

Editorial: More on Baptism (3)

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The Case For Covenantal Infant Baptism

Editor Gregg Strawbridge

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The confessional position of Reformed believers, over against baptists, is succinctly stated in the *Westminster Confession of Faith*:

Chapter XXVIII: Of Baptism.

- III. Dipping of the person into the water is not necessary; but baptism is rightly administered by pouring or sprinkling water upon the person.
- IV. Not only those that do actually profess faith in and obedience unto Christ, but also the infants of one or both believing parents are to be baptized.

In two earlier articles we have reviewed Brian Russell's *Baptism—Sign and Seal of the Covenant of Grace* and shown that his contention for immersion is unfounded (see III above), and Fred Malone's *The Baptism of Disciples Alone* and shown that his arguments against the covenantal position of children (IV above) are not cogent. Copies of the relevant reviews have been sent to both authors without response. In the course of the latter discussion both Malone and the writer quoted John Owen. Recently in my reading I came across this remark from Owen:

Obs. III. Divine institutions cease not without an express divine abrogation.- Where they are once granted and erected by the authority of God, they can never cease without an express act of the same authority taking them away. So was it with the institution of the Aaronical priesthood, as the apostle declares. And this one consideration is enough to confirm the grant of the initial seal of the covenant unto the seed of present believers, which was once given

by God himself in the way of an institution, and never by him revoked.¹

This remark leads us neatly into the consideration of *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*. The volume under review is a symposium, inevitably of variable quality, by some fifteen writers, mainly Presbyterian or Reformed ministers on various aspects of infant baptism. The editor, Gregg Strawbridge, was raised in Southern Baptist circles and baptized at the age of ten and in his charming "Introduction" tells us something of his passage to the Reformed position.

Our challenge, as we serve our risen and reigning Lord, is to become of one mind and so gain a clearer view ... I am among the growing number of those who, like many of our Reformed forefathers, hold that the future of the kingdom, even on this side of eternity, is bright. Jesus shall reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. That reign has commenced. Now, however, among evangelical and Reformed believers, the discussion of who should be baptized is an intramural debate. Or, to use the language of St. Paul, baptism is not listed as a doctrine of first importance (I Cor. 15:3; cf. 1:13).

For Christians to progress in this discussion, we need honest hearts, first of all. We need minds that are willing to submit to all of the Lord's will as revealed in his Word. As a means to our study, we need substantial discussions on the key passages, theological reflection, and historical data that address central questions. This volume aims to provide such a discussion by well-qualified pastors and scholars.

Dr. Strawbridge's name will be known to earlier readers from his valuable article on "Household Baptisms" in *BRJ* 37.

It is difficult to discern a pattern in the order of articles. I will look at each and offer some comment beginning with Dr. Lyle D. Bierma's "Infant Baptism in the Reformed Confessions." Dr. Bierma is professor of Systematic Theology at Calvin Theological Seminary and a minister in the Christian Reformed Church. Now our Lord has told us, "Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he

¹John Owen, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Great Britain; Banner, repr. 1991), vol. 5, p. 433.

will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak: and he will shew you things to come" (John 16:13). Although directed towards the apostles, I submit that this remark has a wider application, for it is observable in the history of the church that whenever heresy arose over the Deity of Christ or the doctrine of the Trinity, etc, not only did God raise up outstanding leaders who expounded the truth, but also the church in her councils set it forth in creeds: *Apostles'*, *Nicene*, *Athanasian*, *Chalcedonian*.² Probably nowhere was this more obvious than at the time of that great movement of the Spirit we call the Reformation when the church shook off the Roman apostasy and numerous gifted men were called forth: Luther, Zwingli, Farel, Calvin, Melancthon, Bullinger, Knox, and lesser known men like Guido de Brès and Ursinus.

We see this principle exhibited in the Reformed treatment of infant baptism. Bierma takes us to the relevant sections of the *Belgic Confession* of the Low Countries (1561), *Heidelberg Catechism* (1563), *Second Helvetic Confession* of Switzerland (1566), and *Westminster Confession* and *Larger Catechism* of England and Scotland (1647, 1648), and shows their rejection of anabaptist and subsequent baptist positions. The covenantal unity of the Old and New Testament are stressed, and most importantly believers' children are seen as incorporated in the church as members. This is a really important discussion and we cannot do better than quote his last paragraph.

In conclusion, the defense of infant baptism in the Reformed confessions and the rejection of the Anabaptist view do not rest on the interpretation of a few disputed biblical texts. Rather, they are based on a comprehensive perspective of the flow of redemptive history, on an emphasis on the communal dimensions of God's gracious dealings with his people, and on the web of interconnected doctrines relating to divine election, the church, the sacraments, and the meaning of baptism. From the viewpoint of the confessions,

²One of the incidental advantages of being raised in Anglican circles was that the repetition of the *Apostles' Creed* morning and evening; of the *Nicene* at every Lord's Supper (and the Ten Commandments) and the occasional use of the *Athanasian* all built up a healthy respect for orthodoxy concerning God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, the return of Christ, the resurrection of the body, the day of judgment, etc. Add to this, the singing of the Psalms and the Canticles including the Benedictus ("To perform the mercy promised to our forefathers: and to remember his holy covenant"), and even the Lord's Prayer ("Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth ...") laid a basis which I fear is lacking in Free Church worship.

infant baptism is not, in the last analysis, simply a doctrine about baptism. It is about God's work of salvation by grace alone as it comes to expression in the midst of his covenant community.

In "Matthew 28:18-20 and the Institution of Baptism," Dr. Daniel M. Doriani, a Presbyterian minister and Professor of New Testament at Covenant Theological College, discusses the great commission. He correctly sees these three verses as a summary of what was a more extended charge. All authority in heaven and earth has been committed to Christ. The disciples are to make further disciples by going, baptizing and teaching. The passage is foundational for the Christian doctrine of baptism, but he suspects the authenticity of the Markan account: "And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned" (Mark 16:15-16).

"Unto You, and To Your Children" is jointly authored by Dr. Joel R. Beeke, professor and pastor in Grand Rapids, and Ray B. Lanning, a Presbyterian pastor also in Grand Rapids. It is of course based on Acts 2: 39: "For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call." These words by Peter on the day of Pentecost announce the start of the New Testament church, but also reminds us of the essential continuity between the New and the Old. As the *Westminster Confession* puts it:

The visible church, which is also catholick or universal under the gospel (not confined to one nation, as before under the law) consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion, together with their children; and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation (25:2).

The authors suggest Scripture provide four contexts for its interpretation:

- Creation and the unity of the race
- Redemption and the covenant of grace
- Prophecy, or the vision of the prophet
- Forensics, or God's lawsuit against Israel

This is a valuable discussion. The old covenant confessedly included children. It is unthinkable that the new should do less! Unfortunately anabaptists

and baptists hold the unthinkable! It is only fair to report that much baptist practice in bringing up their children is a great deal better than their mistaken theory, though it produces inevitable confusion over church membership.

In "The Oikos Formula," Dr. Jonathan M. Watt, a Reformed Presbyterian minister and theological professor discusses an issue which has brought out some theological big guns: Aland, Beasley-Murray, Oscar Cullmann, and Joachim Jeremias, among others. After an extensive discussion of aspects relating to ancient households his conclusion is surely correct:

The church has historically practised infant baptism ... How strange it would be if a patriarch such as Abraham, or a lawgiver like Moses or some other believing Israelite father, could present his infant son for circumcision, but not for baptism. Men who possessed the 'rights of dispensation' spoke on behalf of their household ... Although the household words of the New Testament, by themselves, do not seal the case for infant baptism, they make such a powerful presumption in favor of including children that they lay the burden of proof on those who would claim that children were not participants in *oikos* baptisms. For the culture of that day assumed that children were usually part of the family. Family solidarity, not individualism, had been the norm for the cultures of the patriarchs, the Israelite monarchy ... The preference is for, not against, the inclusion of all family members. It had been that way since the time of Noah (Gen. 7:1), Abraham (Gen. 17:12-13), Joshua (Josh. 24:15), and David (II Sam. 12:10), all the way to those overseers of the early churches (I Tim. 3:4) whose leadership and example—or bad behaviour and errors (cf. I Sam. 3:12-14)—left an impressive legacy for subsequent generations and relatives. From patriarchs to *patresfamilias*, the master of the family spoke for those who were his. When he was baptized, so were they.

It is a pity that the author has not noted the distinction which the Bible appears to make between *oikia* and *oikos*.³ It is surprising that the "theological big guns" largely overlook it.

"Baptism and Circumcision as Signs and Seals" is by Dr. Mark Ross a Pres-

³See, e.g., Douglas D. Bannerman, *The Scripture Doctrine of the Church Historically and Exegetically Considered* (Grand Rapids: Baker, repr. 1976), pp. 76f., 85-88.

byterian pastor and seminary professor. This is a useful discussion of the relation between circumcision and baptism in which he concludes they have the same meaning. The discussion of the significance of Romans 4:11 concerning Abraham (“And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had yet being uncircumcised: that he might be the father of all them that believe, though they be not circumcised; that righteousness might be imputed unto them also”) was useful. This is an informative article and I enjoyed the practical application on pages 108f., though it is too long to quote.

Four articles discuss various aspects of the covenant. “The Newness of the New Covenant” by Pastor Jeffrey D. Niell; “Infant Baptism in the New Covenant” by Dr. Richard L. Pratt; “Covenant Transition” by Pastor Randy Booth and “Covenant Theology and Baptism” by Professor Cornelis P. Venema. The importance of the covenant for the Reformed position is obvious but more recently baptists have been hitting back arguing that the phrase in Jeremiah’s prediction of a “new covenant” (“And they shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the LORD: for *they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them*, saith the LORD: for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more” [Jeremiah 31:34], which is also quoted in Hebrews) cannot be applied to infants, who must therefore be excluded from baptism in the New Testament era. This incidentally was the core of Malone’s argument in our previous review.

Unfortunately, there is also an underlying dispensational thinking in many who are not baptists. Niell argues that the

newness of the new covenant pertains to the external aspects, the outward administration, of the covenant of grace. The new covenant is not new in its nature or membership. A single covenant of grace exists, and God’s elect have been justified in the same way throughout redemptive history—by grace through faith.

Pratt also picks up the baptist objection, arguing that we are in the process of new covenant fulfilment.

The New Testament repeatedly explains that Old Testament predictions of the glorious state of blessing after the Exile began to be fulfilled at Christ’s first coming, continue to be fulfilled in part today, and will be fully realized when Christ returns.

He concludes,

Until that time, we continue to have children in order to multiply and fill the earth. We baptize our children, just as believers circumcised their sons in the Old Testament. We baptize them as the expected heirs of the new covenant, those blessed with the heritage of faith and with special privileges and responsibilities before God.

In any discussion it is of the first importance to see precisely what the point is at issue. This Randy Booth does splendidly in his opening paragraph.

Central to the debate over the proper recipients of baptism is the relationship between the Old and New Testaments, or the old and new covenants. Those who see the new covenant as a *replacement* for the old covenant demand explicit New Testament warrant to *include* the children of believers in the covenant and administer the initial covenant sign to them. Those who comprehend the new covenant as the *extension* of the old covenant, where the children of believers were always included in the covenant, require explicit New Testament warrant to *exclude* their children from the covenant and deny them the initial sign of the covenant. Thus, the degree to which we see either covenant *continuity* or covenant *discontinuity* affects the questions we ask, the standards that must be met, and the answers we will obtain. The first question that must be answered, therefore, has to do with the nature of the transition from the old to the new covenant: Is there a sharp discontinuity, with fundamental and essential changes that usher in a brand new program, or is there a smooth and organic continuity that leads to a renewed and expanded version of essentially the same covenant?

He then proceeds to discuss the issue under four heads: "How does the New Testament view the Old Testament?" "What role does the covenant household play in the redemptive work of the old and new covenants?" "Are there connecting links between the two covenants?" and "Is Christ the Mediator of both the old and new covenants?" After twenty one pages of discussion he concludes that "the two covenants are organically connected—they are essentially one covenant of grace." The family unit is central to God's work of redemption, and the New Testament depends on the Old, and "Christ is the object, the Messenger, and

the Mediator, of both the old and new covenants.” He concludes,

Therefore, the questions about covenant membership and the proper recipients of its signs are easy to answer. Believers and their children have always been members of God’s gracious covenant and recipients of his covenant promises and signs. God has nowhere changed those terms or excluded anyone who was included in the past. Believers and their children are still recipients of God’s covenant promises and signs.

There is an echo here of a quotation by B. B. Warfield with which Venema introduces his essay and which bears repeating:

The argument in a nutshell is simply this: God established His church in the days of Abraham and put children into it. They must remain there until He puts them out. He has nowhere put them out. They are still then members of His Church and as such entitled to its ordinances.⁴

I found Venema’s twenty-nine-page essay on the covenant clear and cogent and he usefully answers two common baptist objections concerning nominalism and baptismal regeneration.

I am not certain why a book on covenantal infant baptism needs the article on “The Mode of Baptism” which comes from the pen of Dr. Joseph A. Pipa, Jr., professor at Greenville. It is true that the Greek Orthodox Church immerses infants—and the Church of England Prayer Book specifies in the “Public Baptism of Infants” that the priest “shall dip it in the water discreetly and warily” but this is rarely practised! Much of the discussion is on Romans 6, but on this subject I have already written more than enough! Here is his concluding sentence: “The mode of baptism is inferred from its meaning, not the meaning of *baptizō* or its relation to burial. Thus, the mode should reflect that of ceremonial cleansing (sprinkling) or the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit (pouring).”

In “A Pastoral Overview of Infant Baptism,” Dr. Bryan Chapell, professor at Covenant Theological Seminary, asks, “Why do Presbyterians baptize infants?” He tells us that he did not always accept the practice having been raised among dedicated, faithful and well-instructed baptists. What follows is more than a party line, it is the reflection of the thought process that led him to believe that

⁴B. B. Warfield, *Works* (Grand Rapids: Baker, repr. 2000), vol. 9, p. 408.

Scripture teaches that God wants believing parents to present their children to Him in baptism. He then sets out his case:

I. The Biblical Background of Infant Baptism

Salvation is through the *covenant of faith* in the Old and New Testaments

The faithful receive a *covenant sign* in the Old Testament

The *covenant continues* in the New Testament

The *covenant sign changes* to reflect New Testament blessings

II. The Biblical Basis for Infant Baptism

The absence of a contrary command

The examples of household baptism

III The Biblical Benefits of Infant Baptism

The devotion of the parents

The blessing of the child

He develops his argument along the usual lines and on the last point, speaking about the blessing of the child raised in the embrace of the church remarks:

In this atmosphere, faith naturally germinates and matures so that *it is possible, even common, for the children of Christian parents never to know a day that they do not believe that Jesus is their Savior and Lord.* Such covenantal growth of a child is, in fact, the normal Christian life that God intends for his people, and it is one of the most striking, but infrequently mentioned, reasons that baptism is rightly administered to infants.

Our authority for infant baptism is Scripture! But if we have interpreted Scripture correctly we may expect the historical evidence to support it. Two articles, one by Dr. Peter J. Leithart ("Infant Baptism in History: An Unfinished Tragicomedy") and the other by Dr. Gregg Strawbridge ("The Polemics of Anabaptism from the Reformation Onward") explore what we know, or often do not know. We all regret the barbarous treatment meted out to some anabaptists—and conversely the Münster—incident but the pursuit of this area warrants a separate article. Over 100 years ago Warfield wrote, "To this is added further the historical evidence of the prevalence in the Christian Church of the custom of baptizing the infant children of believers, from the earliest Christian

ages down to to-day.”⁵ I believe this position remains unchanged by later research. Space prevents a more extensive review.

This volume ends with two splendid chapters. Pastor Douglas Wilson in his “Baptism and Children: their Place in the Old and New Testaments” tells how he came to the biblical position from being a convinced baptist. He shows that the debate is not so much about infant baptism as about *children*. He tells us that he learned the Scripture teaching about children from “my father, who remains to this day a settled Baptist. He is the one who taught me to take the many texts about children at face value—and I did so, long before I came to paedobaptist convictions.” It was when he read Robert S. Rayburn’s splendid essay, “The Presbyterian Doctrines of Covenant Children, Covenant Nurture and Covenant Succession” [www.faithtacoma.org/covenant2.htm], that the whole baptist house of cards came tumbling down around him. Dr. R. C. Sproul, Jr.’s, “In Jesus’ Name, Amen,” argues that “our covenant children are in fact in the covenant, in the church, in the kingdom, in the faith” and that we should handle them as such.

Discussion. The position in regard to the churches in the United Kingdom is interesting but depressing. Most of the “main-line” denominations (all paedobaptist) have largely apostatised: the Church of England, the Church of Scotland, the Presbyterian Church in Ireland and the Presbyterian Church of Wales (Calvinistic Methodists). One could add the Congregationalists and Methodists, and even the bulk of the Baptists. If I may just consider Wales, where I live, it pleased God in the last 50 years to raise up faithful ministers amongst the Presbyterians and as a result of genuine conversions small congregations seceded from the main body. All appear to have become largely baptist in thinking. Why? One suspects a reaction against nominalism in their previous connections, allied with a lack of doctrinal teaching and perhaps a desire to “do something” to signify their change. But in England long standing independent churches have also turned baptist and most new church plants take the same position. Both of the main evangelical monthly newspapers are baptist.

But when one turns to history we find that amongst those used by God to recover and propagate the faith: the Reformers in the sixteenth century, the Puritans in the seventeenth, the leaders of the eighteenth century, along with the theologians of the nineteenth and twentieth century were almost all paedobaptist. One thinks of the Alexanders, Hodges, Dabney, Thornwell, Machen, Berkhof, Hoeksema of America; and the Bannermans, Chalmers,

⁵*Ibid.*, vol. 9, p. 390.

Cunningham, Fairbairn, Murray of Scotland, and in England Goode, Ryle, etc. Why is this?

One is so grateful for the fellowship, love and practical help of like-minded believers that any comment may seem critical. It is not meant to be. We are all products of our age and education, and some of us are fortunate indeed in the ministry we sit under. But our situation means most are quite ignorant of the broad sweep of redemption history. The creeds are not used; the confessions, if they are studied at all, are studied privately; and there is little sense of our place in four thousand years of church and covenant history. In short we lack Christian education, and may readily accept unbiblical ideas on often a very weak base. The only substantial works on the baptist side I can think of since 1950 are David Kingdon's *Children of Abraham* and the volume by Beasley-Murray, and on the paedobaptist the translation of Pierre Marcel's *The Biblical Doctrine of Infant Baptism*, and John Murray's *Christian Baptism*, and C. G. Kirby's *Signs and Seals of the Covenant*.

It is perhaps significant that the three books we have reviewed all have their origin in the United States. We lack in the UK any significant Reformed theological college whereas in the US, in spite of a similar apostasy amongst their main line denominations there is clearly a remnant of Reformed denominations and seminaries. It is not insignificant that a number of contributors to this volume have moved from baptist to paedobaptist thinking. This is not a matter for sometimes angry debate but painstaking exegesis. The quiet tone and thoughtful thinking of the contributors is greatly to be welcomed. A baptist friend who read this volume reacted very positively to it.

But—there is always a but!—there is clearly a muddle going on in the mind of some contributors as to how we see our baptized children inside church and covenant? Do we treat them as infant members to be “brought up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord” until they take their place as adult members? Or do we see them still as little heathen needing to be evangelised?⁶ That debate is not new. In fact it runs back to the founding fathers of America and the half-way covenant. If our patient readers will bear with us we find that we now need a fourth editorial to consider the significant reprint of L. B. Schenk's *The Presbyterian Doctrine of Children in the Covenant*.

⁶For a critical review of *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*, see David Engelsma, “A Presbyterian Case for the Baptist Rejection of Infant Baptism,” *Standard Bearer* (Feb. 15, 2004), vol. 80, no. 10, pp. 223-226.