

Appendix 1: Scenes from the History of Infant Baptism

In the body of the booklet, I made the point that the history of infant baptism shows how bad things got: it wasn't even the Old Testament which set the parameters for the practice. Rather, it was the stubborn problems raised by the process itself which came to dominate its theology. In this Appendix, I give some evidence for my claim, evidence supplied by those who should know.

Take David F. Wright.¹ He could state:

By the Reformation and its aftermath, the compass of baptismal theology had swung right round, so that *what could sensibly be predicated of infant subjects* came to determine theologies of baptism... If vital contact had been maintained with the New Testament, *the limitations of babies* could never have been allowed to prescribe what was to be taught and believed about baptism... Some devaluation of infant baptism is implicit... [in] consequence of taking with greater seriousness the New Testament, rather than the Old Testament, in considering a theology of baptism.

As Wright went on to say, under the dominance of infant baptism, 'the New Testament's presentation of baptism became remote'.²

If Wright's excellent (though over-cautious) prescription were followed, and we saw a return to the New Testament, it would mean the *end* of infant baptism, not merely its *devaluation*! As Wright pointed out:

¹ David Wright was a leading Reformed scholar. See Wikipedia.

² David F. Wright: *What has Infant Baptism done to Baptism? An enquiry at the end of Christendom*, Paternoster Press, Milton Keynes, 2005, pp7,15, emphasis mine.

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The case for *believer's* baptism has typically been based on the New Testament alone – which is, after all, the only part of the Bible where we encounter Christian baptism... The mainstream Reformers bequeathed a defence of *infant* baptism in which even its ablest exponents leaned quite disproportionately on the Old Testament. Believer's Baptists are right to demand that the heirs of the Reformers owe them an *apologia* for infant baptism which [*apologia*] unashamedly owns the full-orbed New Testament witness to Christian baptism.³

Wright is to be commended for this statement. I gratefully acknowledge his honesty.

Shawn D.Wright⁴ noted David Wright's observation on the change in Calvin's *Institutes* where, in the early section the Reformer 'defines baptism in such terms that it might almost have been written of believer's baptism only', and how this leads to 'the huge problem in relating' this to his practice of infant baptism as set out in the later section. Let me explore this a little. At the start, when confronting the errors of Rome, Calvin held the biblical essence of believer's baptism: faith must precede it. In the earlier section of the *Institutes*, note the frequency of 'faith' and the like – 'support our faith', 'confirm our faith', 'believed', 'believers'; the sacraments⁵ are 'added' to 'faith'; 'they... sustain, nourish, confirm and increase our faith'; and so on and on; in short, the Lord's 'mercy and... pledge of his grace... is not apprehended save by those who receive the word and sacraments with firm faith'; 'for what is a sacrament received without faith, but most certain destruction to the church?'; 'they [sacraments] confer nothing, and avail nothing, if not received in faith... we gain nothing unless

³ David Wright: 'Christian baptism: where do we go from here?', in *Evangelical Quarterly...*, April 2006, p168, emphasis mine.

⁴ Shawn D.Wright: 'Baptism and the Logic of Reformed Paedobaptists', in Thomas R.Schreiner & Shawn D.Wright (eds.): *Believer's Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, B&H Academic, Nashville, 2006, p217.

⁵ As before, I allow the offensive word to stand.

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insofar as we receive in faith'. Faith, faith, faith...! Just so! But after the spread of the radicals – the Anabaptists – and their doctrine, though Calvin let this stand in his *Institutes*, things changed.⁶

And it was not only Calvin. David Wright again:

The invocation of circumcision with its covenantal context was generally not an original feature in [the] Reformers' baptismal teaching. It emerges in general terms when, having nailed their colours to the mast of *sola Scriptura* [Scripture alone], they had to row back from an initial emphasis on the necessity of faith for beneficial reception of baptism. This re-positioning occurred when the opposition against whom this emphasis was directed, the old Roman Church, was supplanted by the new foe of Anabaptism. We should not underestimate the seriousness of the challenge posed by Anabaptist radicals. More than one of the magisterial Reformers had to overcome early doubts about infant baptism, independently of Anabaptist protests. It can be seriously argued that the baptism of babies was the single most significant constitutive element of church order that the Reformers preserved [from Rome] without explicit biblical warrant.

Wow!

Wright proceeded, minutely and precisely, to detail these changes in Martin Luther and John Calvin – changes which culminated in contradictions between sections 4:15 and 4.16 in Calvin's *Institutes* from 1536 to 1559:

The impression [it is more than an 'impression'!] is given that there is [for Calvin] one theology of [believer's – biblical! – DG] baptism and another of infant baptism. Too much of the later [Reformed] tradition has either lost sight

⁶ See David Wright: *What...?* pp19-20; John Calvin: *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, James Clarke and Co., Limited, London, 1957, Vol.2 pp491-554; François Wendel: *Calvin: The Origins and Development of his Religious Thought*, Collins, London, 1973, pp318-329; Anthony N.S.Lane: 'Baptism in the thought of David Wright', in *Evangelical Quarterly*, April 2006, p143; Shawn D.Wright.

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of the former, or simply collapsed it into the latter, and hence worked with a doctrine of baptism that, to all intents and purposes, has been a doctrine of infant baptism alone.⁷

Yet, even as late as 1555, Calvin could still declare, albeit somewhat weakly, when commenting on Matthew 28:19; Mark 16:15-16:

The meaning amounts to this, that by proclaiming the gospel everywhere, they should bring all nations to the obedience of the faith, and next, that they should... ratify their doctrine by the sign of the gospel. In Matthew, they are first taught simply to teach; but Mark [16:15] expresses... that they should preach the gospel... Christ enjoins that those who have submitted to the gospel, and professed to be his disciples, shall be baptised; partly that their baptism may be a pledge of eternal life before God, and partly that it may be an outward sign of faith before men. For we know that God testifies [note, testifies – not conveys – DG] to us the grace of adoption by this sign, because he engrafts us into the body of his Son, so as to reckon us among his flock; and, therefore, not only our spiritual washing, by which he reconciles us to himself, but likewise our new righteousness, are represented by it... All who present themselves for baptism do, as it were, by their own signature, ratify their faith... But as Christ enjoins them [the preachers] to teach before baptising, and desires that none but believers shall be admitted to baptism, it would appear [it most definitely is the fact! – DG] that baptism is not properly administered unless when it is preceded by faith... Baptism is enjoined to the faith of the gospel, in order to inform us that the mark of our salvation is engraven on it; for had it not served to testify [note, testify – not convey!] the grace of God, it would have been improper [for] Christ to have said that they who shall believe and be baptised shall be saved [Mark 16:16].

Excellent! Even so, despite what he rightly said about faith before baptism, this did not stop Calvin immediately launching a lengthy tirade against the Anabaptists, using the

⁷ David F. Wright: 'Children, Covenant and the Church', in *Themelios*, RTSF, Leicester, Spring 2004, pp30-37.

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old, hackneyed arguments to come to the self-contradicting conclusion that though faith is essential, and ‘though infants are not yet of such an age as to be capable of receiving the grace of God by faith’, nevertheless ‘it is not rash to administer baptism to infants’!⁸

If Calvin’s logic were to be used by a defendant in court today, is there any doubt what the magistrate would say? ‘My son was too young to have a driving licence, too young to be insured, too young to be capable of passing the driving test, but I assured him that it wasn’t rash of me to compel him to drive on the motorway’, would get short shrift, would it not? Incidentally, Matthew Poole took a similar line to Calvin:

I cannot be of their mind who think that persons may be baptised before they are taught; we want [that is, lack] precedents of any such baptism in Scripture, though indeed we find precedents of persons baptised who had but a small degree of the knowledge of the gospel; but it should seem that they were all first taught that Jesus Christ was the Son of God, and were not baptised till they professed such belief (Acts 8:37).⁹

As far as it goes, very good! However, like Calvin, this did not stop Poole arguing black is white. Since ‘children are a great part of any nation, if not the greatest part... infants are capable of the obligations of baptism, for obligation arises from the equity of the thing, not from the understanding and capacity of the person’. Really? Much of this is incomprehensible; the rest is ludicrous.

Calvin had not been alone in his change of views when challenged by the Anabaptists. Earlier, Luther had done the same:

⁸ John Calvin: *Commentaries*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, reprinted 1979, Vol.16 Part 1 xxxiii; Vol.17 Part 1 pp383-388.

⁹ Mathew Poole: *A Commentary on The Holy Bible*, Vol.3, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, reprinted 1975, Vol.3 p146.

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Luther... in his early Reformation years placed such a conspicuous emphasis on faith in relation to baptism.¹⁰

Between 1520 and 1528, however, he radically changed tack. Jonathan H. Rainbow:

When facing Roman Catholic sacramental objectivity [in the early 1520s], Luther had been at pains to emphasise the necessity of personal faith... Now [in the late 1520s], facing a perceived Anabaptist subjectivity (that is, the insistence on personal faith and intelligent confession of faith as a prerequisite to baptism), Luther emphasised the objectivity of baptism.

In 1520, Luther could say: ‘Unless faith is present, or comes to life in baptism[!],¹¹ the ceremony is of no avail’. Yet in 1528, amazingly he could declare:

Whoever bases baptism on the faith of the one to be baptised can never baptise anyone... Even if they could establish that children are without faith, it would make no difference to me... Since there is no difference in baptism whether faith precedes or follows, baptism does not depend on faith... We are not to base baptism on faith.¹²

Jaroslav Pelikan commented:

Luther’s elevation of spirit over structure and his stress on faith made it even more essential that the baptismal vow be taken freely and consciously... It was reasonable in the light of this for many of his contemporaries to conclude that Luther’s position, consistently carried out, [there’s the key! – DG] would undercut the traditional doctrine and practice of the Church regarding infant baptism... but when it came to the relation between faith and the means of grace, or at

¹⁰ Abraham Friesen: *Erasmus, the Anabaptists, and the Great Commission*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, 1998, p118.

¹¹ What a staggering claim! See my *Luther*.

¹² Jonathan H. Rainbow: “‘Confessor Baptism’: The Baptismal Doctrine of the Early Anabaptists”, in Thomas R. Schreiner & Shawn D. Wright (eds.): *Believer’s Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, B&H Academic, Nashville, 2006 p195.

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any rate to the relation between faith and infant baptism, he did not assign the decisive importance to faith, but gave it to the structured mediation of divine grace in baptism... He declared: 'Anyone who wants to use the faith of the person to be baptised as the basis for baptism may never baptise anyone; for even if you were to baptise the same man a hundred times in one day, you would not know a single one of those times whether he believes'. Theologian of faith though he quite self-consciously was, Luther would not make infant faith the determinative issue in his defence of infant baptism... The defence of infant baptism, then, could not be based solely on the assertion that infants could have faith... Neither the faith of the priest nor that of the candidate could affect the objective validity of the sacrament of baptism... The covenant of God was a stronger and surer foundation for baptism than the faith of the individual, for faith, too, was a sometime thing. How could one be sure, even in the case of an adult, that his faith was authentic and sincere.

I pause! Apparently, because of this difficulty, it is better to baptise unbelievers!¹³ Pelikan again, summarising Luther: 'The covenant... to this, Abraham and his descendants were to look, not to their subjective state'.¹⁴ In other words, sinners are to be encouraged to think about their physical ancestors – and not look to Christ in faith and repentance, and not only for baptism – but salvation! Really? Luther said of the Waldensians:

These brethren hold to the idea that every man must believe for himself and on the basis of his own faith receive baptism, and that otherwise baptism... is useless. So far they believe and speak correctly.

Nevertheless, he went on, even though:

¹³ For the same on Ulrich Zwingli, see Leonard Verduin: *The Reformers and Their Stepchildren*, The Paternoster Press, Exeter, 1964; reprinted, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1980, p201.

¹⁴ Jaroslav Pelikan: *Spirit versus Structure: Luther and the Institutions of the Church*, Collins, London, 1968, pp77,82-83,94-95.

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...there is not sufficient evidence from Scripture that one might justify the introduction of infant baptism at the time of the early Christians after the apostolic period [that is, in the time of the Fathers]... but so much is evident that no one may venture with a good conscience to reject or abandon infant baptism, which has for so long a time been practiced.¹⁵

Amazing! By such an argument, one could ‘prove’ anything!

Ulrich Zwingli, too, in his early days actually denied infant baptism, but drew back. And how! Zwingli: ‘Nothing grieves me more than that at the present I have to baptise children, for I know it ought not to be done’. ‘If we were to baptise as Christ instituted it then we would not baptise any person until he has reached the years of discretion; for I find it nowhere written that infant baptism is to be practiced’. ‘However, one must practice infant baptism so as not to offend our fellow men’.¹⁶ Zwingli actually ‘severed baptism from faith... Zwingli cut baptism loose from faith’: One covenant, one covenant people; therefore circumcision and baptism ‘must be... identical in meaning’. Although Zwingli was not the first to argue for infant baptism on the basis of circumcision, it was he who made it the central plank in the infant baptiser’s argument.¹⁷

As Abraham Friesen observed, Martin Bucer wrote to Luther in 1524:

Although the baptism of [believing] adults alone would probably be far more in accord with the practice of the early church, and also with the teachings of Scripture which *order* that those who know Christ should be baptised, confessing Christ in baptism after they have been taught the doctrine of godliness; and by baptising [believing] adults only would also be destroyed a deceptive trust in baptism [what an important observation – DG]... nevertheless...

¹⁵ Verduin pp196,203-204.

¹⁶ Verduin pp198-199.

¹⁷ See Rainbow pp196-200.

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And so it went on. Bucer then proceeded to speak up for infant baptism!

Friesen listed Oecolampadius, Bucer, Capito, Vadian, Ulrich Hugwald and Sebastian Hoffmeister as all ‘early opposed to infant baptism... It was political opposition that turned Reformers against believer’s baptism. When that happened, “magisterial Reformers” were forced to find reasons to oppose it’.¹⁸

In short, Calvin’s settled position was, as François Wendel said:

In everything concerning baptism, Calvin limited himself, in a general way, to harmonising as well as he could the ideas and the reasoning that he had found in... Augustine, in Luther and in Bucer, the last of whom had reproduced Zwingli’s argument in all essentials, at least in so far as the main problem was how to refute the Anabaptists.¹⁹

Friesen:

Catholic polemicists of the 16th century were quick to point out that the Anabaptists had out-principled the Reformers on the matter of *sola Scriptura* [Scripture alone]. John Eck [observed]... that when the Anabaptists appeared on the scene the Reformers ‘could not refute them, [so] they had to depart from their fundamental principle and [in order to maintain their system] concede that many things were to be believed and observed which had not been written [in Scripture], as Zwingli has pointed out with regard to... infant baptism’.²⁰

If this does not give the game away, I don’t know what does. The right way to approach this subject, of course, is the same as every other: What does the Bible teach? Not: How can we stop the Anabaptists?

David F. Wright, after describing the nonsensical procedure for infant baptism in the 7th and 8th centuries, said:

¹⁸ Friesen pp82,89, emphasis his.

¹⁹ Wendel p329.

²⁰ Friesen p142.

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One feature of this infant-dominated descent into unreality deserves special mention. It seems that it was in the course of this regressive development... that... Jesus' blessing of little children was recruited to justify the laying of hands on infant heads... It is important to stress that there is hardly any trace of this passage being used or interpreted in connection with infant baptism in the patristic period. This should not surprise us, since we have seen that early Christian baptism... focussed on candidates able to answer for themselves.

So it was in the 7th and 8th centuries that these passages were dragooned – note Wright's 'recruited' – into supporting infant baptism. Once this had happened, however, there was no going back:

The 16th-century Reformers... generally include [the episode] as scriptural reading and helpful justification... [of infant baptism]. [In] the *Book of Common Prayer*... 1549 [and its] 1552 revision... this... episode was launched on a new career as a key [so-called] scriptural and indeed dominical support²¹ for the practice of baptising babies, a career which would last until the later years of the 20th century.²²

David F. Wright put some very serious questions on the table for infant baptisers:

Do the infant-baptised become (or are they recognised as already being) members of the church, of the covenant people of God?... Does baptism, or more accurately, the Holy Spirit through baptism, effect anything for babies, or merely mark them out as future recipients? Does baptism... confer specific covenantal blessings on babies, such as new birth or remission of sin, specifically original sin, as

²¹ That is, the support of the Lord Jesus Christ himself.

²² And beyond! David F. Wright: *What...?* pp72-74. Buchanan and Vasey noted that in Thomas Cranmer's justification of infant baptism, 'his weakest points had been his choice and use of Scripture (Mark 10:13-16 – "Suffer the little children...")' (Colin Buchanan and Michael Vasey: *New Initiation Rites...*, Grove Books Limited, Cambridge, 1998, p7).

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Augustine influentially argued?...²³ It may be the case that most evangelical ministers or churches have not endorsed the admission of young children to the communion table. It surely merits more serious consideration than it commonly receives. In its favour is the weighty argument that it takes the baptism of infants genuinely as baptism, as making them truly members of Christ's people. Thus it has the virtue of putting both ordinances of the new covenant on an equal basis, dissolving the anomaly that the infant-baptised have been welcomed into the Christian community, but are debarred for years from its communal meal celebration.

Speaking of 'the children of the faithful', Wright raised the question which infant baptisers (and others) need to answer: Do such 'children [really] belong to the covenant community'? His answer? Yes:

Whether by baptism, by dedication or by thanksgiving and blessing, we welcome the children of the faithful... and we are right to treat them as new members of God's people, not as no better than little pagans or unbelievers.

But, he said, he drew the line. Where? 'At the possibility of unbaptised children at the communion table'!²⁴

And that brings us right up to date. The lesson to be learned from all this? Turn to theology to justify a doctrine or practice, and not to Scripture, and there will be no end to the twisting and turnings necessary to cope with the ensuing fall-out. This principle applies right across the board: conversion, justification, assurance, sanctification, church life... Putting theology or the Confession first – which is frequently done,

²³ I repeat an earlier personal note: I was standing with fellow-speakers at a Reformed conference for a group photograph. The birth of my grandson had been announced at the meeting that morning. I felt a nudge in my side. A Reformed minister hissed in my ear: 'Get him under the covenant, brother; get him under the covenant'. As I recall it now, I wish I had asked: 'On your principles, isn't he already under the covenant?' Or is there a difference between being '*in* the covenant' and *under* it?

²⁴ David F. Wright: 'Children' pp27-28,37,39.

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despite the repeated mantra of *sola Scriptura*²⁵ – spells disaster!

²⁵ That is, ‘Scripture alone’.