

THE SUBJECTS OF BAPTISM

by

Michael Kimmitt.

Introduction: One of the advantages of writing on matters of the Reformed Faith is that there is no particular exegetical axe to grind. It is not likely, after some centuries, that any serious alteration may need to be made; though clearly there may need to be minor adjustments or clarifications. The one requirement is simply to set out as clearly and faithfully possible the Biblical position - and there is no need to be concerned about or to suppress any fact; even if it may point in another direction.

In a series of articles, previously published in this Journal, dealing with the Mode of Baptism (See British Reformed Journal, Issues Nos. 6 - 10 incl.), attention was called to three separate lines of evidence. First, the principle modes of ceremonial purification in the Old Testament were pouring, sprinkling or washing; and these cleansings are called Baptisms in the New Testament. Second, when we examine all the references to actual Baptisms in the New Testament we find that individuals, small numbers, or large numbers, are instantly accommodated and with a complete lack of hassle. The clear practical implication is that Baptism meant pouring or sprinkling - not immersion. Third, ritual Baptism with water simply points to real Baptism with the Holy Spirit: "I indeed have baptized you with water: but he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost" (Mark 1 : 8). Now the Spirit is always spoken of as "falling" (Acts 8 : 16; Acts 19 : 6), or being "poured out" (Joel 2 : 28; Zech. 12 : 10; Acts 2 : 17), etc., so we would expect the mode of the ritual to picture the reality. Each of these lines of evidence confirm the others and a threefold cord is not easily broken (Ecc. 4 : 12). They point to the fact that the Apostolic Mode was Affusion or Aspersion (Pouring or Sprinkling) - not Immersion.

Now the only significant line of argument I have seen against this evidence is that there is some historical material pointing to Immersion in the sub-Apostolic period so that around AD 150 the usual practice was trine immersion in the nude. (But on this see Warfield's excellent study, "The Archaeology of the Mode of Baptism" in "Studies in Theology" publ. B.O.T. 1988, pp.345 ff.) In fact, over the centuries a vast number of different ceremonies have arisen varying from trine immersion at one extreme, to the practice in St. Martin's in Birmingham in the last century, where those to be baptised were arranged round the communion rails and sprinkled from the font by the minister with a brush.

Now to these various modes the Reformed response is that our authority is simply Scripture - not what may be gleaned from archaeology or history - and to remind

our readers that the Biblical requirement is that "all things be done decently and in order" (1 Cor. 14 : 40).

There is an interesting aspect to this as we come to consider the Subjects of Baptism for there is reasonable historical evidence pointing to the Baptism of some children as early as AD 70 or 80 - still within the Apostolic period - and continuing thereafter with hardly any dissent for 1500 years. Nonetheless we repeat, our authority is Scripture. The matter must be fairly determined from there; however interesting or illuminating the historical record may be.

State of the Question: The Christian Church is, or should be, a missionary organization. As it extends its bounds men and women will be converted to Christ. Profession of the faith is ratified by Baptism. We read in Acts of individuals, families and multitudes who are baptized. We have no problem here. Our Service books provide for adult Baptisms. We believe in them and practice them. There is no dispute between us and Baptists on this matter! The real question between us is this: Should the children of one or both professing parents be baptized? To that we who are Reformed reply:

"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."
Westminster Confession XXVIII - Of Baptism..

That is the sole point at issue. We are not concerned to defend abuses of infant baptism, or misunderstandings of particular services which may be used. Nor here to discuss the effects of baptism. The question may be put another way : Are our infant seed to be treated as members of the Church?

Preliminary Considerations: All Systematic Theology is connected and therefore any specific doctrine inevitably depends on others. There are two specific ones that concern us here: Church and Covenant. Both have been discussed in earlier issues of this Journal by other writers, as also in this issue. Here we simply wish to bring out two points. Although a new form is implied by our Lord's words: "I will build my church.." (Matt. 16 : 18) there is a generic unity with the church (Acts 7 : 38) of the Old Testament so that Paul in Romans 11 : 16 - 21 can speak of one tree and one root.

Likewise though we speak of an Old and New Covenant there is an essential unity so that the Apostle tells us in Galatians 3 that we are partakers of the Covenant made with Abraham, and in Hebrews we find a reference to "an everlasting covenant" (Heb. 13 : 20). Both aspects are summed up in the terms of the promise to Abraham: "In thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed." (Gen. 12 : 3). The unity of both is further confirmed by the repeated promise of God: "I will be their God, and they shall be my people". (Jer. 32 : 38; Ezek. 11 : 20; 37 : 27; Zech. 8 :

The Subjects of Baptism

8 etc.).

Arguments for Infant Baptism.

1. We begin by reminding our readers that: "Salvation is of the LORD" (Jonah 2 : 9). Who is saved, and consequently who are lost, lies in the Decree of God formed in eternity. But practically God uses means and we perceive from Scripture that it normally pleases Him to save in the line of generations. At the outset of the sacred volume in Genesis 4 and 5 we note two lines being traced. First we have the line of Cain. Here we see the development of husbandry, mechanics, and music; also of polygamy and warfare. But nothing is said of grace. Then there is the line of Seth. We note here that men "began to call on the name of the LORD" (Gen. 4 : 26). Although we cannot say all his named descendants were saved yet in the seventh generation we read: "And Enoch walked with God: and he was not; for God took him." (Gen. 5 : 24). Further, Lamech and Noah were gracious men. Now clearly not all the Sethites were regenerate for we read in Gen. 6 of mixed marriages between the two lines - and in spite of many sons and daughters being born by Noah's time in the tenth generation only he and his family remain godly.

2. From Noah's line came in time, Abraham; but we note in passing a significant prophecy. "God shall enlarge Japheth, and he shall dwell in the tents of Shem;" (Gen. 9 : 27). Now we have already noted that in Abraham all nations are to be blessed, but as we read the story we see the development of the Covenant promise signified by circumcision for the adult Abraham and the men of his house and all the male infants eight days old. "Thou shalt keep my covenant therefore, thou, and thy seed after thee in their generations." (Gen.17 : 9). Abraham "received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had..." (Romans 4 : 11). But Isaac is circumcised at eight days old. The infant church contained not only believers -Abraham; but also their seed - Isaac.

3. Further, we read of Abraham that the LORD said: "For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the LORD, to do justice and judgment ; that the LORD may bring upon Abraham that which he hath spoken of him." (Gen.18 : 19). There was to be godly training in the ways of the Lord, or as the New Testament puts it; "And ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath: but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord." (Ephes. 6 : 4).

4. In the time of Moses a second sacrament was added - the Passover. Now both involved the shedding of blood and of course pointed forward to the one great and final sacrifice of our Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. "For even Christ our passover is sacrificed for us." (1 Cor. 5 : 7). Now, as we look back, the shedding of blood is no longer appropriate so Baptism replaces circumcision, "In whom also ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in the putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ: buried with him in baptism.....etc" (Col. 2 : 11 - 12), and the Lord's Supper replaces the Passover.

*Circumcision + Baptism
precedes*

Passover + Lord's Table

both essentially a life of individual.

5. The position then is this. For 2000 years Church and Covenant included not only believers but their infant seed. All male children were circumcised at eight days - or they were treated as cut off from the Covenant, (Gen. 17 : 14). Adult proselyte members were circumcised on admission. This continued in the Church as late as AD 60 for we read of those who continued circumcising their children at the time of Paul's last visit to Jerusalem.

6. Now Christ is "the messenger of the covenant" (Mal. 3 : 1) - that Covenant made with Abraham, and He is "a minister of the circumcision for the truth of God, to confirm the promises made unto the fathers: and that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy..." (Rom. 15 : 8 - 9.). Now what were the terms of the Covenant? Just this, that He would be a God unto Abraham and to his seed (Cf. Genesis 17 : 7 - 10). Is there any command that this privileged position of children has been abrogated under the terms of the New Covenant?

7. Let us then seek to review the various references with this question in mind. Matt. 19 : 13 - 15. Here we see our Lord's attitude when the disciples would have resisted: "Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for of such is the Kingdom of Heaven."

Acts 2 : 37 - 39. Peter is preaching on the day of Pentecost and in response to the question "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" replies: "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins.....for the promise is unto you, and to your children..."

Acts 16 : 14 - 15. Here we read of a certain Lydia: ".....whose heart the Lord opened, that she attended unto the things which were spoken of Paul. And when she was baptized, and her household....."

Acts 16 : 30 - 34. Then in the story of the Philippian jailor he asks: "Sirs, what must I do to be saved? And they said, Believe thou on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house. And they spake unto him the word of the Lord, and to all that were in his house.....and he.....was baptized, he and all his, straight-way.....believing in God with all his house." Note: the jailor asks, "What must I do to be saved?", but the reply includes his house, so we see that all the family were baptized, but it was he, singular, who had believed.

1 Cor. 1 : 16. "And I baptized also the household of Stephanus". Here we have a third example of a household baptism.

1 Cor. 7 : 14. "For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband: else were your children unclean; but now are they holy." The children of the covenant are in a special position before Him. There is debate as to what precisely is meant by "holy" in this Corinthian passage, but I suggest the texts that follow do throw Some light on the matter. In Ezek. 16 : 21 God complains that : "...thou hast slain my children..." , and in Malachi 2 : 13 - 15 rebuking divorce: "That he might seek a godly seed..."

Eph. 6 : 1-3. "Children, obey your parents in the Lord: for this is right. Honour thy father and mother; (which is the first commandment with promise;) that it may be

The Subjects of Baptism

well with thee, and thou mayest live long on the earth.”

Col.3 : 20. “Children, obey your parents in all things: for this is well pleasing unto the Lord.” Now who are being addressed here and in the previous quotation ? In the first, the letter to the Ephesians is addressed to “the saints which are at Ephesus, and to the faithful in Christ Jesus:”. In the second, the letter to the Colossians, the address is to “the saints and faithful brethren in Christ which are at Colossae.” We see instruction being given to husbands, to wives, masters, servants, and children. All are equally being treated as members of Christ’s Church!

Discussion. Let is now be clear. It is not asserted that these texts prove infant baptism. We do not know whether the households of Stephanus, Lydia, or the Philippian jailor contained any children, though there must be a good probability that one or more did. What is being asserted is this. The infant descendants of Church members under the Old Covenant were also treated as Church members and the males received the sacrament of circumcision. There is no evidence that this privilege has been withdrawn under the New Covenant, and the incidental notices of the New Testament are entirely consistent with their membership and consequent baptism. Put negatively we may reasonably ask our Baptist brethren, with their emphasis on individual repentance and faith, to say what in their system and practice corresponds to the three household baptisms mentioned above?

We may summarize what we have been saying by recognizing that God is Sovereign in salvation. But it pleases Him to use means to His ends and it is His gracious and merciful provision to normally call His elect in a Covenant line. We see this in the line of Seth over against that of Cain. We do not see for instance, election operating apparently randomly between the two lines. That of course does not mean that all the Covenant line are saved - amongst the Sethites it would appear that the majority fell away. Nor does it mean that God may not start a fresh Covenant line at any time; for we see precisely that happening in all missionary outreach. I have heard of Dutch Reformed who can trace back their ancestry 400 or 450 years and say that in every generation there have been those who have called upon the name of the Lord. Under the Old dispensation the sign of the Covenant line was Circumcision; under the New, Baptism. It is entirely in line with this that we should expect to baptise our infant seed - and all the evidence points in this direction. The line of Shem ran down through Abraham to the Patriarchs and thus all Israel. Most of us in the west are Japhethites. It is appropriate that in this, as in other regards, we should dwell in the tents of Shem!

Conclusion: We have sought, in this article, to set forth the truth in a postive manner. In a final article, if the Lord will, objections to paedobaptism will be considered and some practical conclusions drawn from the whole discussion.