

Of Infant Baptism

John Owen (1616-1683)

I. The question is not whether professing believers, Jews or Gentiles, not baptized in their infancy, ought to be baptized; for this is by all confessed.

II. Neither is it whether, in such persons, the profession of saving faith and repentance ought not to go before baptism. This we plead for beyond what is the common practice of those who oppose us.

Wherefore, testimonies produced out of authors, ancient or modern, to confirm these things, which consist with the doctrine of infant baptism, are mere tergiversations [conflicting or evasive statements], that belong not to this cause at all; and so are all arguments produced unto that end out of the Scriptures.

III. The question is not whether all infants are to be baptized or not; for, according to the will of God, some are not to be baptized, even such whose parents are strangers from the covenant. But hence it will follow that some are to be baptized, seeing an exception confirms both rule and right.

IV. The question is only concerning the children or infant seed of professing believers who are themselves baptized. And, —

First, they by whom this is denied can produce no testimony of Scripture wherein their negation is formally or in terms included, nor any one asserting

what is inconsistent with the affirmative; for it is weak beneath consideration to suppose that the requiring of the baptism of believers is inconsistent with that of their seed. But this is to be required of them who oppose infant baptism, that they produce such a testimony.

Secondly, no instance can be given from the Old or New Testament since the days of Abraham, none from the approved practice of the primitive church, of any person or persons born of professing, believing parents, who were themselves made partakers of the initial seal of the covenant, being then in infancy and designed to be brought up in the knowledge of God, who were not made partakers with them of the same sign and seal of the covenant.

Thirdly, a spiritual privilege once granted by God unto any cannot be changed, disannulled, or abrogated, without an especial divine revocation of it, or the substitution of a greater privilege and mercy in the room of it; for,—

1. Who shall disannul what God hath granted? What he hath put together who shall put asunder? To abolish or take away any grant of privilege made by him to the church, without his own express revocation of it, is to deny his sovereign authority.

2. To say a privilege so granted may be revoked, even by God himself, without the substitution of a greater privilege and mercy in the room of it, is contrary to the goodness of God, his love and care unto his church, [and] contrary to his constant course of proceeding with it from the foundation of the world, wherein he went on in the enlargement and increase of its privileges until the coming of Christ. And to suppose it under the gospel is contrary to all his promises, the honour of Christ, and a multitude of express testimonies of Scripture.

Thus was it with the privileges of the temple and the worship of it granted to the Jews; they were not, they could not be, taken away without an express revocation, and the substitution of a more glorious spiritual temple and worship in their room.

But now the spiritual privilege of a right unto and a participation of the initial seal of the covenant was granted by God unto the infant seed of Abraham (Gen. 17:10, 12).

This grant, therefore, must stand firm for ever, unless men can prove or produce,—

1. An express revocation of it by God himself; which none can do either directly or indirectly, in terms or any pretence of consequence.

2. An instance of a greater privilege or mercy granted unto them in the room of it; which they do not once pretend unto, but leave the seed of believers, whilst

in their infant state, in the same condition with those of pagans and infidels; expressly contrary to God's covenant.

All this contest, therefore, is to deprive the children of believers of a privilege once granted to them by God, never revoked, as to the substance of it, assigning nothing in its room; which is contrary to the goodness, love, and covenant of God, especially derogatory to the honour of Jesus Christ and the gospel.

Fourthly, they that have the thing signified have right unto the sign of it, or those who are partakers of the grace of baptism have a right to the administration of it: so Acts 10:47.

But the children of believers are all of them capable of the grace signified in baptism, and some of them are certainly partakers of it, namely, such as die in their infancy (which is all that can be said of professors): therefore they may and ought to be baptized. For,—

1. Infants are made for and are capable of eternal glory or misery, and must fall, dying infants, into one of these estates for ever.

2. All infants are born in a state of sin, wherein they are spiritually dead and under the curse.

3. Unless they are regenerated or born again, they must all perish inevitably (John 3:3). Their regeneration is the grace whereof baptism is a sign or token. Wherever this is, there baptism ought to be administered.

Fifthly, God having appointed baptism as the sign and seal of regeneration, unto whom he denies it, he denies the grace signified by it. Why is it the will of God that unbelievers and impenitent sinners would not be baptized: It is because, not granting them the grace, he will not grant them the sign. If, therefore, God denies the sign unto the infant seed of believers, it must be because he denies them the grace of it; and then all the children of believing parents dying in their infancy must, without hope, be eternally damned. I do not say that all must be so who are not baptized, but all must be so whom God would have not baptized.

But this is contrary to the goodness and law [love?] of God, the nature and promises of the covenant, the testimony of Christ reckoning them to the kingdom of God, the faith of godly parents, and the belief of the church in all ages.

It follows hence unavoidably that infants who die in their infancy have the grace of regeneration, and consequently as good a right unto baptism as believers themselves.

Sixthly, all children in their infancy are reckoned unto the covenant of their parents, by virtue of the law of their creation. For they are all made capable of eternal rewards and punishments, as hath been declared.

But in their own persons they are not capable of doing good or evil.

It is therefore contrary to the justice of God, and the law of the creation of human kind, wherein many die before they can discern between their right hand and their left, to deal with infants any otherwise but in and according to the covenant of their parents; and that he doth so, see Romans 5:14.

Hence, I argue,—

Those who, by God's appointment, and by virtue of the law of their creation, are, and must of necessity be, included in the covenant of their parents, have the same right with them unto the privileges of that covenant, no express exception being put in against them, This right it is in the power of none to deprive them of, unless they can change the law of their creation.

Thus it is with the children of believers with respect unto the covenant of their parents, whence alone they are said to be holy (I Cor. 7:14).

Seventhly, Christ is the "messenger of the covenant" (Mal. 3:1)—that is, of the covenant of God made with Abraham; and he was the "minister of the circumcision for the truth of God, to confirm the promises made unto the fathers" (Rom. 15:8). This covenant was, that he would be "a God unto Abraham and to his seed."

Now if this be not so under the new testament, then was not Christ a faithful messenger, nor did confirm the truth of God in his promises.

This argument alone will bear the weight of the whole cause against all objections; for,—

1. Children are still in the same covenant with their parents, or the truth of the promises of God to the fathers was not confirmed by Christ.

2. The right unto the covenant, and interest in its promises, wherever it be, gives right unto the administration of its initial seal, that is, to baptism, as Peter expressly declares (Acts 2:38-39). Wherefore,—

The right of the infant seed of believers unto baptism, as the initial seal of the covenant, stands on the foundation of the faithfulness of Christ as the messenger of the covenant, and minister of God for the confirmation of the truth of his promises.

In brief, a participation of the seal of the covenant is a spiritual blessing. This the seed of believers was once solemnly invested in by God himself. This privilege he hath nowhere revoked, though he hath changed the outward sign; nor hath he granted unto our children any privilege or mercy in lieu of it now under the gospel, when all grace and privileges are enlarged to the utmost. His covenant promises concerning them, which are multiplied, were confirmed by Christ as a

true messenger and minister; he gives the grace of baptism unto many of them, especially those that die in their infancy, owns children to belong unto his kingdom, esteems them disciples, appoints households to be baptized without exception. And who shall now rise up, and withhold water from them?

This argument may be thus further cleared and improved:—

Christ is “the messenger of the covenant” (Mal 3:1)—that is, the covenant of God with Abraham (Gen 17:7); for,—

1. That covenant was with and unto Christ mystical (Gal. 3:16); and he was the messenger of no covenant but that which was made with himself and his members.

2. He was sent, or was God’s messenger, to perform and accomplish the covenant and oath made with Abraham (Luke 1:72-73).

3. The end of his message and of his coming was, that those to whom he was sent might be “blessed with faithful Abraham,” or that “the blessing of Abraham,” promised in the covenant, “might come upon them” (Gal. 3:9, 14).

To deny this, overthrows the whole relation between the old testament and the new, the veracity of God in his promises, and all the properties of the covenant of grace, mentioned [in] II Samuel 23:5.

It was not the covenant of works, neither originally nor essentially, nor the covenant in its legal administration; for he confirmed and sealed that covenant whereof he was the messenger, but these he abolished.

Let it be named what covenant he was the messenger of, if not of this. Occasional additions of temporal promises do not in the least alter the nature of the covenant.

Herein he was the “minister of the circumcision for the truth of God, to confirm the promises made unto the fathers” (Rom. 15:8); that is, undeniably, the covenant made with Abraham, enlarged and explained by following promises. This covenant was, that God would be “a God unto Abraham and to his seed;” which God himself explains to be his infant seed (Gen. 17:12)—that is, the infant seed of every one of his posterity who should lay hold on and avouch that covenant as Abraham did, and not else. This the whole church did solemnly for themselves and their posterity; whereon the covenant was confirmed and sealed to them all (Exod. 24:7-8). And every one was bound to do the same in his own person; which if he did not, he was to be cut off from the congregation, whereby he forfeited all privileges unto himself and his seed.

The covenant, therefore, was not granted in its administrations unto the carnal

seed of Abraham as such, but unto his covenanted seed, those who entered into it and professedly stood to its terms.

And the promises made unto the fathers were, that their infant seed, their buds and offspring, should have an equal share in the covenant with them (Isa. 22:24, 44:3, 61:9). "They are the seed of the blessed of the Lord, and their offspring with them" (65:23). Not only themselves, who are the believing, professing seed of those who were blessed of the Lord, by a participation of the covenant (Gal. 3:9) but their offspring also, their buds, their tender little ones, are in the same covenant with them.

To deny, therefore, that the children of believing, professing parents, who have avouched God's covenant, as the church of Israel did (Exod. 24: 7-8), have the same right and interest with their parents in the covenant, is plainly to deny the fidelity of Christ in the discharge of his office.

It may be it will be said, that although children have a right to the covenant, or do belong unto it, yet they have no right to the initial seal of it. This will not suffice; for,—

1. If they have any interest in it, it is either in its grace or in its administration. If they have the former, they have the latter also, as shall be proved at any time. If they have neither, they have no interest in it;—then the truth of the promises of God made unto the fathers was not confirmed by Christ.

2. That unto whom the covenant or promise doth belong, to them belongs the administration of the initial seal of it, is expressly declared by the apostle (Acts 2:38-39), be they who they will.

3. The truth of God's promises is not confirmed if the sign and seal of them be denied; for that whereon they believed that God was a God unto their seed as well as unto themselves was this, that he granted the token of the covenant unto their seed as well as unto themselves. If this be taken away by Christ, their faith is overthrown; and the promise itself is not confirmed but weakened, as to the virtue it hath to beget faith and obedience.

Eighthly, particular testimonies may be pleaded and vindicated, if need be, and the practice of the primitive church.

(John Owen, *Works* [Edinburgh: Banner, repr. 1968], vol. 16, pp. 258-263)