

Argument 8

Infant Baptisers Argue from the Words of Jesus to Mothers with Their Children

The verses in question are found in Matthew 19:13-15, with parallel passages in Mark and Luke. Words like:

Let the little children come to me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of God. Assuredly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will by no means enter it (Mark 10:14-15; see also Matt. 18:1-6).¹

It will be readily seen that infant baptism and church membership are not spoken of in these passages. This is of the utmost significance.² Whatever else is referred to, *baptism – infant or otherwise – is not*. It would seem, however, from an infant baptiser's point of view, that a marvellous opportunity was missed. Infant baptism could have been unequivocally established so easily! It was just the right circumstance. And, if I am not speaking out of turn, if the baptism of infants is what Christ requires, and since he knew what endless controversy there would be over it in the history of the church, it is surprising, to put it no stronger, that he chose not to take the glorious opportunity afforded him at the time, and thus settle the matter once and for all.

That being said, all commentators – infant baptisers and Baptists – find difficulties of interpretation. But certain things stand out. Jesus wants children to come to him, opening his arms to them (Mark 10:16). But he did not say that children are sinless; he did not say that children are regenerate; he did not say that children are in the

¹ Are we talking about new-born babies or older children? They brought βρεφη to Jesus in Luke 18:15, but he immediately spoke of παιδια (Luke 18:16-17). παιδια is used in all the other references. βρεφη does mean new-born babies, but παιδια can be older children – see Mark 9:21,24,36. It is not an important question – other than for those who want to argue for *infant* or *baby* baptism from the passage.

² 'There is no mention at all of baptism' (Lloyd-Jones: *The Church* p40).

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covenant. What Jesus did say is that all who are to be converted must become child-like; that is, they must become totally dependent in their attitude and spirit. No one who is self-sufficient will ever come to Christ, throwing himself absolutely and unreservedly upon his mercy. But that is just what sinners must do; hence, whoever does not receive the kingdom as a little child will never enter it: 'Unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven' (Matt. 18:3). But all who become like a child in this respect, do belong to the kingdom. Note Christ's words: 'As little children'; he did not say that children – not even these children – belong to the kingdom of heaven.³

Before I look at the way infant baptisers misuse this episode, I ask a question: Reader, when, do you think, men started to use it to justify infant baptism? Judging by the claims made for it today, one would imagine it must have been New Testament times. But, of course, there is not an atom of evidence to indicate that the first disciples ever thought in such terms. What about the next two or three hundred years – the age of the Fathers, when infant baptism arose – did the Fathers turn to these passages? There is scarcely any evidence of it! Wright, after describing the nonsensical procedure for infant baptism in the 7th and 8th centuries, said:

One feature of this infant-dominated descent into unreality deserves special mention. It seems that it was in the course of this regressive

³ 'As a little child'. But 'when [Christ] enjoins his followers to become like a child, this does not extend indiscriminately to all points'. Least of all does it extend to age! 'Comparisons must not be too closely or too exactly carried out, so as to apply at all points... The tender age of little children is distinguished by simplicity to such an extent, that they are unacquainted with... all the incentives to pride... That man is truly humble who neither claims any personal merit in the sight of God, nor proudly despises brethren, or aims at being thought superior to them, but reckons it enough that he is one of the members of Christ, and desires nothing more than that the head alone should be exalted... The term "children" is now applied metaphorically by Christ to those who have laid aside lofty looks, and who conduct themselves with modesty and humility' (Calvin: *Commentaries* Vol. 16 Part 2 pp332-334). Pratt, however, showed no such restraint: Christ 'taught... that the kingdom... belonged to the children who were brought to him and to others like them' (John H. Armstrong p71). Not at all. Christ was saying that [the kingdom] belongs to all (men and women) who will become spiritually child-like.

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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 support⁴ for the practice of baptising babies, a career which would last until the later years of the 20th century.⁵

As an inevitable consequence of the concept of mothers presenting their babies for baptism, the notion arose that those mothers (and others) should act as sponsors for the babies. Why? Because the babies were unable to speak for themselves! The non-speaking babies, not only unable to speak, but unable to have and profess faith – which, infant baptisers admit, is the New Testament requirement for baptism – were said to make 'their' profession of faith – so the theologians argued – through the lips of their sponsors acting as ventriloquists on their behalf! And this 'theology', originating (surprise, surprise!) with Augustine, was reinforced by the Reformers, not excluding Calvin himself!⁶

So now we know. The Gospel passages in question were not used to defend infant baptism until the 7th or 8th centuries, and such a use carried with it senseless – utterly daft! – corollaries. So can we hope that infant baptisers in the 21st century will stop using these passages

⁴ That is, the support of the Lord Jesus Christ himself.

⁵ And beyond! 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...")' (Buchanan and Vasey p7).

⁶ See end note on p176 for excursus: 'The madness of Reformed ventriloquism at the baptism of infants'.

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to try to justify their practice? I doubt it! I fear the love of the sentimental note it has introduced is too deeply ingrained.⁷

How do infant baptisers use these verses to justify their practice? In regard to this, I have already pointed out that baptism is not referred to, but if infant baptisers insist on bringing it into the passages, they prove too much. Let me first demonstrate that they do insist on bringing it in. For instance, Engelsma: ‘How important our children’s inclusion in the covenant is to God is shown in the New Testament (covenant) by Christ’s command: “Suffer little children (infants) to come unto me... for of such (infants of believers) is the kingdom of God (made up)” (Luke 18:15-17)’. Reader, you can see that Engelsma applied a subtle gloss to Christ’s words – a gloss which cannot be justified. Could he categorically state that the infants presented to Christ in Luke 18 were ‘infants of believers’? Of course not. Yet he said they were, and on the basis of that unwarranted assumption he was prepared to move on to the subject of baptism – which is not mentioned in the passage – and criticise those who do not allow infants to join the church by baptism. ‘Every Baptist church denies membership to all children’, he complained. He went on to deplore this, saying that such people are engaged in a ‘grim teaching and practice’ in that they ‘will not suffer the little children to come to Christ, but [forbid] them’.⁸ Once again, notice the gloss, the subtle adjustment to Christ’s words. Christ did not say anything about baptism or joining the church, did he? Yet Engelsma virtually put those words in Christ’s mouth. Coming to

⁷ According to its advocates, infant baptism is often a sentimental social occasion, not far removed from baby-adulation. See, for instance, Carson: *Farewell* pp14-16. But infant baptisers do not stand alone in this particular dock. Many evangelical, not excluding Reformed Baptist, churches have a lot to answer for. The cult of children, so common in the world, has captured large sections of the church – children’s church, children’s (often toe-curlingly childish) talks, family services, crèches for those well able to remain (and who ought to remain) in the service (and benefit), the inordinate emphasis upon youth work, and such like. I fear that many teenage baptisms in such churches may be little more than social events. Indeed, it is worse. In some cases, they are little removed from a party atmosphere, a kind of half-way house between an English wedding-breakfast and an American high-school graduation, tinged with religion. I speak with sadness of what I know of this growing phenomenon. See Tidball p158 on infant dedication.

⁸ Engelsma pp10-11.

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Christ is being sprinkled and joining a church as an infant, according to Engelsma! Baptists – who will not baptise infants – are shutting them out from Christ, forbidding them to come to the Saviour, he said. What arrant nonsense. Has Engelsma ever met a Baptist?

Such abuse has a long pedigree. As we have seen, Calvin dismissed the Anabaptists for their refusal to baptise infants, especially because of their argument (the biblical argument) that the only way to be reconciled to God is by faith. He said that this episode in Christ's life proves this is not true for infants; children are reconciled to God and adopted by baptism. Calvin was definite: Christ extended grace to the infants, gave them purity, they were renewed by the Spirit of God to the hope of salvation, and were reckoned by Christ as among his flock. Having made such startling claims, Calvin found no difficulty in thinking it reasonable that infants ought to be baptised. The Anabaptists, he said, were cruel to children, foolishly excluded them, drove them far from Christ's fold, and shut the door.⁹ Only eternity will reveal how many have been deluded by Calvin's astonishing claims.

To return to the main point: Since infant baptisers want to support their practice by Luke 18:1-6 and the like, on their logic it follows that all infants should be baptised; at least, all infants who belong to one or both parents who express some general desire that they should be baptised or 'something should be done to them'. Certainly infant baptisers cannot restrict the baptism to the children of parents who are in the covenant; not by arguments from these passages. Were all the mothers in the covenant? How can anyone be sure? Had the mothers been baptised? If so, when? And did any of them have children at the time? If so, why had they not been baptised with their mothers? Why were they being brought separately? And, if the mothers had not been baptised, why weren't they baptised with their babies on this occasion?

⁹ Calvin: 'Since the whole race of Adam is shut up under the sentence of death, all from the least even to the greatest must perish, except those who are rescued by the only Redeemer. To exclude [infants] from the grace of redemption... would be too cruel; and therefore it is not without reason that we employ this passage as a shield against the Anabaptists [because] they refuse baptism to infants' (Calvin: *Commentaries* Vol.16 Part 2 pp390-391). Calvin's words can only mean that since all infants are ruined in Adam, all infants should be baptised, and thus all infants will be saved. Diabolical!

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In any event, as I have pointed out, baptism is not present in the passages. Hence why all this talk about baptism? The verses afford not the slightest ground for baptising anybody, let alone infants.

What is more, why did the disciples, who had been baptising – and, according to infant baptisers, baptising infants in the process – try to stop the mothers bringing their infants to Christ? If they had been used to receiving infants in order to baptise them, why would they now come between Christ and these mothers with their infants? It would have been the most natural thing in the world to welcome children since they had been in the habit of baptising them. Infant baptisers want us to believe that the disciples – who were utterly nonplussed by these mothers bringing their infants to Christ – had been baptising such! This is too much to swallow. Clearly, the disciples were not as sure about what to do with infants as infant baptisers are! They certainly did not look for water.¹⁰

In 1864, C.H.Spurgeon preached a sermon on this from Mark 10:13-16. It was aptly entitled: ‘Children Brought to Christ, Not to the Font’. In his characteristic way he said:

¹⁰ And what now about the parent-child principle in the Abrahamic covenant – which infant baptisers make so much of? Robert L.Reymond recognised the point. The best he could come up with was: ‘Though the disciples should have known better, their attitude toward children may perhaps be explained from the fact that the status of children under then-current, but totally unbiblical, religious law consistently placed them [the children] in the company of the deaf and dumb, the weak-minded, the blind and crippled, the aged, Gentiles, women and slaves’ (Reymond p196). In other words, the parent-child principle had died out at this time. If so, how is it, as infant baptisers claim (I do not agree), John the Baptist used the principle, as did Peter at Pentecost, Paul with the households, and so on? Are we to believe that although John the Baptist used it, the disciples of Christ had forgotten it when the mothers approached them, yet remembered it by the time of Pentecost? How did they recover the principle? When did they recover it? What evidence is there for such a recovery? The argument is utterly flawed, nothing but special pleading. How do we know the Jews had forgotten circumcision and allowed it to lapse at this time? I see no evidence for such a claim. In making his suggestion, Reymond cited Joachim Jeremias who, as one wit remarked, unearthed *at least* all the evidence for infant baptism (see Wright: *What...?* p18; Lane 140). Infant baptisers once again show the desperateness of their position – they seem willing to clutch at any passing flimsy straw.

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This text has not the shadow of the shade of the ghost of a connection with baptism. There is no line of connection so substantial as a spider's web between this incident and baptism, or at least my imagination is not vivid enough to conceive one. This I will prove to you, if you will follow me for a moment.

It is very clear, dear friends, that these young children were not brought to Jesus Christ by their friends to be baptised... there is not a hint about their being baptised... Surely the parents themselves knew tolerably well what it was they desired, and they would not have expressed themselves so dubiously as to ask (Jesus) to touch them, when they meant that he should baptise them.

In the next place, if they brought the children to Jesus Christ to be baptised, they brought them to the wrong person; for... John, (John 4:2), expressly assures us that Jesus Christ baptised not, but his disciples: this settles the question once for all, and proves beyond all dispute that there is no connection between this incident and baptism.

But you will say: 'Perhaps they brought the children to be baptised by the disciples?' Brethren, the disciples were not in the habit of baptising infants, and this is clear from the case in hand. If they had been in the habit of baptising infants, would they have rebuked the parents for bringing them? If it had been a customary thing for parents to bring children with such an object, would the disciples who had been in the constant habit of performing the ceremony, have rebuked them for attending to it? Would any Church clergyman rebuke parents for bringing their children to be baptised? If he did so, he would act absurdly contrary to his own views and practice; and we cannot therefore imagine that if infant baptism had been the accepted practice, the disciples could have acted so absurdly as to rebuke the parents for bringing their little ones. It is obvious that such could not have been the practice of the disciples who were rebuked [by Christ for hindering the children].

Moreover, and here is an argument which seems to me to have great force in it, when Jesus Christ rebuked his disciples, then was the time if ever in his life, to have openly spoken concerning infant baptism... If he wished to rebuke his disciples most effectually, how could he have done it better than by saying: 'Wherefore keep... these children back? I have ordained that they shall be baptised... how dare you then, in opposition to my will, keep them back?' But no, dear friends, our Saviour never said a word about 'the laver of regeneration'¹¹... when he rebuked them – not a single sentence. Had he done so, the season would have been most appropriate if it had been his intention to teach the practice...

¹¹ Reader, please recall the words of Luther, Archibald Alexander, Calvin and others.

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To close all, Jesus Christ did not baptise the children... He... dismissed them without a drop of [water]. Now, if this event had any connection with baptism whatever, it was the most appropriate occasion for infant baptism to have been practised. Why, it would have ended for ever the controversy... I, my brethren, would sooner be dumb than speak a single word against an ordinance which Christ himself instituted and practised; and if on this occasion he had but sprinkled one of these infants... then the question would have been settled for ever, and some of us would have been saved a world of abuse, besides escaping no end of mistakes; for which we are condemned, in the judgement of many good people, for whom we have some affection, though for their judgement we have no respect.¹²

I realise that Spurgeon directed his sermon against the advocates of baptismal regeneration,¹³ but the arguments he presented are relevant to the case in hand. Indeed, they are more than relevant. They are unanswerable.

¹² Spurgeon: 'Children Brought' pp414-415.

¹³ But as I have shown, Calvin and many others make statements which amount to it. Many Reformed baptisers are unequivocal sacramentalists – not excluding baptismal regeneration. And, as I have pointed out, increasingly, Baptist scholars are to be included in this stricture. For more on Spurgeon, the baptism of infants and baptismal regeneration, see Grass and Randall pp62-67.