD BAPTISM DIVIDE?

Derek W. H. Thomas*

A comparative/contrasting consideration of the doctrine and practice of baptism in the Westminster, Savoy and Baptist Confessions of the seventeenth century. The paper concludes that there is evidence for a different understanding of the nature and scope of the covenant of grace as well as issues relating to the mode of baptism.

The doctrine of baptism raised temperatures in the mid-seventeenth century as much as it seems to do in our own time. Among some of the more colourful titles to appear in the wake of stormy debates was one by an anonymous (Baptist) author, Trepidantium Malleus,¹ *A Snake in the Grass Caught and Crush't, or a Third and Last Epistle to a now furious deacon in the Church of England, the Reverend Mr. George Keith, with some remarks on my former epistles to him, especially that against plunging in Baptism.*² Rev. Keith and the pseudonymous Malleus spared little in tempering their language as they publicly debated the demerits of each other's position on baptism.

Equally intemperate offerings came from the pens of a Presbyterian, Rev. Richard Carpenter, *The Anabaptist Washed and Washed and Shrunk in the Washing*, and the (Baptist) Ranter, Samuel Fisher, *Baby-baptism mere Babism*.³ Less intemperate titles (if not content) included Thomas Wall's *A Necessary treatise for this age, or A Plain discovery of that great error of denying baptism with water to the children of believers*.⁴

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¹ His real name was Samuel Young. Another of his colourful titles began, "*Foxonian Quakers Dunces Lyars and Slanderers...*"

² Published in 1700.

³ Both were published in 1653, just after the Westminster Assembly dissolved.

⁴ Published in 1669. Another book written by Mr. Henry Danvers, *A Treatise of Baptism*, received a hostile reception. Mr. Obed Wills responded with his own work of 259 pages entitled *Infant Baptism Asserted and Vindicated by Scripture and Antiquity: In Answer To a Treatise of Baptism lately published by Mr. Henry Danvers: Together with a full Detection of his Misrepresentation of divers Councils and Authors, both Ancient and Modern. With a just censure of his Essay to Palliate the horrid Actings of the Anabaptists in Germany* (1674). The following year Danvers republished his *Treatise of Baptism. Wherein That of Believers, and that of Infants, is examined by the Scriptures; with the History of both out of Antiquity: making it appear, that Infants Baptism was not practiced for near 300 years after Christ*, adding, *A Reply to Mr. Wills in Defence of the said Treatise And A Second Reply to Mr. Baxter in Defence of the same As also A Rejoynder to Mr. Wills his Vindictae With an answer to his Appeal*. Book titles have certainly

Baptism – what does it mean?

Given this vitriolic engagement, it might come as a surprise to find that seventeenth century Calvinists were of the same mind as to the *need for*, and *meaning of* Christian baptism. Presbyterians, Congregationalists and Baptists insisted that baptism was necessary because the natural man inherits original sin and is constitutionally totally depraved. A survey of the Westminster Confession, the Savoy Declaration of the Congregationalists, and the 1677 Baptist Confession,⁵ reveals a surprisingly unanimous opinion as to its meaning:

Westminster Confession (1646)	Directory for the Publick Worship of God (1645)	Savoy Declaration (1658)	Baptist Confession (1677/89)
“Sacraments are holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace, immediately instituted by God, to represent Christ and His benefits; and to confirm our interest in Him: as also, to put a visible difference between those that belong unto the Church and the rest of the world; and solemnly to engage them to the service of God in Christ, according to His Word” (27:1) “Baptism is a sacrament of the New Testament, ordained by Jesus Christ, not only for the solemn admission of the party baptized into the visible Church; but also to be unto him a sign and seal of the covenant of grace, of his ingrafting into Christ, of regeneration, of remission of sins, and of his giving up unto God, through Jesus Christ, to walk in the newness of life.” (28:1)	“It is instituted by our Lord Jesus Christ: It is a seal of the covenant of grace, of our ingrafting into Christ, and of our union with him, of remission of sins, regeneration, adoption, and life eternal: That the water, in baptism, represents and signifies both the blood of Christ, which takes away all guilt of sin, original and actual; and the sanctifying virtue of the Spirit of Christ against the dominion of sin, and the corruption of our sinful nature: That baptizing, or sprinkling and washing with water, signifies the cleansing from sin by the blood and for the merit of Christ, together with the mortification of sin, and rising from sin to newness of life, by virtue of the death and resurrection of Christ.”	“A sign and seal of the covenant of grace... representing Christ and his benefits, confirming our interest in him, and solemnly engaging us to the service of God in Christ, according to his Word” (28:1) “a sign and seal of the covenant of grace, of his ingrafting into Christ, of regeneration, of remission of sins, and of his giving up unto God through Jesus Christ to walk in newness of life” (29:1)	“a sign of fellowship with Christ in his death and resurrection, of being grafted into him, of remission of sins, and of giving up oneself to God, through Jesus Christ, to live and walk in newness of life” (29:1)

changed. See further, Kimberly McWhorter, “A Seventeenth Century Stew: Midwives, Infant Baptism and William Harvey,” in *The Cornerstone Historical Journal*, No. 25, June 2004.

⁵ Although written in 1677, the document was not made public until after the Restoration and the Toleration Act of 1689 when Baptists were given equal civil tolerance along with Established churches in England and Wales.

Among the points of agreement are:

- (1) Baptism represents Christ and the privileges of fellowship (communion) with him
- (2) Baptism represents forgiveness of sins
- (3) Baptism engages those who receive it to serve Christ in a manner that is in accord with “newness of life”

However, paedobaptist and credobaptist agreement on these particular issues hides significant disagreement as to the meaning of baptism. Baptist logic argues that baptism represents these agreed aspects because the one receiving baptism is *already* a believer. Baptism is a sign and seal *of* faith and therefore signals union with Christ, forgiveness of sins, and the need for sanctification in an already realised sense. Paedobaptists view it differently. Baptism is not so much a sign *of* faith, but a sign *to* faith. It points to realities that are actualised when faith is exercised but does not suggest when faith becomes a reality (or, that faith may never occur).

For infants, as much as for professing adult believers, baptism both signs and seals union with Christ, forgiveness of sins, and the need for sanctification, but *not* in the sense that these are already in possession. Rather, they are a sign and seal of the gospel in which these benefits are promised to the one who believes. Subjectively, fellowship with Christ, forgiveness of sins, and sanctification are benefits only the regenerate knows. But objectively, baptism points to the gospel that elicits the response.⁶

Further points of difference relate to the robust covenant theology of the Westminster Divines and to the hermeneutical importance of a unified covenant of grace that spans both Testaments and includes, by way of implication, a unity of administration to those considered covenant members. Fundamental to the Westminster Divines is a theological premise that baptism is a sign and seal of the new covenant, which carries with it historical precedence of previous covenants in redemptive history. As such, there is already an expectation of *inclusion* rather than *exclusion* at the dawn of the new covenant era. This issue is of singular importance in ascertaining the core issue that divided paedobaptists and credobaptists.

⁶ Note the words of Sinclair Ferguson: “To be baptized is to be baptized into Christ’s death (Rom 6:1-4). This is the inner meaning of the sign... This explanation does not mean that the sign *contains* what is signified any more than the word that is preached *contains* Christ. Rather both are means by which the Spirit can and does communicate to receptive faith the divine blessings the signs signify. Obversely, when met with stubborn unbelief, these signs will confirm the judgment they imply.” *Baptism: Three Views*, ed. David F. Wright (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2009), 92-93.

A credobaptist hermeneutic, particularly one made from an assumption of a bi-covenantal theological framework (as the 1677/1689 Baptist Confession certainly is),⁷ must address the issue of the way baptism and circumcision relate within the *one* administration of the covenant of grace that spans both old and new covenants. The statement in the 1677/89 Baptist Confession on the covenant is illuminating: "This covenant is revealed in the gospel; first of all to Adam in the promise of salvation by the seed of the woman, and afterwards by farther steps, until the full discovery thereof was completed in the New Testament; and it is founded in that eternal covenant transaction that was between the Father and the Son about the redemption of the elect" (BC 7:3). Stating the relationship of covenant succession in redemptive history this way avoids the tricky issue of how covenantal *continuity* works from Abraham to Paul. Westminster's more expansive declaration, including references to circumcision, is clearer: "There are not therefore two covenants of grace, differing in substance, but one and the same, under various dispensations" (WCF 7:6). This opens the door for a view that insists that not only is there a continuity of one covenant of grace (as the 1677/89 Confession also suggests), but also continuity in the *administration of its signs and seals*.

The Westminster Assembly's discussions on baptism spanned almost a year (1645-46). The length of the debates reflect work done on separate documents (The Directory for the Publick Worship of God [1645], and The Confession of Faith [1646]), both of which have significant things to say about the sacraments in general and baptism in particular.⁸ Prominent in the discussions was Stephen Marshall, a commissioner of the Assembly. Preached as devotional exercises held in the Abbey-church of Westminster to some of the Commissioners, Marshall chose as his topic, "On the Baptizing of

⁷ By "bi-covenantal" we mean a fundamental division of history into a pre-lapsarian covenant of works and a post-lapsarian covenant of grace. "The first covenant made with man was a covenant of works, wherein life was promised to Adam; and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience. Man, by his fall, having made himself incapable of life by that covenant, the Lord was pleased to make a second, commonly called the covenant of grace; wherein He freely offers unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ; requiring of them faith in Him, that they may be saved, and promising to give unto all those that are ordained unto eternal life His Holy Spirit, to make them willing, and able to believe" (Westminster Confession 7:2,3). The 1677/89 Baptist Confession does not employ the language "covenant of works" (though the idea is implicit in Chapter 7:1), but it clearly defines the post-lapsarian economy as under a covenant of grace: "Moreover, man having brought himself under the curse of the law by his fall, it pleased the Lord to make a covenant of grace, wherein he freely offereth unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ, requiring of them faith in him, that they may be saved; and promising to give unto all those that are ordained unto eternal life, his Holy Spirit, to make them willing and able to believe" (1677/89: 7:2).

⁸ For details of the exact dates and discussions, see David F. Wright, "Baptism at the Westminster Assembly," in *The Westminster Confession into the 21st Century*, ed. Ligon Duncan (Fearn: Mentor, 2004), 1:161-186.

Infants”.⁹ The sermon was immediately attacked by the leading Baptist, John Tombes, and was equally speedily defended in a 250-page treatise, *A defence of infant-baptism in answer to two treatises, and an Appendix to them concerning it, lately published by Mr. Jo. Tombes: wherein that controversie is fully discussed* (1646).

The minutes of the Assembly¹⁰ record a remarkable degree of discord over many issues, including the following:

- (1) Whether baptism should be applied to the head *and* face of a child.¹¹
- (2) Whether baptism should involve one or three administrations of water (reflecting the Trinitarian “name” of Matt 28:19).
- (3) Could a midwife bring a child for baptism in circumstances where the mother and father were unable to attend and the life of the child was under an imminent threat of survival? Questions of delaying baptisms were also discussed.
- (4) Whether the parents ought to be catechised at the time of the baptism.¹²
- (5) Are private baptisms allowable?
- (6) Can infants whose parents are ungodly be baptised (as was the practice among the Continental Reformed churches)?¹³
- (7) The efficacy of baptism.

It should be remembered that some of the proposals offered by the Westminster Divines were revolutionary. Outlawing private baptisms, for example, was passed relatively easily despite evident lack of precedent. Edmund Calamy (1600-1666), who presided over one of the largest cong-

⁹ Later published, it amounted to over 70 pages. See, <http://www.westminsterassembly.org/transcribed-works/a-seromon-of-the-baptizing-of-infants/>. Accessed 9/6/12.

¹⁰ Until the publication of Chad van Dixhoorn (ed.), *The Minutes and Papers of the Westminster Assembly, 1643-1653*, 5 Vols. (Oxford University Press) later this year (2012), all conclusions based on previous editions of the minutes of the assembly are tentative.

¹¹ The Directory included the instruction, “by pouring or sprinkling of the water on the face of the child.”

¹² Issues of infant mortality loomed large in the seventeenth century and a sense of urgency was understandable, particularly if private baptisms were deemed unlawful. Regulative Principle issues surfaced (argued vociferously by Samuel Rutherford): it was deemed insufficient to argue the merits of catechising without direct Scriptural warrant for the practice. It was, in fact, Parliament, rather than the Assembly, who denied the validity of public catechising. Presbyterians have long since reversed the hand of the State in the baptism of children.

¹³ Guilielmus Apollonius, a minister at Middelburg, wrote to the Assembly arguing for the position that so long as the children came from “godly stock,” they ought to be baptised. The practice was based on the belief that the nation can be regarded as federally holy. Apollonius visited London in the summer of 1645 and was invited to attend the Assembly. His book, *A Consideration of Certain Controversies*, was given the unusual approbation of a public recognition by the prolocutor, William Twisse. See, Robert Letham, *The Westminster Assembly* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2009), 326-27.

regations in London, noted that no baptisms had taken place in the church in the previous three years before the Assembly discussed this matter.¹⁴ Robert Baillie, whose letters written during the Assembly are filled with delicious insights, wrote to his cousin, William Spang (who was in the Netherlands at the time), expressing his sense of relief at the ease with which private baptisms were outlawed:

We have carried, with much greater ease than we expected, the publickness of baptisme. The abuse was great over all this land. In the greatest parosch [parish] in London, scarce one child in a-year was brought to the church for baptisme. Also we have carried the parents presenting of his child, and not their midwives, as was their universall custome.¹⁵

Babies and the font

The 1677 Baptist Confession is clear enough as to the subjects for baptism: “Those who actually profess repentance towards God, faith in, and obedience to our Lord Jesus Christ, are the only proper subjects for this ordinance” (29:2). Both the Westminster and Savoy Confessions express similar statements: “Those that do actually profess faith in and obedience unto Christ” (WCF 28:4; SD 29:4).¹⁶

	Westminster Confession (1646)	Directory for the Publick Worship of God (1645)	Savoy Declaration (1658)	Baptist Confession (1677/89)
Subjects (Adults)	“Those that do actually profess faith in and obedience unto Christ” (28:4)		“Those that do actually profess faith in and obedience unto Christ” (29:4)	“Those who actually profess repentance towards God, faith in, and obedience to our Lord Jesus Christ, are the only proper subjects for this ordinance” (29:2)
Subjects (Children)	“also the infants of one, or both, believing parents, are to be baptized” (28:4)		“also the infants of one or both believing parents are to be baptised, and those only” (29:4)	

¹⁴ See, D. F. Wright, “Baptism and the Westminster Assembly,” 176.
¹⁵ *The Letters of Robert Baillie, A. M., Principal of the University of Glasgow, M.DC. XXXVII – M.DC.LXII*, ed. David Lang. 3 vols. (Robert Ogle, Edinburgh, 1841-2), II:204-5.
¹⁶ A Committee was established in September 1646 to consider the writings of John Tombes, chief critic of the paedobaptist position during the Assembly.

Baptists and paedobaptists affirm the baptism of believers and, with the collapse of Christendom in the Western world, it is not uncommon to see more and more cases of believer's baptism, reflecting what must surely have been the case in the infancy of the church as it spread across pagan Europe.

The inclusion of the qualifier "only" in the 1677 Confession limits baptism only to believers, whereas both Westminster and Savoy add the clause: "...also the infants of one, or both, believing parents, are to be baptized" (WCF 28:4; SD 29:4). In addition, the Savoy includes the phrase "and those only," reflecting a suspicion in the late seventeenth century that discerning who may qualify as "believing parents" continued to be something of a problem.

Interestingly, the New England ministers adopted the Savoy Declaration virtually intact in the Reforming Synod 1679-1680 but left out "and those only." The reason behind this omission was a desire not to limit baptism to the children of those who were converted. The Congregational churches of the New England colonies adopted the "Half-Way Covenant," allowing children and grandchildren of the original settlers whose piety was considerably less than their forebears to be baptised. Savoy evidently agreed to no such practice.

No grounds for the baptism of infants are given in either the Confession or the Savoy Declaration, though the proof texts (added later in the case of the Confession) disclose the biblical underpinnings and theological contours of paedobaptist logic in the seventeenth century. In addition, the Directory for the Publick Worship of God provides further theological justification for the practice of baptising the children of believers:

That the promise is made to believers and their seed; and that 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, and to the outward privileges of the church, under the gospel, no less than the children of Abraham in the time of the Old Testament; the covenant of grace, for substance, being the same; and the grace of God, and the consolation of believers, more plentiful than before: That the Son of God admitted little children into his presence, embracing and blessing them, saying, *For of such is the kingdom of God*: That children, by baptism, are solemnly received into the bosom of the visible church, distinguished from the world, and them that are without, and united with believers; and that all who are baptized in the name of Christ, do renounce, and by their baptism are bound to fight against the devil, the world, and the flesh: That they are Christians, and federally holy before baptism, and therefore are they baptized. (Directory, Of the Administration of the Sacraments)

Earlier in the Westminster Confession, the Divines expressed a definition of the church in keeping with their paedobaptist belief: the church consists of those who profess their faith *and* their children (WCF 25:1). But what is the theological argument in defence of the baptism of infants of believers as understood by the Confession? Piecing all the information together provides the following line of argument:

- (1) Children of believers are “within the covenant” (Larger Catechism 166).
- (2) “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, and to the outward privileges of the church” (Directory).
- (3) The principle of “believers and their seed” as having collective significance in both old covenant and new covenant: “the promise is made to believers and their seed... under the gospel, no less than the children of Abraham in the time of the Old Testament” (Directory).
- (4) The unity of the administration of the covenant of grace, “for substance, being the same” in both Old and New Testaments. The consolations of the new covenant cannot therefore be viewed as less than those of the old covenant in which Abraham’s children received the sign and seal of the covenant (Directory).
- (5) Jesus “admitted little children into his presence, embracing and blessing them, saying, *For of such is the kingdom of God*” (Directory).
- (6) The Directory’s viewing as significant children “born within the church” is an appeal to 1 Cor 7:14, that the children of one believing parent is “holy” and separate from the world. The Confession adds the sentence, “the infants of one, or both, believing parents, are to be baptized” providing as proof texts, 1 Cor 7:14 and the words of Peter at Pentecost in Acts 2:38-39, “the promise is to you and to your children.” Denying the view that the children of believers are in covenant with God renders Pentecost as the greatest act of excommunication in the history of the church.

As we have already seen, the shape of the argument in favour of paedobaptism relies significantly on the contours of covenant theology as expressed in seventeenth century understanding. In particular, as we have seen, note ought to be taken of the robust expression of covenant continuity (rather than discontinuity) that pertains to the administration of the covenant of grace in both the Old and New Testaments, concluding with the statement, “There are not therefore two covenants of grace, differing in substance, but one and the same, under various dispensations” (WCF 7:6). This statement, missing from the 1677/89 Baptist Confession in its briefer chapter on the covenant (Chapter 7), leaves credobaptist logic with only one option: baptism can only be applied to “those who actually profess repentance towards God, faith in, and obedience to our Lord Jesus Christ.” The divide stems from a fundamental disagreement on how the covenant of grace is viewed within Old and New Testament administrations. For Baptist polemics, a radical discontinuity exists at the point where the new order of things is seen to begin. Consequently, there is discontinuity of administrations of respective signs and seals.

“Dipping is not necessary”

A key issue in the Westminster debates on baptism related to its mode: “Dipping of the person into the water is not necessary; but Baptism is rightly administered by pouring, or sprinkling water upon the person” (WCF 28:3). The identical statement occurs in the Savoy Declaration (SD 29:3).

	Westminster Confession (1646)	Directory for the Publick Worship of God (1645)	Savoy Declaration (1658)	Baptist Confession (1677/89)
Mode	“Dipping of the person into the water is not necessary; but Baptism is rightly administered by pouring, or sprinkling water upon the person” (28:3).	“For the manner of doing of it, is not only lawful but sufficient, and most expedient to be, by pouring or sprinkling of the water on the face of the child, without adding any other ceremony.”	“Dipping of the person into the water is not necessary; but baptism is rightly administered by pouring or sprinkling water upon the person” (29:3)	“Immersion, or dipping the person in water, is essential for the proper administration of this ordinance” (29:4)

“Dipping... is not necessary” has been viewed as a concessionary statement along the lines of Calvin’s view of the mode of baptism.¹⁷ Thus, the statement is read as suggesting that baptism means “immersion” but it is not necessary to immerse; sprinkling or pouring is equally valid.

Ecumenically pleasing as such a view might prove to be, had the Westminster Confession taught such a view, it is almost certainly *not* what the Divines intended, and that for at least two reasons. First, the minutes reveal that to the fore in the discussion were the views of John Lightfoot, whose expertise on matters linguistic and theological relating to baptism were second to none. Lightfoot was insistent that baptism meant “effusion” or “sprinkling” *only*. What the Confession intends is that “dipping” is *not* what baptism means. Once again, the Directory must be allowed to interpret the Confession. Its advice is explicit: “the manner of doing of it, is not only lawful but sufficient, and most expedient to be, by pouring or sprinkling of the water on the face of the child.”

¹⁷ “Whether the person baptised is to be wholly immersed, and that whether once or thrice, or whether he is only to be sprinkled with water, is not of the least consequence: churches should be at liberty to adopt either, according to the diversity of climates, although it is evident that the term baptise means to immerse, and that this was the form used by the primitive Church.” John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Trans. Henry Beveridge (Peabody: Hendricksen, 2008), 868 [4.15.19].

“They are Christians” – the efficacy of baptism

Equally controversial were the views of the Divines on the efficacy of baptism.

Westminster Confession (1646)	Directory for the Publick Worship of God (1645)	Savoy Declaration (1658)	Baptist Confession (1677/89)
<p>“grace and salvation are not so inseparably annexed unto it, as that no person can be regenerated, or saved, without it: or, that all that are baptized are undoubtedly regenerated” (28:5)</p> <p>“The efficacy of Baptism is not tied to that moment of time wherein it is administered; yet, notwithstanding, by the right use of this ordinance, the grace promised is not only offered, but really exhibited, and conferred, by the Holy Ghost, to such (whether of age or infants) as that grace belongs unto, according to the counsel of God’s own will, in His appointed time” (28:6).</p>	<p>“The inward grace and virtue of baptism is not tied to that very moment of time wherein it is administered... and that outward baptism is not so necessary, that, through the want thereof, the infant is in danger of damnation, or the parents guilty, if they do not condemn or neglect the ordinance of Christ, when and where it may be had”</p>	<p>“grace and salvation are not so inseparably annexed unto it, as that no person can be regenerated or saved without it; or that all that are baptized are undoubtedly regenerated” (29:5).</p> <p>“The efficacy of baptism is not tied to that moment of time wherein it is administered; yet notwithstanding, by the right use of this ordinance, the grace promised is not only offered, but really exhibited and conferred by the Holy Ghost to such (whether of age or infants) as that grace belongs unto, according to the counsel of God’s own will in his appointed time” (29:6).</p>	

The words that proved most controversial were those found in the Directory relating to infants presented for baptism: “they are Christians, and federally holy before baptism, and therefore are they baptized.” In addition, the words of the Confession itself prove equally difficult: “the grace promised is not only offered, but really exhibited, and conferred, by the Holy Ghost” (28:6). The Savoy Declaration makes identical statements (SD 29:5-6).

Few statements have occasioned more reaction, then as much as now. The Westminster Divines viewed baptism as the instrument and occasion of regeneration by the Spirit, of the remission of sins, of ingrafting into Christ (cf. 28:1). “The Confession teaches baptismal regeneration,” concludes David F. Wright, and given his status as both a historian and theologian, it takes a degree of courage to fault him.¹⁸ But fault him we do, and that on the “variety of qualifications” that Wright himself provides but found inconclusive. These qualifications demonstrate that whatever else the Divines understood by baptism, they did *not* view it as a regenerating ordinance, effective *ex opere operato*. The evidence includes:

- (1) The inward grace and virtue of baptism is not tied to the moment of administration of baptism (Directory and WCF 28:6).
- (2) Despite the importance of baptism, the neglect of it does not warrant a conclusion that the infant is in danger of damnation (Directory¹⁹, WCF 28:5).
- (3) The clear reference to the work of regeneration taking place “in God’s appointed time” should be understood as occurring before, during, or after baptism (WCF 28:6²⁰).
- (4) The insistence on the Holy Spirit as the one who confers what baptism signifies moves the focus away from the ordinance itself as having regenerating powers (WCF 28:6).

Given these express qualifications, it is difficult not to draw the opposite conclusion than that of Wright’s, viz., that whatever the Divines were attempting to say it was *not* a view in sympathy with baptismal regeneration. *What* the Divines were attempting to express is admittedly difficult to define with any degree of clarity. That the “clarity” was not obvious to later generations of Presbyterians is evident from the fact that the offending phrase “they are Christians” was dropped in subsequent revisions of the Directory. Even the language of the Confession needs deft explanation. Thus, Wayne Spear, explaining the language of “exhibited” and “conferred” in WCF 28:6 insists in a parenthetical note that they are “synonyms”.²¹

Difficult as we may find the language of the Westminster Confession and Directory, the degree of baptismal realism in the language of the Divines is no more difficult than what we find in the pages of the New Testament. One

¹⁸ See, David F. Wright, “Baptism and the Westminster Assembly,” 169.

¹⁹ “Outward baptism is not so necessary, that, through the want thereof, the infant is in danger of damnation.”

²⁰ “...the grace promised is not only offered, but really exhibited, and conferred, by the Holy Ghost, to such (whether of age or infants) as that grace belongs unto, according to the counsel of God’s own will, in His appointed time.”

²¹ Wayne Spear, *Faith of our Fathers* (Pittsburgh: Crown & Covenant Publications, 2006), 148.

imagines similar misgivings and charges of baptismal regeneration over such sentences as these, particularly if in view are infants:

- (1) "We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death" (Rom 6:4).
- (2) "Having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God" (Col 2:12).
- (3) "Baptism... now saves you" (1 Pet 3:21).

The degree of linguistic gymnastics Presbyterians admittedly engage in to avoid the charge of teaching baptismal regeneration is equally as necessary to exegete Scripture as it is to exegete the Confessional statements on baptism. Of course, this is a point credobaptists employ, concluding the invalidity of paedobaptism. But the point I make here is simply that *for paedobaptists*, the Confessional and Directorial statements are no more difficult than the New Testament itself. It is a mark of the degree to which paedobaptist polemics have influenced contemporary paedobaptist thought that the latter find Pauline and Petrine statements of baptism in need of severe qualifications.

Conclusion

In analysing the three major Reformed Confessions of the seventeenth century, I have tried to show that it is not simply the *mode* or *subjects* of baptism that is at issue; it is an understanding of the covenant of grace as it operates redemptive-historically. Perhaps, the issue can be summed up in the citation of a single Old Testament verse in the proof texts provided in the Westminster Confession's statement on baptism. Justifying infant baptism, the Confession cites Genesis 17:7, "And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you." Its absence from the 1689 Confession is understandable (all proof texts are from the New Testament alone), but telling. As one prominent credobaptist expresses it, following an affirmation of his commitment to a covenantal hermeneutic: "Furthermore, we believe that the promises to Abraham, which are fulfilled in the new covenant, are *not* the passing on of covenant signs to infant seed, but the promised outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon his elect Jew and Gentile seeds through faith in Christ."²² At the point of new covenant inauguration, there is a radical discontinuity in administration of signs and seals, a discontinuity that from a paedobaptist perspective renders Pentecost

²² Fred Malone, *The Baptism of Disciples Alone: A Covenantal Argument for Credobaptism Versus Paedobaptism* (Cape Coral: Founders Press, 2003), 54-55.

the greatest excommunicatory act in the history of God's redemptive purposes.

The issue of baptism is hermeneutical as much as it is anything else. And for Westminster and Savoy, a hermeneutic of continuity in the administration of the gospel in both Testaments required a continuity of recipients of its signs and seals. It was more than a mere division over water. What Westminster and Savoy saw, in distinction to the 1677/89 Confession, was the need for a *canonical* approach to baptism.²³ There was more than water and infants at issue. It was, in fact, an understanding of the *modus operandi* of the covenant of grace.

²³ Cf. Robert Letham's words: "When we discuss baptism we need to adopt a canonical perspective, taking into view the whole Bible." *A Christian's Pocket Guide to Baptism* (Fearn: Christian Focus Publications, 2012), 15.

INFANT BAPTISM: PUTTING OLD WINE INTO NEW WINESKINS?

John Stevens^{*}

The long historic division between paedobaptists and credobaptists results from significantly differing biblical theologies. This article will suggest that classic paedobaptist arguments are based on a misreading of the relationship between the Abrahamic covenant and its fulfilment in the new covenant inaugurated by the death and resurrection of Jesus. A thoroughgoing salvation-historical approach to the unfolding fulfilment of the covenant leads to the inevitable conclusion that baptism is not the replacement of circumcision as a sign of the promises of the covenant of grace, but a dramatisation of the receipt of salvation and the forgiveness of sins effected by baptism in the Spirit, which is the primary blessing of the new covenant. The children of believers are not included in this new covenant by birth, but only by spiritual rebirth. The implications of this understanding for baptismal practice are considered. Baptism should follow as closely as possible upon conversion, and is primarily intended to assure the convert of their new status and new life in Christ. Convinced paedobaptists should not be required to be rebaptised as a condition for church membership or participation in the Lord's Supper. Both paedobaptists and credobaptists are urged to practice charity, accepting each other because they have been accepted by Christ and baptised by his Spirit.

For more than four hundred years Protestant Christians, who are united in their rejection of the Roman Catholic sacramental understanding of baptism as conferring regeneration, have been divided as to the appropriate administration of baptism. One reason why this division has proved so difficult to resolve is the frustrating lack of conclusive biblical evidence, whether didactic or narrative, as to the proper subjects of baptism. The New Testament contains no explicit account of the baptism of infants, nor instructions to evangelists, elders or parents to baptise children. It contains no explicit instructions for the baptism of the children of believing parents when they profess personal faith. Paedobaptists and credobaptists can thus argue until they are blue in the face about the likely implications of the "household" baptisms recorded in Acts without either achieving the exegetical equivalent of a knock-out punch.¹

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¹ See for example Ben Witherington, *Troubled Waters*, (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2010), 2-3; Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1958), 634, 636; Letham, *A Christian's Pocket Guide to Baptism*, (Fearn: Christian Focus, 2012), 2.

In reality both paedobaptists and credobaptists are agreed about a great deal regarding the biblical teaching on baptism. They agree that individuals who come to faith in Christ, and who have not been baptised previously (which is the increasingly normative reality in post-Christian western society), ought to be baptised. They are agreed that the act of baptism symbolises a complex nexus of spiritual realities, including cleansing from sin, regeneration to new life, union with Christ in his death and resurrection, and the receipt of the Holy Spirit. They are also generally agreed that there is little evidence of the practice of infant baptism in the early church before the end of the second century.

In the end the differences between paedobaptists and credobaptists come down not so much to the exegesis of particular passages referring to baptism, but to different understandings of biblical theology and the relationship between the covenant God made with Abraham and the new covenant that was inaugurated by the Lord Jesus. The strongest theological arguments in favour of infant baptism emphasise the unity of the covenant of grace established between God and Abraham, so that the children of Christians are regarded as being in exactly the same position in relation to the new covenant in Christ as were the children of Abraham in relation to the covenant God made with him. Since circumcision has been replaced by baptism as the sign of the new covenant, it is argued that the new covenant sign should be applied to the children of believers in obedience to the command to Abraham to circumcise his children in Gen 17.

It is the purpose of this article to question this classic paedobaptist understanding of the relationship between the covenant with Abraham and the new covenant inaugurated through Christ, and hence to argue against the equation of circumcision with baptism and the legitimacy of using the command in Gen 17:1-14 in support of infant baptism.² It will be argued that the classic Reformed view has failed to give sufficient attention to the progressive nature of revelation and covenant development through the history of salvation, and that it has sought to back-project a full new covenant understanding into the types and shadows which God established in order to point ahead to the coming reality.

It will be asserted that the basic relationship of the covenants in the history of salvation is that of promise and fulfilment (2 Cor 1:20; Luke 24:44). The foundational covenant promise made to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (Gen 3:15, 21) is progressively fulfilled through the cov-

² I am primarily interacting with the arguments developed by Louis Berkhof in his *Systematic Theology*, and Robert Letham in his recent *A Christian's Pocket Guide to Baptism*, as representative of the classic Reformed position. I have also benefitted from Ben Witherington, *Troubled Waters: Rethinking the Theology of Baptism* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2007) and Thomas R. Schreiner & Shawn D. Wright, *Believers Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ* (Nashville: B & H Publishing, 2006).

enants made with Noah, Abraham, Israel and David, and reaches its climax in Jesus who inaugurates the promised new covenant through his death and resurrection. Whilst Dispensationalism³ fails to read the unfolding biblical story of salvation as a single unified programme for the salvation of God's elect people, Jew and Gentile alike, through a series of interlinked covenants, and hence denies the unity of the covenant of grace, classic Reformed theology fails to recognise the progression of the fulfilment of the covenant of grace, from typological physical fulfilment to antitypical spiritual reality in Christ.⁴ In the light of this promise-and-fulfilment dynamic it will be argued that circumcision and baptism serve essentially different functions. Circumcision is given as a *sign of the promise* God made to Abraham, which is ultimately a promise of the coming of Christ and the blessings he will bring. Baptism is a *symbol of the fulfilment of the promise* God made to Abraham and the enjoyment of the blessing. As such baptism does not function as a sign of God's promise of future salvation, but as a sign of the inaugurated experience of salvation, including the forgiveness of sins, new birth to eternal life, union with Christ and the receipt of the Spirit. It is only appropriate for those who have received the blessings of the new covenant by faith in Christ.

The Relationship Between Biblical Covenants and their Accompanying Signs

It is necessary to start by considering the relationship between the biblical covenants and the signs which God commanded to accompany them, since paedobaptists argue that circumcision is an outward sign of an inward spiritual reality, and hence that circumcision is parallel to baptism. They argue that circumcision was a sign of regeneration, the mortification of the flesh, and justification by faith.⁵ This is thought to be the case because of the way in which the Old Testament speaks of the need for the Israelites to circumcise their hearts, and how in Rom 4:11 Abraham's circumcision is said to have been a seal of his righteousness by faith.

Whilst circumcision certainly came to be regarded in the Scriptures as a metaphor for the need for complete dedication and wholehearted loyalty to God, in Gen 17:9-14 circumcision is not presented as if it were an outward sign of spiritual reality, but rather as a physical enactment of the promise that God made to Abraham in the covenant, which was to serve to remind

³ See for example Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism, Revised edition* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2007).

⁴ The approach adopted in this article is akin to that of Peter J. Gentry & Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012).

⁵ See for example Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 633-634.

him and his descendants of the promise that he had made to them. The purpose of the sign was not to reveal outwardly the inward spiritual character of Abraham, nor to initiate him into membership of God's people, as this had already occurred, still less to effect any inward change in him, but rather to reassure him and his descendants of the trustworthiness of God's word of promise to him and of the need to keep the conditions of the covenant.

This is, in fact, the common characteristic of the signs that accompany the biblical covenants. There are three main Old Testament covenants which have accompanying signs: the covenant with Noah, for which the accompanying sign is the rainbow (Gen 9:12-17); the covenant with Abraham, for which the accompanying sign is circumcision; and the covenant with Israel for which the accompanying sign is the Sabbath (Exod 31:12-18). It is perhaps possible to regard God's promise to Adam and Eve in the garden as a covenant, in which case the covenant sign could be the animal skins that he provided for them to wear, which would be a physical enactment of his promise to remove their sin by sacrifice and covering (Gen 3:21).

However, taking just the three covenants that unequivocally have accompanying signs, it seems that the relevant sign is a physical enactment of the substance of what is promised in the covenant. Thus in the case of the Noahic covenant, the rainbow is a physical manifestation of the triumph of the sun over the rain, which reminds of God's promise never to flood the earth again with water. Similarly in the case of the Sinai covenant the sign of the Sabbath physically enacts God's promise of rest and holiness to his people, reminding them of the purpose of their redemption from slavery in Egypt (Exod 32:17; Deut 5:12-15). The signs are not outward manifestations of inward spiritual realities, but physical reminders of the substance of the promises that God has made. High Presbyterian theology seems to me to be shaped by an incipient sacramentalism,⁶ which rejects a bare memorialist understanding of the covenant signs, yet there is no indication in the biblical texts themselves that the signs are anything other than reminders of the promises that God has made to his people.

We should expect, therefore, that circumcision should function as a physical embodiment and reminder of the promise that God made to Abraham and his descendants. When viewed in this way the ritual of circumcision makes eminent sense as the covenant sign. God's command to Abraham to circumcise himself and his descendants is given after Abraham

⁶ See for example Letham, *A Christian's Pocket Guide to Baptism*, 182 who cites John Knox's rejection of a bare memorialist understanding of the sacraments: "We utterlie damne the vanitie of they that affirme Sacramentes to be nothing ellis bot naked and baire signes. No, wee assuredlie believe that be Baptisme we ar ingrafted in Christ Jesus, to be made partakers of his justice, be quhilk our sinnes are covred and remitted." See also Peter J. Leithart, *The Baptized Body* (Moscow: Canon Press, 2007), 1-28.

questions whether he can truly trust God's word of promise that his descendants will inherit the Promised Land. God had already entered into his covenant with Abraham to this effect in Gen 15, where the covenant-making ceremony involved the cutting of various animals. The fundamental promise made in the covenant is the promise of offspring from Abraham's own body, since this is a pre-requisite of the fulfilment of God's promise that he will become a great nation and that his descendants will inherit the land. Circumcision thus enacts the promise God made to Abraham in the covenant and brings assurance that it will be fulfilled. It physically marks Abraham and his descendants with a reminder of the covenant-making ceremony of Gen 15, and thereby of the accompanying promise, and also warns of the consequences of breaking the covenant by abandoning covenant loyalty to the sovereign who made the promise. It is entirely appropriate that the covenant sign is borne in the penis of Abraham and his descendants, since the covenant promise concerns his fertility. It reminds the bearer of the promise to Abraham that his literal "seed" will produce his metaphorical "seed" of physical descendants. The sign was also especially apposite to the Israelites as a reminder of the God's promise of fertility in contradistinction to the fertility gods of the Canaanites.

Circumcision therefore, like the prescribed signs of the other Old Testament covenants, serves as a physical enactment of the chief promise of the covenant. It was not a sign of personal salvation or regeneration, nor even of covenant membership. It was a physical reminder of the promise to Abraham that he would have descendants who would take possession of the Promised Land. It was a means by which the covenant promise would be remembered and trusted in subsequent generations, especially whilst the descendants of Abraham endured four hundred years of slavery in Egypt.⁷ It was a reminder that, despite appearances, God was working out his plan for his people in the salvation history they were experiencing.

This function of circumcision is supported by the fact that it was applied to physical descendants of Abraham who were outside of the elect line through which the covenant promises would be fulfilled. Thus in Gen 17:23 Ishmael was circumcised, even though he would never personally be the heir of the promises. Ishmael's circumcision was surely not a sign of any inward spiritual reality in his life. Similarly Esau was circumcised alongside Jacob, despite the fact that in his case God had revealed that he was not the elect bearer of the promise (Gen 26:23; Rom 9:10-13).⁸ His circumcision was not a sign of an inward spiritual reality, and certainly provides no support to the

⁷ See the context of the covenant in Genesis 15:13-16.

⁸ Douglas Wilson, *To a Thousand Generations: Infant Baptism – Covenant Mercy to the Children of God* (Moscow: Canon Press, 1996), 45.

concept of presumptive regeneration as the basis for circumcision and baptism.⁹

This understanding of the significance of circumcision is also borne out by Paul's exposition of the substance of the covenant promise in the New Testament. In Gal 3:15-19 he explains that the covenant promise made to Abraham was not a promise of personal salvation as such, but the promise of a "seed". This promise initially referred to Isaac (Gal 4:21-31), but supremely referred to the promise of Christ, who is the true "offspring" to whom the promise referred.¹⁰ The covenant entered between God and Abraham in Gen 17 was a step along the way towards the fulfilment of the covenant of grace God entered between himself and Adam and Eve in Eden, the substance of which was the coming of a snake-destroying offspring (Gen 3:15). The covenant ceremony and the mark of circumcision are added to bring assurance and confidence in the promise.

Examination of the original purpose of circumcision is relevant to the interpretation of Rom 4:11 where Paul says that Abraham "received circumcision as a sign, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised." Credobaptists reject the view that this verse establishes the generic purpose of circumcision as an outward sign of regeneration and justification. One possibility is to take Paul as referring exclusively to Abraham, such that his circumcision was a sign of his personal righteousness, since he had in effect received credo-circumcision. However an alternative is to regard circumcision as a sign and seal of the promise that Abraham believed in order to obtain justification, namely the promise that God would bring life from his dead body (Rom 4:19-20). This would fit with the context, since Paul is arguing that Abraham's faith in the promise of God is the pattern for justifying faith for those who are not circumcised. Justification is not a consequence of faith in the abstract, but of specific faith in the resurrecting power of God. Abraham's justifying faith was faith that God could bring life from his dead body, whereas the justifying faith of the Christian is faith in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead (Rom 4:19-20).¹¹ Old Testament justifying faith is faith that looks forward to the coming of the offspring and trusts God's promise that he will come, whereas New Testament justifying faith looks back and trusts that the resurrected Lord Jesus is the offspring who has come.

⁹ Stephen J. Wellum, "Baptism and the Relationship Between the Covenants", Ch 4 in Schreiner & Wright, *Believer's Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ* (Nashville: B & H Publishing, 2006).

¹⁰ See for example Wilson, *To a Thousand Generations*, 44, who adopts this interpretation of the significance of circumcision.

¹¹ N. T. Wright, *Romans*, The New Interpreter's Bible 10 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 502.

Finally it might be noted that this analysis of the nature and function of the covenant signs commanded by God in the Old Testament raises the possibility that baptism ought not to be regarded as the formal covenant sign of the new covenant at all. Nowhere in the New Testament does Jesus command baptism to be practiced as a specific new covenant sign, nor do he, or the apostolic authors of the epistles, equate it with circumcision directly.¹² The only specific mention of a sign in connection with the new covenant is to be found in Jesus' teaching regarding the Lord's Supper. In Luke 22:20 Jesus declared of the cup of wine he offered after supper "this cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you". Paul adds in 1 Cor 11:25 that he commanded: "do this as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." This would suggest that it is the Lord's Supper which functions as the sign of the new covenant, not baptism. As in the case of the Old Testament covenants the cup enacts the promise that God has made, namely the forgiveness of sins through the shed blood of the Lord Jesus. In just the same way that the rainbow, circumcision and Sabbath were given to enable God's people to remember the covenant promises, so too is the Lord's Supper. It is therefore perhaps somewhat ironic that the vast majority of paedobaptists practice only credo-communion, and deny the instituted covenant sign to those who they believe to be members of the church. The controversial Federal Vision theology has highlighted this apparent inconsistency.¹³

Circumcision and the New Covenant

Although circumcision was not given to Abraham as an outward sign of an inward spiritual reality, it subsequently came to be utilised as a metaphor speaking of the need for the Israelites to undergo an inward spiritual transformation that they evidently lacked. The physical sign of the Abrahamic covenant thus became a prophetic picture of the need for a new covenant. The call for the Israelites to circumcise their hearts is found in both Deuteronomy and Jeremiah, books which emphasise the need for real inner heart devotion to God in place of mere external legalistic obedience and which make clear that the Israelites cannot bring about this inner transformation themselves. It requires a new work of God, equivalent to a new creation or a resurrection. In Deut 10:15-16 Moses calls upon the Israelites to circumcise their hearts, yet in Deut 30:6 it is clear that their hearts

¹² See Martin Salter, "Does Baptism Replace Circumcision? An Examination of the Relationship between Circumcision and Baptism in Colossians 2:11-12," *Themelios* 35, no. 1 (2010): 15-29; David Gibson, "Sacramental Supersessionism Revisited: A Response to Martin Salter on the Relationship Between Circumcision and Baptism" *Themelios* 37, no. 2 (2012): 191-208.

¹³ Steve Wilkins & Duane Garner (eds), *The Federal Vision* (Monroe: Athanasius Press, 2004); Guy P. Waters, *The Federal Vision and Covenant Theology: A Comparative Analysis* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2005).

will only be circumcised when God himself delivers them from the exile they will endure because of the uncircumcised hardness of their hearts. Similarly Jer 4:4 calls the people of Judah and Jerusalem to circumcise their hearts, and 9:26 describes the house of Israel as uncircumcised in heart and spiritually identical to the pagan nations despite the fact that they bear the physical sign. Resolution of the problem will only come when God makes a new covenant with his people, as a result of which he will put his law in their minds and write it on their hearts, which is in effect to circumcise their hearts (Jer 31:31-34).

The fact that the physical sign of circumcision comes to be developed as a metaphor for a different kind of inward circumcision undermines the argument that circumcision was, from the outset, an outward sign of an inward spiritual reality. It was not a sign of Abraham's mortification but of God's promise of an offspring. As the endemic sin and unfaithfulness of God's people became evident the call to be circumcised in heart made clear that something more than external circumcision was necessary, and that it had not taken place. If circumcision was originally given as an outward sign of an internal reality then it was an empty sign, since God had not in fact worked the inward reality. The inward reality would only be realised when Christ inaugurated the new covenant.

This understanding of circumcision as a sign that came to point prophetically ahead to the need for a new inward reality, rather than as a sign of that inward reality, is also supported by Paul's use of the language of baptism in relation to the Old Testament events in 1 Cor 10:1-5. Paul does not equate the imagery of baptism with circumcision, but with the deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt through the Red Sea. Baptismal language is not used to describe the covenant promise, but the fulfilment of that promise in the salvation of the Israelites. The passage of the people of Israel through the waters of the Red Sea is a picture of their passage through death and the wrath of God into new life. The Israelites were "baptised" because they experienced salvation and entered new life. It is not surprising that baptism in the New Testament pictures the experience of salvation rather than the mere promise of salvation. Baptism is associated not with circumcision, but with experiencing the redemptive liberation of the Exodus, passing through death into the freedom to serve and worship God. Baptism is thus the sign of having experienced the new and true Exodus in Jesus, which involves passing through the wrath of God and into the freedom of resurrection life (Rom 6:1-14).

The Fulfilment of the Sign of Circumcision by Jesus

It is clear from the New Testament that the physical sign of circumcision is no longer a prerequisite for membership of the people of God and admission

to the assembly of his people. However this was by no means evident to many Jewish Christians during the apostolic era. The matter was in principle resolved by the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15, but Paul's letters show that he had to fight a constant rear-guard action against those who taught that circumcision was required of those who put their faith in Jesus, whether as a prerequisite for justification or as a crucial step of sanctification by submission to the yoke of the Torah.

In the mass of New Testament material regarding the place of circumcision in the Christian life there is nothing that would suggest that baptism was the replacement of circumcision as the covenant sign, and therefore that it ought to be practiced in obedience to Gen 17.¹⁴ If this were the case then it would surely have been the most obvious and convincing riposte to the arguments of the circumcision party that Gentile believers had been baptised, and that they had thus complied with the new requirement for covenant admission. The fact that they had undergone the replacement sign would render it unnecessary to undergo the precursor sign. It might also be thought that, if circumcision had been replaced by baptism, then Jewish Christians would have ceased circumcising their children and started baptising them instead. However Acts 21:20-25 makes clear that Jewish Christians in Jerusalem were continuing to circumcise their children, and Paul takes steps to rebut false rumours that he is teaching them not to do so.

The New Testament material therefore provides no support for a simplistic replacement of circumcision by baptism as a covenant sign, with a static covenant of grace stretching from Abraham to the church, encompassing the children of believers but with a different sign once Jesus has come. Rather the reason why circumcision is no longer necessary is because it has been fulfilled and rendered obsolete. Its typological significance has been exhausted by fulfilment in Jesus and the final revelation of the mystery of salvation in him. This goes not just for circumcision, but for all the shadows of the Law, including the sacrificial system, the priesthood, the Sabbath, and the ritual purity laws that symbolise cleanliness and purity. The theological shape of the New Testament is thus not that circumcision has been replaced by baptism, but rather that circumcision has been fulfilled by the inauguration of the new covenant and rendered unnecessary.¹⁵

Jesus, by his coming and his sacrificial death, has fulfilled the original typological significance of circumcision. He is the long-awaited offspring of Abraham who will gather his descendants and bring them safely into the true promised land of the new creation. In his death on the cross he bears the

¹⁴ Wellum, "Baptism and the Relationship Between the Covenants".

¹⁵ Cf. Jesus' language of fulfilment in the Sermon on the Mount: Matthew 5:17-20. For the basic dynamic of promise and fulfilment in the new covenant see Douglas J. Moo, "The law of Christ as the fulfilment of the law of Moses" in *Five Views on Law and Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 319-376.

covenant curse deserved by Israel because of their unfaithfulness to God. Just as the penalty for covenant breaking was death, symbolised in the covenant made with Abraham by the cutting of the animals and enacted and remembered in circumcision by the cutting of the foreskin, so Jesus took that judgment on himself as a substitute and representative of his people. Paul explains the significance of Jesus' death in such terms in Col 3:11, where he speaks of the death of Jesus as his circumcision. On the cross Jesus was cut off from his people, and from his Father, fulfilling the warning of Gen 17:14. As a result there is no need for those who come after him to be circumcised. The promise enacted in circumcision has been fully fulfilled. It no longer needs to be remembered in the same way because the reality to which it pointed has now come. Baptism is instead the enactment of the new Exodus experienced by those who join themselves with Jesus by faith.¹⁶

In reality paedobaptist practice is inconsistent with the theology it advocates. Reformed paedobaptists argue for the baptism of children with a believing parent, but the biblical texts regarding circumcision admit of no such limitation. Gen 17 refers to the command to circumcise "your descendants after you for the generations to come". Exod 20:6 and Deut 7:9 speak of the Lord's love to a thousand generations. If baptism is to be taken seriously as the replacement for circumcision then there is no good exegetical basis for restricting baptism to the children of a believer. Why not apply the replacement covenant sign to the physical descendant of a believer many generations back, for example a grandparent or a great-grandparent?¹⁷ Unless there is some reason why the scale of God's promise has been curtailed with the coming of Christ, paedobaptists ought to be altogether more expansive in their willingness to baptise, a position which is reflected in the obligation of the Church of England to baptise the children of those who live within their parish boundaries.

The coming of the new covenant also fundamentally changes the nature of the administration of the covenant. In the Old Testament the covenant promises are pictured in corporate categories. The promise of the offspring is given to Abraham and his descendants,¹⁸ and so it is appropriate that the covenant sign is marked on the male offspring of Abraham. It is common for paedobaptists to charge credobaptists with unbiblical individualism¹⁹ in their understanding of God's dealing with his people, thus undermining the pattern of God's covenant promise to parents and their children. This critique seems especially pointed and counter-cultural in the context of a

¹⁶ Tom Holland, *Contours of Pauline Theology* (Fearn: Mentor, 2004), 141-154; Anthony Thiselton, *The Hermeneutics of Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).

¹⁷ See the summary of the historic debate on this issue in Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 642.

¹⁸ In Gal 3:1-22 Paul explains that the function of Israel in salvation-history was to be the nation through whom the promised offspring would come into the world.

¹⁹ See Letham, *A Christian's Pocket Guide to Baptism*, 29-41.

western culture which has become highly individualistic. However the biblical evidence would suggest that one of the features of the new covenant is its radically individualistic nature, which is distinct from the covenant structure that preceded it. This follows from the very nature of the new covenant as addressing the hardness of the heart, which can only ever be individual. In the new covenant personal faith, personal regeneration and the personal indwelling of God by the Spirit are the fulfilment of the Old Testament types of covenantal headship, corporate regeneration of Israel as a nation, and the corporate dwelling of God in the centre of the camp of his people, whether in the tabernacle or the temple.

The culmination of the history of Israel in the exile, which was a judgment that fell on the whole people because of the sin and unfaithfulness of the Davidic king who was their federal head, is followed by the promise of a new era in which every person will be treated as an individual rather than as part of a corporate entity. This radical new individualism is especially clear in Ezek 18 and is stated to be a characteristic of the new covenant in Jer 31:27-34. The individual nature of the new covenant is dramatically symbolised by the gift of the Holy Spirit, who is now given to each and every believer personally (Acts 2:3-4), and not just to the representative prophets and kings of the Old Testament. Justification is clearly the result of personal faith in Christ and the gospel promise, not inclusion in the faith of a corporate representative. Faith in Christ brings about inclusion in a corporate entity, the church which is his body, and enjoyment of the corporate blessings that are there enjoyed, but entrance is on a purely individual basis. One feature of this radical individualism is that women who come to faith in Christ are required to be baptised in their own right. They are no longer treated as included along with their covenant head, whether father or husband.

The full revelation that has now come in Christ makes clear that salvation was always radically individual, and merely pictured in corporate terms. As has already been seen, the fundamental promise of the covenant God made with Abraham was that of an offspring, which was fulfilled not in the people of Israel as a whole but in a unique single individual, the Lord Jesus Christ. Eschatological salvation in the Abrahamic covenant was also clearly individual in reality, since only those who had faith were truly God's elect covenant people. As Paul explains in Rom 9-11, "not all who are descended from Israel are Israel." The new covenant reveals what had been the case all along. We need to remember that the Old Testament is typology rather than spiritual reality, and its significance and meaning must be interpreted by the new covenant reality.

The radically individual nature of the new covenant also changes the status of children in relation to the covenant. Whereas the promises made to Abraham were made to him and his descendants, the fact that these

promises have now been fulfilled in Christ means that they are no longer offered in the same way. Paedobaptists are keen to stress the inclusion of children within the covenant on the basis of the promise made to Abraham, and point to how Jesus welcomed the children to come to him (Matt 19:13-15). However in context Jesus' welcome of the children seems much more satisfactorily explained as a prophetic action illustrating the kind of child-like faith and trust which is essential to entering the kingdom of God. Jesus himself regularly refers to his disciples as "little ones" (Matt 18:6-9; 25:40), and in contrast to the self-righteous Pharisees and teachers of the law they have come to him with no claim to any status by right.²⁰ Paedobaptists make little reference in their arguments to the teaching of Jesus which suggests that the inaugurated new covenant will have the effect of dividing families, and of causing generational division between parents and children (Matt 10:32-39). The new covenant community will be a community of personal faith in Jesus, not of family background. It is not just a case of grace rather than race, but of personal faith rather than parental faith.

The fulfilment of the covenant in Jesus further has the consequence that the physical descendants of Abraham are no longer in a privileged spiritual position regarding their relationship with God. As a result of their rejection of Jesus they have been cut out from the olive tree which represents the people of God through history (Rom 11:17-21). Whilst they can be grafted back in by faith in Christ, they are in the same lost condition as pagan Gentiles because of their unbelief, and are currently foreigners to the covenant blessings of God, including the forgiveness of sins and the presence of the Holy Spirit. As a result of the coming of the new covenant, the gospel promises are now made to all people alike, Jew or Gentile, irrespective of their race or their parentage. In Acts 2:38-39 Peter calls the Jews at the Pentecost festival to repentance and faith in Christ in order that they might enter into the new covenant blessings of forgiveness and the Spirit. He declared that "the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off – for all whom the Lord our God will call." Acts starts with the programmatic statement of Jesus' plan for world evangelisation (Acts 1:18), which is then unfolded through the narrative. Given this broader context of the book as whole, Acts 2:38-39, far from echoing the promise of Genesis 17 to Abraham and supporting covenant continuity, suggests a radical broadening of the promise and a fundamental alteration in the covenantal administration. The promise is now made to absolutely everyone in the world: to the Jews and also to the Gentiles who are far off.²¹ This is then demonstrated in practice in Acts 10:45, when Cornelius receives the very

²⁰ Jesus' welcome of the little children stands in direct contrast with the rich young ruler who expects to be welcomed into the kingdom because of his law-keeping obedience: Matthew 19:16-30.

²¹ Cf. also the promise of Jesus in John 3:16.

blessings promised here simply by believing the gospel. The new covenant does not make special promises to the children of believers, but makes a promise to every member of the human race, namely that “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (Acts 2:21; Joel 2:28-32). The reference to “you and your children” is not a republication of the Genesis covenant but an assurance to a people who have rejected their Messiah and put him to death that they will not be cut off and abandoned as a people entirely. Just as Jesus promised, in a few short years Jerusalem was besieged and the temple destroyed. However the gospel promises of mercy and forgiveness in Christ continue to be offered to the Jewish people for all coming generations (Rom 1:16-17; Chps 9-11).

If paedobaptist practice is justified by the argument that baptism is a sign and a seal of God’s promise, then logically the sign ought to be offered to all, irrespective of the belief or otherwise of their parents, since the promise of the gospel is made to all, and not specifically to people of a particular race or of believing families. If it signifies the gospel promises then there is no reason why it should be confined to the children of Christian parents.

It is worth noting the difficult verses in 1 Cor 7:12-14 in which Paul states that the children of a mixed marriage between a Christian and an unbeliever are made holy by the sanctifying presence of the believing spouse. Whatever these verses might mean,²² and we cannot be sure of the exact background except that it seems to be that some in Corinth are arguing that converted spouses have the right (or perhaps even the obligation) to leave their unbelieving pagan spouse, they have no direct relevance to baptism. There is no suggestion that the child concerned has been, or is required to be, baptised. The most likely referent is a converted wife married to a pagan husband who is raising their children in his religion. In such a case there is no likelihood that the child has been, or will be, baptised.

Baptism and the New Covenant

With the death and resurrection of Jesus the sign of circumcision has been exhausted of significance. It has been completely fulfilled in him and remains merely a human marker of cultural identity with no further spiritual significance.²³ The New Testament does not treat baptism as the replacement for circumcision under a continuing covenantal administration, but rather emphasises that a new era of salvation history has been entered, in which circumcision plays no necessary part. The new covenant also brings

²² For an exhaustive survey of the history of interpretation of this passage see Anthony Thisleton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 527-533. See also Witherington, *Troubled Waters*, 41-49.

²³ It is for this reason that Paul is willing to circumcise Timothy in Acts 16:3 and why he does not oppose the practice of Jewish Christians circumcising their children.

about the true inner spiritual transformation that physical circumcision had never achieved, and the lack of which it came to prophetically picture. Baptism pictures the coming of this spiritual reality, the absence of which was evidenced by the practice of mere physical circumcision. Baptism in the New Testament is a symbol not of God's promise of salvation, but of the receipt of the blessings of the inaugurated new covenant. It follows that the proper objects of baptism are those who have entered into the possession of these blessings on the basis of their faith in Christ.

Baptism does not originate in the New Testament as a covenant sign replacing circumcision. Baptism first began as a ritual conducted under the old covenant in addition to circumcision in the ministry of John the Baptist. That John's baptism is not identical to Christian baptism is evident from Acts 19:1-7,²⁴ when those who have received only the baptism of John are required to be re-baptised into the name of Jesus. The baptism of John was a washing in water which symbolised repentance and cleansing from sin. It was probably preparatory for the coming of the new covenant since the Old Testament indicated that the new covenant would come only when the people returned to God in true heart repentance (Deut 30:1-3). John's baptism was also a prophetic symbol of the promise of the coming of the Holy Spirit, which was the fundamental blessing promised in the new covenant. John's baptism pointed ahead to the time when Jesus would baptise his people with the Spirit. John's ministry was also a fulfilment of the promise of Mal 4:5-6 in which Elijah would seek to bring about spiritual renewal amongst God's people before the judgment of the day of the Lord. John's ministry was a failure in regard to the people of Israel, but a success in regard to Jesus. The people of Israel did not truly repent and prepare for the coming of the new covenant, but rejected Jesus. In consequence the judgment of the Lord was poured out on their land in the siege and destruction of Jerusalem. However Jesus, by his baptism, identified himself as the representative of repentant Israel, and as a result was able to inaugurate the new covenant blessings through his life and ministry, whilst at the same time bearing the judgment on behalf of his people through his death on the cross. He alone fulfilled the conditions of Deut 30:2 and was able to bring about the return from exile and the accompanying blessings. It follows from this that John's baptism is not exactly the same as the baptism Jesus commanded his disciples to practice after his resurrection as they preached the good news of the gospel, which is the good news of the kingdom and the new covenant, to the world.

The New Testament teaching strongly suggests that post-Pentecost baptism is not a sign of the promise of God, but is a sign that a person has

²⁴ Witherington, *Troubled Waters*, 71. Berkhof, however, argues that John's baptism was "essentially identical" to the baptism of Jesus: *Systematic Theology*, 623.

received the blessings of the inaugurated new covenant. As was noted at the start, all are agreed that baptism symbolises an integrated package of spiritual realities. It is a ritual washing, which pictures cleansing from the stain of sin. It dramatises death and burial, which pictures identification with Christ in his wrath-bearing death on the cross. It dramatises resurrection to new life, which pictures the regeneration and new birth of conversion. It dramatises the receipt of the Holy Spirit, picturing how those who share in the new covenant have been baptised by the Spirit. The language of the New Testament letters maintains the closest possible connection between baptism, regeneration and personal salvation (1 Pet 3:21; Titus 3:5), and bases its exhortation to faithful living on the ground that those who have been baptised have received the realities of which baptism is a picture and ought to live in confident assurance and faithful conformity to them.

Perhaps the most significant element of baptismal symbolism is that of receiving the Holy Spirit. In Acts, baptism is closely connected with either the promise, or the receipt, of the Holy Spirit. The prime reason why those who have only received the baptism of John need to be re-baptised in Acts 19:5 is because they have not received the Holy Spirit. Cornelius is baptised because his baptism by the Holy Spirit demonstrates that he has been accepted by God and shares in the blessing of the new covenant (Acts 10:47-48). This close connection between baptism and the receipt of the Holy Spirit is unsurprising. If, as has been argued, Jesus is the fulfilment of the promise of offspring for Abraham, then the gift of the Holy Spirit is the promised blessing of the covenant, and the deposit guaranteeing enjoyment of the new creation to come (2 Cor 1:22; Eph 1:13-14). As Paul explains in Gal 3:14, Gentile believers have received the blessing given to Abraham, which is the Spirit, by faith without circumcision. It is the gift of the Spirit which means that new covenant believers have the status of full adult sons in God's household, in contrast to Old Testament believers who were the equivalent of infant sons living under the guardianship of the law.

The relationship between baptism and the receipt of the Spirit is further evidence that baptism is not to be regarded as the replacement of circumcision as a sign of a covenant identical in its administration. A person becomes a member of the new covenant community, incorporated into and united with Jesus, by God's work of baptism by the Holy Spirit. As Paul writes in 1 Cor 12:12-13, what makes a person a member of the body, a participant in Christ, is that they have been baptised by God into the one body by the one Spirit. This refers not to some second blessing experience, but simply to receipt of the Spirit at conversion. This Spirit baptism, which effects union with Christ and regeneration, is the work of God. It accomplishes the inner transformation that the Old Testament demanded and pictured by the metaphor of "circumcision of the heart". In Col 2:10-15 this regenerating, uniting and forgiving action of Christ, which is elsewhere clearly the work of

the Spirit (Rom 2:29), is spoken of as being circumcised by Christ (Col 2:11). As was noted above, there is no language in the New Testament which speaks of baptism as a direct replacement for circumcision, and the only language specifically referring to a memorial sign of the new covenant refers to the Lord's Supper. However the New Testament does speak of the receipt of the spirit as a "seal" of the new covenant, and a guarantee of the full enjoyment of the new creation to come.²⁵ Once again this suggests that baptism is not the functional equivalent of circumcision. It is not a sign confirming God's promise, but an enactment of the receipt of the fulfilment of God's promise, and as such only appropriate for those who have already been "sealed" by God. Baptism does not point ahead to what God will do, but instead points back to what he has done for the person being baptised.

The close nexus between baptism and regeneration in the New Testament has led some paedobaptists to argue for the baptism of infants on the basis of presumptive regeneration.²⁶ In many ways this would be a more understandable justification for infant baptism, in that it does justice to what the New Testament teaches that baptism signifies. It is not a sign of a promise but an enactment of salvation received. However presumptive regeneration as a basis for baptism is exegetically unsustainable, is not supported by the practice of circumcision in the Old Testament where those who are declared not to be elect are circumcised, and is demonstrably falsified by the fact that a large number of those baptised on the basis of "presumed" regeneration turn out not to be regenerate.²⁷

Summary

As the foregoing discussion demonstrates, the relationship between God's covenant with Abraham, and between the sign of circumcision and New Testament ritual of baptism, is highly complex. This is not surprising since the whole nature of the relationship between the Old Testament covenants and their fulfilment in the new covenant, and between biblical types and their fulfilments, is also highly complex. Signs and rituals commanded by God take on rich metaphorical meanings. Baptism is multivalent, connected in different ways to cleansing, regeneration and forgiveness and baptism in the Spirit.

²⁵ 2 Corinthians 1:22; Ephesians 1:13.

²⁶ See the discussion of Berhof, *Systematic Theology*, 639; Lewis Bevens Schenck, *The Presbyterian Doctrine of Children in the Covenant* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2003). See also The Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion, Art XXVI which states that baptism is a sign of regeneration.

²⁷ See for example William H. Griffiths Thomas, *The Principles of Theology: An Introduction to the Thirty-nine Articles* (London: Vine Books, 1978), 371-387 [O/P].

The following main points have been made:

- (1) Circumcision was not an outward sign of an inward reality but a physical reminder of God's promise to Abraham/Israel.
- (2) Circumcision has been fulfilled by the inauguration of the new covenant by the death and resurrection of Jesus and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.
- (3) The new covenant is radically individualistic in contrast to the typological corporate categories of the Old Testament covenant.
- (4) Baptism pictures the receipt of forgiveness, new life by regeneration, and baptism by the Holy Spirit.
- (5) Baptism is never explicitly said to be the sign of the new covenant whilst the receipt of the Spirit is the seal of the new covenant which brings assurance to the individual, and the Lord's Supper is the memorial sign of the new covenant promises of forgiveness through the death of Christ.

It follows from all of these arguments, taken as a mutually reinforcing complex whole, that New Testament baptism should not follow the pattern of administration of circumcision, because the new covenant has ushered in a new and different era of salvation history, fulfilling the promises of the old and establishing a new shape for covenant administration which reflects the inward spiritual reality that has now come. This analysis provides a solid theological basis for the historical evidence suggesting that infant baptism was not part of the practice of the church during the first century of its existence, whilst taking seriously the covenantal nature of God's dealing with his people and the fundamental unity of his one plan of salvation which was accomplished through the life, death resurrection, ascension and Spirit-sending of Jesus.

Implications for the Practice of Baptism

The Protestant practice of paedobaptism was forged in the context of the Reformation, in reaction to both sacramental Roman Catholicism and emerging Anabaptist extremism. Ever since these theological battle lines were drawn paedobaptists and credobaptists have made their case not just from biblical argument, but by drawing attention to the perceived or actual consequences of their rival's praxis. It is easy to find bad baptismal practice in both camps. In this final section I will seek to draw some practical implications for baptismal practice which are driven by my theological understanding of baptism as a sign of the receipt of salvation and its benefits under the inaugurated new covenant. Credobaptists are not agreed amongst

themselves on these issues and many would take a different view to my own.²⁸

1. *The Timing of Baptism*

It follows from the nature of baptism that it ought to be administered as closely as possible to conversion, which is the moment that the blessings of the new covenant are received. The primary purpose of baptism is to enact, for the benefit of the person being baptised, the fact that they have experienced salvation, and to bring them assurance that they have entered into a new life and that their sins have been forgiven. Baptism is not commanded as a means by which an individual can make public testimony of their new faith to as many people as can be gathered. This pattern of immediate baptism on credible profession of faith in Christ is what we find in the New Testament. The crowds at Pentecost, the Ethiopian eunuch, Cornelius, Lydia, the Philippian jailer, and the disciples of John the Baptist in Ephesus were all baptised immediately they believed the good news of the gospel.

Paedobaptists are right to criticise credobaptists who, in effect, practice baptism on the basis of sanctification because they delay baptism until converts have undertaken considerable instruction in the Christian life and demonstrated the authenticity of their conversion. The practice of many credobaptists is far removed from that of the New Testament, where baptism is the immediate response to evangelistic preaching. Failure to practice baptism biblically has led to the invention a whole series of other rituals to mark conversion (raising your hand, coming forward in an altar call, filling in a form, speaking to friend, confirmation, formal church membership) which have taken the place of the biblically mandated response, namely baptism.

Baptism is not to be administered on the basis of certainty that the person is elect and a true believer, but rather on the basis of credible profession of faith in Jesus as Lord. The New Testament does not suggest that the apostles were especially introspective about whether people were truly elect or not, since this is a matter for God alone (Acts 8:13). The church does not claim that it knows who is truly elect, but baptism is on the basis of giving the human evidence of being elect, i.e. faith.

Of course the faith that is required for baptism must have an irreducibly minimal content. It must be a faith that confesses that Jesus is "Lord" and that believes that he has risen from the dead (Rom 10:9-10). These are complex truths, requiring some grasp of what we would today call Trinitarian theology, and an understanding of the cross (which is

²⁸ For different practical implications see, for example, Mark Dever, "Baptism in the Context of the Local Church", Chp 10 in *Schreiner & Wright* (eds), *Believers' Baptism*.

presupposed by believing Jesus to be risen from the dead). Baptism also follows on from repentance, so an experiential understanding of sin, guilt and the just deserving of God's judgment are also essential.

Rather than militating against baptism on conversion, awareness of the complexity of the irreducible content of faith for baptism should force us to reflect on the content of our evangelism. We need to proclaim these truths rather than make simplistic appeals to receive forgiveness of sin. It is noticeable that in Acts many of the first converts were those who were from a Jewish or "god-fearing" background, and hence who would have been familiar with the theological categories of the gospel. Amongst pagans it was often necessary to undertake much more detailed explanation of the gospel message. We should not imagine that many, if any, pagans were converted and baptised after a twenty-minute short talk. A biblical understanding of baptism will encourage us to baptise people as soon as possible after they have professed faith, but also deepen the content of our evangelistic work.

One of the advantages of adopting proper baptismal practice on conversion, following suitably deep evangelism, is that it would minimise the danger of false professions of faith. Many of the rituals we have devised to take the place of baptism are simply too easy, and do not require people to take a step which symbolises their death to their former life and marks their new life in Christ. They are easy to undertake without symbolically burning boats with unbelieving family, friends and culture. Professions of faith are treated rather more like opportunities to try Jesus out, as if we were dating him or living with him, whereas true conversion is the equivalent of a marriage. The seriousness of baptism is very evident when working with those from non-Christian cultures, such as Chinese international students or Muslims. They realise that baptism is a definitive step and will only undertake it when they are truly converted. No person professing faith in Christ who was not baptised as a child, should be regarded as a true convert unless and until they are willing to undergo baptism. Those who were baptised as infants ought to be encouraged to be baptised, and only accepted as a true believer if they hold genuine paedobaptist convictions as a matter of conscience.

The close proximity of baptism and conversion in the New Testament also suggests that baptism loses its potency and significance the longer the delay that occurs. Baptism a considerable period after conversion fails to dramatise the fundamental change that has taken place in the life of the believer, and they will almost certainly have derived their assurance from elsewhere, most probably the evidence of their changed life and the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit. It seems to me that there comes a point at which baptism ceases to serve any useful purpose because the appropriate time for baptism has long passed. From God's perspective there is no such thing as an unbaptised Christian, because the baptism that effects salvation is baptism

by the Holy Spirit into the Body of Christ and the blessings of the new covenant. Whilst a person who is newly converted ought to be baptised as soon as possible, it is questionable whether there is any real need to baptise a long-professing believer who was baptised as an infant. It makes little sense to press for the rebaptism of a person who came to personal faith years ago. Such a person has been baptised by the Holy Spirit into membership of the Body of Christ and has been functioning as a member of Christ's Body, serving and using the gifts that they have been given. Water baptism to symbolise something that took place years previously will make no difference to their standing with God, their inclusion in Christ, the forgiveness of their sins, their spiritual gifting or their personal assurance. Of course if such a person feels that in conscience they wish to be baptised then there is no reason to refuse to do so, but to insist that they need to be baptised as an act of obedience to Christ is to demand something anachronistic.

2. *The Age of Baptism*²⁹

Paedobaptists commonly argue against credobaptism on the grounds that it introduces the artificial concept of an "age of responsibility" below which churches are unwilling to baptise young people, with the result that believing children are denied membership and participation in the church. This criticism needs to be taken seriously by credobaptists. If baptism is to be administered to adults on the basis of their credible profession of faith, then those who profess faith in this way ought to be baptised irrespective of their age. In most cases very young children will not in fact profess such faith, but a small number may do so, in which case the church should be willing to baptise them. However the corollary of this is that Christian parents must beware of the danger of seeking to push their children into professions of faith and baptism. It is better to teach the gospel to children and to leave them to make their response to it, rather than to push them to incant the response that we long to hear. I would be more likely to respond to the request of a child for baptism who has come to ask to be baptised of their own initiative rather than because they have been pushed to do so parents or others.

We should not, however, think that the problem of age is confined to credobaptists. Paedobaptists have to make the same judgment but at a different place. As was noted above, paedobaptists almost invariably practice credo-communion, which requires exactly the same judgment to be made in relation to the professions of faith by children. Arguably since baptism is a one-off ritual to mark conversion, whereas the Lord's Supper is a regular

²⁹ For a counter view to that presented here see the practice of Capitol Hill Baptist Church Washington DC: <http://www.capitolhillbaptist.org/we-equip/children/baptism-of-children/>

ritual to sustain and develop gospel faith, the Lord's Supper is the more important of the two. It is inconsistent for paedobaptists to admit children to baptism but not to the faith-sustaining meal that Jesus commanded his disciples to observe.

Paedobaptists also have to determine the age at which they will treat their unbelieving children as apostates from the covenant and subject them to church discipline. In effect they also operate an age of responsibility, so young children who deny Christ will not be treated as apostates.³⁰ They also face the same issue in regard to church government. Paedobaptism holds that baptised children are members of the church. However both congregational and Presbyterian models of church government involve some measure of congregational decision making, for example in regard to the election of church officers and the exercise of church discipline. Infants and children are generally excluded from the decision making process and disenfranchised compared with those who have achieved the requisite "age of responsibility".

Most significantly, paedobaptists face the same problem if an adult is converted who already has children. Since the parent has been converted then the children ought also to be baptised along with them. Whilst this is unproblematic if the children are infants, at what age does a child have the right to refuse to be baptised along with his or her parent? What should be done about a child refuses to believe that Jesus is Lord? This is especially relevant in our contemporary culture where parents do not enjoy, either legally or socially, the power over their children of the *paterfamilias* in ancient society. Inevitably paedobaptists have to determine an age of responsibility.

3. *The Status of Children in the Church*³¹

Perhaps the most powerful and emotive arguments used by paedobaptists to justify infant baptism concerns the status of children within the church. They present a stark alternative in which credobaptists are characterised as regarding their children as mere pagans, with detrimental effects to their spiritual education. They regard it as impossible for credobaptists to fulfil the biblical instructions to parents to bring up their children "in the training and instruction of the Lord."³² They point to the logical inability of

³⁰ It is only authors from the Federal Vision perspective who seem to have grappled with this issue in any detail. See Leithart, *The Baptised Body*, 83-106; Wilson, *To a Thousand Generations*, 81-96.

³¹ For a balanced treatment of the status of the children of believers see Eric Lane, *Special Children: A Theology of Childhood* (London: Grace Publications, 1996).

³² See for example Charles Dunahoo, *Why Baptise Infants*, <http://equip.pacep.org/why-baptize-infants-2.html>

credobaptist parents to teach their children to pray the Lord's Prayer to "Our Father."

Before addressing this issue directly it is worth noting that in reality both paedobaptist and credobaptist parents act very similarly in relation to their children. Paedobaptist parents teach their children the gospel and encourage them to put personal faith in Jesus as Lord and to live for him. They pray that their children will come to personal faith. Very few seem to exercise church discipline against their children when they fail to profess faith and act as apostates. Credobaptist parents teach their children the bible and instruct them in the demands that God makes of his people. If there is a difference it is in the degree to which they expect with confidence that their children will come to personal saving faith, and to which they allow their children to live on the assumption that they are Christians already.

Paedobaptists and credobaptists alike have to address questions of the fate of children who die without conscious faith in Christ.³³ This is not a matter on which there is agreement. Most paedobaptists and credobaptists consider it possible that God can bring genuine regeneration to children without this being expressed by conscious professed faith. Most paedobaptists do not take the view that all unbaptised children, whether of believing or unbelieving parents, are inevitably eternally lost, nor do they believe that all baptised children are eternally elect. Thus in practice infant baptism brings no more certainty of infant salvation, and the eternal destiny of the baptised children of paedobaptists is no different to that of the unbaptised children of credobaptists. In both cases it is a matter of trusting to the grace and mercy of God, and the presence or absence of baptism is an irrelevance.

In regard to the status of the children of believers within the church, credobaptists do not have to accept the false antithesis presented by paedobaptist theology. They do not have to regard their children as the equivalent of mere pagans. They have been placed by God's sovereign choice (Acts 17:26-27) in families where they have the opportunity to hear the good news of the gospel and experience the witness of the life of the covenant community. They are in a privileged position, perhaps not unlike that of unconverted Jews and God-fearers in the New Testament period. In Rom 3:1 Paul addresses the question "what advantage then is there in being a Jew?" and begins to answer "much in every way!" The only concrete advantage that he sets out before moving on in his argument defending his gospel is that

³³ The Canons of Dort, Article 17, state that the children of believers are elect and certain of salvation, but make no reference to the salvation of the children of unbelievers. The Westminster Confession and Savoy Declaration make no explicit statement regarding the specific salvation of infants but affirm the salvation of an undefined class of elect infants dying in infancy. A. A. Hodge argues for a "highly probable hope" that all infants are elect: *The Confession of Faith* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1958), 174-175.

they “have been entrusted with the very words of God.” To be an unconverted Jew is to live within the sphere of the revelation of God, to possess the Scriptures which speak of Jesus and all that he will do for his people (Luke 24:44-49; 2 Tim 3:15). In a similar way the children of Christian parents have been placed in a sphere in which they have the opportunity to come under the sustained sound of the gospel. Those who are not born to Christian parents have a much-diminished opportunity in this regard. For credobaptist parents the command to bring children up “in the training and instruction of the Lord” is primarily a command to explain, apply and model the gospel to the lives of our children. In practice this is what paedobaptist parents do, irrespective of their baptismal theology of covenant inclusion.

Paedobaptists are entirely correct that credobaptists, to be consistent with their own theology, should not teach their children to parrot the Lord’s Prayer and assume that God is their Father in a saving and covenantal way. All people, irrespective of the faith or otherwise of their parents, are entitled to cry out to God in prayer, and it is right for parents to teach and model this to them, but the right to call upon God as Father belongs to those with whom he has established a relationship of sonship. The prayer Jesus taught his disciples to pray was given in an old covenant context, to Jewish disciples, against the background of God’s relationship to Israel as Father. In the new covenant it is again the inner and individualistic work of the Spirit which enables those who are regenerated to cry out to God as “Father” (Rom 8:14-16). Once again paedobaptist parents face the opposite dilemma, namely when they are to start forbidding their children to pray to God as “Our Father” because it is evident that they do not have personal saving faith and are apostate?

4. *Baptism and Church Unity*

One of the tragedies of the division between paedobaptists and credobaptists is that baptism, which was meant to be an expression of the unity of believers in the Lord Jesus (Eph 4:1-16), has become a cause of division between those who profess to love and serve the same Lord.³⁴ It is generally credobaptists who are most guilty in this regard. Those who hold that believers’ baptism is an essential act of obedience to the Lord Jesus thereby deny the validity of the baptism of paedobaptists, who may have been professing and serving disciples of the Lord Jesus for many years. As a consequence they often refuse to permit them to become members of their churches, and even refuse to allow them to share the Lord’s Supper. Somewhat inconsistently, whilst they refuse to share fellowship with them in

³⁴ See for example the comments of E. J. Poole-Connor, founder of the FIEC, in *Evangelical Unity*, The Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches, 145-173, 175-176.

this way they are more than happy to work alongside them in mission and in para-church organisations.

Whilst it is natural for those who hold to a credobaptist position not to wish to undertake infant baptisms, since this would be counter to their conscience, there is no reason why disagreement over baptism should necessitate exclusion from church membership, sharing the Lord's Supper together, and even service in church leadership. The baptism which matters to God, and is spiritually effective, is baptism by the Holy Spirit into the body of Christ. Our fundamental obligation as Christians is to accept and welcome those who have been accepted and welcomed by the Lord Jesus (Rom 15:7).³⁵ To refuse to welcome a person into the membership of the church, still worse to refuse to welcome them to share the Lord's Supper, is in effect an act of church discipline which calls into question the fact of their salvation.

To refuse to share the Lord's Supper with other believers on the grounds that they have not been baptised in a particular manner comes dangerously close to Peter's withdrawal from eating with the Gentile believers in Antioch, which led to a public rebuke by Paul (Gal 2:11-21). Peter did not believe that circumcision was required for salvation, so he was not himself committing the Galatian heresy, but his behaviour in breaking fellowship had the effect of excluding Gentile believers from the church unless they chose to be circumcised. The issue of eating together was no trivial matter, since the main meeting of the early church was clearly a gathering to share the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11:17-35; Acts 2:46; 20:7), which was an act of fellowship and mutual acceptance. The insistence of a particular mode of baptism for church membership, and especially for participation in the Lord's Supper, falls into the same category. It forces justified and regenerate believers to form schismatic separate fellowships, or to comply with a requirement that goes against their conscience. The unity established by the Spirit, in whom all believers have been baptised, ought to be expressed in willingness to share the Lord's Supper with all those who have been accepted by Christ and baptised into his body. It is tragically sad if we refuse to share the Lord's Supper on earth with those with whom we will be sharing the messianic banquet prefigured by it in glory.

It is of course natural that individual churches wish to protect and maintain their convictions regarding baptism, but there are effective ways of achieving this without excluding paedobaptists from membership or the Lord's Supper. In many communities in the UK it is no longer viable to maintain multiple conservative evangelical churches divided only by reason of their baptismal convictions. If credobaptists are to share a gospel vision for the nation as a whole they need to recognise, and face up to the reality

³⁵ Concluding the argument of 14:1-15:6.

that, whilst it is possible for those of credobaptist convictions to join paedobaptist fellowships, it is generally impossible for paedobaptists to join credobaptist fellowships. It is no surprise, therefore, to find large numbers of those who are convictionally credobaptist worshipping happily as part of conservative evangelical Anglican churches, but to find considerably fewer paedobaptists worshipping as part of credobaptist churches.

Conclusion

It is hardly realistic to suggest that this article will resolve the centuries' long difference between paedobaptists and credobaptists. Although baptismal practice is the presenting issue, the different approaches of paedobaptists and credobaptists conceal much deeper issues of biblical and systematic theology concerning the way in which God has dealt with his people through salvation history. It is hoped that it will bring some helpful clarity to the debate, perhaps moving the discussion beyond the boundaries of classic Reformed and Dispensational approaches, thus aiding mutual understanding, gracious dialogue and loving acceptance of each other as brothers and sisters in Christ, baptised by his Spirit into his one Body.

A COVENANTAL VIEW OF BAPTISM AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO EVANGELISM

*Kevin J. Bidwell**

Christian baptism is in urgent need of being revisited by the evangelical church. This essay explores a covenantal view of baptism and its relationship to evangelism. The doctrine of baptism as put forward by the teaching found in the Westminster Standards is upheld. It is contended that there is a connection between God's covenant and God's signs of the covenant, which in the New Testament are baptism and the Lord's Supper. The shadow of baptism in the Old Testament was circumcision: whereas circumcision involved the shedding of blood and therefore it pointed forwards to the future shed blood of Christ, baptism points backwards to the shed blood of Christ and Christ's completed atonement. Baptism in the new covenant is to be administered using water and the new covenant name of God, "the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit" (Matt 28:19); and it is to be applied to Christian converts, and the children of believing parents.

Introduction

On Sunday morning of 21 April 1861, the great Baptist preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon expounded from Matt 28:18-19. His title was "The Missionaries' Charge and Charter". He declared that: "We think that our brethren do serious damage to the Gospel by baptizing children. We do not think their error a little one. We know it does not touch a vital point; but we do believe that infant baptism is the prop and pillar of Popery."¹ Strong words. Such understanding may well shape the thinking of many professing Christians, but was Spurgeon correct in his bold assertions? Is the baptism of the children of believers essentially Popery, instead of fundamental Protestantism? Should not Spurgeon's opinions and the doctrine of believer's baptism come under fresh scrutiny? My aim is to put forward a different viewpoint, one that is a covenantal view of baptism.

John Calvin, Martin Luther and the Magisterial Reformers would all dissent loudly at Baptists accusing them of error. They all practised the baptism of infants within the Christian church and they similarly faced opposition from the Continental Anabaptists on this point. The position commonly labelled paedobaptism is much maligned, especially among many professing Christians in England and Wales. Why is this the case? What has

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¹ Charles Haddon Spurgeon, "The Missionaries' Charge and Charter", A Sermon Delivered on Sunday Morning, 21 April 1861, No., 383.

happened to cause such a change in the doctrine of the church since the sixteenth century work of reformation first broke upon the shores of Great Britain?

The Magisterial Reformers were similarly in harmony concerning the primary marks of a true church: the preaching of pure doctrine and the right administration of the sacraments (baptism and the Lord's Supper). Calvin, in his hugely influential *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, stated that: "wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ's institution, there it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists."² Therefore, a correct doctrine of the sacraments is essential for the life, purity and health of the church. A right understanding of the sacraments, including baptism, cannot be supposed to be a secondary and non-essential topic for the church of Jesus Christ.

In this paper, I intend to explore a range of issues concerning covenantal baptism; sometimes this view is broadly assumed to be that of paedobaptism. However, in recent times some credobaptists have sought to freshly articulate their own perceived connection between the new covenant and baptism.³ Nonetheless, my intention is to uphold that the covenantal baptism as taught in the Westminster Standards is one which is faithful to Scripture and the Presbyterian reformation which emanated from Geneva. In order to build a biblical foundation, one that is hopefully pastoral, I intend to explore a range of exegetical and common fallacies that are brought against the Westminster Assembly's conclusion on baptism.

The issue of baptism as it relates to evangelism is a crucial and pivotal matter that needs to be examined. The question that deserves our attention can be put in this way: in which direction should the sign of baptism point? At this juncture we will introduce the first English Baptist John Smyth, and his legacy that remains in the church to this day; a legacy which, in essence, changes the sign nature of baptism. While I seek to propose a covenantal baptism, one that is to be applied to adults outside of the covenant of grace, as well as the children of believing parents, my approach is hopefully persuasive and peaceful. A key goal is to connect this theology of baptism to evangelism, most especially to the covenant responsibilities that we must uphold to instruct our children. Indeed, we must explore these matters together in a humble and teachable spirit with a constant appeal to "all Scripture" (2 Tim 3:16), not only to selections from the New Testament, while remembering the call for reformation in our generation.

² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*: Vol. 1, ed. John T. McNeill (Louisville: Westminster Press, 1960, repr. 2006), 1016, 1023, [4.1.4 and 9].. Hereafter called *Institutes*.

³ Stephen J. Wellum, "Baptism and the Relationship Between the Covenants", *Believer's Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, eds, Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn D. Wright (Nashville: B & H Publishing, 2006).

Covenantal baptism as taught in the Westminster Standards

The Westminster Standards comprise the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF), and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms.⁴ All three documents contain clear systematic teaching on the Reformed understanding of the faith, ecclesiology and the sacraments. John Murray held these Standards in high regard as he wrote on “The Importance and Relevance of the Westminster Confession”. He believed that “the Westminster Confession is the last of the great Reformation creeds... No creed of the Christian Church is comparable to that of Westminster in respect of the skill with which the fruits of fifteen centuries of Christian thought have been preserved... In the category to which the Confession belongs, it has no peer.”⁵

Many are unaware that these doctrinal standards were the product of a seventeenth century English assembly, one which sat in London during the years of the English Civil War, at the request of Parliament.⁶ Its 120 ministerial members were chosen as men deemed to be experts in divinity. They discussed, debated and wrote until their precise theological statements were to the satisfaction of the majority of the whole assembly. Following the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, along with a host of other historical factors, these summaries of the Christian faith have spread around the world, but are perhaps least known in England, from where they emerged. Even a brief historical panorama demonstrates the acceptance of Westminster theology, including its teaching on baptism, by such men as B. B. Warfield, Robert Murray M'Cheyne, Archibald Alexander, Matthew Henry and Thomas Watson, to name a few. It would be challenging to argue a case that these distinguished ministers all held a theological blind-spot concerning their understanding of baptism. So what is this theology of baptism?

Three chapters in the Westminster Confession (1646) are particularly pertinent to our subject. The first is Chapter 7, “Of God’s covenant with Man”, which sets out the unifying principle of the books of Scripture: God’s covenants. The covenant pre-Fall is referred to as a “covenant of works” where a promise was given upon the condition of obedience (Gen 2:17). Following Adam’s fall, the language used to describe the successive unfolding of God’s covenants is that of the “covenant of grace”. The theological term “covenant of grace” is deliberate in order to stress the priority of the Triune

⁴ The Westminster Assembly, *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (1646) (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 2001); *The Westminster Larger Catechism* (1648) (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 2001); *The Westminster Shorter Catechism* (1648) (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2008).

⁵ John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray: Volume One, The Claims of Truth* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1976, repr. 2001), 317-18.

⁶ Robert Letham, *The Westminster Assembly: Reading Its Theology in Historical Context* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2009).

God's grace in his dealings with mankind. This fits with Paul's teaching (Eph 2:8-10) that it is "by grace you have been saved through faith" and that even the faith we may have, is itself a gracious gift of God.

A continuity of God's dealings with mankind is upheld between the Old and New Testaments while carefully preserving the differences. The administration of the "covenant of grace" was in the OT in "shadow", pointing forwards until the death of the testator, the Lord Jesus Christ (Heb 9:15-17). The "substance" belongs to Christ himself (Col 2:17) which is manifested in the gospel; therefore the new covenant is the fulfilment of this covenant succession, but it is the same "covenant of grace". It is now to be administered differently, and indeed with greater simplicity, but also with greater spiritual efficacy, clarity and power, with the promised Holy Spirit (Heb 8:6-12). The new covenant promises more for the church, and not less, than the old dispensation. The ordinary means of grace are the preaching of the Word of God, the sacraments and prayer (Matt 28:18-20; Acts 2:42; 1 Cor 11:23-25).

It is at this point of theology concerning God's covenants and the extent of continuity and discontinuity that exists between the two testaments, that different understandings of baptism mainly arise. Covenant theology could be understood as a kind of theological crossroads for different branches of the church.

Chapter 27, "Of the Sacraments", is a second one of significance in the Confession and it precedes the chapter on baptism. The sacraments are signs and seals of the "covenant of grace" and they are to be applied to make visible the difference between the church and the world. Both sacraments have their roots in the previous dispensations: the Passover being the precursor to the Lord's Supper and circumcision being the foreshadow of baptism. Paul teaches in his Letter to the Romans that Abraham "received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith" (4:11). Sacraments are signs to all people observing their administration, but they are only "seals of righteousness" to those to whom they do belong. This rich comprehension of the sacraments found in the Confession does not permit a notion that they are naked or hollow signs, but rather that they declare the "priority of grace over faith". Furthermore, baptism and the Lord's Supper, rightly used, do not only exhibit the grace of God, but upon the words of institution given by Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit, this grace is anticipated to be conferred, according to the promises of God (WCF, 27:3).

It is unnecessary to emphasise the relevance of Chapter 28 "Of Baptism" to our subject. However, it has been important to give this background prior to discussing baptism. A doctrine of Christian baptism should encompass fruitful connections for a biblical theology and this is where a covenantal view excels. Baptism in the NT applies the new covenant name of God, "the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt 28:19), to the recipient, as a sign pointing to their adoption into God's family. An ordained minister of

the gospel must only use water, which must be administered by pouring, sprinkling or immersion, of the person being baptised. All three modes of baptism convey biblical imagery of what is being exhibited through Christ and his benefits of redemption. The Confession states that “not only those who profess faith in and obedience unto Christ, but also the infants of one or both believing parents, are to be baptised” (WCF 28:4).

The Westminster position excludes the notion that baptism is the means of regeneration (WCF, 28:5), and is therefore contrary to what is taught by the Roman Catholic Church.⁷ It denies a doctrine of presumptive regeneration, whereby the church is led to assume that regeneration will always automatically follow baptism, with respect to infants. It likewise does not encourage what is sometimes practised among Anglicans today: the baptism of infants when neither parent professes faith but lives within a Church of England parish. (This reflects a dereliction of duty on the part of an Anglican minister rather than the official position of the Anglican church, one which supports a covenantal theology of baptism.⁸) Spurgeon’s enthusiastic hyperbole that “infant baptism is the prop and pillar of Popery” is therefore demonstrated to be untrue with respect to the covenantal theology of this sacrament, as supported by Reformed Presbyterians.

The historic position on baptism of the Westminster divines, similarly does not affirm the contemporary ideas of hyper-covenantalism that are promoted by some within the Federal Vision movement.⁹ Some of their proponents collapse the two sacraments together and wrongly teach that baptised infants should also be served the Lord’s Supper, sometimes known as paedocommunion. Such a suggestion is surprising considering that Paul clearly forbids this practice in 1 Cor 11:28, because the recipient has to be capable of examining themselves.

The Baptist scholar Shawn D. Wright asserts that it is “no simple task” to grasp the “logic of the Reformed paedobaptist position” and he cites a Presbyterian to support his own view on this matter.¹⁰ I would hope that Wright is familiar with the reformed logic of the Westminster Standards, but he chooses to focus on Calvin, Pierre Marcel and John Murray in his paper to argue against paedobaptism. The three representatives he enters into discussion with, would most likely respond that the perspicuity, logic, consistency and theological depth of these documents on baptism is unmistakeable.

⁷ *The Roman Catholic Church, Catechism of the Catholic Church* (London: Burns & Oates, 1994, repr., 2010), 2.2.1.VII, 284.

⁸ The Anglican Church, “The Ministration of Publick Baptism of Infants to be Used in the Church” in *The Book of Common Prayer* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1956).

⁹ Guy Prentiss Waters, *The Federal Vision and Covenant Theology: A Comparative Analysis* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2006), 3, 259, 287-91.

¹⁰ Shawn D. Wright, “Baptism and the Logic of Reformed Paedobaptists” in *Believer’s Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, eds Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn D. Wright (Nashville: B & H Publishing, 2006), 207.

In sum, a covenantal view of baptism as taught in the Westminster Standards constantly appeals to the whole of Scripture for its support. We agree with the Apostle Peter who preached on the Day of Pentecost that baptism signifies the “forgiveness of sins” and the “gift of the Holy Spirit”. Furthermore the promise in the gospel is “for you and your children” (Acts 2:38-39). The waters of baptism replace the rite of circumcision for visible membership of the new covenant community. Herman Bavinck rightly instructs that “circumcision pointed forward to the death of Christ, baptism points back to it. The former ends, the latter begins with that death.”¹¹ The NT’s “instruction about washings” (Heb 6:2, “washings” is baptismōn) is a rich teaching. The waters of baptism are waters of promise, that being covenant promise. We look to the Triune God expectantly for the fulfilment of these promises, while also seeking to carry out our covenant responsibilities as disciples of Christ.

Answering three common exegetical fallacies concerning a Westminster Standards’ view of baptism

This section is mainly directed at handling objections to paedobaptism that arise from the credobaptist church community in England and Wales. Their primary arguments also provide a suitable platform to exegetically defend the Westminster Standards’ doctrine of baptism. Simultaneously, engaging in this pursuit also exposes large gaps within a Baptist hermeneutic, not only for baptism, but for the gospel, and the credobaptist approach to the unity of Scripture. Within the scope of this essay, I intend to respond to the three most common arguments that I have personally encountered. These form the basis of what I would deem to be three common exegetical fallacies concerning a Westminster Standards’ view of baptism.

The New Testament is silent concerning the baptism of infants/children

The Baptist theologian, Stephen J. Wellum, contends that “it does not seem to bother them [Reformed Presbyterians] that in the NT there is no express command to baptise infants and no record of any clear case of infant baptism”¹² (Spurgeon makes the same charge). Considering that the Book of Acts was a missionary situation, the practice of baptism was not restricted to newborn infants but also to the children of believers. It would be unlikely for

¹¹ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Holy Spirit, Church, and New Creation*, Volume Four, ed., John Bolt, trans., John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 527.

¹² Stephen J. Wellum, “Baptism and the Relationship Between the Covenants” in *Believer’s Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, eds Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn D. Wright (Nashville: B & H Publishing, 2006), 97.

the gospel to come to a Gentile city and for baptism only to be applied to infants, and not to include the children of those converts because they were beyond infancy.

We run into reverse logic in the arguments of those who deny baptism to the children of Christians. It would be just as easy to reply that “it does not seem to bother them [Baptists] that there is no express command to exclude believers’ children from receiving the sign of baptism”. One common fallacy is that those who practice a covenantal position, only baptise infants; it often comes as a revelation to some, when they discover that we baptise adults following conversion also, but only if they have never been baptised before. However, we do not want simply to appeal to theological logic, but to the Scriptures.

There is majestic harmony to the opening line and closing verses of Matthew’s Gospel. Jesus Christ is introduced as “the son of Abraham” and the new covenant commission is to “make disciples of all nations”, “to baptise them” in (into) the name of the Trinity, and to teach them in an ongoing sense, to “observe all” that Christ commanded (Matt 1:1, 28:18-20). The links with the ongoing fulfilment of the Abrahamic covenant to “all nations” are undeniable. The newness of the new covenant is stunning, but this can only be fully appreciated if we understand Christ as “the son of Abraham”. To think of this title is to be reminded of God’s covenants and indeed Malachi prophesied that Christ will be “the messenger of the covenant” (Mal 3:1).

According to Paul, God preached the gospel to Abraham (Gal 3:7-9) and promised him that “in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen 12:3). This spoke specifically of the Gentiles, but also of the inclusion of families. When God “made a covenant” with Abraham (literally, made is “cut” *kāraṭ* and a “covenant” is *bərīt*), the Lord said “To your offspring I give this land” (Gen 15:18). Thus the covenant of God was not to Abraham alone, but also to future posterity.

Almighty God promised Abraham: “I will establish [literally, is *hāqimōtī*] my covenant between me and you and your offspring... to be God to you and to your offspring after you” (Gen 17:7). The Hebrew verb construct used here for “I will establish” is the active verb form Hiphil, which means God will actively fulfil his side of the covenant. J. V. Fesko explains that God first “cut” a covenant with Abraham which he then “establishes”, not only with Abraham, but with his “seed”.¹³ The promise also required that Abraham had to keep the covenant, and circumcision was to be “a sign of the covenant” (Gen 17:9-14). Abraham applied the “covenant sign” to all the males in his household; failure to do so would mean a breaking of the covenant and any uncircumcised would be “cut off from his people” (Gen 17:14).

¹³ J. V. Fesko, *Last Things First: Unlocking Genesis 1-3 with the Christ of Eschatology* (Fearn: Christian Focus, 2007), 80-81, 87-88.

The Abrahamic covenant clarifies the classic biblical structure of God's covenant dealings with his people. This can be understood to be likened to a chain, one which has four links: "Command-sign-promises-responsibilities". Abraham applied the sign of circumcision by God's command, but he was also required to "command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD... so that the LORD may bring to Abraham what he has promised him" (Gen 18:19). This does not exclude the doctrine of election but God has ordained that his election operates along the lines of this covenant framework, though not exclusively. God can sovereignly call people outside of these covenant dealings to himself, if he chooses.

Now the "penny should drop" metaphorically speaking. Those who were circumcised were "Abraham and his son Ishmael... all the men in his house, those born in the house and those bought with money from a foreigner" (Gen 17:26-27). Later the sign of circumcision was applied to "Isaac when he was eight days old" (Gen 21:4). Abraham had already "believed the LORD" (Gen 15:6) and he was counted as righteous (Gen 15:6), as the NT abundantly testifies (Rom 4:9-25; Gal 3:14, 29). But, what about 13-year-old Ishmael, the men in the household, and later baby Isaac? If some contest that circumcision is not the foreshadow of baptism, then what is? This sign was not applied as an "adult believer's only circumcision". To the contrary, God reveals in the OT that the communication of his grace is generous and inclusive, not exclusive and narrow.

Every covenant in the Bible includes children (Gen 1:28; 2:9, 17; 9:9; 17:10; Deut 5:6-21; 6:4-7; 2 Sam 7:12-16; Acts 2:38-39; Eph 6:1-4). Every biblical covenant requires the believing parent(s) to uphold God's covenant through an obedient life to the Lord and to teach their children to do the same. This understanding enhances a doctrine of the family, which the Scriptures simply assume. From Adam to Noah, from Moses to David, from Pentecost until the Second Coming of Christ, an individualistic faith is precluded. The idea of God administering his covenant of grace in a way that is bereft of a covenant sign to be applied with promises to children, is alien to the whole of the Bible. God's covenants embrace the future posterity of faithful and obedient believers.

This is what Peter preached in Jerusalem: "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself" (Acts 2:38-39). The new covenant follows the same identical structure of: "Command-sign-promises-responsibilities". A believer is to receive the covenant sign, with their children, and sometimes the whole household, and the promises are the "forgiveness of sins" and the poured out "Holy Spirit" (Acts 1:4; 2:33, 39); and this must include the responsibility of discipleship through the church (Matt 28:18-20). When those "afar off",

those “whom the Lord our God calls to himself”, are grafted in, as the Gentile household of Cornelius was, then the same covenant pattern applies, as Peter modelled in Acts 10:23-48. This narrative ends with the baptism of Cornelius, his relatives and friends, following the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

Why did I suggest that “the penny should drop”? A covenantal view of baptism is congruous with, and underlies in my view, the reason why the apostle Paul baptised the whole households of Lydia, the Philippian jailer and Stephanas (Acts 16:15; 16:33; 1 Cor 1:16) in the NT, as a “sign” of their commitment to Christian discipleship. The new covenant initiation sign instituted by Christ was baptism, and it was commonly applied to whole households when someone believed, including their children, and it was no longer restricted to the physical seed of Abraham. After Pentecost, once someone believed, Christian baptism was applied to Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free, and boys and girls of parents in the faith (Gal 3:27-29). The Abrahamic covenant of command, sign, promises, and responsibilities, flow harmoniously via the gospel for all nations, on the basis of the command of Jesus Christ, “the son of Abraham” (Matt 28:19; Mark 16:15-16; Luke 24:47; Acts 1:8).

Anthony N. S. Lane has a decisive article to demonstrate “fairly conclusively that by the last quarter of the second century infant baptism was well established across the Roman Empire”.¹⁴ Lane concludes that:

There is no hint anywhere in the surviving Christian literature from the first five centuries that anyone objected in principle to infant baptism, that anyone considered it improper, irregular or invalid. If it was a post-apostolic innovation, this silence is remarkable.¹⁵

What is most likely is that there was some diversity with respect to the practice of infant baptism. However, to argue against the initiation of children into the church through baptism, finds no support from the post-apostolic church. “The evidence from the NT that babies were baptised is impressive, though not conclusive” asserts Lane.¹⁶ The evidence from the post-apostolic church is unambiguous that the baptism of infants took place unopposed.

Baptism must be by immersion or dipping

The Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689 significantly alters and reduces its sections on “God’s Covenant”, “Sacraments” (renamed Baptism and the

¹⁴ Anthony N. S. Lane, “Did the Apostolic Church Baptise Babies: A Seismological Approach”, Tyndale Bulletin (Cambridge: Tyndale House, 2004), 55.1, 118.

¹⁵ Lane, “Did the Apostolic Church Baptise Babies”, 128.

¹⁶ Lane, “Did the Apostolic Church Baptise Babies”, 130.

Lord's Supper) and "Baptism" (Chapters 7, 28 and 29).¹⁷ Despite being based upon the WCF, the theological fabric is amended at the very points which are central to comprehending a covenantal view of theology, the sacraments and baptism. In short, the Baptist theological DNA on baptism has been changed. These changes are necessary to their Reformed confession in order to uphold believer's baptism. The DNA of its theological system has to be amended to accommodate this revised sacrament.

This same Confession insists that there is only one mode which is valid for baptism. It is asserted that: "Immersion, that is to say, the dipping of the believer in water, is essential for the due administration of this ordinance."¹⁸ There are two proof texts given which are Matt 3:16 and John 3:23. However, do these texts substantiate that immersion is essential for the due administration of this ordinance? The stakes are high. If the subscribers of this Confession are correct, then millions of professing Christians, both now, and over two millennia, have been misled, and the validity of their baptism may well be questioned.

Both proof texts refer to the baptism of Jesus which was John's baptism of repentance and not Christian baptism instituted by the Saviour. A common fallacy is an appeal to infer "immersion" when Scripture records "he went up from the water" (Matt 3:16). This is reading into the text what is not there. Similarly, "immersion" is not taught in John 3:23 where the Bible records that "John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because water was plentiful there". Water must be used in baptism, but the whole of the NT is silent concerning the specific mode of baptism to be used, either as immersion, pouring or sprinkling. To insist on baptism by immersion only is an ecclesial aberration and it potentially wounds the conscience of Christians without biblical warrant.

However, being aware of this insufficient exegetical footing, the plea is made by some, from the meaning of the Greek word "baptise" (baptizō). Proponents of this view insist that it is to be understood exclusively as "to immerse, plunge or dip". Greek scholars concur that this meaning is included, but the context of each usage of this word in the NT does not fit such a

¹⁷ *The Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689, A Faith to Confess, Rewritten in Modern English* (Leeds: Carey Publications, 1975, repr., 2002). The chapter on "God's Covenant" is reduced from six points in the WCF to three. Of note is the absence of "the covenant of works", the explanation that the same covenant of grace is administered differently in the time of the law and the time of the gospel, or that the ordinances of the covenant under the gospel are "the preaching of the Word, and the administration of the sacraments". The only real similarities are that the Baptist Confession and the Westminster Confession carry the same chapter title.

The chapter on "Of the Sacraments" is renamed and reduced from five to two points and it is bereft of any covenantal language or sign nature to be exhibited by them. Baptism and the Lord's Supper are simply called "ordinances". The section on "Baptism" is likewise reduced from seven headings to four.

¹⁸ *The Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689, A Faith to Confess*, 29:4, 62.

constrained straight-jacket of meaning (Mark 7:4; Col 2:12; Heb 6:2; 9:10). Frederick Danker responsibly includes the idea of “ritual or ceremonial washing”.¹⁹ John Owen refuses to yield to this singular insistence of dipping. He writes: “I must say, and will make it good, that no honest man who understands the Greek tongue can deny the word to signify ‘to wash’, as well as ‘to dip’.”²⁰ Owen prefers the rendering “to wash” and this has implications of cleansing which is spiritually significant. The waters of baptism speak of the shed blood of Christ and the out-pouring of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38; Eph 1:7; Titus 3:5-6; Heb 12:24).

Additionally, it is necessary to demonstrate that Rom 6:4 is insufficient proof that immersion should be the only mode of baptism. Paul writes “we were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life” (Rom 6:4). John Murray expounds this passage: “Paul in Romans 6 speaks of being baptised into Jesus’ death (v 3), of being planted together with him in the likeness of his death (v 5), and of being crucified with him (v 6; cf. Gal 2:20). It is apparent that immersion and emergence do not resemble these.”²¹ Therefore, the WCF is affirmed: “Dipping of the person into the water is not necessary: but baptism is rightly administered by pouring or sprinkling water upon the person” (28:3). Dipping is not excluded, but it is not exclusively necessary for Christian baptism.

Believers must be rebaptised, if necessary

Rebaptism is presented as a dogmatic belief, often undergirding a Baptist doctrine of the church.²² It is founded upon two premises. First, baptism is to be administered only to believers upon profession of their faith in Jesus Christ for salvation, and secondly it must be applied by immersion in water. Hopefully, the second premise has already been dealt with. However, this now leaves the first assumption to be considered.

¹⁹ Frederick William Danker, *The Concise Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 67.

²⁰ John Owen, “Of Dipping” in *The Works of John Owen: The Church and the Bible*, Volume 16, ed. William H. Goold, (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1968, repr., 2006), 266-67. Owen infers that his preferred mode of baptism is pouring.

²¹ John Murray, “Baptism” in *Collected Writings of John Murray: Volume 2, Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1977, repr., 2001), 372.

²² John F. MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus: What is Authentic Faith?* Revised and Expanded Anniversary Edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 21. Here MacArthur states: “As a pastor I regularly rebaptize people who once ‘made a decision’, were baptized, yet experienced no change. They come later to true conversion and seek baptism again as an expression of genuine salvation. We hear such testimonies nearly every week from the baptistery of Grace Community Church”.

Let me paint a potential scenario for us to contemplate. A woman called Miriam was baptised as an infant in the Anglican Church, where the Triune name of God was given to her at that time. As a young lady, she is converted in her late teens and the church she then attends, while studying at university, exhort her to be baptised again as an expression of her new-found faith. She is persuaded and she testifies before the church of her “coming to Christ” and the minister baptises her by pouring water upon her head. Everything goes well, she graduates and then moves to a new city. There she joins a lively evangelical church. She applies for church membership, but she is politely advised that she cannot be received into membership unless she is baptised by immersion. What should she do? What is the biblical basis for her second and third baptisms? Was her first baptism irrelevant?

One Bible text that is regularly heard as a “rallying cry” when an adult makes a clear profession of faith is Mark 16:15-16: “Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel... whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.” Some people understand that an individual’s profession of faith must always precede baptism, therefore any baptism that reverses this order renders any previous baptism as baseless. For some, this appears to be an “open and shut case”. But is it? The basis for salvation is clearly not baptism, but faith in Jesus Christ, his shed blood (Rom 3:22-25) and the confession of Jesus’ lordship and resurrection (Rom 10:9).

The issue again revolves around the inclusion of the seed of believers, or not, into the visible church through baptism. Some well-intentioned Christians accuse well-instructed paedobaptists of baptising non-Christians because of their inclusion of the offspring of baptised believers into the visible church. In the heat of theological debate, we can all become combative. Those holding to a baptistic view need to be cautious because a good number of believer’s baptisms have been performed upon people who later proved to have not been converted. How many non-Christians have Baptists baptised? Indeed, saving efficacy is upon faith in Christ Jesus, not baptism. Simon, who practised magic in Samaria is proof-positive that baptism was not infallibly applied by the early church (Acts 8:9-24).

From my vantage point, it would seem that a Baptist line of argument leads to a highly individual event, where the person’s faith is seen to be the primary factor requisite for baptism. The practice of rebaptism declares that this is a sacrament bereft of efficacy. It is merely a memorial to seal what has already happened.²³ This gives the impression that it is a time-bound

²³ Wayne R. Spear, “The Nature of the Lord’s Supper According to Calvin and the Westminster Assembly” in *The Westminster Confession into the 21st Century: Essays in Remembrance of the 350th Anniversary of the Westminster Assembly*, Volume 3, ed., Ligon Duncan (Fearn: Christian Focus, 2009). Spear explains the difference between a bare memorial view consisting of “only remembrance” that is commonly attributed to Zwingli (though not everyone would agree that

practice, one that only looks back after the event of the new birth, thus acting as a badge to proclaim an individual's faith and promised obedience. It becomes an ordinance that then places emphasis upon faith over grace; my understanding of church history leads me to be cautious, because this was the fundamental error of Arminianism.

Calvin is perceptive when he commented that Mark 16:15-16 teaches that the Lord Jesus "connects baptism with doctrine". He expounds further that faith is here placed before baptism: "Since the Gentiles were altogether alienated from God, and had nothing in common with the chosen people; for otherwise it would have been a false figure, which offered forgiveness and the gift of the Spirit to unbelievers, who were not yet members of Christ."²⁴ The right administration of paedobaptism is that the faith of the father and/or the mother is to be professed at the baptism of the child, along with their commitment to the fulfilment of covenant responsibilities by the parent. Faith is present at baptism by the witnessing congregation also.

There are four weaknesses in the argument for rebaptism. First, the initiation sacrament is never to be twice applied: in the OT it was impossible to do because it was circumcision. The NT does not mention a single instance of Christian rebaptism, nor does it even infer re-enacting baptism once the Triune name has been placed upon someone. In Acts 19:1-7 Paul insists that some disciples are baptised again, but that was because they had only received John's baptism, which we have established was not Christian baptism.

Secondly, rebaptism fails to understand God's promises and the power of the Holy Spirit (John 3:5-8). Robert Letham explains that "there is an efficacy attached to them [the sacraments] that goes far beyond a mere visual aid".²⁵ Many professing Christians would fail to "join the dots" and connect God's faithfulness in Miriam's later conversion to her previous baptism as an infant. Baptism does not have power to regenerate but Letham further clarifies: "That this happens is due to the gracious work of the Holy Spirit alone. However, it does not occur independently of baptism but rather in and through it... [God] keeps his appointments."²⁶ Christ Jesus, the head of the church, mediates a better covenant with better promises, he is the "the guarantor of a better covenant" (Heb 7:22; 8:6). Therefore we should expect,

this was actually his position); he contrasts this "memorial view" with Calvin who argued for a "remembering" of Christ but also a "spiritual communion" with Christ through the Supper.

²⁴ John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark and Luke*, Vol. 3, trans., William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 386.

²⁵ Robert Letham, *A Christian's Pocket Guide to Baptism: The Water that Unites* (Fearn: Christian Focus, 2012), 51.

²⁶ Letham, *A Christian's Pocket Guide to Baptism*, 60.

in faith, for God's efficacious grace to be tied to the new covenant sacraments that he personally instituted before his ascension, including baptism.

A third weakness in the argument for rebaptism, often unknowingly, is a subliminal denial of God's faithfulness and therefore it potentially misrepresents this NT ordinance. The theological term to explain God's grace in baptism is *prolepsis*; meaning something that is represented as existing before it does so. I would not want to hurtfully undermine the practice of child dedication but it was probably introduced to replace the covenant baptism of children with a "dry baptism" not taught in Scripture. Why should the church exchange God's institution for the baptism of children with a dedication that does not convey or teach Christ's authority, purpose or promised grace? The WCF is correct to affirm that: "The efficacy of Baptism is not tied to that moment of time wherein it is administered; yet notwithstanding, by the right use of this ordinance, the grace promised is not only offered, but really exhibited and conferred by the Holy Spirit, to such (whether of age or infants) as that grace belongs unto, according to the counsel of God's own will in His appointed time" (28:6).

Fourthly, rebaptism fails to properly display the attribute that God is eternal (Deut 33:27; Rom 16:26). There can be much joy associated with the baptism of adults and infants, and as we return to our daily lives following a service including baptism, we often forget what happened or our memory of the sacrament grows dim. This is not the case with the "eternal Spirit" (Heb 9:14) and his remembrance of baptism. Ultimately the covenant signs are for the Triune God, as we learn from God's covenant with Noah. The Lord instructed him that when the bow is in the clouds "I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant" (Gen 9:8, 11, 14-17).

The Westminster Larger Catechism magnifies the eternity of the Triune God because it affirms that baptism is a "sign and seal of ingrafting into himself, of remission of sins by his blood, and regeneration by his Spirit; of adoption, and resurrection unto everlasting life" (Q. 165). Resurrection of the body is future for all and this teaches everyone that some blessings are to follow baptism: for infants we look forward in faith to regeneration, but all baptised Christians look forward to the sealed promises represented in this sacrament, ones that are only realised fully in heaven.

What should Miriam have done? When she was converted in her teens she could have gracefully responded to the elders that her first baptism at infancy was valid, and that rebaptism is unnecessary, indeed unbiblical. Miriam could use such an opportunity to testify to the faithfulness of the Triune God to her, to point to the grace of God which has now been revealed to her as a needy sinner and to remind people that "God keeps his appointments".

In which direction should the sign of baptism point?

Baptism is an important event in the life of any church. A church's understanding of baptism is a mirror of the theology that a particular church holds, even though it may not be apparent to the undiscerning eye. Our doctrine of this subject raises a crucial question as to the direction that the baptismal sign is directed. I would like us to take a brief step back into history to know something of the first English Baptist, John Smyth. As we briefly peer into the life of this pivotal character upon the stage of the development of believer's baptism, we will understand the roots from where this doctrine sprang, and some of the consequences for our theology.

John Smyth, the first English Baptist

John Smyth (?1570-1612) belonged to what is historically referred to as the "English Separatist Tradition". B. R. White asserts that this movement "reached its climax"²⁷ through Smyth's theological developments. A summary of his rapid trajectory is supplied by Jason K. Lee who writes:

John Smyth is one of the most intriguing figures in Baptist history. Though most renowned as a pioneer of the General Baptists, Smyth was actually a Baptist for less than two years. His pilgrimage of faith included stages as a Puritan, a Separatist, a Baptist, and a Mennonite. These changes took place in a period of about a decade.²⁸

In 1606, as an ordained Anglican preacher, Smyth seceded to pastor the Gainsborough Separate Church which was twinned with a congregation in nearby Scrooby, where he became acquainted with the famed leaders John Robinson, William Bradford (who later became the Governor of the Plymouth Plantation) and William Brewster. The year 1608 was probably when Smyth and his congregation emigrated to Amsterdam, 1609 the time when believer's baptism was introduced and 1612 marks his death and the forming of the first Baptist church in Spitalfields, London by his former associate Thomas Helwys, who incidentally had previously seceded from the disbanded congregation led by Smyth in Amsterdam.²⁹

²⁷ B. R. White, *The Development of the Doctrine of the Church Among the English Separatists with Especial Reference to Robert Browne and John Smyth*, Oxford: Oxford University, unpublished PhD Thesis, 1960, i.

²⁸ Jason K. Lee, *The Theology of John Smyth: Puritan, Separatist, Baptist, Mennonite* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2003), xi.

²⁹ Kevin J. Bidwell, "The Church as the Image of the Trinity": *A Critical Evaluation of Miroslav Volf's Ecclesial Model* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 64. This paragraph is taken from this book by the kind permission of the publisher. Chapter 5 of this book "Free Church Ecclesiology: John Smyth as Volf's Chosen Ecclesial Representative" offers a fuller treatment on the theology of Smyth.

The doctrine of the church had been subject to constant debate for decades, prior to Smyth's innovations. The crux of the issue revolved around where the locus of congregational authority should rest, to replace the assumed Anglican Episcopal system. Matthew 18:15-17 was the heartbeat of much of the discussion. The phrase "tell it to the church" in Matt 18:17 was understood by the Reformed church to mean "tell the elders", however for Smyth, he strongly advocated that the "final seat of church authority was the congregation".³⁰ Ecclesiology was "in the mix" but Smyth moved away from his contemporaries, such as Robinson, Richard Clifton and Governor Bradford.

Smyth demonstrated discontinuity from the Separatist tradition on a number of inter-connected fronts. He adopted his own ideas for baptism, church government, liturgy and theology. Smyth arrived in Amsterdam during a "time of theological ferment concerning the theology of Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609)" and this was prior to the Synod of Dort's (1618-19) theological settlement. Walter H. Burgess observed that he abandoned the Calvinistic scheme of particular redemption, unconditional election and predestination, in favour of the Arminian framework of a universal atonement and partial depravity.³¹ His democratic church polity led him to bring the ministry of pastors and elders "under full subjection to the mind and will of the congregation".³² This opened the way for a weakness in church order because the authority of elders became one that was conferred by the congregation, instead of being derived from the Lord, as confirmed by other elders. However, he is most remembered for forging new paths in radically changing his doctrine, practice and constitution of baptism, and this we now address.

A two-pronged influence probably accounted for his reorganised baptism: a rejection of Church of England practices, including the baptism of infants; and the influence of the Arminian Anabaptists in Amsterdam. Smyth rejected paedobaptism and he provocatively preached that the baptism of infants was anti-Christian and that it led to a false constitution of the church. Therefore we now understand that Spurgeon's comments which open this article have had a long and unfortunate polemic history. The fountainhead of English Baptists arose from the theology, pen and preaching of Smyth, and few Baptists and Christians know this. For the Separatist tradition, according to Stephen Brachlow, there was laid "considerable stress on the conditional

³⁰ Bidwell, *"The Church as the Image of the Trinity"*, 66.

³¹ Walter H. Burgess, *John Smyth the Se-Baptist, Thomas Helwys and the First Baptist Church in England* (London: James Clarke, 1911), 175-76.

³² Bidwell, *"The Church as the Image of the Trinity"*, 68.

covenant relationship of visible obedience”³³ for the constitution of a local church. It is unanimously testified by historians, that for Smyth “baptism now replaced the church covenant”.³⁴ Here lies the problem.

The sign of baptism was changed. Children of believing parents were now excluded from church membership through the rite of baptism. Any notion of covenant promises on the basis of Gen 17:10-12 and Acts 2:39 as holding validity, were effectually rendered null and void. It was a new understanding of the new covenant. Instead of baptism pointing to God’s gracious and future provision in the case of infants, it now pointed in a 180-degree different direction. Baptism pointed to an individual’s visible gospel obedience and faith. The ideas for this new baptism were derived from an Arminian stable and it understandably led to disruption with the historic Reformed community, both then and now.

To be frank, it would not be without warrant if someone suggested that believer’s baptism is “a prop and pillar” of Arminian thought. This conclusion does not mean that there cannot be Calvinistic Baptists or Baptists who hold to covenant theology,³⁵ Spurgeon being a prime example; he was a preacher of Calvinistic soteriology *par excellence*. In my view covenant baptism is fully consistent with and mutually reinforces Reformed theology and adult believer’s baptism is fully consistent with and mutually reinforces Arminian theology. For a Reformed Baptist, God’s sovereignty and grace in the salvation of sinners in their Calvinistic scheme is being held in tension with a believer’s sacrament of baptism. For an Arminian Baptist, both their theology and baptism are congruous, so it does not matter in this case. Many may disagree with this notion, but the doctrine of baptism does shape our understanding of the church and also evangelism. Additionally, believer’s baptism, as Smyth teaches us, points to individual faith and obedience and this has significant implications for evangelism.

The sign of baptism impacts our approach to evangelism

All would agree that baptism is the entrance point into the visible church of the Triune God. But, we must ask what is written, metaphorically, over the entrance door into the church? In which direction does the sign of baptism point? Baptists would argue that it points to our faith in Jesus and our obedience to him. However, the signs of the covenant do not point to man, but instead to God. This is why the inclusion of children in baptism is such a

³³ Stephen Brachlow, *The Communion of Saints: Radical Puritan and Separatist Ecclesiology, 1570-1625* (Oxford: OUP, 1988), 151-52. Stephen Brachlow, “John Smyth and the Ghost of Anabaptism: A Rejoinder”, *Baptist Quarterly* (Didcot: Baptist Historical Society, July 1984), 30.

³⁴ Bidwell, “*The Church as the Image of the Trinity*”, 71.

³⁵ Robert W. Oliver, *History of English Calvinistic Baptists 1771-1892: From John Gill to C. H. Spurgeon* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2006).

stumbling block to Baptists, because they argue “how can a child have faith?”. It is my contention that the practice of believer’s baptism focuses wrongly on what “man is doing” rather than on what “God is doing”. It portrays salvation by faith instead of being by grace through faith. It leaves a potential vacuum for the doctrine of the family and it inserts doubts as to the place of children in the church.

Similarly, it would be wrong if I gave the impression that all churches that practice a covenantal view on baptism have all things right. Wellum raises an important concern that paedobaptism may lead to a “downplaying of the need to call our children to repentance and faith”³⁶. However, I believe that Wellum misses the mark to claim that believer’s baptism is the “new covenant sign... ordained by our Triune God as a proper means of grace that we ignore, distort, or downplay to the detriment of our spiritual life and mission”.³⁷ Our final section, discusses a healthy approach to evangelism that a covenantal framework for baptism should hopefully encourage.

Baptism and its relationship to evangelism

It is almost unnecessary to explain that it is beyond the scope of this paper to outline a complete theology of biblical evangelism, though such an essay on this subject is exigent. William Still’s assessment of British evangelicalism in his day, probably still holds true today. He lamented that “we are suffering from an evangelistic complex, an obsession with evangelism, which at best is too fruitless”.³⁸ There must be a biblical balance in the church to focus on the “you and your children” as well as reaching out to those who are “afar off”. A return to this all-important subject of baptism may well provide meaningful answers to help the church redress imbalances that may exist. R. B. Kuiper helps us all because he reminds us that there is a “double responsibility of the church”: this is to “build up its members in the faith” while equally and simultaneously bringing the “gospel to those who are outside the church”.³⁹

Within these constraints, I will make a general proposition applicable to all sections of evangelicalism, irrespective of their baptismal stance. This will be followed up with five particular implications that stem from a covenantal view of baptism and its relationship to evangelism. This section will handle its suggestions within the proposed covenantal framework of “command–sign–promises–responsibilities” to address some familiar evangelical practices that probably need to be re-examined and amended. There is an inevitable

³⁶ Wellum, “Baptism and the Relationship Between the Covenants”, 161.

³⁷ Wellum, “Baptism and the Relationship Between the Covenants”, 161.

³⁸ William Still, *The Work of the Pastor* (Fearn: Christian Focus, 1984, repr., 2010,) 81.

³⁹ R. B. Kuiper, *The Glorious Body of Christ: A Scriptural Appreciation of the One Holy Church* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1967, repr., 2001), 158.

overlap between the doctrine of the church, worship and evangelism, because the preaching of the gospel in and through the church is the Triune God's primary means of extending grace to a fallen world.

A general proposition to be addressed first is the necessity to recapture what is placed at the very heart of baptism, as ordained by the Lord Jesus Christ. The proposition is that the new covenant name of God – the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit – be placed upon people at baptism as a new step for the NT people of God (Matt 28:19). Letham presents the view that the Triune God unfolds revelation of himself progressively and that this name, linked with the new covenant sacrament of baptism, is “God’s crowning revelation of himself – all that went before points to this”.⁴⁰

However, the Triune name should not be restricted to a baptismal liturgy only. Baptism into that name may be an entrance point to the new covenant community but not an end point. It should be a thread woven throughout the fabric of the church’s theology, worship, preaching, sacraments and mission. This name should continue as a focal point throughout the whole process of new covenant discipleship according to Matt 28:18-20. The new covenant commission recorded by Matthew marks a new plan for the gospel, where the geography is extended and the knowledge of God is expanded.

This Trinitarian motif for discipleship is found throughout Paul’s epistles and most notably in his Letter to the Ephesians. A recovery of this motif for the twenty first century church in the West, could potentially answer the post-modern challenge regarding the church’s evangelistic battle with religious pluralism. The Triune God of the church is unique. This could embolden the church’s evangelism in a multicultural world that is filled with the claims of many religions for the uniqueness of their god. Velli-Matti Kärkkäinen concisely sums up the Western world as “an individualistic, post-modern cacophony of differing voices and pluralism”.⁴¹ Perhaps if church members were equipped with the doctrine of the Trinity and if the new covenant name of God were to be interwoven into public worship more extensively, a range of apologetic issues could be handled at the same time to equip the saints in their day-to-day evangelism.

The first particular proposition is for the recovery of a covenantal approach to baptism, which includes baptising the children of Christian parents. It has been demonstrated that the explication of baptism found in the Westminster Standards embraces a covenantal framework that is faithful to Scripture but that it also has a doctrine of the family inextricably interwoven in it. It is hard to contemplate how any other version of baptism can adequately balance the inter-connected scheme of “command-sign–

⁴⁰ Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2004), 411-12.

⁴¹ Velli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to Ecclesiology: Ecumenical, Historical & Global Perspectives* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2002), 7.

promises-responsibilities". To refuse children baptism in the visible church is to amend our ecclesiology to a reductionist approach to include only adults. Children from Christian homes are treated as "afar off" when God has given their parents covenant promises. The potential efficacy tied to baptism by the working of the Holy Spirit is denied to the next generation in the church.

The second proposal is for the whole family to worship God together during public worship on the Lord's Day. The common rejection of a covenantal approach to baptism which includes infants, probably explains why in some church services children are ushered out at some stage prior to the preaching. This has never been the Reformed tradition. It is unthinkable to withhold children from the ordinary means of grace in the public worship, or for them to not regularly hear preaching, nor to observe the administration of the sacraments. Escorting children out during public worship is to wrongly divide up the family. A correct view of covenant baptism should naturally lead to a congruous view of public worship in the church by whole families together. This is how we should now understand how the doctrine of baptism shapes our doctrine of the church and evangelism. The WCF rightly teaches that the visible church consists of those who profess the true religion and their children (25:2).

The third proposition is that our evangelism must not neglect the church's children and that they are to be treated differently to those children from non-Christian homes. For example, should we expect the same narrative of conversion from a child brought up under the gospel to those converted from paganism? Letham, in writing on baptism, outlines that in the evangelism of our children in the church, we should not seek a similar crisis conversion narrative from them, as is often testified by those outside the covenant of grace altogether.⁴² Like Timothy, most of the church's children have been acquainted with the Scriptures from childhood and we should seek to nurture them to a genuine profession of faith, with accompanying good fruits (2 Tim 3:10-17).

The fourth proposal is that Christian parents need to be instructed in the covenant promises and obligations that belong to them. This principle deserves far more extensive treatment than we can now give it. Some of these responsibilities include the head of the house leading his household in "family worship". My wife is Dutch and I learned this practice from my family in The Netherlands. The giving of thanks for the evening meal is followed, after we have eaten, with the reading of the Scriptures, or a catechism question, along with discussion as a family of what has been read, sometimes the singing of a psalm or hymn and family prayer. It is one of our spiritual highlights as a family and it nourishes the children in the Christian faith daily.

⁴² Letham, *A Christian's Pocket Guide to Baptism*, 99-101.

The fifth proposition is the necessity for the catechising of adults and children in the church. In my experience as a Christian, over more than two decades, the best form of evangelism is when Christians are rightly excited by the gospel and the church where they worship. This can never happen by the quest for constant outreach activities at the expense of feeding, caring, instructing and nurturing the whole church. The church's dual responsibility must be pursued. In my opinion the recovery of the content of the Reformed faith requires attention and it was for this precise reason that the Westminster divines did not only produce a Confession of Faith; it was foreseen that the church's elders needed the right tools for effective discipleship and catechism's were produced. It is my contention that the use of the Westminster Larger and Shorter Catechisms in the church can help to solve this discipleship problem.

The growth and general acceptance of believer's baptism probably explains the common neglect of Reformed catechisms. J. I. Packer and Gary A. Parrett write on "The Waxing and Waning of Catechesis". The authors comment that "within evangelical circles, conservative Presbyterians and other Reformed believers probably represent the only major groups that have regular acquaintance with the notion of catechesis".⁴³ They pinpoint part of the waning of doctrinal instruction in the church to the rise of the Sunday school model for the teaching of children. They highlight that Baptists and other denominations would commonly reject Reformed catechisms because they taught a different view on baptism (WSC, Q. 95). They propose that catechetical instruction was unfortunately replaced with a form of biblical moralism, one that lacks doctrinal content.⁴⁴ This analysis is searching and it is a much-needed exposé of a contemporary weakness, one that needs to be addressed within evangelicalism.

Conclusion

Christian baptism is in urgent need of being re-visited by the evangelical church. The biblical teaching of the sacraments is that they are "signs and seals" of God's covenant grace (Rom 4:11). The forerunner of baptism in the OT was circumcision, which God instituted in Genesis 17. God commanded Abraham: "As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you... and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you" (Gen 17:9-11). We have noted the clear connection that existed between covenant and circumcision.

⁴³ J. I. Packer and Gary A. Parrett, *Grounded in the Gospel: Building Believers the Old-Fashioned Way* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2010), 33.

⁴⁴ Packer and Parrett, *Grounded in the Gospel*, 71-72.

There is a connection between God's covenant and God's signs of the covenant, which in the NT are baptism and the Lord's Supper. The shadow of baptism in the OT was circumcision: whereas circumcision involved the shedding of blood and therefore it pointed forwards to the future shed blood of Christ, baptism points backwards to the shed blood of Christ and Christ's completed atonement. Baptism in the new covenant is to be administered using water and the new covenant name of God, "the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit"; and it is to be applied to adults and the children of believing parents.

As with the sign of the covenant – circumcision in the OT – in the NT this sign is to be applied not only to believers, but also to the children of believing parents. The exclusion of children in baptism by evangelicals is a mistake. A sincere question has been considered: In which direction does the sign of baptism point? Baptists would argue that it points to our faith in Jesus and our obedience to him. However, the signs of the covenant do not point to man but instead to God.

Baptism is not connected to the timing of its ordinance for its efficacy. The same is true of the Lord's Supper. The waters of baptism speak of the shed blood of Christ and the out-pouring of the Holy Spirit – Titus 3:5-6 says: "he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Saviour, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life."

Baptism must always declare the "priority of grace over faith". We are not saved by faith. We are saved by grace through faith (Eph 2:8-9). It is important that we recover the biblical doctrine of baptism to ensure that God is most glorified, to strengthen the view that evangelism must be God-centred, with Christ declared in the gospel, freely offered for the salvation of sinners. This is something which is by God's grace alone. A covenantal approach to baptism best represents this vision so that the church's evangelism is in harmony with biblical theology.

THE ANGLICAN DOCTRINE OF BAPTISM

Lee Gatiss*

This article examines the theology of baptism found in the foundational documents of the Church of England. It expounds the Latin and English texts of the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion, to see what they teach on the subject, noting especially the Protestant and Reformed (but non-Zwinglian) nature of the Anglican doctrine as well as some of its biblical and patristic foundations. A previously unnoticed example of the Articles' dependence on Calvin's *Institutes* is brought out with regard to infant baptism. Through a study of the liturgical expression of this theology in the various editions of the Book of Common Prayer it also highlights the importance of some historic moments of particular controversy, especially regarding the efficacy of baptism. With application throughout for confessional Anglicans today, it also concludes with a brief look at contemporary controversies surrounding the covenantal nature of baptism, and the current downplaying of baptism within Anglican Evangelicalism.

Introduction

Anglicans are keen credobaptists. The Church of England baptises three times as many adults each year as the Baptist Union of Great Britain.¹ This is a little known truth, obscured perhaps by the fact that the established church also baptises infants. Yet the official statistics are hard to argue with: in the Church of England from 2002-2010, for example, the number of people baptised on profession of faith rose from 8,400 to 11,160 (a rise of nearly a third). Surprisingly, perhaps, only about 60% of Anglican baptisms in 2010 were of infants under one year of age, as more and more older children and adults seem to be being baptised later in life.²

This being acknowledged, Anglicans are also keen paedobaptists. Like the vast majority of Christians today, and the vast majority of Christians throughout history, they believe there is a scriptural argument in favour of

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¹ With thanks to Rachel Tole, Database Manager for the Baptist Union, for her help in accessing the best available BUGB figures. Over the last 10 years or so, there have been around 3,500-4,000 baptisms of people of all ages in BUGB churches each year. The most recent figures for comparison indicate that the Church of England baptises *more than three times* the number of non-infants: there were 11,160 baptisms of people aged 12+ in the Church of England (2010) against 3574 in the Baptist Union (2010-2011).

² In 2010, there were an additional 5,930 infants and children involved in "thanksgiving" services, a relatively new option for Anglicans which is more "prayers and smiles" than the "promises and splashes" of a baptism, as some express it. Anglican statistics here are from <http://www.baptism.org.uk/statistics.htm> and *Church Statistics 2010/2011* (London: The Archbishops' Council, 2012).

baptising the children of believers. The Anglican Reformers at the time of the Reformation re-examined this doctrine, along with everything else they had inherited from the medieval and early church, with the same willingness to follow where the Bible led. Like the other magisterial Reformers on the continent, they worked extremely hard to see if it could be adequately grounded both exegetically and theologically. Despite the presence of radical Anabaptist voices making the case for abolition, they thoughtfully and deliberately concluded that, "The Baptism of young children is in any wise to be retained in the Church, as most agreeable with the Institution of Christ."³

In this article we will examine the doctrine of baptism in the Church of England. We will look first at the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion, to see what they teach on the subject. Second, we will sample the liturgical expression of that theology in the 1662 Book of Common Prayer. Along the way we will glance at the official Homilies and Canon Law of the Church of England as well, and touch on some historic moments of particular controversy surrounding this doctrine. Finally, we will note some recent developments and suggest a few ways forward for those who remain committed to the Protestant and Reformed doctrine of baptism. It is a doctrine under threat today, not merely of attack by its traditional enemies (folk superstition and Roman Catholicism), but also of neglect by its more natural defenders, due to widespread ignorance, misunderstanding, and diffident silence for the sake of pan-evangelical unity. My brief here is not to provide a full exposition of the biblical case for baptism or infant baptism in particular.⁴ What I hope to show is that with a better grasp of the contours of confessional Anglican belief on the subject a right confidence in its Evangelical credentials can be restored, and a right perspective on its relative importance can be maintained. As will become clear, Anglican doctrine was not developed in an English bubble, remote from the wider discussion in the Reformed community on the Continent, and so I hope that this will be of interest and use also to non-Anglicans and those outside of England who share common roots in European Reformed thought.

³ Article 27 of The Thirty-nine Articles of Religion. See below on the wording of this and the Article's debt to Calvin.

⁴ I have tried to give a flavour of the biblical case for infant baptism in my exposition of the paedobaptist doctrine of the Congregationalist divine, John Owen (1616-1683), in "From Life's First Cry: John Owen on Infant Baptism and Infant Salvation" in L. Gatiss (ed.), *Preachers, Pastors, and Ambassadors: Puritan Wisdom for Today's Church* (London: Latimer Trust, 2011), 325-366.

The Thirty-nine Articles

In this first, and longest section, we will examine the Articles of Religion, which remain the official doctrinal standard of the Church of England.⁵ Substantially drafted by the martyred Archbishop, Thomas Cranmer (1489-1556) under Edward VI, they were edited by Bishop John Jewel (1522-1571) and re-issued in their definitive form under Elizabeth I in 1571.⁶ Today, no one is to be ordained as a minister in the Church of England unless they “possess a sufficient knowledge” both of Scripture and the Articles, and ordinands are required to affirm their loyalty to this “inheritance of faith” as their “inspiration and guidance” for ministry.⁷

Articles 25-31 relate the Anglican doctrine of the sacraments, with Article 27 devoted to baptism and 28-31 to the Lord’s Supper. So we will look first at what Articles 25-26 teach regarding sacraments in general, with a particular eye on baptism, and then secondly at the specific statements about baptism in Article 27. What we will observe is that the Anglican doctrine of baptism is Protestant (not Roman Catholic) and yet indebted to the early church, and Calvinist (not Zwinglian) in its Reformed credentials.

1. Effectual signs of God’s good will to the faithful (Article 25)

The Articles begin their sacramental affirmations by clearing the ground with some statements in Article 25 about sacraments in general:

Sacraments ordained of Christ, be not only badges or tokens of Christian men’s profession, but rather they be certain sure witnesses, and effectual signs of grace, and God’s good will towards us, by the which he doth work invisibly in us, and doth not only quicken, but also strengthen and confirm our Faith in him.

This opening paragraph of Article 25, which significantly echoes the Lutheran Augsburg Confession and the Second Swiss Confession, makes it clear that sacraments are not *only* badges or tokens of something in those receiving

⁵ Canon 36 of 1604 required all ministers to subscribe to the Articles at ordination and on admission to a benefice. Today’s Canon A5 asserts that “The doctrine of the Church of England is grounded in the Holy Scriptures, and in such teachings of the ancient Fathers and Councils of the Church as are agreeable to the said Scriptures. In particular such doctrine is to be found in the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion, The Book of Common Prayer, and the Ordinal.”

⁶ Jewel was the chief apologist for the Elizabethan Settlement and defender of the Protestant Reformation in England. His *Apologia Ecclesiae Anglicanae* (*Apology for the Church of England*) was first published in 1562, 450 years ago this year.

⁷ See Canons C7 and C15, the latter of which says, “Led by the Holy Spirit, [the Church of England] has borne witness to Christian truth in its historic formularies, the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion, The Book of Common Prayer and the Ordering of Bishops, Priests and Deacons.” Ordinands affirm and declare “my belief in the faith... to which the historic formularies of the Church of England bear witness.”

them. They may be that, to some degree, but they are not to be understood as solely anthropocentric and declarative of our profession of faith. Being baptised cannot simply be about the baptisand making a public declaration of faith and being marked out. The more Zwinglian approach to the Supper (sometimes called “mere memorialism”) and to baptism (as a human pledge of allegiance and sign of belonging) is here rejected as insufficient. Rather, the Article affirms that God truly does something through the sacraments, “he doth work invisibly in us” to stimulate and strengthen faith.⁸ It is not the sacraments themselves which work; God works through them. That is not to say that our reception of them is inconsequential, a thought to which we will return in a moment. Yet it does argue that the sacraments are a gift from Christ whereby God does something; as opposed to them being a God-given way for us to declare something to him and/or others.

The Article continues,

There are two Sacraments ordained of Christ our Lord in the Gospel, that is to say, Baptism, and the Supper of the Lord. Those five commonly called Sacraments, that is to say, Confirmation, Penance, Orders, Matrimony, and Extreme Unction, are not to be counted for Sacraments of the Gospel, being such as have grown partly of the corrupt following of the Apostles, partly are states of life allowed in the Scriptures; but yet have not like nature of Sacraments with Baptism, and the Lord's Supper, for that they have not any visible sign or ceremony ordained of God.

In line with the Continental Reformation, the Church of England affirms that there are only two sacraments: baptism and the Lord's Supper (not here called “the eucharist” or “the mass” it should be noted, but given the more biblical title from 1 Cor 11:20). Roman Catholicism acknowledged at the Council of Trent, and acknowledges still, seven sacraments,⁹ and yet the Reformers rejected all those which had no specific dominical sanction.¹⁰ That is, they did not repudiate marriage and other helpful ordinances, but they removed the sacramental aura from them, so to speak, and limited the number of sacraments to two.¹¹ They claimed the support of no less than

⁸ T. P. Boulton, *An Introduction to the Theology of the Church of England in an Exposition of the Thirty-nine Articles* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co, 1875), 209 observes that the Latin term translated “quicken” is *excitat* and is “not applied, therefore, to the *first* quickening or bringing to life.” It may be translated rouse or excite.

⁹ The numbering of seven sacraments probably originates in the mid-twelfth century with Peter Lombard in his *Sentences*, 4.2.1. In 1547, the Council of Trent (Session VII, Canon 1) anathematised those who give a different number or deny that any of the seven are truly and intrinsically a sacrament.

¹⁰ See for example, Calvin's *Institutes*, Book 4 chapter 19 on the five falsely-named sacraments.

¹¹ In the Homily on Common Prayer and Sacraments it is admitted that “In a general acceptation the name of a sacrament may be attributed to anything whereby a holy thing is signified” though this is discouraged, and cannot be taken to mean these other things are sacraments in the way baptism and the Lord's Supper are. This explains the loose use of the phrase “Sacrament of Matrimony” in the Homily against Swearing and Perjury, in an otherwise

Augustine for doing so.¹² They are *gospel* sacraments in that they rehearse and communicate the heart of the good news, the death and resurrection of Christ, and the need for faith in him. The modern trend (observable in some cathedrals especially) to refer again to ordination or confirmation as sacraments ought therefore to be resisted.¹³

The final part of the Article declares the true *use* of a sacrament:

The Sacraments were not ordained of Christ to be gazed upon, or to be carried about, but that we should duly use them. And in such only as worthily receive the same, they have a wholesome effect or operation: but they that receive them unworthily, purchase to themselves damnation, as Saint Paul saith.

This at first appears to be more narrowly about the Lord's Supper. It mentions the Roman abuses of the elements of bread and wine in the Supper, which were processed around and exposed in a monstrance (a fancifully designed vessel, often in a circular or sunburst shape, used to display relics or consecrated elements) for the adoration of the faithful. So-called "holy water" from a baptismal font might also be carried about, however, and used for blessing things or in making the sign of the cross on one's forehead at various times. The Article rejects all these as wrong uses of the sacraments, which are instead to be "*duly* used", that is, used according to Christ's institution: water for baptising; bread and wine for consuming. As the influential German reformer Martin Bucer (1491-1551) wrote to Cranmer, concerning the superstitious practice of blessing and consecrating inanimate objects, "Our sacraments exist in use, they are actions"; apart from this use they are merely bread, wine, and water.¹⁴

Finally, the last sentence of the Article affirms that both sacraments have a "wholesome effect or operation". Again, they are not merely empty signs. However, they operate in a wholesome and positive way only in those who

helpful parallel there between baptism and marriage. The Homilies were official Anglican sermons, mentioned in the Thirty-nine Articles and intended to be used by ministers who were unable or unlicensed to write their own sermons.

¹² In the Homily of Common Prayer and Sacraments, Augustine's teaching regarding two sacraments is cited, from his letter to Januarius and the third book of his work on Christian Doctrine.

¹³ See however the opinion of E. J. Bicknell, *A Theological Introduction to the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co, 1935), 452 who thinks the Article does not deny the name sacrament to these things, only an equality of status with baptism and the Supper. The Article does say, however, that they are not to be counted as sacraments of the gospel and since they are not sacraments of the old covenant either, they cannot properly be called sacraments at all.

¹⁴ "Sacramenta nostra sunt in usu, actiones sunt... Extra hunc usum... quod Dominus esse decrevit omnem panem, vinum, aquam." See Bucer's *Censura* in E. C. Whitaker, *Martin Bucer and the Book of Common Prayer* (Great Wakering: Mayhew-McCrimmon, 1974), 99.

receive them “worthily.” Those who do not, “purchase to themselves damnation.” Their spiritual efficacy is conditional. This takes up the language Paul used in 1 Cor 11:27-32 of the Supper: “Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord... anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died.” It is noteworthy that the Article does not restrict this negative effect to the Supper alone but speaks of “they” and “them”, that is, both the Supper and baptism.¹⁵ Those who do not receive the Supper rightly, eat and drink judgment upon themselves; those who do not receive baptism rightly purchase to themselves damnation (employing the more general language of “purchasing”, rather than Paul’s language of eating and drinking judgment, makes this warning applicable across both sacraments). As Gilbert Burnet says in his 1699 commentary on the Articles, the one who receives baptism without adding an inward profession of the outward faith, can only “aggravate his Damnation.”¹⁶ The more puritan and Reformed Anglican, Richard Sibbes (1577–1635), also used this language of “aggravation.”¹⁷ Or to quote a more recent commentary on the Articles by Gerald Bray, “If a sacrament is administered to someone who is not one of the elect, its effects will be the opposite of those intended.”¹⁸

This is entirely in accordance with Reformed thinking elsewhere. Calvin, for example, says in his sermon on Eph 2:11-13 of those who stray from the gospel, “the baptism we received in our childhood served no other purpose than to make us doubly guilty before God.” Those who were plunged into the superstitions of Roman Catholicism, he says, “had as good as renounced their baptism.”¹⁹ He adds that,

we receive a singular benefit at God’s hand when we have the use of the sacraments, which are like guarantees that he takes and owns us to be as his household and church. It is true that if we abuse them, we shall pay dearly for it, but be that as it may, when the sacraments are used for

¹⁵ Contra Bicknell, *A Theological Introduction*, 460 who thinks the plural must refer to the two elements of bread and wine in one sacrament only.

¹⁶ Gilbert Burnet, *An Exposition of the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England* (London, 1699), 303.

¹⁷ He argued that without faith in later years, “all is frustrate”, our baptism does us no good, but was in vain. To sin after being baptised, for him, was “a great aggravation of sinne” because it is disloyal to the God to whom one is covenanted, just as adultery is worse than fornication. See his *Evangelical Sacrifices in XIX Sermons: Volume 3* (London, 1640), II.162-164 (in “The Faithful Covenanter”) and II.190-196 (in “The Demand of a Good Conscience”).

¹⁸ Gerald L. Bray, *The Faith we Confess: An Exposition of the Thirty-nine Articles* (London: Latimer Trust, 2009), 139. It is worth noting, however, as Bicknell, *A Theological Introduction*, 460 does, that damnation here does not necessarily mean eternal punishment but more likely a temporal chastisement.

¹⁹ *John Calvin’s Sermons on Ephesians* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1973), 171.

the purpose for which they were ordained, it is certain that they are treasures which we cannot esteem and prize too highly.²⁰

Likewise, Bucer, speaking specifically of infant baptism, wrote that “unless people show the greatest respect for the mysteries of Christ they receive them to their judgment.”²¹ W. H. Griffith Thomas, commenting on the Articles, says that “the condition of the baptised is different from and superior to those who are unbaptised. It may be difficult in modern degeneracy to say that the baptised are better than the unbaptised, but speaking broadly it is so, for Baptism at least introduces the recipient to the sphere of the Church which on any view is decidedly higher and better than any sphere outside.”²² He does not mean the baptised are “better people” as in nicer or more Christlike, of course, only that they are in a spiritually more privileged position. This naturally brings with it certain obligations.²³ So, if we abuse our baptism by not receiving it rightly (by adding to the outward sign an inward faith), we shall pay dearly for it. We shall be “doubly guilty”, that is, not just guilty of unbelief or superstition, but of defiling our baptism, rejecting the blessings signed and sealed to us in it. As Jesus said, “Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required” (Luke 12:48).²⁴

We ought to press the obligations of baptism more clearly. In the case of infant baptism, for example, it is clear that parents may well request it “moved by little more than social convention or... profound but inarticulate feelings of their child’s need of God’s favour.”²⁵ What a terrific thing it is when they voluntarily approach those who could lead them to a knowledge of God in the gospel! Yet if baptised, parents and their children who do not diligently attend the means of grace and have faith in Christ will have only made things worse for themselves on the day of judgment, not better. Their lack of faith will be counted as spiritual adultery and disloyalty to a solemn covenant, and therefore judged more strictly than if they had never come into contact with the gospel at all. It is neither kind nor pastorally wise to

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 175. Both this sermon and the next contain a number of useful reflections on matters sacramental.

²¹ Whitaker, *Martin Bucer*, 85 (my translation), “nisi enim maximi habeantur hominibus haec Christi mysteria, in iudicium ea sibi sumunt.”

²² William H. Griffith Thomas, *The Principles of Theology: An Introduction to the Thirty-nine Articles* (London: Vine Books, 1978), 376.

²³ See Burnet, *An Exposition*, 305-306 on the blessings and obligations of the gospel with regard to those baptised.

²⁴ See the extended meditation on this verse which is found in the Westminster Larger Catechism question 151. See also Michael Horton, *Introducing Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 152 who speaks about those in the covenant of grace “even those who fall away” being in a “worse position than those outside the covenant.”

²⁵ *On the Way: Towards an Integrated Approach to Christian Initiation* (London: Church House, 1995), 85.

allow someone to enter into such a covenant without making these things absolutely plain.

My personal experience of having such honest conversations is that it can create greater interest in the gospel amongst non-church-attending, unbelieving parents who have a vague sense that they should bring their child to God but no real understanding of why. Once I was privileged to bring a new father to Christ himself first, and baptise him, before later baptising his daughter who he had originally come to see me about. He was struck by my explanation of the seriousness of what he was asking for and realised he needed to know more about Christianity. On another occasion, a father decided after much thought that he could not take part in his child's baptism service because he realised after the weeks of preparation that he was not right with God and could not sincerely say what he was required to say publicly. This opened up more valuable evangelistic conversations. Bishop Colin Buchanan rightly suggests that "If we grant baptism on request, we trivialise the Lord's provision, lead parents into declarations which mean nothing to them, and often precipitate a reaction against infant baptism by strong believers whom we thus lose to Anabaptists."²⁶ It is certainly true that if we become mere dispensers of indiscriminate, unexplained baptisms we are missing out on the gospel opportunities which such baptism enquiries can open up, failing in our duties before God even while we attempt perhaps to be obedient to the letter of canon law.

2. *Depending on Christ's promise, not "worthy" ministers (Article 26)*

Article 26 roots the Church of England's sacramentology in patristic wisdom. It is entitled, "Of the Unworthiness of the Ministers, which hinders not the effect of the Sacraments" and reads,

Although in the visible Church the evil be ever mingled with the good, and sometimes the evil have chief authority in the Ministration of the Word and Sacraments, yet forasmuch as they do not the same in their own name, but in Christ's, and do minister by his commission and authority, we may use their Ministry, both in hearing the Word of God, and in receiving the Sacraments. Neither is the effect of Christ's ordinance taken away by their wickedness, nor the grace of God's gifts diminished from such as by faith, and rightly, do receive the Sacraments ministered unto them; which be effectual, because of Christ's institution and promise, although they be ministered by evil men.

Jesus once said to his disciples, "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat, so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice" (Matt 23:1-3). Similarly, within the church there will always be those who minister God's word and sacraments

²⁶ Colin Buchanan, *Is the Church of England Biblical? An Anglican Ecclesiology* (London: DLT, 1998), 246.

whose ministry we can benefit from but who themselves do not practice what they preach. This Article addresses the concern of those who doubt the validity or efficacy of the sacraments administered by such people. "I was baptised by X," they might say, "but look, I now see that he's an immoral man who in his own life has rejected the very truths he taught me to love. Is my baptism still valid?" Sometimes even the faith of such people is rocked by some later-revealed unworthiness in the minister who baptised and disciplined them.

Article 26, which has its roots in the Donatist controversy of the fourth century, asserts that the efficacy of the sacraments depends on Christ alone, and not on anything in the one who administers them.²⁷ As Paul told the Philippians, the important thing is not the minister, but that Christ is proclaimed (Phil 1:18). This is a teaching common to the churches of the Reformation, and was reasserted in the face of radical Anabaptist agitations on the Continent and the serious spiritual doubts which arose during the vicious religio-political swings of the English Reformation. It enabled those Protestants who were baptised under Roman Catholicism to have confidence in their baptism as resting on Christ's institution and promise, and faith in this alone, and not on the godliness, soundness, or intentions of the priest who performed it.²⁸ People like Luther, Calvin, and Cranmer were not re-baptised once they broke with Rome. Without this sort of assurance, people would be subject to all kinds of spiritual angst for themselves whenever a minister did anything sinful. The impact and persuasiveness of a minister's teaching may be damaged by, say, tax evasion, lust, and coarse language; but these do not hinder the effect of the sacraments they administer. The Augustinian-Reformation doctrine re-focuses people's attention away from the human personality and back onto God and his word. In many ways, we ought to forget who baptised us. The worthiness or qualifications or celebrity status of the minister is not pertinent; what matters is being baptised in Christ's name and trusting in him.

This is a vital point theologically,²⁹ and it is also made in other confessions and catechisms.³⁰ It is however also of course true that no

²⁷ This was a repeated point throughout the middle ages too. Lombard, *Sentences*, 4.5.1 for example, reasserts it, with a number of quotations from Augustine and others.

²⁸ We may draw parallels and ask whether if a couple who were married by a minister who turned out to be a rogue, are truly married. Of course they are, if the marriage is performed legally and correctly. Marriage is not a sacrament, but the same applies: outwardly someone is truly baptised if it was performed legally and correctly, regardless of the minister's godliness. Neither the minister himself nor the sacrament in itself have the power to bring about the inward spiritual change which God's word alone effects through faith.

²⁹ Mark Burkill, *Unworthy Ministers: Donatism and Discipline Today* (London: Latimer Trust, 2010) is an excellent contemporary exposition of this Article.

³⁰ The Westminster Shorter Catechism, question 91, for example says that "The sacraments become effectual means of salvation, not from any virtue in them, or in him that doth administer

church can retain the loyalty and true affection of its members for long without pious and godly leadership. Churches led by “the evil” will be dreadfully confused, sorely lacking in evangelistic fervour and the enthusiastic pursuit of sanctification. So for the health of the body, there must be effective discipline for those who are notoriously deficient. The end of Article 26 is clear that we must not simply accept false or immoral teachers passively within the church. We have a duty not just to avoid them but also to accuse and charge them before competent authority: “Nevertheless, it appertaineth to the discipline of the Church, that inquiry be made of evil Ministers, and that they be accused by those that have knowledge of their offences; and finally, being found guilty, by just judgment be deposed.” Baptisms carried out by such ministers are valid, by Christ’s ordinance and faith in him. But if found guilty they should be removed from spiritual leadership by those with the authority to do so, before their bad example or teaching leads others astray. As Michael Jensen and Tom Frame rightly say, “The expulsions from ministry envisaged by this article have perhaps been too infrequent.”³¹

It is a sad reflection that ungodly people sometimes have senior authority in the church. Some may say that this is to be expected in established churches which follow the Constantinian model of church-state relations, encouraging hypocrites to seek high office in the church.³² Yet we know from all too sad experience that Anglican churches in England have no monopoly on unconverted, worldly leaders.

3. *An instrument of grace (Article 27)*

Having made these opening remarks about the nature of the sacraments in general, the Articles then proceed to a specific statement about baptism:

Baptism is not only a sign of profession, and mark of difference, whereby Christian men are discerned from others that be not christened, but it is also a sign of Regeneration or New-Birth, whereby, as by an instrument, they that receive Baptism rightly are grafted into the Church; the promises of the forgiveness of sin, and of our adoption to be the sons of God by the Holy Ghost, are visibly signed and sealed; Faith is confirmed, and Grace increased by virtue of prayer unto God. The Baptism of young Children is in any wise to be retained in the Church, as most agreeable with the institution of Christ.

them; but only by the blessing of Christ, and the working of his Spirit in them that by faith receive them.”

³¹ Michael Jensen and Tom Frame, *Defining Convictions and Decisive Commitments: The Thirty-nine Articles in Contemporary Anglicanism* (Canberra: Barton Books, 2010), 74.

³² An interesting point to ponder in this, the 1700th anniversary year of the Battle of Milvian Bridge, after which Constantine became the first Christian emperor of Rome.

This makes a number of key assertions. First, it begins with another “not only, but also” statement (as in Articles 25 and 28), thus showing that certain views, while not entirely inaccurate, were nevertheless inadequate.³³ Baptism certainly is a sign of our confessing the faith, and a sign of our profession in the sense of our calling to die to sin and live for righteousness.³⁴ According to the Article, those who are baptised are “Christian men” (if modern readers will forgive the lack of gender neutrality), while those who are not thus “christened” are not. Baptism helps people discern the difference between those who are and are not Christians. This takes up the outward, phenomenological language of the New Testament, which also gives the name “Christian” to those who are outwardly identified as followers of Christ.³⁵ It is important to note, however, that this is not the only way in which we today use the term. The way we use it, “Christian” very often means “true believer”, or is functionally equivalent to “elect” or “saved.” That is not the meaning here. The Article is certainly not saying that everyone who is baptised is a true believer or that they are going to heaven as a result of their baptism! The formularies are everywhere opposed to such *ex opere operato* theologising.³⁶ Rather, as the later Westminster Confession says, baptism puts “a visible difference between those that belong unto the church, and the rest of the world.”³⁷

That being said, baptism is not solely an outward boundary marker. Anglicans assert that it is more than that. It is also a sign, an instrument, and a seal. As a sign it signifies regeneration (it does not, note, *produce* that new birth!); as Gilbert Burnet wrote, “this is not to be believed, to be of the nature of a Charm, as if the very act of Baptism carried always with it an inward Regeneration.”³⁸ As an instrument it grafts into the church those who *rightly*

³³ Charles Hardwick, *A History of the Articles of Religion* (Cambridge: Deighton, Bell and Co, 1859), 94-97 makes it clear how, in the historical context, this Article is taking a stand against the “mere token” view.

³⁴ This is how “our profession” is understood in the Book of Common Prayer baptism service.

³⁵ E.g. Acts 11:26 and 1 Peter 4:16. The name in both cases appears to have been given by outsiders to those they identified as being part of the movement. See Charles K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994), 555-557 who argues that as a name for disciples of Jesus it was unlikely to have arisen internally.

³⁶ In Scripture, one can be “bought” and even “baptised” without being finally saved, according to e.g. 2 Pet 2:1 and 1 Cor 10:1-10. On which, see Steve Jeffery, Mike Ovey, and Andrew Sach, *Pierced for our Transgressions: Rediscovering the Glory of Penal Substitution* (Leicester: IVP, 2007), 275 n78 and my *For Us and For Our Salvation: ‘Limited Atonement’ in the Bible, Doctrine, History, and Ministry* (London: Latimer Trust, 2012), 52-57. See also Paul’s comments about circumcision in Romans 2:28-29.

³⁷ Westminster Confession of Faith, 27:1. Griffith Thomas, *The Principles of Theology*, 373 states that “This idea of Baptism as the Divine mark of Christians is an elementary view accepted by all.”

³⁸ Burnet, *An Exposition*, 302.

receive it (not, note, automatically as if by magic).³⁹ This accounts for the Reformers' clear preference for baptisms in church rather than at home.⁴⁰ As a seal it authenticates the promises of forgiveness and adoption, as a visible word from God. "Faith is confirmed and grace increased" says the Article, but not, note, by virtue of the act of baptism itself but by virtue of "prayer unto God" (of which there is much, as we shall see, in the Prayer Book service).⁴¹ Thus we see how carefully the Article makes positive statements about baptism while staying as far away from the false doctrines of Rome on this point as possible.

"In the wording of this Article," claims Boulton, "our Reformers seem to have borrowed little or nothing from other sources."⁴² On the contrary, the final phrase, "The Baptism of young children is in any wise to be retained in the Church, as most agreeable with the Institution of Christ" is most probably borrowed directly from Calvin's *Institutes*. In the 1553 Articles, Cranmer had originally written, "The custom of the Church to christen young children is to be commended, and in any wise to be retained in the Church." The final 1571 wording, that paedobaptism is "most agreeable with the institution of Christ" is, however, strikingly similar to the section heading added to Calvin's *Institutes*, Book 4 chapter 16 in the final edition of 1559.⁴³ This reads, "Paedobaptismum cum Christi institutione & signi natura optimè congruere" (paedobaptism best agrees with the institution of Christ and with the nature of the sign).⁴⁴

³⁹ The Latin here is *recte* not *rite*, which means that the thought is "with the correct disposition, or fulfilling the proper conditions", rather than "when the external ceremonial is properly performed." *Rite* is the word used in Article 25 when it says the sacraments are to be rightly used (as opposed to being gazed upon or carried about), and in Article 26 when it speaks about receiving the sacraments "by faith and rightly" (*fide et rite*).

⁴⁰ There is a separate service for baptism of infants at home, but its use is discouraged except in extreme circumstances. Canon B21 states that "It is desirable that every minister having a cure of souls shall normally administer the sacrament of Holy Baptism on Sundays at public worship when the most number of people come together." This is for two main reasons: "that the congregation there present may witness the receiving of them that be newly baptized into Christ's Church" (i.e. it is a corporate and incorporating act), and also that other members of the Church may "be put in remembrance of their own profession made to God in their baptism" (i.e. it is a visible reminder of God's claim upon us).

⁴¹ Confusingly, the Latin edition of the Article has here *vi divinae invocationis*, "by virtue of the divine invocation" which could mean the baptisand's faith is confirmed and grace increased not by the congregation's prayers to God but by invocation of the Trinity in the formula of baptism.

⁴² Boulton, *An Exposition*, 226.

⁴³ Published by Robert Stephanus in Geneva. In the English edition of 1561 published in London by Wolf and Harison, the section heading is translated, "That the Baptisme of infantes doth very well agree with the institution of Christ and the nature of the signe." The previous (3rd and 4th) editions of the *Institutes* published in Strasburg and Geneva in 1543 and 1554 did not have these section headings.

⁴⁴ The Latin of Article 27 is "cum Christi institutione optime congruat."

I think it is clear, then, that the Article here borrows a crisp headline from the *Institutes*. Whether it might also at some level therefore encourage Anglicans to look to Calvin's exposition of infant baptism as a model biblical defence of the practice, I leave to the judgment of the reader.⁴⁵ The Article itself wisely does not set out a biblical case for infant baptism *per se*, leaving us a degree of latitude to argue for it in a variety of different ways, without being confessionally tied to any particular exegetical or theological reasoning.⁴⁶ It is certainly true that the Articles limit the options theologically, rightly filtering out several erroneous views; but they do not push for too much precision in between the extremes.⁴⁷ They also make no comment on the necessity of infant baptism, though the Roman doctrine of absolute necessity is certainly rejected, in view of the strong emphasis on salvation *sola fide* in the formularies.⁴⁸

It is not even said in the Articles that it is an absolute requirement for Christian parents to baptise their children, however desirable it may be. It is clearly *expected* of Anglicans that they will do so, of course (and ministers were enjoined by the 1552 and 1604 Canons to seek out unbaptised children so they could be baptised).⁴⁹ If it is true that infant baptism "best fits with Christ's institution" of the sacrament, as the Articles say, no-one assenting to

⁴⁵ Calvin was widely read and disseminated in Elizabethan England. One Roman Catholic complained that "The Institutions of Calvin are so greatly esteemed in England, that the book has been most accurately translated into English, and is even fixed in the parish churches for people to read," while another lamented that "English bishops enjoin all the clergy to get the book almost by heart, never to have it out of their hands, to lay it by them in a conspicuous part of their pulpits." See A. M. Toplady, *The Complete Works of Augustus Toplady* (Harrisburg, Virginia: Sprinkle Publications, 1987), 258, 261.

⁴⁶ Not all Anglicans would agree with Griffith Thomas, *The Principles of Theology*, 378 for example, when he claims that "the great spiritual fact at the root of the practice of infant baptism" is that all children belong to Christ already by virtue of a (supposedly) universal atonement. This of course proves far too much and would justify indiscriminate baptism of *everyone*, even unbelievers, if Christ truly died for all in this sense. It is better not to begin a case about the proper subjects of baptism with highly contentious assertions about the atonement! (This is also done by William Baker in his 1883 commentary, *A Plain Exposition of the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England*).

⁴⁷ On this point see William Goode, *The Doctrine of the Church of England as to the Effects of Baptism in the Case of Infants* (London: Hatchard and Son, 1850), 1-2.

⁴⁸ The Council of Trent declared that, "If anyone says that baptism is optional, that is, not necessary for salvation, let him be anathema." (Session VII, Canon 5 on Baptism). In the *Book of Common Prayer* Catechism, it is said that baptism is *generally* necessary (i.e. it is normal and obedient to be baptised), thus utilising a standard Protestant distinction which repudiated the Roman doctrine of *absolute* necessity but did not altogether reject the importance of baptism. See Francis Turretin, *The Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1997), 3:384-393, who goes too far in asserting (387) that the one who refuses to get baptised at all is "guilty of a heinous crime and incurs eternal punishment."

⁴⁹ This was partly for political reasons perhaps, as Roman Catholics and Anabaptists (who would both attempt to avoid having their children baptised) were considered politically dangerous at this time.

them would wish to be thought a second best Christian! Certainly those who claim to be in accord with the official formularies should be content to baptise their children, and strongly advocate that others do so. It ought to be remembered, however, that only ministers are expected to declare any level of assent to the Articles; it is not required of each and every churchgoer that they do so.⁵⁰

If this Article is true, then we must not so overvalue dramatic conversions (as wonderful as they are) that we think lightly of the tremendous blessing of being baptised as an infant and brought up to know and love the Lord Jesus from an early age. Nor should we feel we have to “leave it up to them to make the decision to be baptised when they’re older” as if this is somehow more authentic, either spiritually superior or more likely to produce the fêted conversion experience. Rather, we ought to think and speak more often of the common experience of baptised children who may grow spiritually into a deeper appreciation of the blessings signed and sealed to them in their baptism, in gradual or sudden ways analogous to physical growth (which can be slow and steady or come in spurts).

The Book of Common Prayer

Having looked at the Anglican theology of baptism, we turn now to examine, more briefly, its liturgical expression in the Book of Common Prayer. The authoritative edition is that from 1662, celebrating its 350th anniversary this year, though this is very close to the second Cranmerian Prayer Book of 1552, and is substantially just a lightly amended evolution of that earlier book.⁵¹ We will unpack the baptismal service in the 1662 book, as opposed to the more modern liturgies of Common Worship, since the BCP alone has “confessional” status. As we will see, it is important to note that this must be read through the primary lens of the Articles and not be interpreted in such a way that it serves an agenda foreign to them.⁵²

⁵⁰ See Charles Neil and J. M. Willoughby, *The Tutorial Prayer Book* (London: Church Book Room Press, 1963), 371 who think the wording of the Article “would seem to be designed to avoid ‘unchurching’ those who find a difficulty in Infant Baptism.”

⁵¹ For more on the complex evolution of the Prayer Book, see Francis Proctor and Walter Hayward Frere, *A New History of the Book of Common Prayer* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1951) and Dyson Hague, *The Story of the English Prayer Book* (London: Church Book Room Press, 1949). One significant change is that a prayer concerning the water (“Sanctify this water”) absent from 1552 (possibly due to Bucer’s *Censura*, e.g. Whitaker, *Martin Bucer*, 88-91, 98-101), was added in 1662; for a helpful explanation of which see Neil and Willoughby, *The Tutorial Prayer Book*, 388. Another helpful addition in 1662 was a service for adult baptism, more necessary after the confusions of the Commonwealth period but also because of the increasing number of converts from pagan religions in the American colonies.

⁵² The Irish BCP makes this very clear here by adding to its preface, “No minister of this Church is required to hold or teach any doctrine which has not been clearly determined by the Articles of Religion.”

The first thing to note about the infant baptism service is that it is focused on prayer and instruction.⁵³ It begins with as clear a declaration of the need for God's initiative in salvation as one is likely to hear in any liturgy:

Dearly beloved, forasmuch as all men are conceived and born in sin, and that our Saviour Christ saith, None can enter into the kingdom of God, except he be regenerate and born anew of water and the holy Ghost; I beseech you to call upon God the Father, through our Lord Jesus Christ, that of his bounteous mercy he will grant to *this child* that thing which by nature *he* cannot have, that *he* may be baptized with water and the holy Ghost, and received into Christ's holy Church, and be made a *lively member* of the same.

There then follow two long prayers to that effect, a Bible reading (Mark 10:13-16) and an exhortation based upon that reading, and another prayer.⁵⁴ The godparents then declare the faith in which the child is to be brought up (using the words of the Apostles' Creed), followed by another prayer, that the old Adam in the child might be buried and the new man raised up. Another prayer, linking the efficacy of baptism to the cross of Christ and alluding to the Great Commission, then asks that the child "may receive the fulness of thy grace, and ever remain in the number of thy faithful and elect children." The child is then baptised in the name of the Trinity,⁵⁵ after which follows the Lord's Prayer, and a thanksgiving prayer. The service closes with an exhortation to the godparents in which they are strongly urged to make sure the child hears sermons and is taught to recite the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the Ten Commandments "and all other things which a Christian ought to know and believe to his souls health," as well as being "vertuously brought up to lead a godly and a Christian life" of dying to sin and living to righteousness. It is clear that baptism is an initiation into a lifelong battle against indwelling sin, the world, and the devil, requiring God's constant grace and biblical encouragement. It is not a once-and-for-all pseudo-magical charm which guarantees salvation by virtue of the external act, but (as the

⁵³ For a more comprehensive exposition of the Baptism service, see Gordon P. Jeanes, *Signs of God's Promise: Thomas Cranmer's Sacramental Theology and the Book of Common Prayer* (London: T&T Clark, 2008), 241-288.

⁵⁴ It would be a mistake to think that by having only one reading in this service the Church of England was somehow resting the entire weight of the argument for infant baptism on a single text. As J. C. Ryle comments in *Expository Thoughts on Mark* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1985), 203-204, "Of course, it is not pretended that there is any mention of baptism, or even any reference to it in the verses before us. All we mean to say is that the expressions and gestures of our Lord in this passage, are a strong indirect argument in favour of infant baptism. It is on this account that the passage occupies a prominent place in the baptismal service of the Church of England."

⁵⁵ Either the minister "shall dip it in the water discreetly and warily" or, if it is weak, "it shall suffice to pour water upon it."

BCP Catechism puts it), “an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.”⁵⁶

Puritan exceptions to the 1662 baptism service were various.⁵⁷ They thought ministers should not be forced to baptise the children of atheists, infidels, or heretics of course, or of unbaptised or excommunicated parents. They also wanted the power to refuse baptism to the children of “notorious and scandalous sinners” until their parents had repented. They asked for more notice to be given to the minister than just 24 hours.⁵⁸ They were against the imposition of godparents too, since Scripture does not mention them whereas it does particularly mention parents (especially fathers) which the liturgy does not.⁵⁹ The main sources of controversy, however, surround the two paragraphs immediately following the baptism itself, where the child is signed with the sign of the cross and where the minister says “Seeing now, dearly beloved brethren, that *this child* is regenerate and grafted into the body of Christ’s Church...”⁶⁰

Concerning the sign of the cross, this is part of a wider debate about church ceremonies that was going on throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Cranmer, like Calvin, saw that “although the basic core of the baptismal rite had remained intact, it had been incrustated by a number of superstitious rites which had obscured the basic sacramental action.”⁶¹ These included anointings with oil, chrism, repeated exorcisms (where

⁵⁶ The Catechism reminds all baptised children that this outward and visible sign bound them to personal repentance and faith upon coming of age, and requires them to recite and explain the Lord’s Prayer, the Ten Commandments, and the Creed (thus testing the work of the godparents which they were exhorted to in the baptism service).

⁵⁷ They can be found conveniently grouped together in Richard Baxter, *Reliquiae Baxterianae* (London, 1696), II. 326-327. Colin Buchanan, *The Savoy Conference Revisited* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2002), 52-58 also provides the Bishops’ answers and an informed discussion of the points at issue in each objection.

⁵⁸ A week’s notice (at least) is now enshrined in Canon B22.1.

⁵⁹ It is now acknowledged in Canon B23 that “Parents may be godparents for their own children,” and the role of the parents is more significant in today’s Canons B22, B23, and B26 than it was in 1662. One of the reasons why baptisms can be put off is to allow time to prepare and instruct the parents and godparents, who ought to be both baptised and confirmed themselves before having their children baptised. Canon B23 specifically states that godparents should be able to *faithfully* fulfil their responsibilities towards the child (e.g. in giving them Christian instruction, as parents also must according to B26) and also be an example in their own godly living (presumably in regular church attendance and other marks of godly discipleship). As the official commentary on the new *Common Worship* services says, “a committed Christian faith is presupposed in parents and godparents.” *Common Worship: Initiation Services* (London: Church House, 1998), 200.

⁶⁰ There was also controversy regarding the doctrine of infant salvation spoken of in a rubric at the end of the service (and in the Homily on Salvation), on which see my *The Tragedy of 1662: The Ejection and Persecution of the Puritans* (London: Latimer Trust, 2007), 22-23 and “From Life’s First Cry” in *Preachers, Pastors, and Ambassadors*, 325-366.

⁶¹ Hughes O. Old, *The Shaping of the Reformed Baptismal Rite in the Sixteenth Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 176.

unclean spirits were bidden to come out of the child and leave it alone in future), the giving of candles, and other things which made baptism appear more like the initiation ceremonies for ancient Greek and Roman mystery cults. "How much better it would be to omit from baptism all theatrical pomp, which dazzles the eyes of the simple and deadens their minds," said Calvin.⁶² Influenced also by the Continental Reformed theologians Vermigli and Bucer, Cranmer had actually done away with almost all such ceremonial accretions in the baptismal rite. In 1549 there remained several places in the service marked with a black cross, to indicate the sign of the cross should be made, as well as both anointing with oil and the "white vesture" or "crisome" for each child.⁶³ In the reformed service of 1552 (and hence 1662) these were all abolished and the *signa crucis* replaced by this one signing, of the child, explained by the minister.⁶⁴

The Puritans, however, saw that this appeared to be "a sacrament within a sacrament." Since it was not part of the biblical institution of baptism, they said, it would be better not to confuse the central matter by adding a ceremony which might imply the baptism itself was incomplete. Indeed, some complained that not only did Roman Catholic theologians ascribe numerous supernatural effects to signing with the cross, but "the common people in many parts of the land... hold that their children are not rightly baptized without it."⁶⁵ A clarifying Canon was promulgated in an attempt to address this concern,⁶⁶ but whatever legal canons say is in practice irrelevant to ordinary people attending and observing a church service, and so practically many felt (and may still feel) that the signing was a potentially misleading distraction, like other distractions added to baptism then and now.⁶⁷ Martin Bucer told Cranmer, however, that he considered the sign here

⁶² Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* trans. F. L. Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), II. 1319 (Book IV, chapter XV).

⁶³ The child also had to be dipped three times: first on its right side, then its left, and finally "dypping the face toward the fonte." Threefold dipping is commended in *Common Worship*, as indicating the Trinitarian faith into which the child is baptised, though a single dip is still considered legal and valid.

⁶⁴ See Buchanan, *The Savoy Conference Revisited*, 34 n33 who suggests that both Bishops and Presbyterians seem to have forgotten this historical point by 1661. In 1549 the child was signed with the sign of the cross before the actual baptism, on both forehead and breast, as well as being exorcised of an "uncleane... cursed spirite."

⁶⁵ *An Abridgement of that booke which the ministers of Lincolne Diocesse delivered to his majestie upon the first of December 1605* (Leiden, 1617), 38-39, 52.

⁶⁶ Canon 30 of 1604. The current Canon B25 likewise says "The Church of England has ever held and taught, and holds and teaches still, that the sign of the Cross used in baptism is no part of the substance of the sacrament: but, for the remembrance of the Cross, which is very precious to those that rightly believe in Jesus Christ, has retained the sign of it in baptism, following therein the primitive and apostolic Churches."

⁶⁷ Paul F. Bradshaw (ed.), *Companion to Common Worship* (London: SPCK, 2001), 165-166 only strengthens these anxieties in a discussion of both 1662 and *Common Worship*. Both the

a very simple and effectual reminder (“admodum simplex, et praesentis admonitionis”) of the cross of Christ, provided it was strictly understood, without superstition or merely casual adherence to custom.⁶⁸

Concerning the language of baptismal regeneration, it is well worth noting that until the Laudians made too much of this in the 1620s and 1630s, even the Puritans had not, on the whole, objected to it. That is, they understood what it meant, in harmony with the Articles, and did not imagine that it was an affirmation of the Roman Catholic doctrine of regeneration *ex opere operato*. Even that most Protestant Queen, Jane Grey, could affirm against her Roman Catholic interrogator that, “By the sacrament of baptisme I am washed with water and by the Spirit regenerated.”⁶⁹ Martin Bucer spoke of it as being reborn in the church (“in Ecclesia renasci”).⁷⁰ As Robert Letham rightly says, “The Reformed confessions are clear on the connection between baptism and regeneration. While they consistently oppose the Roman Catholic doctrine of *ex opere operato*, which asserts that the sacraments are efficacious by the fact of their use, they are equally severe on those who would reduce baptism and the Lord’s Supper to mere symbols.” Indeed, Reformed theologians often refer to baptism as “the laver of regeneration.”⁷¹

It was only as the more ceremonial “high church” party began to interpret such things in a more Romanising direction that the Puritans began to take exception to it. At the 1661 Savoy Conference, then, they objected to this phrase, saying “We cannot in Faith say, that every Child that is baptized is *regenerated by God’s Holy Spirit*; at least it is a disputable point, and therefore we desire it may be otherwise expressed.”⁷² The phrase is patient of a soundly Reformed and biblical interpretation,⁷³ and Ashley Null concludes from a wider study of his thought that “Cranmer thought paedobaptism effective only for the elect.”⁷⁴ So we must understand this phrase as liturgical language, claiming in the judgment of charity and faith what has been prayed

white robe and the anointing with oil make an unwelcome return in the new services, along with candles, signings, and even episcopal sprinklings in additional to baptism itself.

⁶⁸ See his *Censura* or examination of the BCP in e.g. Whitaker, *Martin Bucer*, 91.

⁶⁹ See the account she wrote of her interrogation by John de Feckenham in *Here in this booke ye haue a godly epistle made by a faithful Christian A comunication betwene Fecknam and the Lady Iane Dudley* (London, 1554).

⁷⁰ Whitaker, *Martin Bucer*, 83.

⁷¹ Robert Letham, *The Westminster Assembly: Reading Its Theology in Historical Context* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2009), 334, 339. His discussion of debates between members of the Assembly on different meanings of baptismal regeneration is very helpful.

⁷² *Reliquiae Baxterianae*, II.327.

⁷³ See for example J. Alec Motyer, “Baptism in the Book of Common Prayer” in L. Gatiss (ed.), *The Anglican Evangelical Doctrine of Infant Baptism* (London: Latimer Trust, 2008), 33-42.

⁷⁴ J. A. Null, *Thomas Cranmer’s Doctrine of Repentance: Renewing the Power to Love* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 230.

for throughout the rest of the service. It is not making a presumptuous statement about the child's salvific state, and is not at all contrary to the whole receptionist, faith-conditional doctrine of the sacraments found throughout the Thirty-nine Articles (which we have seen above). As Dyson Hague put it,

All the troubles in regard to our Baptismal Service have come from disintegration or misinterpretation. The teaching of the Church on baptism must never be taken in segments, nor are fragmentary elements of the service to be excised or protruded. Articles, Catechism, and Baptismal services form one perfect whole, and it is only in as far as all and each of these are weighed, compared, and mutually interpreted that the doctrinal integrity and beauty of the Church's teaching can be maintained.⁷⁵

This understanding of the language of the Prayer Book was tested in the mid nineteenth century in the so-called Gorham Case. George Gorham was barred from taking up his role as vicar of Brampford Speke by Bishop Phillpotts of Exeter who found, after grilling Gorham with 149 questions covering 52 hours over 8 days in 1847 and 1848, that his doctrine of baptismal efficacy was unsound. Gorham was an Evangelical, and held (broadly) to the view I have outlined here, which the Archbishop of York at the time declared was "nearest to the mind of the Reformers."⁷⁶ Gorham's appeal went all the way up to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council, which found in his favour: "opinions, which we cannot in any important particular distinguish from those entertained by Mr. Gorham," they ruled, "have been propounded and maintained, without censure or reproach, by many eminent and illustrious prelates and divines who have adorned the Church from the time when the Articles were first established."⁷⁷

This gave great encouragement to Victorian Evangelicals.⁷⁸ In a context where Tractarianism was seeking to re-read the Articles and Prayer Book in a way more sympathetic to Roman Catholicism (e.g. John Henry Newman's Tract 90), this was a resounding vote in favour of the Reformed and Evangelical doctrine of the sixteenth century Reformers. So, for example, J. C. Ryle could, without any hesitation, declare that, "To maintain that every child who is baptized with water is at once regenerated and born again, appears to turn the sacrament of baptism into a mere form, and to contradict both

⁷⁵ Dyson Hague, *Through the Prayer Book: An Exposition* (London: Church Book Room Press, 1948), 295.

⁷⁶ See James C. Whisenant, *A Fragile Unity: Anti-Ritualism and the Division of Anglican Evangelicalism in the Nineteenth Century* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003), 22.

⁷⁷ See Robert Phillimore, *The Ecclesiastical Law of the Church of England* (London: Sweet and Maxwell, 1895), II.851-852. They associated Gorham's Evangelical views with those of "Jewel, Hooker, Usher, Jeremy Taylor, Whitgift, Pearson, Carlton, and Prideaux."

⁷⁸ Some Anglo-Catholics, however, left in disgust to join Rome, including the future Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster, Henry Edward Manning. See John S. Reed, *Glorious Battle: The Cultural Politics of Victorian Anglo-Catholicism* (London: Tufton Books, 1998), 40, 64.

Scripture and the Thirty-Nine articles.”⁷⁹ The whole episode established the primacy of the Articles as the hermeneutical grid through which the Prayer Book was to be understood, thanks in large part to the work of William Goode, Rector of St. Antholin’s church in London.⁸⁰ Evangelicals began to appreciate their Reformation heritage more after the Gorham judgment, and to cooperate more freely with nonconformists as a result, less worried about High Church critics questioning their Anglicanism.⁸¹

There has always been a spectrum of evangelical opinion on this subject. Though all would reject the Roman Catholic view, some have always been more Zwinglian, so to speak, and felt uncomfortable with anything more than symbolic, tokenistic language. Socinians, who rejected orthodox Trinitarian theology for a rather flat and blinkered (supposedly “Bible alone”) hermeneutic, also took this view, even denying that baptism was to be continued at all after the first century.⁸² Some evangelicals have approached this conclusion in recent years, notably David Broughton Knox who seems to make baptism a merely optional (and in many contexts an inappropriate or meaningless) act.⁸³ The formularies, and Reformed theologians generally, declare this view biblically inadequate. Most evangelical Anglicans have taken the hypothetical, conditional view of baptismal efficacy. Others have also held to the view that as well as signifying these conditional blessings, baptism truly does admit a child into the privileges of the church in a covenant relation to God, and that this is such a great and distinctive blessing as to deserve the name regeneration. Yet regeneration is not by them understood as conversion, or the spiritual transformation of the soul. Thus

⁷⁹ J. C. Ryle, *The Upper Room* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1990 [1888]), 354. For more on the Gorham Case, see Owen Chadwick, *Victorian Church: Part One 1829-1859* (London: SCM, 1966), 250-271; J. C. S. Nias, *Gorham and the Bishop of Exeter* (London: SPCK, 1951); and J. R. S. Taylor, “Gorham on Infant Baptism,” in *Churchman* 66 (1952), 141-147.

⁸⁰ E.g. his *A Defence of the Thirty-nine Articles as the Legal and Canonical Test of Doctrine in the Church of England* (London: Hatchard, 1848) and (mentioned earlier), *The Doctrine of the Church of England as to the Effects of Baptism in the Case of Infants*. See also Peter Toon, *Evangelical Theology 1833-1856: A Response to Tractarianism* (London: Marshall, Morgan, and Scott, 1979), 87-88.

⁸¹ See Donald M. Lewis, *Lighten Their Darkness: The Evangelical Mission to Working-class London, 1828-1860* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1986), 178.

⁸² See the English translation of their *Racovian Catechism* (London, 1652), 109-112.

⁸³ See D. Broughton Knox, “New Testament Baptism” in *Selected Works, Volume 2: Church and Ministry* (Kingsford NSW: Matthias Media, 2003), 263-309. He seems thankfully inconsistent with his own exegesis of certain biblical passages and perhaps because of his otherwise generally Reformed Anglicanism does allow that water baptism today can be legitimate in some circumstances. Baptism is, however, “suitable only for a very few persons in a fully Christian culture” (305), and unwise and inapplicable in many heathen cultures (309). In the BCP, infant baptism is a prayer, he says (306-307), nothing more. Knox claims Article 27 asserts “that the baptism of infants is consonant with holy scripture” but that “it is not identical with the baptism of holy scripture” (308). This appears to be somewhat different to the actual assertion in the Article that “infant baptism best accords with the institution of Christ.”

Griffith Thomas comments that, "Baptismal Regeneration is twofold. Regeneration is birth into the visible Church; conversion is birth into the Church invisible... So that Baptism is the introduction of the recipient, whether adult or child, into a new condition or relation. It must not be overlooked that since the Puritan age Regeneration has come to mean renovation or conversion. But this was not the meaning of the Reformers, nor has the idea been changed in the Prayer Book."⁸⁴

Nineteenth century commentator T.P. Boulton outlined four schools of thought on this subject: A1 was the Tridentine *ex opere operato* view; A2 was a more high church Anglican view, similar but not identical to that; A3 was this objective covenant view. All of these saw baptism as actually doing something in and of itself, though how that thing was conceived was very different, depending on what was meant by "regeneration." Boulton's fourth category, B, was the hypothetical, conditional view. He claimed that the majority of evangelicals were of this view, but "not a few of them, including men of considerable learning, belong to the class A3."⁸⁵ He may have been thinking of H.C.G. Moule, or the great Charles Simeon, who wrote of an objective covenant in baptism but also of the need for a truly spiritual regeneration: "We are indeed received into covenant with God in baptism; but it is regeneration that really makes us his children."⁸⁶ Boulton is quick to add that we must be careful to ask always what is meant by regeneration and what precisely is thought to be conveyed invariably by baptism. "Failing that," he warned, "it is apparent that such a gross absurdity might result, and in fact has resulted, in ignorant or careless minds, as the confusing of an extreme Tridentine divine with a moderate English Churchman of the class A3; for each of them teaches invariable baptismal regeneration, but each means a widely different thing."⁸⁷ This is no less true in 2012 than it was in 1875.

The idea that baptism automatically produces a spiritual new birth is a problem within a particular conception of salvation. When it is understood that salvation from God's right judgment on us due to our rebellion against him, purchased by Christ on the cross, is applied to us by the Spirit in the new birth, there are two views: Evangelicals want to link that new birth with election and faith; Rome links it to the sacraments. But the salvation thus

⁸⁴ Griffith Thomas, *The Principles of Theology*, 385. He draws attention here especially to the phrase in the Catechism which speaks of "Baptism, wherein I was made a member of Christ." He adds on page 387 that "the reformers in their own books and also in the Formularies for which they are responsible, did not intend to condemn all doctrine of Baptismal Regeneration, but only the sense it has come to have to-day."

⁸⁵ Boulton, *An Introduction to the Theology of the Church of England*, 230-235.

⁸⁶ Charles Simeon, *Helps to Composition; or, Six Hundred Skeletons of Sermons* (Philadelphia, 1810), 3:92. See the similar fivefold taxonomy of Neil and Willoughby, *The Tutorial Prayer Book*, 374-375 which quotes from H. C. G. Moule, who seems also to have held this view.

⁸⁷ Boulton, *An Introduction to the Theology of the Church of England*, 235.

acquired is in many respects the same. A wholly different conception of what salvation actually is, however, is at play in some of today's liturgies. The official commentary on Common Worship for example claims that the world's biggest problem is that it is "subject to forces other than God... social blindness and estrangement is the root sin of which actual sins are symptoms... The root remedy for sin is therefore the creating of relationship in a community centred on God with a new pattern of life. For their right growth new human beings need to be grafted in from the start."⁸⁸ This makes salvation from sin a horizontal thing, so to speak, more than a vertical one. Being in the community and conforming to it is what counts, and in such a context baptism is most importantly a boundary marker of corporate belonging. The commentary also focuses on "how entry into the new community is also entry into the life of the Trinity," with clear allusions to the Eastern doctrine of *theosis*, or deification.⁸⁹ In such a situation it is clear that the debate here is not over the means of grace alone and how salvation is applied, but over what salvation is. To address this, a much longer article would be required!

Some contemporary issues

It is noteworthy that in none of the texts we have surveyed above, the Articles, Prayer Book, and Canons, does the word "covenant" occur with regard to baptism. This may be surprising, given that almost all theological discussion of sacraments is suffused in covenantal terminology. The earliest commentary on the Articles for example says, "Children belong to the Kingdom of Heaven... and are in the covenant; therefore the signe of the covenant is not to bee denied them."⁹⁰ Richard Sibbes concurred, preaching that "Whence we see a ground of baptizing infants, because they are in the Covenant. To whom the Covenant belongs: the seal of it belongs."⁹¹ "Sacraments are federal acts," says Burnet,⁹² while Dyson Hague adds that "the Baptismal service is a covenant service," and "the basic underlying principle of infant baptism is the principle of federal union or covenant right."⁹³ Griffith Thomas sums it all up when he writes that, "The doctrine of Baptism is best understood when we remember that God has made with man

⁸⁸ Common Worship: *Initiation Services*, 189.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 189.

⁹⁰ T. Rogers, *The English Creede* (London, 1587), 49.

⁹¹ Sibbes, *Evangelical Sacrifices*, II.158. See also II.162, 190-191, 196.

⁹² Burnet, *An Exposition*, 294. "Federal" of course means covenantal, from *foedus*, the Latin for covenant.

⁹³ Hague, *Through the Prayer Book*, 288, 290.

a covenant,” and “we may regard Baptism as the formal act by which we embrace God’s covenant.”⁹⁴

It would of course be absurd to suggest that the sacraments have nothing to do with the biblical theme of covenant. The mere absence of the buzz word does not mean the concept and reality is not present.⁹⁵ The word covenant only appears once in the BCP marriage service (in a prayer), and yet marriage is foundationally a covenant, biblically speaking.⁹⁶ It seems best to conclude then that the federal, covenantal nature of baptism is everywhere assumed by Anglican texts. Though it may be true that the Anabaptist challenge of the sixteenth century made Reformed theologians work harder at grounding the doctrine biblically and systematically, covenant theology (including its application to infant baptism) does of course have both a patristic and medieval pedigree.⁹⁷ The largest treatise on covenant theology in the seventeenth century was indeed written by a paedobaptist Anglican minister.⁹⁸

More recently, however, covenantal infant baptism has fallen on hard times within Anglican Evangelical circles. Despite its pedigree amongst the leaders of post-war evangelicalism such as John Stott and Alec Motyer, it has come to be viewed by some with suspicion.⁹⁹ Baptism is of course one of those subjects on which Anglicans have obvious differences with many of our closest friends and gospel partners in non-Anglican churches (and often within our own congregations). So perhaps a certain reticence to discuss this potentially divisive “distinctive” is therefore understandable, especially given the complexity of disagreements over covenant theology. Yet secondary issues are not unimportant issues, and with care it should be possible robustly to expound a view on such matters while graciously maintaining fellowship

⁹⁴ Griffith Thomas, *The Principles of Theology*, 375-376.

⁹⁵ Scripture does not speak of a covenant with the day and night when those things come into being in Gen 1, but does do so later in Jer 33:20. Many also see a covenant between God and Adam in Gen 2, despite the absence of the term itself (and it seems that Hos 6:7 does later refer to that arrangement as a covenant). Similarly, God’s covenant with David is described using federal terminology in Ps 89, but not in the narration of its institution in 2 Sam 7.

⁹⁶ See Prov 2:17, Ezek 16:8-14, and Mal 2:14. Note, again, that marriage is not called a covenant when first described by Scripture in Gen 2, though the term is clearly correct biblically.

⁹⁷ See Heiko A. Oberman, “*Wir sein pettler. Hoc est verum.* Covenant and Grace in the Theology of the Middle Ages and Reformation,” in his *The Reformation: Roots and Ramifications* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994), 91-115; Stephen Strehle, *Calvinism, Federalism and Scholasticism: A Study of the Reformed Doctrine of Covenant* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1988); L. J. Duncan, ‘The Covenant Idea in Ante-Nicene Theology’. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Edinburgh, New College (1995); and D. A. Stoute, ‘The Origins and Early Development of the Reformed Idea of the Covenant’. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Cambridge (1980).

⁹⁸ Francis Roberts (1609-1675), *Mysterium et Medulla Bibliorum. The Mysterie and Marrow of the Bible: viz. God’s Covenants with Man* (London: R.W. for George Calvert, 1657).

⁹⁹ See L. Gatiss (ed.), *The Anglican Evangelical Doctrine of Infant Baptism* which contains papers from both Stott and Motyer on covenantal infant baptism. Some of the analysis in the next few paragraphs is taken from my preface to that volume.

with brothers and sisters who read the Scriptures differently at this point. Sadly, however, as a result of this and other trends (such as a knee-jerk anti-Romanism), at many Anglican Evangelical baptisms one is likely to hear only a list of things which baptism is *not*, rather than a clear and robust exposition of its covenantal basis, blessings, and obligations. Little wonder, then, if people go away with the impression that we are embarrassed about infant baptism and do not take it as seriously as Anglican Evangelicals have done in the past.

Hence it would seem that there is some confusion regarding baptism in a number of Anglican Evangelical churches at present. As a result, many have lapsed into either Zwinglianism or a kind of default anti-paedobaptism, because these seem easier to understand and feel most distant from Roman Catholicism.¹⁰⁰ This mystification in the pews may be due partly to the absence of seemingly trustworthy material on the subject. There are many Presbyterian works of great value, clarity, and erudition,¹⁰¹ but less from a distinctively Anglican perspective that is dependable.¹⁰² Our modern liturgies are often deliberately ambiguous, overstuffed with complex symbolism, and usually left unexplained. Few expository preachers would pause in a standard Sunday sermon to unpack the implications of their text for the doctrine of infant baptism (or perhaps, any other doctrine). It is to be feared, therefore, that congregations are not often exposed to the biblical and theological reasoning behind the practice, which leaves them only with superstitious or erroneous explanations from less reliable sources that can quickly be dismissed by the biblically literate. It may also be that uncertainty in the pews is due to uncertainty in the pastor's study, for which a general downplaying of doctrine and church history might well be responsible.

In addition, there are movements within Reformed and conservative evangelicalism at present, with support from certain circles in the United States, which are strongly and passionately paedobaptist but which also defend some less mainstream views. 'Federal Vision' theology, for example, has proved to be somewhat divisive and controversial, and theologians

¹⁰⁰ On Zwinglianism as a default position for some Anglican Evangelicals regarding the other sacrament, see the ever-provocative Carl R. Trueman, "The Incarnation and the Lord's Supper" in D. G. Peterson (ed.), *The Word Became Flesh: Evangelicals and the Incarnation* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003), 189-190.

¹⁰¹ For example, most recently there is Robert Letham, *A Christian's Pocket Guide to Baptism: A Water that Unites* (Fearn: Christian Focus, 2012). But see also Daniel Hyde, *Jesus Loves the Little Children: Why We Baptize Children* (Grandville: Reformed Fellowship, 2006); G. Strawbridge (ed.), *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2003), Robert R. Booth, *Children of the Promise: The Biblical Case for Infant Baptism* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1995), and Pierre-Charles Marcel, *The Biblical Doctrine of Infant Baptism: Sacrament of the Covenant of Grace* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, 1953).

¹⁰² Michael Green, *Baptism: Its Purpose, Practice and Power* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1987) is a notable Anglican defence of the evangelical view. See also the relevant chapters in J. C. Ryle's, *Knots Untied* (London, 1874).

associated with this movement have written and focused much in the last few years on issues of covenant and baptism.¹⁰³ Yet it would be illogically sloppy to so associate a belief in infant baptism with the Federal Vision that holding to the former was thought to automatically implicate every paedobaptist in the perceived peculiarities of the latter (be it post-millennialism, preterism, or paedocommunion). Some critics who are less enamoured by Reformed theology generally can see a Romanising “high church” drift or an American home-schooling conspiracy behind everyone who holds convictions regarding infant baptism, even just standard centuries-old Anglican convictions. Yet a greater awareness and appreciation of our Reformation (and post-Reformation) heritage could prevent such over-reactions. But on this subject, I defer to the authority of our beloved Bishop J. C. Ryle:

The subject of infant baptism is undoubtedly a delicate and difficult one. Holy and praying men are unable to see alike upon it. Although they read the same Bible, and profess to be led by the same Spirit, they arrive at different conclusions about this sacrament. The great majority of Christians hold, that infant baptism is Scriptural and right. A comparatively small section of the Protestant Church, but one containing many eminent saints among its members, regards infant baptism as unscriptural and wrong... But the difference now referred to, must not make members of the Church of England shrink from holding decided opinions on the subject. That church has declared plainly in its Articles that 'the baptism of young children is in any wise to be retained, as most agreeable with the institution of Christ.' To this opinion we need not be afraid to adhere.¹⁰⁴

May this article go some way towards helping Anglican Evangelicals to recover that same gracious, yet unashamed, confidence.

¹⁰³ For example, see Steve Wilkins and Duane Garner (eds.), *The Federal Vision* (Monroe: Athanasius Press, 2004); Doug Wilson, *To a Thousand Generations: Infant Baptism - Covenant Mercy to the Children of God* (Moscow: Canon Press, 1996) and *Reformed is Not Enough: Recovering the Objectivity of the Covenant* (Moscow: Canon Press, 2002); Peter J. Leithart, *The Baptized Body* (Moscow: Canon Press, 2007); Rich Lusk, *Paedofaith: A Primer on the Mystery of Infant Salvation and a Handbook for Covenant Parents* (Monroe: Athanasius Press, 2004); Mark Horne, *Why Baptize Babies? An Explanation of the Theology and Practice of the Reformed Churches* (Monroe: Athanasius Press, 2007); and R. A. Smith, *The Baptism of Jesus the Christ* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2010).

¹⁰⁴ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on Mark* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1985), page 204.

“LET THE LITTLE CHILDREN COME TO ME...” BUT SHOULD WE BAPTISE THEM?

WHY BELIEVERS’ BAPTISM SHOULD USUALLY BE ADULT BAPTISM

Mike Gilbert-Smith^{*}

Though Baptists agree on the necessity of a profession of faith for Christian baptism, there is considerable disagreement as to whether baptism should be restricted to those of a particular age. This article builds upon two key assumptions of credobaptism and of the concurrence of baptism, church membership and participation at the Lord’s Supper to argue that baptism is appropriate for those who are at the stage in life where they are taking on adult responsibilities independent of parental authority. The responsibilities of church membership are inappropriate for children, and therefore the entry point of church membership should be delayed until adulthood. This is not to suggest that even very young children cannot be genuine disciples. Rather, the appropriate locus of their discipleship ought to be the family, rather than the church.

Introduction: a pastoral minefield that must be traversed

The age at which to baptise believers upon their own profession of faith is simple neither in principle nor in pastoral practice.

It is complex in terms of discerning biblical principles for several reasons. Most simply, nowhere is the question addressed directly in the Bible. We are given the age of one person only at his baptism, the Lord Jesus Christ.¹ Few have followed early Anabaptist leaders in insisting that we wait until candidates are about 30 years old before we admit them to baptism in order that they might follow Jesus’ example.²

Therefore the approach must be one of inference from other biblical principles as to what would be wisest. For some, we should baptise young children as soon as they are capable of professing faith.³ For others, we should find an “age of accountability”, which I shall argue is rather more

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¹ Luke 3:23.

² See the study of Anabaptist views of the age of accountability in Keith G. Miller, “Complex Innocence, Obligatory Nurturance and Parental Vigilance: ‘The Child’ in the work of Menno Simons” in Marcia J. Bunge Ed., *The Child in Christian Thought* (Eerdmans, 2001) 206.

³ E.g. John Starke “Should we Baptize Small Children? Yes” The Gospel Coalition blog, accessed 28/09/2012 <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/tgc/2011/02/23/should-we-baptize-small-children-yes/>.

difficult to pinpoint than some seem to suggest.⁴ Instead, my approach will be to look at the responsibilities that accompany baptism, and to argue that these responsibilities are best conferred upon those who would be ready to take on other more adult responsibilities, including greater independence from parents.

Unless one concludes that there is a definite age at which one may baptise, (e.g. 4, 10, 12, 18, or 20) the application of the principles are far more complex even than discerning what those principles are. Young adults of identical age may be at very different levels of maturity, and in very different circumstances. Trying to persuade anyone of the wisdom of delaying baptism is an emotive issue, but the emotions are intensified when it is a particular child, and that particular child's parents require persuasion. Parents can often see their children as "special cases"; and while not wanting to deny that any child is special, one must be aware of the pressures that might be put on that young person's peers that if someone of their own age within the church has received baptism, then why shouldn't they? Unless pastors are willing to have difficult and unpopular conversations with young people and their parents, churches will face ever-downward pressure upon the age of baptism until the distinction between paedobaptists and credobaptists will be blurred. The theology of the grounds of baptism might remain different, but the place of baptism within the discipleship of that child, who may grow up even unable to remember their baptism, will be practically identical.

Even more sensitive will be the situations where a pastor or an eldership are wishing to address a culture within a local church that hereunto happily baptised children younger than the current eldership are happy with. "My brother was baptised at 13; why can't I be?" is a difficult question to answer when confronted with a teenager. Sometimes it is an even harder conversation to have with her parents.

All this is to say that I am not unaware of the pastoral minefield that is opened up by arguing for a higher age of baptism than is often practised in baptistic churches today. Those who argue for a lower age might occasionally be accused of being unwise, but rarely of being a child-hating, harsh, hurtful, divisive, uncharitable or Spirit-quenching bigot.⁵ But any pastor arguing for delay well into teenage years should be prepared to receive all such criticism, and must therefore be fully convinced in his own mind that delaying can actually be the most loving, caring, family-honouring, Christ-glorifying approach for the individual young person, and for the practice of the local church. As Mark Dever once said in a sermon to which I

⁴ See section 7.2 below.

⁵ I was called many of these things in a recent post written for the 9marks blog arguing more briefly for this position. <http://www.9marks.org/blog/when-did-baptists-become-paedobaptists-9-reasons-why-we-shouldnt-baptise-young-children-even-if> accessed 15/8/12.

am much indebted in this paper, “Such pressures for baptising younger and younger believers could only be resisted by pastors who are convinced that there are clearly biblical reasons for not doing this.”⁶

There is not space in this paper to advise how to negotiate such conversations, but I am painfully aware that they will certainly come and require much wisdom, gentleness and patience. Rather, I hope to argue that making the “charitable assumption” of publicly recognising a young person’s profession of faith in baptism may not be as charitable as we might suppose. If baptism comes with responsibilities, we might recognise that some may be too immature to take on such weight, and therefore should be left free from them until they are old enough. As Tertullian states in the earliest extant treatise that addresses the age of baptism, “If any understand the weighty import of bequeaths, they will fear its reception more than its delay: sound faith is sure of salvation.”⁷

Just this morning I passed a poster at a train station that was trying to raise money for a women’s charity. “Remember leaving school? Getting married? Having your first child? So does Edele: she is 12 years old.” The point is clear. Some of the greatest blessings of life are not so agreeable if they are experienced prematurely. I will argue that baptism is one event that is best left until adulthood. But first I shall clarify two key assumptions that I shall be making.

Two key assumptions

Assumption 1: We should not baptise infants

There has been much ink spilled on the question of whether we should baptise infants and children who are too young to profess their own faith⁸ ever since the first recorded explicit mention of infant baptism by Tertullian

⁶ Mark Dever, *At what age should believers be baptized* (sermon preached at Capitol Hill Baptist Church, 21 April 2002) <http://www.capitolhillbaptist.org/2002/04/at-what-age-should-believers-be-baptized/>.

⁷ Tertullian, “On Baptism” in Alexander Roberts & James Donaldson, eds., *The Ante-Nicene Christian Library: Translations of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, 3, (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994 [1870]), 678.

⁸ For arguments from a baptistic perspective see Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn Wright, *Believer’s Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ* (Nashville: B&H, 2007); Paul K. Jewett, *Infant Baptism and the Covenant of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978); Fred Malone, *The Baptism of Disciples Alone* (Cape Coral: Founders Press, 2003). From a paedobaptist perspective, Gregg Strawbridge, *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2003); John Murray, *Christian Baptism* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1980), Douglas Wilson, *To A Thousand Generations: Infant Baptism, Covenant Mercy for the People of God* (Moscow: Canon Press, 1996) Lee Gatiss Ed., *The Anglican Evangelical Doctrine of Infant Baptism* (London: Latimer Trust, 2008).

in around A.D. 200.⁹ The fact that Tertullian both mentions infant baptism and opposes it makes it clear that for at least 1800 years the practice has been debated. I do not intend even to survey this debate. This paper is written unapologetically from within a baptistic framework. It may be of some minor use to paedobaptists in questions regarding the age of communicant membership, and in understanding a baptistic position more clearly, but it is written primarily for those who have already agreed that Christians should only be baptised upon profession of their own faith rather than that of their parents or other sponsors. I shall therefore not even attempt to interact with the objections that would most certainly arise against the conclusions of this paper from the parallel to circumcision, baptismal regeneration, infant faith or any other arguments that would be used to deem a profession of faith to be unnecessary for baptism.

Assumption 2: Water Baptism effects full communicant church membership

I came to baptistic convictions as a teenager. It seemed evident to me that the Bible says “Repent and be baptised” (Acts 2:38) and that the order matters. It wasn’t until several years later that I began to see the ecclesiological implications of baptism. Just as faith-producing Spirit baptism is the door to membership of the invisible body of Christ, so public water baptism is the door to the visible church.¹⁰

Christians across the centuries have recognised this. The question of “whom should we baptise” was identical to the question “whom should we admit to church membership”. So, when Thomas Shepard argues for infant baptism in seventeenth century New England, he entitles his treatise, “The Church Membership of Children.”¹¹

Where Baptists have differed from paedobaptists in this is that Baptists have made no subdivision of members into full, adult, communicant members, and child, non-communicant membership. Baptists (along with the innovative Reformed paedocommunionists¹²) have seen only one church membership and that is full membership.

However, in current, individualistic evangelicalism, this is often very confused. Baptism, church membership and admission to the Lord’s Table are seen as three largely unrelated events in the life of a disciple. I have been a member of one Baptist church with unbaptised (not even infant baptised) members, and of another where parents made the decision when a child was

⁹ Tertullian, “On Baptism” 677-678.

¹⁰ See 1 Cor 12:13, Acts 2:41.

¹¹ Thomas Shepard, “The Church Membership of Children” in I. H. Murray, *The Reformation of the Church* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1965) 383-409.

¹² E.g. Tim Gallant, *Feed My Lambs: Why the Lord’s Table Should Be Restored to Covenant Children* (Grand Prairie: Pactum Reformanda Publishing, 2002).

ready for the Lord’s Supper, not the church, sometimes a decade before their baptism. I have lost count of the number of times I have heard a baptismal candidate say, “I’m ready for baptism but not yet for church membership.” All three of these positions would have been utterly unthinkable to Christians from all denominations even a century ago.

My assumption is that baptism and church membership come together, or, more precisely that baptism is the Christian entry ritual into public identification with Jesus Christ (Rom 6:3) and with his body the church (1 Cor 12:13). Moreover, as Jonathan Leeman put it in a recent interview, “Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are just signs of the thing. Church membership is the thing itself.”¹³ This is not to deny that the Lord’s Supper and Baptism are means of grace, but merely to assert that they are means of grace given in large part to make the invisible body of Christ seen through visible identification with Christ in baptism, and continued union with Christ in the Lord’s Supper. Or as George Beasley-Murray states, “to be baptised to Christ is to be baptised to his Body. And to be accepted by Christ into his church, but not by the local church into which he is baptised, would be preposterous.”¹⁴

Just as the marriage service and marital intercourse are signs of the marriage, so baptism and the Lord’s Supper are signs of church membership. Baptism without church membership is like getting married and returning to the parental home (without your spouse!). The Lord’s Supper before baptism is like sex before marriage. The Lord’s Supper without church membership is like sharing a bed with your wife but not actually sharing a life with her.

I shall rely heavily upon this second assumption. And any reader who doesn’t share this assumption will probably not agree with my conclusions, but they should know also, that they probably don’t agree with one of the key ecclesiological agreements that almost all churches, baptistic and paedobaptist, would have shared until the middle of the twentieth century.

The responsibilities taken on with baptism

The direct responsibilities of water baptism

Baptism is public identification with the Lord Jesus Christ into his death and resurrection entailing the public responsibility of living “a new life” (Rom 6:1-3). Elsewhere baptism is “the pledge of a good conscience before God” (1 Pet 3:21). Thus, in the very act of baptism the candidate becomes a public

¹³ <http://www.9marks.org/audio/roundtable-discussion-church> accessed 2/10/2012.

¹⁴ George Beasley-Murray, “A Baptist interpretation of the place of the child in the church” in *Foundations* 8 (April 1965) 157-158. He however, reached different conclusions to me on the age of baptism.

representative of the Lord Jesus Christ and the life that he gives to all who believe. This is a graver responsibility than when someone merely professes faith, for in baptism the church is recognising that profession of faith to be credible and publicly giving thanks for it.

The responsibilities of church membership

When a person is baptised, not only are they baptised into Christ, but also into his body, taking on the responsibilities of church membership.

Though paedobaptists have held back certain responsibilities¹⁵ from children who have been baptised but not yet entered into communicant membership, no such division is consistent with credobaptism. We should therefore delay baptism until such a time as a candidate is ready for all the privileges and responsibilities of church membership.

(1) The Lord's Supper

Though, as we have seen, there are direct responsibilities associated with being baptised, the warnings associated with coming to the Lord's Table are far clearer. "Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord" (1 Cor 11:27), for "Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ?" (1 Cor 10:16).

If we are to admit someone to the Lord's Table, we need to recognise the weightiness of that admission, and the real danger we are putting people in if they are not ready to participate in a worthy manner.

(2) Church discipline

There are two ways in which church discipline becomes a responsibility for those who have been baptised and welcomed into church membership: firstly as one who may come under church discipline, and secondly as one who must participate in the church discipline of others.

Those who have entered membership in a church are subject to its discipline. The congregation may not allow one of its members to remain in unrepentant sin without publically removing them from membership (Matt 18:15-17; 1 Cor 5:1-5). One should ask if such public discipline is the best way to deal with unrepentant sin in pre-teens and younger teenagers. God has kindly given children families to be the nurturing structure in which

¹⁵ Such as participation in the Lord's Supper, and, where polity allows, voting in any matter that is put to the whole church.

children will be brought up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord (Eph 6:4). However, as soon as someone is baptised and enters church membership, if they fall into persistent, unrepentant sin, it cannot remain the sole responsibility of the parents to lovingly correct and discipline them, for their church membership may not be allowed to continue.

It is a real challenge for a pre-teenager or younger teenager to recognise that discipline can be an act of love even when it comes from his or her parents. When it must come from the whole church, I fear that it will cause too many who sincerely professed faith, but were never truly converted, to flee from the church and never return, feeling that they received only judgment. Because it seems harsh to discipline someone before they have even reached their majority, in practise it means that such discipline is rarely practised, and the teenager merely stops attending church, whilst still being a church member. Yet, having taken a young person into membership, a seemingly gentle refusal to practise church discipline may be worse for their soul even than discipline at a young age, as they would then be taught by the church continuing to allow them membership and the Lord's Supper, that serious unrepentant sin should not cause them to doubt their salvation.

Perhaps even weightier for young shoulders than the possibility of receiving church discipline is the responsibility to be involved in exercising it in the lives of others. Both Jesus (Matt 18:17) and Paul (1 Cor 5:4) insist that it is the responsibility of the entire gathered congregation to speak to the unrepentant sinner within the congregation and to ultimately put that sinner out of fellowship. If we are welcoming children into our membership this is the responsibility that we are giving them. Should a thirteen year-old schoolboy have the responsibility in being one of the voices speaking into the life of a 32 year-old adulterer? I cannot clearly see how such a responsibility would be appropriate or helpful for such a young person. If Pharisaism and self-importance are two of the chief temptations for children of believers who profess faith young, then by prematurely giving them very adult responsibilities we will only exacerbate such temptations.

(3) Maintaining doctrinal purity

When addressing the potential abandonment of the gospel in the Galatian churches Paul writes not to the elders of the churches (some of whom may have been involved in teaching another gospel) nor any other subdivision of the church, but he writes “to the churches in Galatia” in their entirety (Gal 1:2). He gives them the highest possible mandate of authority in the area of doctrinal authority: they are to declare as anathema even Paul himself or an angel from heaven if either were to preach another gospel (Gal 1:8-9). Each church in Galatia had corporate responsibility to silence false teaching,

whether it was from an apostle, an angel, or anyone else. Are we to give children a share in this responsibility?

The removal of a pastor who has abandoned the gospel is one of the most painful actions that any church may ever have to take. Should not those whom we would not even recognise as legally being mature enough to get married be put potentially under such a weighty and heart-wrenching responsibility as this? Would it not rather be wiser to shield them – allow them to grow to greater maturity without such great responsibilities?

The responsibilities of the family

Love and authority are to be experienced by children from their parents, not only where discipline is necessary, but in through every area of childhood.¹⁶ Parents are responsible for bringing up their children. It is true that all wise parents will grant their children increasing responsibilities, privileges and freedoms.

I have recently allowed my oldest child her first trip to a High Street shopping centre with a similar-aged friend. The temptation as a father to follow on my bicycle at a short distance, or to phone her every five minutes was almost too much to resist! Parents must allow their children to grow in responsibility. Parents may also choose to incorporate many other influences upon their children's lives in their education and discipleship. But whether a parent decides to educate their child at home or send them to a state or private school, it is the parent who remains responsible for them. Similarly parents may choose different ways in which to partner with the ministries provided by the local church in their children's discipleship. But the parents remain responsible.

This all changes when a child is baptised and welcomed into church membership. Now the church *has its own* responsibilities to disciple that child. Immediately that child has two spiritual authorities in their life: the parents' and the church's. Are parents ready to share that responsibility with the church? Ought they to be ready for that in the case of a 10, 12 or 14 year old? Are they, in fact, partially abdicating a responsibility that should still be theirs alone? Is the lowering of the age of baptism and church membership in fact a recipe for undermining the responsibilities of parents in bringing up their children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord, for they see, functionally at least, that this has now become the church's job and no longer theirs?¹⁷

¹⁶ For an excellent survey of Jesus' and Paul's teaching on the family see Andreas J. Köstenberger, and David W. Jones, *God, Marriage, and Family: Rebuilding the Biblical Foundation* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004) 109-128.

¹⁷ E.g. Dennis Rainey, Charles R. Swindoll, and Roy B. Zuck, *Ministering to the 21st Century Family: Eight Big Ideas for Church Leaders* (Nashville: W PubGroup, 2001) Chapter 8.

George Barna claims that though “85% of parents believe that they have the primary responsibility for the moral and spiritual development of their children... more than two thirds of them abdicate that responsibility to the church... For instance, we discovered that in a typical week, fewer than 10 per cent of parents who regularly attend church with their kids read the Bible together, pray together (other than at meal times) or participate in an act of service.”¹⁸

Because of the need for some Christian spiritual oversight, it does mean that I might cautiously suggest a lower baptismal age for those professing faith from a non-Christian background. In the case of a clear profession of faith by one who is not following their parents' faith, the need for Christian leadership from the church may be a reason to consider baptising sooner. However, this too is not without huge sensitivities pastorally. Will respect for parents be able to be well communicated, even as faith in Christ is being publically professed in baptism? Are they ready to take on the responsibilities of membership? Might there be ways to give a clearer pastoral oversight of such children without giving them the burden of church membership? I still have un-answered questions here, but I also hear few asking them. These questions require the wisdom of elders who know the church and know the teenager and their circumstances.

The responsibilities of the pastors

As already stated, unless a pastor has very good reasons not too, the temptation will be assume that any child who takes the initiative to request baptism must be ready to receive it. It is a pressured situation but every pastor must recognise his responsibilities to that candidate, their parents and the wider church.

Responsibilities to the candidate

The younger people are the more vulnerable they are, and the more direction they need. We are neither to doubt the sincerity of a child's profession of faith, nor the boldness of their request for baptism. Every step to profess faith in Christ should be verbally and prayerfully encouraged but not immediately certified by baptism. Though children can live as disciples of Christ from when they are very young, much of the discipleship of the young is training for the future responsibilities of adulthood. When a child expresses a premature desire for such responsibilities, whether it be a sexual

¹⁸ George Barna, *Transforming Children into Spiritual Champions* (Ventura: Issachar Resources, 2003) 109, quoted in William Yount, *The Teaching Ministry of the Church* (Nashville: B & H, 2008) 288.

relationship, leaving home, stopping their education and getting a job or being baptised, they should always be encouraged in recognising that this is a good thing that they should desire for the future, but that the present will be a time of preparation for that, not a time to prematurely grasp at it. Much of discipleship of the young is to be the learning of patience and humility, both of which will be aided through delaying baptism until adulthood.

One should also have a conversation with the child to ensure that they realise that baptism is necessary neither for faith, nor for assurance of faith. It will not be a wasted conversation that begins with a request for baptism and ends with an encouragement for a young person to read through 1 John and to know that the atoning work of Christ is of far greater value than baptism, and that genuine salvation is evidenced in continuing faith, love and obedience before it is evidenced in baptism.

Responsibilities to the parents

We have a responsibility towards parents to disciple them into understanding their responsibility as parents. It is good to instruct parents that it is not their role as parents to lead their children to “pray the sinners’ prayer”; there are plenty of children who have prayed the sinner’s prayer with well-meaning parents, and place their assurance of salvation firmly in the fact that they can “name the day” when they prayed it, but whose assurance proves tragically false in due time.¹⁹ While continually clarifying the gospel and the call to respond to that gospel in repentance and faith, it is important for parents to resist attempting to “define the moment”, nor even to seek to discern whether their child is regenerate, rather to consistently teach and model what the regenerate life looks like, knowing that time will tell whether their child is regenerate. All professions and evidences of faith should be met with encouragement and prayer, without parents feeling that it is their responsibility to tell their children that they are most certainly credible.

Responsibilities to the church

Though I would argue that admission to baptism should be on the basis of a case-by-case decision by the elders of the church rather than a set age, nevertheless a culture will be built up within the church as to the age and stage that is considered appropriate for baptism. We cannot get away from the fact that a precedent is being set by each young candidate for baptism

¹⁹ For further studies of use of the sinner’s prayer see Kurt Gebhards, “False Assurance: A biblical look at the Sinners’ Prayer” in John MacArthur, *Evangelism: How to share the Gospel Faithfully* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2011) 133-147.

being accepted. There will be expectations from other young people, other parents and the congregation at large that if the last three teenagers within the church were baptised around their 13th birthday: isn't it about time that Linda is baptised now she has turned 13? Though similar problems might arise with adults: “But you baptised Mahmoud two months after he professed faith, and I've been a Christian for six months!” the pressure will be harder when the delay to see the mature fruit of repentance might take years in the case of a child compared with perhaps a few months in the case of an adult.

An even more pressing pastoral responsibility towards the whole church that the pastor must take into consideration is the impact of admitting younger members into the church upon the purity of the church. As Tony Hemphill has observed within Southern Baptist churches, the proliferation of childhood baptisms has been a major factor in the abandonment of church discipline and the purity of the church in its doctrine and lifestyle.²⁰

Responsibilities to the head of the church

The church has been given the power of the keys to the visible church (Matt 18:18), and to a large extent these are administered by pastors holding conversations with potential church members. This is a very serious responsibility. We do not wish to wrongly shut people out of the visible church. But we also do not wish to casually name as sheep those who as yet show only fledgling evidence. The local church, as Christ's body is to display Christ's character. If we admit young children to membership because we don't have the heart to say “no”, then likely we won't have the heart to say “no” to their continued membership if they start living clearly non-Christian lives.

It will be the path of least resistance for a pastor to decide to baptise anyone who requests baptism. But in the end such a policy is one that displays more of the fear of man and desire to be loved, than the true shepherd-like love for the individual child, or the church as a whole, let alone the Good Shepherd himself.

The voice of the past

We have seen from the first arguments against Infant Baptism that Tertullian insisted upon awaiting other adult responsibilities such as marriage, or at least tested adult celibacy outside of marriage. Baptists have tended to follow suit through the centuries, waiting at least until young people have some

²⁰ Tony Hemphill, “The Practice of Infantile Baptism in Southern Baptist Churches and Subsequent Impact on Regenerate Church Membership” (Faith and Mission 18:3, Summer 2001).

other independence, such as a jobs of their own, before admitting them to baptism.

Cyprian was born around 200 AD and baptised around 246 AD (aged 46). Jerome was born around 347 AD and baptised around 366 AD (aged 19). Chrysostom was born around 350 AD and baptised around 367 AD (aged 17 or 18) by Meletius, bishop of Antioch. John Gill was brought up in a Baptist home and was baptised at age 19, Nov. 1, 1716 (just 3 weeks shy of his 20th birthday). John Ryland was brought up in a Baptist minister's home in Northampton, England, and was baptised in 1767 at age 14. Samuel Pearce was brought up in Baptist home and was baptized on July 20, 1783, Pearce's 17th birthday.²¹

These ages were typical throughout the eighteenth century. We start to see some Baptist ministers lowering the age of baptism during the second half of the nineteenth century after the Second Great Awakening. For example, though Charles Spurgeon himself wasn't baptised until 6 months after his very clear conversion at 16, and didn't baptise his sons until they were 18 despite being involved in evangelistic ministry for some years prior to that, he did argue for baptising children much younger, and is known to have baptised 12, 11 and even 10 year olds. And so he preached:

Brothers and Sisters, it would be very greatly sinning against children if the moment their little susceptible minds were made to feel terror on account of sin, we should put that down as repentance. Or the moment they felt some joy at the thought of the love of Christ we should assure them that they possessed faith. This would be to educate them in self-deception. We should not look to find in the young more than in the old. But so far as faith and repentance are concerned, we must require quite as much. I mean that the same repentance which is necessary in an adult in order to salvation is indispensable in a child.

Let us judge them righteously, but let us not judge them censoriously. Let us be willing to receive them to Baptism and to the Lord's Table, and when they are received, instead of thinking of them as though they were less valuable than other members, let us count them to be the very pride of the flock!²²

If anything we should delay longer not shorter than the past. We often hear that children have to grow up so quickly today. This may be the case compared to the 1950s in terms of exposure to the world. However, in terms of responsibility, children are caused to grow up less quickly, particularly in the West, than their Victorian forebears. How many of the 12 year olds baptised by Spurgeon would have been in full-time employment, for example?

²¹ I am very grateful to Mark Dever who has supplied me with a list of baptismal ages that he has collected over some time. This is my source for these ages, and the twentieth century ages below. For some of these, and others in the list, see Mark Dever, "Baptism in the context of the Local Church" in Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn Wright, *Believer's Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ* (Nashville: B&H, 2007) 329-352.

²² Charles Spurgeon, *Do not sin against the Child* <http://www.spurgeongems.org/vols13-15/chs840.pdf> accessed 15/8/12.

Baptismal ages begin to drop rapidly, however, through the twentieth century, just as growing affluence in the West means that the ages of employment and marriage are increasing. Dale Moody was baptized at 12 in 1927 in Grapevine, Texas. Jimmy Carter was baptized at 11 in 1935 (or 1936) in Plains, Georgia. Paige Patterson was baptized at age 9 in 1951 by his father, a Baptist pastor in Beaumont, Texas.

Come the twenty-first century, among Southern Baptists it is not uncommon for 4 year olds to be baptised. As one writer put it, “It is alarming to realize that fully one third of all first baptisms in the SBC are children who have not yet learned how to choose their own clothes”.²³ Though believers’ baptism has rarely been practised so early in Britain, it has still been common at least from the mid-twentieth century to baptise children as young as 8.²⁴ But without a principled argument to delay baptism, the pressure upon the age of baptism will remain downwards.

How long should we delay?

The question amongst credobaptists is not whether we should delay baptism, but to what extent should we delay. I do not yet know of any credobaptists who would baptise a two year old, though I have no doubt that a two year old can profess faith in Christ, nor do I have any reason to believe that there may not be many two year olds who have come to genuine, if immature faith. Yet Baptists have recognised that it is very difficult to discern with young children whether a profession of faith is more than a repetition of the faith of their parents. And, by definition, credobaptists will not baptise on the basis of parental faith that has not yet also become their own.

We should delay so that evidence of faith is given

The younger a professing believer, the longer one should wait in order to discern whether faith is genuine, particularly those children who have believing parents. Children are both designed and commanded in the Scriptures to obey their parents, and to follow them. Without ever questioning the sincerity of a child’s profession of faith, we would be unwise to underline it in baptism until sufficient evidence is given that this is a faith that is owned by the child. In most circumstances it will be very hard to distinguish a healthy desire to trust and follow parents from a Spirit-wrought desire to

²³ Tony Hemphill, “The Practice of Infantile Baptism in Southern Baptist Churches and Subsequent Impact on Regenerate Church Membership” (Faith and Mission 18:3, Summer 2001).

²⁴ See the discussion of baptismal age in Anthony R. Cross, *Baptism and the Baptists* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2000) 387-395.

follow the Lord Jesus, and it will be unhelpful to attempt do this. We should teach children what it means to follow Jesus, and how to find full assurance of salvation in him without declaring their faith real in baptism.

In terms of the Parable of the Sower, when assessing baptismal candidates we are dealing with those who are either good soil, rocky soil or thorny soil. We are by no means requiring a criterion of certainty before we would baptise anyone. We simply do not have the ability or the responsibility to look into a baptismal candidate's heart in order to discern whether a profession of faith is credible. In order to have reasonable evidence that someone has genuine faith, and is therefore good soil, we need also to have reasonable evidence that they are not thorny or rocky soil, that is, they are not those whose profession of faith will cave under the pressures of persecution and worldliness (Mark 4:13-20). If a mere profession of faith is required rather than a credible profession of faith then baptism, designed by the Lord to be a great aid in the assurance of the believers' faith, will offer false assurance to many.

In the case of those still living in the parental home with little independence, there is a real question concerning the extent to which such evidence is possible. How much has such a profession of faith faced the pressure of persecution and the pull of the world? The answer is not to send children out like sheep amongst wolves so that they will show earlier evidence of regeneration, but to recognise the huge opportunities that the safety of childhood gives for instruction, for patience, and for preparation for a lifetime of discipleship that we pray they will have.

Children are designed by the Lord to be malleable, even gullible. It is natural for children to believe what their parents tell them. They are able to be shaped, and formed by teaching and instruction due to their natural childlike trust. Paul expects church members to be unlike children "tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes." (Eph 4:14, ESV). In order to discern if a child's faith is credible, one has two choices: either to accept their faith upon the basis of the credibility of the parents' faith (but then we really have become paedobaptists) or to try to distinguish between faith in Christ and faith in the parents, which is extremely difficult, and has doubtful spiritual benefits. Rather we should allow children to profess faith within the nurturing environment of the family home until such time as childhood is left behind, and a credible profession of faith is possible. If credibility of belief is at all an aim, there is something seriously awry when we count someone's faith in Christ credible at an age when many of their peers believe in Father Christmas.

We should not look for an “age of accountability”

The question therefore is not whether to delay, but *how long* to delay. Until a child is four? Six? Ten?

Many have argued that the biblical age is twelve citing a notion of an “age of accountability”, as Jewish boys might first read the Scriptures publicly at 12 after their bar mitzvah, and Jesus himself visited the temple at Passover aged twelve (Luke 2:41-52).²⁵ However the term “age of accountability” is nowhere found in the New Testament, and if we look through the Old Testament to glean what age a child comes to full accountability, twenty seems a more likely candidate than twelve: Only those over twenty should serve in the army (Num 1:1-4) participate in offerings (Exod 30:14) or commence service as a Levite (1 Chron 23:27; 2 Chron 31:17; Ezra 3:8). And only those over twenty died in the wilderness as a result of God’s judgment upon their unbelief (Num 14:29).

So, it is difficult to argue that twelve is an age of full accountability. We are left once again without a clear answer of how long to delay, but only with the need to exercise biblical wisdom.

We should delay until adulthood

All this leads me strongly in the direction of concluding that the appropriate stage of life in which someone should take on the responsibilities of baptism, membership and the Lord’s Supper is when they are taking on other adult responsibilities. I don’t want to put an age on this because different teenagers take on adult responsibilities at different ages.

A sixteen year old single mother recently converted from a non-Christian background may well be seen to have a great deal more adult responsibility for their faith than an eighteen year old home-educated pastor’s son who quietly professes faith while still living in the parental home.

For elders considering whether a teenager is mature enough for the responsibilities of baptism and church membership, they would do well to ask themselves what they would be saying if the same person was asking advice on whether the elders considered them mature enough to take on other responsibilities such as leaving full-time education to get a job, leaving home, or even getting married. Elders who would shrink back from advising the teenager to take on any of these other responsibilities, yet rush into laying upon that young soul the burdens of holding the keys of the kingdom of heaven, have either overestimated the maturity needed for responsibility

²⁵E.g. John S. Hammett, “Regenerate Church Membership” in Thomas White, Jason G. Duesing and Malcolm B. Yarnell III, *Restoring Integrity in Baptist Churches* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2007) 39-41.

in the world, or underestimated the maturity needed for responsibility within the church.

Objections anticipated

Are we being just plain disobedient?

Our wisdom falls woefully short of God's wisdom. If it seems wise for us to prevent children from receiving baptism, whereas the word of God commands it, our wisdom is foolishness indeed.

Are we like the disciples preventing children to come to Jesus (Luke 18:15-17)? Are we leading children into disobedience because they are commanded to repent and be baptised upon their profession of faith (Acts 2:38-39)? Are we ourselves being disobedient to the Great Commission of Jesus in failing to baptise children as soon as they become disciples? As one blogger has put it,

Refusal of baptism is a sin. If I refuse to baptize a genuinely converted child, I am forcing them not to do what Jesus has commanded them to do. Nay, all the worse, I am refusing to do what Jesus has commanded **me** to do in the Great Commission.²⁶

Or, as Ted Christman argues,

In short, it regrettably "forbids the children" who are truly converted to obey the Great Commission. It forbids them membership in the church. It forbids them the Lord's Table. It forbids them the pastoral oversight that rightfully belongs to all members of the church. It forbids them the sense of belonging to the family of God, even though they do in fact belong to Christ.²⁷

Luke 18:15-17²⁸

The first text proves either too much or too little: it is often used by paedobaptists and will be of no use for those who argue for believer's baptism of children, because there were not just young children, but babies present. Whereas Matthew and Mark use only the word τὰ παῖδια in their accounts Luke uses two Greek words τὰ βρέφη and τὰ παῖδια suggesting that Luke was "thinking especially of babies"²⁹.

²⁶ Bart Barber, "On Mandatory Age Thresholds for Believer's Baptism" <http://praisegodbarebones.blogspot.co.uk/2009/04/on-mandatory-age-thresholds-for.html> accessed 15/8/2012.

²⁷ <http://www.hbcowensboro.org/mediafiles/forbid-them-not-pdf.pdf> accessed 16/10/2012.

²⁸ Cf. also Matt 19:13-15; Mark 10:13-16.

²⁹ Colin Brown, "Child" in Colin Brown (Ed.), *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Volume 1 (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1986), 283.

In any regard, there is little to connect this account with baptism. As Spurgeon once put it, “There is no line of connection so substantial as a spider’s web between this incident and baptism, or at least my imagination is not vivid enough to conceive one.”

He backs this claim up with three arguments.

It is very clear, Dear Friends, that these young children were not brought to Jesus Christ by their friends to be baptized. “They brought young children to him, that he should touch them,” says Mark... In the next place, if they brought the children to Jesus Christ to be baptized, they brought them to the wrong person; for the Evangelist, John, in the fourth chapter, and the second verse, expressly assures us that Jesus Christ baptized not, but his disciples: this settles the question once for all, and proves beyond all dispute that there is no connection between this incident and baptism.

But you will say, “Perhaps they brought the children to be baptized by the disciples?” Brethren, the disciples were not in the habit of baptizing infants, and this is clear from the case in hand. If they had been in the habit of baptizing infants, would they have rebuked the parents for bringing them? If it had been a customary thing for parents to bring children with such an object, would the disciples, who had been in the constant habit of performing the ceremony, have rebuked them for attending to it?³⁰

Acts 2:38-39

Again a classic text in the conversation between credobaptists and paedobaptists, Peter’s command to “Repent and be baptised” is applied to “you and your children and for all who are far off – for all whom the Lord our God will call.” Credobaptists have traditionally emphasised the facts that the promise is not for all children, but those who repent, those who are called, and that this excludes infants. Can it, however, also exclude children old enough to repent and to profess faith? Are we stopping children from obeying Jesus’ commands by refusing them baptism when they themselves request it?

We should firstly ask what is meant by “children” in Acts 2:39. The Greek phrase is “τοῖς τέκνοις ὑμῶν”. This “denotes the child in relation to his parents and forefathers”³¹ not children as opposed to adults. Therefore, many times the word τέκνον is used in the New Testament to refer to adults. The point being made is not that this is for children as well as for adults, but that this is for people from every generation and from every nation. Each generation of believers in every nation must come to repent and be baptised.

The fact that this is a command does not automatically imply that it is a command that children must obey if they are to be faithful disciples of Jesus. There are many other commands in the New Testament given to disciples which we infer do not apply to children, and that in no way is their disciple-

³⁰ Charles Spurgeon, *Children Brought to Christ, not to the Font* <http://www.spurgeon.org/sermons/0581.htm> accessed 15/8/2012.

³¹ Colin Brown, “Child” 285.

ship compromised as a result. So, we do not think that “The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat” (2 Thess 3:10) applies to ten year olds! Neither would we see commands to marry (1 Cor 7: 9, 36), or even to “be fruitful and multiply” (Gen 1:28) as applying to children.

To suggest that we must baptise children because the command to repent and be baptised applies to children begs the question.

Matthew 28:18-20

Similarly to the previous passage, here we have a clear biblical command concerning the baptism of disciples. However, here the command is given to us as the church to baptise them, rather than to the individual disciple to be baptised.

Again, one must ask whether one can ever be faithful to the command to “make disciples of all nations, baptising them...” if one delays baptism in order to perceive the credibility of their profession of faith. Again, all credo-baptists agree. Their two year old may sing, “I have decided to follow Jethuth” but they do not immediately baptise her. The question remains, “how long a delay is wise in the case of children?”

Are we avoiding a clear implication of the New Testament?

Is the baptism of believing children strongly implied if not directly commanded? Does the near immediate baptism of people coming to faith in Acts imply that a long wait between faith and baptism is always wrong? Does Titus 1:6 imply the necessity of discerning a child’s faith in a way that this paper denies?

Acts 2:41 etc.

The immediate baptism of three thousand who profess faith on the day of Pentecost might be seen as strong evidence against the need to delay baptism until evidence of faith is observed. Other evidence could also be mounted from Acts to suggest that baptism was fairly immediate upon profession of faith.³² Firstly, we should note that the baptisms in Acts are largely happening in the context of a persecuted church. For example, on the day of Pentecost, the three thousand baptised were all professing faith in Christ in the city where he had recently been crucified. There was little doubt that the cost of discipleship was extremely evident to them.

³² E.g. Acts 8:12, 8:38, 9:18, 10:48, 16:15, 16:33, 19:5 and especially 22:16.

Titus 1:6

Does Titus 1:6 insist that an elder must be “a man whose children believe?” (NIV). If this is a criterion for eldership, then surely it must also be a sufficiently credible evidence of faith for baptism, must it not?

I would simply disagree with the translation, and suggest that πιστά would be better translated “faithful” or “trustworthy”, as in the NIV footnote.³³ What is clear from this qualification for eldership, however, is that the family is a great testing ground for eldership: for the father has pastoral responsibility within the family, just as the pastor has pastoral responsibility within the church.

Aren't we withholding wonderful blessings from children?

We see baptism, church membership and the Lord's Supper as means of grace, that the Lord has given his church for her blessing and edification. Are we really saying that we want to withhold such blessings from our children, whom we love? Yes, we are!

We regularly withhold God's blessings from our children because we do not think that they are appropriate blessings for children. Who but the most hardened allegorist can read Song of Solomon and not see the Lord's blessing upon sexual love? Yet whilst teaching our children to prepare for the blessings of a God-honouring marriage, we are rightly horrified when we hear of children who have either sought (or worse, received social pressure to seek) such blessing prematurely. We could add to this the blessings of earning a living, of leaving home, of financial independence from parents and the list goes on. These are all good things we should all prepare our children for, whilst rightly holding them back from them.

Concerning the blessing of pastoral oversight, for those raised with Christian parents, such pastoral oversight is more appropriately given by parents than by the elders of a local church. Interestingly, both in Titus 2, and in 1 Tim 5-6 Paul instructs Timothy and Titus to discharge pastoral responsibility towards older men, younger men, older women, younger women, elders, slaves and masters, but never children. When such a seemingly comprehensive survey of pastoral responsibility is outlined in these chapters, it would seem very strange if children under Timothy and Titus' pastoral care would be so absent. Is Paul, even under the divine inspiration of the Spirit, refusing to instruct pastors as to how to let the little

³³ So also KJV, ESV footnote. Such a reading fits better with the negative counterpart “not wild and disobedient”, as well as with the parallel qualification in 1 Tim 3:4, that speaks only of obedience to parents, not to the Lord. In the qualification for women in 1 Tim 3:11, translators that had translated πιστά as “believing” in Titus 1:6 consistently translate πιστάς as “faithful” or “trustworthy” (so NIV, ESV, HCSB, NASB).

children come to Jesus, or does he merely see this as the pastoral responsibility of fathers not pastors, as we see in Eph 6:4 and Col 3:21?

Conclusion: a positive vision for children of believers

I have argued in this paper largely about what is good for children. The baptism of young children is not good for them, or for their peers.

However, the consideration must be not only the individual child, but the ultimate glory of God. The purity of a church that is accountable to one another and responsible before God is ultimately undermined by child baptism. If the purity of the church is undermined, then so also is her witness to every generation of children.

In the end we must have far more concern about whether children are in the invisible, eternal church, than at what age they are admitted into membership in the visible, temporal church. We should share the gospel with children, we should encourage them to repent and believe, we should encourage parents to take an active interest in their children's discipleship and encourage all fledgling signs of faith. We should teach children to grow in the grace of evangelism, service and love within the community. We can and should do all this without baptising them.

We should not deny all responsibilities from younger teenagers, and even pre-teens. We need not merely tell teenagers to wait until they are older before they are ready to be baptised and join the membership of the church. Such a negative vision is insufficient, just as in other realms of growth. For example, we would be foolish to tell a teenager struggling with a growing sex drive only to abstain from sex until they are old enough to get married.³⁴ In both cases, the reason they should wait is because of the need to grow in maturity. A positive vision for that time of growth towards maturity must be held out.

In preparing children for the responsibilities of marriage we would encourage them to learn how to have appropriate and healthy relationships with members of the opposite sex. In preparing them for church membership we would seek to train them in loving people of different ages and stages of life across the spectrum of the church.

This learning curve does not need to wait until teenage years. When visiting a member of the church in hospital I will often take one of my children with me as I visit, read the word, listen and pray. This is good both for the congregation member I am visiting and for the child. Within the life of the church there are some areas of service that are restricted to members of the congregation, but there are many that are not. Teenagers and younger children have helped serve within the corporate gathering of the church in

³⁴ I'm grateful to T. Michael Lawrence for this analogy and much of this section.

many ways from serving refreshments afterwards, to helping with the public address system, to playing a musical instrument, to helping with childcare. It is appropriate to give growing responsibilities and opportunities for service without the weighty responsibilities or holding the power of the keys, or even drinking judgment upon oneself.

My hope is that by delaying baptism until adulthood the discipleship of children will be less burdensome, and the coming to baptism and church membership will be more meaningful for the one who is old enough to be incorporated into the body of the church with all its privileges and responsibilities, and see them not as a burden, but, like the groom on his wedding night, as a long anticipated privilege now enjoyed.

REVIEW ARTICLE

Baptism: Three Views

Edited by David F. Wright, with contributions by Sinclair B.

Ferguson, Anthony N. S. Lane, Bruce A. Ware

IVP Academic, 2009, 200 pp, £10.99

There are two opposite errors that evangelical Christians easily stumble into on the topic of baptism: we treat it with too little or too much importance.

The former error, I assume, is more common these days. The thinking here is, the West is secularising; we live in post-Christendom now; let's not divide over non-essentials. Instead we must affirm the main thing we all share – the gospel.

The latter error, more common perhaps in former times, is still found wherever provincial mindsets cannot see that the work of Christ's kingdom is afoot in denominations beyond their own. My own denomination, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) in the United States, often succumbs to this temptation. I remember one convention speech where the speaker made some remark about "As goes the SBC, so goes Christianity in America. As goes Christianity in America, so goes Christianity in..." You can guess how that horrible progression of thought ends.

The solution to the first error is to recognise that baptism may not be *essential*, but it is *important*. The solution to the second is to realise that baptism is *important*, but not *essential*. In short, Christians need at least three categories for setting theological priorities: essential, important, and unimportant. We often miss that middle category, and act as if everything is either essential or completely unimportant.

Baptism is not essential because it does not save. The word of the gospel alone saves. Yet baptism is important because (i) it proclaims the gospel visibly; (ii) it helps to protect the gospel from generation to generation; and (iii) it serves to publicly identify the people of heaven on earth, both for their sake and for the sake of the nations.

To help us sort through several prominent views on baptism comes the helpful book *Baptism: Three Views*, edited by the late professor of patristics and Reformation Christianity, David F. Wright. Presbyterian minister Sinclair Ferguson presents the case for infant or paedobaptism. Baptist theologian Bruce Ware argues for believers' baptism or credobaptism. And professor of historical theology Anthony Lane offers a dual-practice position.

My younger sister, who was raised a Baptist like me but now attends a Presbyterian church with her husband and a newborn, recently asked me for a good lay-level book on the topic. I happily commended this one. It is

written in a friendly, easy-to-follow way. Each author provides a reasonably compelling defence of his position. And the book's format is conducive to a fruitful interchange.

All three authors give a 30-to-35 page presentation of their position, which is followed by a 5-to-10 page response from the other two, and is then concluded with an approximately 5 page rejoinder by the original presenter. This creates – I dare say – a fun dynamic, allowing the reader to see the different sides on any given point of dispute without getting bogged down in the intricacies of one position. It is an ideal format for this type of topic.

Ware on believers' baptism

Ware opens the conversation by doing what Baptist theologians typically do: he offers a definition of the disputed term and then marshals a host of texts before the reader. To summarise in bite-sized morsels, Ware, who alone argues for both a particular mode (immersion) and subject (believers) of baptism, presents these challenges:

- (1) The root of the Greek word *baptō* means “immerse” or “submerge” (21).
- (2) In terms of usage, the New Testament describes scenes of “going down to the water” or “coming up out of the water” of believers (e.g. Matt 3:16; Acts 8:38)(21-23).
- (3) Every New Testament instruction or command of baptism involves repentance, faith, or something else that presumes conscious belief (e.g. Matt 28:19; Acts 2:38; 2:41; 8:12; 8:35-38; 9:18), including the “household texts” (16:32-34; 18:8)(24-27; 29-35).
- (4) No text in the New Testament explicitly mentions the baptism of infants (29-40), and the favourite texts of paedobaptists don't say what they think they say (e.g. Acts 2:38-39).
- (5) “Only baptism by immersion provides the symbolism of dying to the old and being raised to the new life in Christ” (27).
- (6) The old covenant incorporated people at two levels, both the ethnic and national as well as the spiritual or promise; but the new covenant incorporates only those who have been forgiven of their sins and received God's law on their hearts, i.e. those who have repented and believed. Hence, the people of the new covenant, the church, is not a mixed community – “at least *in principle and by structure and design*” (emph. orig., 50; 41-47). There is no category for unbelieving covenant members.
- (7) Circumcision, too, functioned at both levels (ethnic/national and spiritual/promise). Which means, there is both continuity and discontinuity between circumcision and baptism. Both are a sign and seal of their respective covenants (see Rom 4:11), but circumcision

had an ethnic/national element that has fallen away. Only the spiritual/promise remains. Hence, the children of believers should not be baptised (45).

- (8) Not surprisingly, the only explicit connection the New Testament makes between circumcision and baptism is drawn between spiritual circumcision of the heart and baptism (Col 2:11-12)(46, 116).
- (9) A growing number of scholars suggest that most churches practiced believers' baptism in the first four to six centuries of the church's existence, and when infant baptism was practiced, it was treated as necessary for the remission of sins, hardly a theology most Protestant paedobaptists would welcome (47-49).
- (10) Believers' baptism grounds the regenerate nature of the church.
- (11) Baptists link the objective work of Christ with the subjective response of faith (73).

Ware rests his case lightly on historical grounds, largely on exegetical grounds, but not insignificantly on historical-redemptive grounds.

Ferguson on paedobaptism

Sinclair Ferguson makes his case mostly in this last historical-redemptive category, which of course is what Presbyterians do so well. He offers these challenges:

- (1) In terms of mode, the New Testament baptismal accounts do not require immersion since pouring might have occurred (even in Matt 3:16 or Acts 8:38) (51-53).
- (2) The early church attests to the practice of infant baptism, as with the third century *Apostolic Tradition* which refers to baptising children who are not yet able to speak (79-84).
- (3) As with Abraham's circumcision, baptism is a sign and seal of the righteousness that comes by faith. But where believers' baptism emphasises what the believer does in responding by faith, the paedobaptist emphasises what Christ has done (53-55; 86-91; 92-96). It is a Christo-centric emblem, not a fidecentric one. Emphasis is on the movement from objective to subjective, not the opposite.
- (4) The household baptism texts demonstrate that the Old Testament's covenantal understanding of the family continues (56-57). God would not promote the family unit in the Old Testament only to displace it in the new, and nothing in the New Testament suggests the family has been displaced (106-07). The epochal movement from old covenant to new presents not a contraction (removing the

- family) but an expansion (adding the nations, as well as women into the covenantal sign).
- (5) Jeremiah includes the “to you and your seed” principle in his exposition of the new covenant (Jer 32:38-40), as do all divine covenants prior to Pentecost (57-58; 101, 103-04).
 - (6) The fact that the way of salvation has always been the same suggests that the ordinance which replaces circumcision, which was a sign of that salvation, can also be given to infants (100-01; 104).
 - (7) Peter’s promise at Pentecost specifically underscores that these promises also go to the seed of believers (Acts 2:38-39)(103-04).
 - (8) Christ specifically blesses not just children (Mark 10:13-16) but seemingly babies (Luke 18:15-17)(107-08).

No doubt Ferguson exegetes texts, like Ware. But the overall paedobaptist argument depends less on straightforward reading of the texts and more heavily on a canonical framework that informs how one reads the baptism texts. Ferguson calls Ware’s approach “proof-textual” (105), which is always a convenient epithet when the proof-texts don’t immediately work in your favour, at least on the surface.

To be forthright, reading these first two accounts back to back did make me think, “Perhaps this explains why the Presbyterians I know have more education than the Baptists I know.” Yes, that’s a stereotype, but I say that as a Baptist. The credobaptist account, I dare say, is just easier to grab onto for the common Joe (“Look, the Ethiopian eunuch and Philip *went down to the water!*”). The paedobaptist account, honestly, requires greater theological sophistication and canonical sensitivity, at least if you are not a first-century Jew. That does not mean it is right or wrong. It simply means a person in the twenty-first century who is not accustomed to conversations about Old Testament circumcision has to think harder to see it.

Lane on mixed practice

Anthony Lane, whose position will be less familiar to most readers, treats baptism on the pages of the New Testament not as “believers’ baptism” but as “converts’ baptism.” This subtle shift emphasises the immediacy of a person’s baptism upon conversion: converts get baptised to show they are converts.

Conversion, Lane argues, consists of four steps: repentance, faith, baptism, and reception of the Holy Spirit. That does not mean baptism is regenerative or a salvific requirement, as such. Lane acknowledges that the thief on the cross was saved. His point is simply that baptism is the flip side of faith. It is how faith expresses itself.

When it comes to the children of believers – whether infants or not – Lane appreciates the paedobaptist emphasis on the corporate and familial nature

of the faith, and so assumes the early Christians would have done *something* to adapt or modify the practice of convert baptism for their children. Since conversion involves all four steps listed above, some may have concluded that nothing would be lost if baptism comes first, to be followed years later by repentance and faith.

What's important to recognise, says Lane, is that the New Testament is silent on whether or not infants were baptised. When we look to the data of the first four centuries, however, we find a plurality of practices: sometimes infants were baptised, sometimes not, and for a number of reasons. Then, like seismologists who feel the ripples of an earthquake thousands of miles away, we can make deductions about what was happening in the original apostolic churches, namely, there were a variety of practices happening there as well. In other words, accepting the authority of Scripture means "respecting the silences of Scripture as well as its positive statements" (166).

A second kind of silence is important for Lane's argument – the silence among the church fathers concerning *principled* arguments against infant baptism. Tertullian, for instance, offers something like a prudential argument against it. But that, in itself, is instructive. Apparently infants were being baptised, which is what prompted him to make a prudential argument. But the lack of a principled argument suggests that neither he nor others had principled objections. The first principled arguments against infant baptism don't occur until one obscure group in the Middle Ages and then the Anabaptists in the Reformation.

Lane concludes from all of this that the contemporary church has grounds to offer more than one practice. Surely adult converts must be baptised, most centrally. But then Christian families should be permitted to baptise their infants or to delay their baptism.

Evaluation

Admittedly, I am not an objective reader. I was convinced of the believers' baptism picking up the book, and I remain convinced of it setting it down, maybe even more so.

What the book did do, however, is enrich my original position by the things I learned from the other two perspectives. Ferguson's robust presentation of baptism as a sign and seal of the righteousness a Christian gains through faith is worth incorporating and adapting into a Baptist framework, as Ware gladly does. And Lane's insistence on the tight relationship between faith and baptism, even calling it a Christian "passport" (129), reminds us of how important the topic is in the Bible. Faith subjectively expresses itself through baptism, and it is a public marker of entrance into the objective faith.

Further, the book reminded me of how tough this topic is. Sinclair Ferguson observes at one point that the interlocutors had reached an

“impasse,” and most readers will probably feel that. Every position is intelligent, and offers a reasonably coherent explanation for the biblical and historical data. It is like a private detective and a police lieutenant staring down at the same dead body and same set of clues, but one is convinced the butler did it while the other is convinced the estranged wife did it, and both are adamant. Where do you go from there?

For instance, Bruce Ware offers what I took to be a compelling Baptist explanation for the “household baptism” passages in Acts, but Ferguson and Lane are not compelled. What else can be said?! Thank you, folks. Goodnight. That’s all we have.

It is tempting for me to throw my two cents into the argument, perhaps observing that both Jeremiah and Jesus very much *do* annul the ethnic “and to your seed” covenantal principle (Jer 31:29-30; Matt 12:50; 19:29; cf. Matt 3:9; 10:35).

Further, the paedobaptist idea of the covenantal inclusion of infants only works because of a vagueness surrounding which covenant they are included within – the theologically conceived covenant of grace? The exegetical new covenant? I honestly find it impossible to stare at the words of Jeremiah 31:31-34 and understand how exactly an infant is *included* in its promises, unless one wants to say that baptism *guarantees* such inclusion because it effectually implants the Holy Spirit, as the passage discusses.

Or, Ferguson is surely right to affirm the continuous nature of salvation from old covenant to new. But I would argue that he, like paedobaptists generally, can only equate circumcision and baptism by smothering the institutional distinctions within the text, such as (Ware observes) the two layers of meaning behind circumcision (national/ethnic and spiritual/promise).

But instead of hearing my own arguments, a reader does well to jump into the book’s responses and rejoinders. What he or she will discover, I contest, is that the different positions depend upon subtly different theological methodologies. One author emphasises the exegetical, one the historical-redemptive, and one the historical. The impasse exists on this topic, in part, because of these differing assumptions about which kinds of data and methods are most persuasive.

Finally, there is only one right explanation for who should get wet, a point our relativistic age likes to overlook. And obedience to Jesus means searching for it. Paying closer attention to methodology, I believe, will help. A solution is not essential to faith, but it is important.

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BOOK REVIEW

A Christian's Pocket Guide to Baptism – The Water that Unites

Robert Letham, Christian Focus, 2012, 128pp, £4.99

Robert Letham is senior tutor in Systematic and Historical Theology at the Wales Evangelical School of Theology. His book encourages Christians to see children of believing parents as part of the covenant community, and, therefore, to receive the covenant sign of baptism.

The book has three parts. In the first Letham sets out the underlying principles he sees as the keys of Bible interpretation. In the second he explains what baptism signifies. The final part spells out his conclusions.

In part 1 Letham believes that the 'reading of Scripture is often governed by unconscious principles that influence what we see in the text'. In four short chapters he seeks to outline principles that will prevent this.

In the first he explains that in interpreting Scripture some things are clear and plain, while other things are only deduced after reflection. He cites the Trinity as an example of the latter, and so concludes: 'when thinking about baptism we should deal not only with the express statements of the Bible but also with the wider sense of Scripture that is entailed with these pronouncements' (8).

Letham continues in the second chapter to show that the Old and New Testament are a coherent whole. Therefore the covenant made to Abraham is not contradicted by the covenant through Moses, and the new covenant in Jesus is the fulfilment of the old covenant. When it comes to baptism, Letham argues that whilst baptism is a new covenant sign its meaning 'cannot be established from the New Testament alone' (15). He concludes that baptism should be understood 'canonically'.

In the third foundation chapter the focus is on how, throughout the Bible, we see God use 'material signs to reinforce his promises' (20). Covenantal signs therefore point to the activity of God. The signs are distinct from the reality but they point to what God has done or will do. 'Baptism is first and foremost a divine activity' (28).

In the final section of part 1 we are shown the importance of the corporate nature of God's plan. In both the Old Testament and the New Testament we are shown that the individual is seen in the context of the corporate nature of either Israel or the Church. Whilst not denying individual responsibility, Letham argues that the corporate context is key to understanding baptism.

In the second part of the book Letham seeks to explain the New Testament meaning of baptism. In the first two chapters Letham takes us

through many New Testament texts to argue that baptism signifies cleansing from sin and union with Christ. I wasn't always convinced that every 'washing' or 'cleansing' reference he cites was as clear a reference to baptism as he assumes. However, Letham argues against a Roman Catholic view that sees the mere act of baptism as efficacious, or the more widespread evangelical view that sees baptism as merely symbolic.

The third chapter in the main section of the book is a brief survey of Reformed historical theology. The purpose is to show that the view of baptism that many evangelicals hold today differs from that of Protestant heritage. Letham comments, 'The classic confessions of the Reformed church all speak of the Holy Spirit conveying grace in connection with baptism' (78).

In the final chapter of part 2 Letham addresses the question of who should be baptised. Few will disagree with him that those converted from paganism should be baptised. He then argues that children of believers should also be baptised. He thinks that credobaptists fail to appreciate the continuity of the new covenant with the Abrahamic covenant, and therefore to understand that baptism is the 'fulfilment of, and successor to circumcision' (83). He concludes by arguing that the New Testament sees the 'household' as the basis for covenantal administration.

Part 3 is the conclusion to the book. In it Letham seeks to draw the threads of his discussion together. He widens the issue beyond baptism of children of believing parents, to their being part of the church. He concludes with the challenge: 'If you consider that Paul addresses the children of believing parent(s) in terms of their privileges and responsibilities in Christ, then should they not receive the means of grace, the covenant sign of baptism?' (105).

I enjoyed reading the book. I found part 1 particularly helpful. I thought that Letham rightly encourages us to read the Bible as a whole and also not to be too individualistic in regards to the plan of God. If anything I thought this section could have been developed further.

I thought that the middle section of the book was the hardest to read. There was some repetition and I would have valued more space given to expounding the Biblical texts he cited. Further I thought the section that surveyed historical theology would have been a bit tough on a reader not knowing the Westminster Confession of Faith.

The final section of the book poses important questions about children being part of the church. I was left wondering what Letham's view of children and communion is!

Having read the book I was still left with some questions. For example, if it is so obvious that we should see baptism as the fulfilment of circumcision, why isn't there any clear New Testament reference that shows that? Further is it as clear as Letham suggests that the meaning and function of the old covenant sign of circumcision is the same as that of baptism?

Credobaptists will also suggest that systematic theology is too much the governing tool of how the Bible is being interpreted. Whilst I agreed with Letham's desire to stress the unity of the covenant of grace I would have liked him to deal with the arguments of those who see some discontinuity too. Credobaptists will argue that the new covenant is only made with believers or the elect, whereas the old covenant externally included believers and non-believers within Israel.

In this short book Robert Letham has rehearsed well the arguments for the baptism of believers' children. Letham has a clear desire to sit under the authority of the Scriptures and to take seriously the historical teaching of Reformed thinking. He clearly and firmly rejects, as well as refutes, Roman Catholic tradition and teaching. The book's title claims to be 'a Christian's pocket guide to baptism', but without engaging at any length the arguments for credobaptism, I don't think that it will convince all. However I hope that credobaptists as well as paedobaptists will read it.

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