

Begg on Baptism: Playing with Fire

I wish I didn't have to write this article, but the issue is so important...

But talk about David and Goliath! What gives this virtual nonentity the right to question – let alone strongly disagree with and confront – one of the brightest stars in the galaxy of contemporary evangelical preachers, one who is followed by thousands?

That's the response I expect.

In his discourse, 'The Baptism Debate', Alister Begg, himself, gave me the right.¹ He told us all to emulate the spirit of Acts 17:11. That would have been my position anyway, but that's what he said. So here goes.

I'm not going to repeat my arguments against the double-speaking contradictions of infant baptisers, nor against their dreadful confusion over the covenants, having already set all that out in print.²

No! I simply want to point out that Begg, when he delivered that address, was either being remarkably naive or else playing with fire. As I have said, he is followed by thousands, and, as such, his words have influence – for good or ill. The point is, Begg spoke at length on infant baptism, quoting extensively from some of the leading exponents of the practice, and although he showed that he did not altogether buy into their teaching, he was, I am convinced, at the very least, unwise in some of his comments.

¹ YouTube 16th Dec. 2022.

² See my *Infant Baptism Tested*; see also, on my sermonaudio.com page, my 'Reformed Infant Baptismal Regeneration'.

In particular, he talked about believers being ‘unnecessarily divided’ over ‘the meaning and mode of baptism’ since, he said, we are ‘united on the fundamentals of the gospel’.

I’ll say it again: in my view, such talk is highly dangerous. I know it is a growing phenomenon: many Reformed teachers (both Presbyterian and Baptist varieties) are prepared to ease the sprinkling of infants (baby baptism) or dipping of believers into a convenient filing cabinet labelled ‘Non-Essentials’ – as long as they are agreed on what they call ‘the fundamentals’.³

But this is nonsense!

Why?

For a start, who in Scripture ever used the concept? I can’t imagine the man of Acts 20 chopping the Bible into bits in this way, and putting to one side certain doctrines and practices which his hearers might well regard as ticklish, hoping that the apostle wouldn’t mention any of them. Oh no! This is what Paul told the Ephesian elders, and the context in which he told them:

Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God. Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears (Acts 20:26-31).

And, don’t forget, he didn’t adopt the notion of ‘non-fundamental’ when it came to Peter’s eating habits (Gal. 2:11-14) – what a heap of personal trouble that would have spared him!

³ See my *False Brothers: Paul and Today* for my comments on John MacArthur and R.C.Sproul.

It seems to me that Paul had never been told of the commandment: ‘Thou shalt not rock the boat! Keep the peace at all costs!’

The fact is, defining fundamental and non-fundamental principles of the gospel has proved notoriously elusive. It sounds clever and comforting – in theory; in practice, things are not so easy. Men have certainly tried – Richard Baxter, for one.⁴ But they always fail. For one thing, circumstances can alter cases.⁵

Moreover, there is something much more fundamental (pun intended) going on. Let’s allow, for sake of argument, that infant sprinkling can be tolerated as ‘a non-fundamental’, a subject of academic difference and debate. If so, we end up in a place Scripture will never allow us to stand. Scripture always insists that we read God’s word to learn, to learn that we might feel, and to learn and feel that we might experience and live out (see Proverbs 1:2-6; 2 Timothy 3:15-17; in truth, the entire Bible). It’s the old question of light and/or life. Both, of course, are essential. But just because a man knows the gospel in his head – that is, he has light – if that light is not translated into life transformation, he is still in his sins. In other words, we cannot treat doctrine as a matter of debate, an academic subject. We cannot put what we believe into an insulated box, lock the lid, and forget about it in life. Scripture is unequivocal; in both old and new covenants judgment is according to works (see, for example, Psalm 62:12; Proverbs 24:12; Jeremiah 17:10; 32:19; Matthew 16:27; John 5:28-29; Romans 2:3-6; 2 Corinthians 5:10; 1 Peter 1:17; 4:17-18; Revelation 2:23; 20:11-15; 22:12).⁶

⁴ See D.Martyn Lloyd-Jones: *The Puritans: Their Origins and Successors*.

⁵ I am not adopting the Reformed system and virtually equating circumcision and sprinkling. I am merely making an illustration. Sometimes circumcision seemed indifferent to Paul (Acts 16:3; 1 Cor. 7:19; Gal. 5:6; 6:15); other times, it was fundamental (Acts 15:1-2; Rom. 2:25-29; Gal. 5:2-3).

⁶ Salvation is by grace; judgment is of works.

What I am saying is that all this talk about ‘fundamentals’ is missing the point. Begg made the mistake that a growing number make. Theologians, teachers, preachers, lecturers, writers can talk about infant baptism until the cows come home, using all their armoury of double-speak, get-out clauses, small print, and all the rest, but in the end it’s not what the bigwigs pronounce or don’t pronounce that matters. It’s what’s going on in the minds of John and Jennifer Bloggs (or Doe) gathered round the font: it’s what they think is happening as their little Johnny or Jenny is sprinkled by the minister pronouncing the correct formula. And I am convinced that very many of them they really do think that ‘something has been done’ to their little one. *And every infant-baptising minister knows this.*

And here we come to the crux.

For the moment, let us put to one side what the minister thinks, and what the parents think. And let us get a grip on what the babies will come to think. *For, above all, it’s what little Johnny or Jenny, as they grow up, will come to think of it – that is really crucial here.*

And from what I have discovered in experience and in my reading around the subject, a great many of those growing children really do think ‘something has been done’ – that they are right with God because of it.

Consequently, to talk about infant sprinkling as a side-issue is nonsense – dangerous nonsense. And the reason is that infant sprinkling introduces a serious confusion – and, at the very least, encourages the making of a devastating mistake – over a vital issue, an issue of eternal consequence. I am talking about regeneration.

Now I am – myself – prepared to use the word ‘fundamental’ about regeneration, and for a very good reason: Christ gave me the warrant. As he plainly stated:

Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God... That which is born of the flesh is flesh,

and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you: ‘You must be born again’... (John 3:3-8).⁷

You can’t be more fundamental than that!

Baby sprinkling very, very seriously jeopardises what people think of regeneration. And that’s putting mildly!

I know that the officiating minister can do as Begg did and insist that regeneration is essential, and that the sprinkling has not regenerated the baby – although the words the minister uses often get very close to it, if not actually asserting it.⁸ But if the minister has sprinkled a baby with the appropriate form of covenant-theology double-speak – I make no apology for such language⁹ – I am convinced that the overwhelming majority of parents who have used the minister’s ministrations – *along with their growing infants* – do rely on his actions and words at the font, and quietly ignore all his warnings and get-out clauses.

For such ministers, doling out categorical, glowing promises – as it were – with the right hand, and taking them back with the left, all of it couched in a tortuous theology, leaving the *hoi polloi* free to pick and choose, preferring ‘the nice bits’, might, they think, let them off the hook. If so, it’s not only the parents and the growing babies who have got it terribly wrong, and are accountable. The ministers are fooling themselves. And they will have to carry the can for their part in the débacle!

⁷ Christ used ‘water’ in ‘unless one is born of water and the Spirit’ (John 3:5) as an illustration of cleansing, renewal. He was not referring to water baptism (see my *Infant, Baptist Sacramentalism: A Warning to Baptists*).

⁸ As above, see my ‘Reformed Infant Baptismal Regeneration’.

⁹ See my *Infant*.