

Argument 9

Infant Baptisers Argue from Silence

Another way the infant baptisers try to justify their practice is to argue from silence, though, as we saw a little earlier, some of them, at least, appreciate the difficulties involved, and are not always so keen on it. The attempt to justify infant baptism from silence is remarkable. Apparently, so we are told, since there is no direct command *not* to baptise infants in the New Testament, infants ought to be baptised. As Marcel put it, and put it very dogmatically: ‘The silence of the New Testament regarding the baptism of infants militates in favour of... this practice. To overthrow completely notions so vital, pressed for more than two thousand years... to withdraw from children the sacrament of admission into the covenant, the apostolic church ought to have received from the Lord an explicit prohibition’.¹

This remarkable argument from silence is of doubtful logic at best, and smacks of stipulating what commands Christ should and should not have given to his church. ‘Ought to’? Who said? apart from Marcel and friends, that is.² The Holy Spirit has taught us and warned us of many things in Scripture – things which would only come to light centuries later. Yet, apparently, he left us to reason from silence over an issue and a practice as far-reaching as the baptism of infants. Incredible! In addition, the reasoning is absurd. Although infant baptisers admit that Christ and his apostles said nothing about the subject – not a word about it – we are supposed to realise that their very silence is clear proof that we must baptise infants! To my mind at

¹ Kingdon p25.

² I hope, reader, you can detect the difference between Marcel’s ‘ought to’ and the way I expressed my views on silence in the previous chapter on the mothers and their children. Furthermore, as I have said, there is a right way for arguing from silence – but this means there is also a way which is wrong! Great care is needed. And a greater sense of reverence for Christ than Marcel showed here.

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least, the claim seems odd coming from those who so often argue for the Regulative Principle.³

And what about the ‘two thousand years’? What ‘notions so vital’, which had been the practice in Israel for ‘two thousand years’, did Marcel think came over from the Old Testament into the New? Practices such as circumcision, membership of Israel by physical descent, and so on? I have shown that the principles which lay behind those practices, though they had lasted for ‘two thousand years’, fell with the passing of the old covenant in the death and resurrection of Christ.⁴

Moreover, it must be borne in mind that the silence argument is a game for more than one player. Very strange things have been proposed by its use. What, for instance, of the Presbyterian in 1653 who claimed that since the New Testament does not forbid the maintenance of parish clergy by the 10% levy on all Englishmen (that is, tithes), then this must mean the Church tithe system is the proper way to support ministers?⁵ What is more, Papists and others can build their wicked notions on silence. Beware! It *is* possible to use the argument – Spurgeon did it in the sermon quoted earlier – but great care must be taken with it. The scriptural silence on infant baptism can be used to support the case for *not* baptising infants – indeed, infant baptisers have to face the fact that their practice is not even mentioned in the New Testament⁶ – but the silence should not be used the other way round, as Marcel did. If Scripture does not command us to do something, we will not claim scriptural authority for it. Is this not the right course? To put it no higher, it is much safer than claiming scriptural warrant for a practice because we are not told it is forbidden.⁷

³ That is, nothing is to be done in the church unless directly sanctioned by Scripture.

⁴ Once again I have to ask: Why do infant baptisers cling to the shadows of the old covenant? And as for Marcel’s use of old-covenant principles: Should we have the death penalty – stoning – for adultery, blasphemy and witchcraft? Does the New Testament expressly tell us we should not? What about the silence now?

⁵ Hill: *Bible* p42.

⁶ And *this* is the silence they should be concerned about.

⁷ Philpot: ‘How are we to know when [omission, arguing from silence] is of importance [valid], and when it is not? By this simple rule: Omission is of

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However, since silence is a weapon infant baptisers like to use, why should females be baptised? Only males were circumcised in the Old Testament, and there is no direct, explicit command to baptise females; so why did the apostles baptise them? Why should they change the practice of, as Marcel put it, ‘more than two thousand years’? Silence, it is claimed, means we must carry out Old Testament principles and practices in the church. It was a revolutionary step to baptise women; silence ought to mean – according to infant baptisers – that only males should be baptised.⁸

Again, infant baptisers baptise infants, but in the main they do not allow them to partake of the Lord’s supper.⁹ As the Westminster

great importance when analogy, or the weight of probable evidence, is *against* a thing having occurred; omission is of little importance when analogy is in *favour* of it. To argue from analogy means to argue from what has occurred that the same thing will occur again under similar circumstances... The omission of any example or precept for the baptism of infants in the New Testament is of great weight against that practice. Why? Because both precept and practice in the New Testament are entirely for baptising believing disciples. We therefore argue from analogy (that is, from how we may gather it is most probable that the apostles acted under such and such circumstances), that they *did not* baptise infants. In other words, the stream of analogy is *against* the practice of baptising or sprinkling infants. Now, in this case, the argument from omission is so strong that only one thing can overturn it. And what is that? The producing of an instance of an infant having been baptised in the New Testament, or a precept to baptise them. To argue from “households” [see Argument 7] being baptised, that infants were [baptised], will not do here, as it is to make one omission make up for another omission’ (Philpot pp17-18, emphasis his); that is, two silences do not make a stronger argument than one!

⁸ The issue of male and female, of course, does not arise in *biblical* baptism. Only believers, and all believers, male and female, must be baptised. There is a question to be asked, and this is it: Is this person a believer?

⁹ Calvin: Before the supper, ‘examination... must precede, and this it were vain to expect from infants... How, pray, can we require infants to commemorate any event of which they have no understanding; how require them “to show forth the Lord’s death”, of the nature and benefit of which they have no idea?’ Just so! Calvin might bluster: ‘Nothing of the kind is prescribed by baptism. Wherefore, there is the greatest difference between the two signs’ (Calvin: *Institutes* Vol.2 p550). But, reader, scan the various quotations I have supplied from his writings, and see if this stands up. Above all, read the Bible to see if it does. Where, in Scripture, do we read of any

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Catechism, question 177, puts it: ‘Baptism is to be administered... even to infants; whereas the Lord’s supper... only to such as are of years and ability to examine themselves’.¹⁰ But in the Old Testament the (male) children were circumcised, and they and the infant girls, along with their family, partook of the Passover. Why then, on the infant baptiser’s logic, can infants not partake of the supper? And since they cannot,¹¹ why is there no explicit command to say they should not? Surely it would have been a natural development from the Old to the New Testaments, and silence is said to mean that Israelite practice must be taken into the church. So, if the circumcision of infants meant that infants should be baptised, yet the same link does not apply to the supper, why was the early church not told about it? Was there not a very real danger that they might have given them the supper? Why the silence?

In any case, as for infants not partaking of the Lord’s supper, if they were baptised on the Day of Pentecost, as infant baptisers mistakenly assert from Acts 2:39, why did they not partake of it? It clearly states that ‘those who gladly received his word were baptised; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them. And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers’ (Acts 2:41-42). If infants were included in the three thousand of verse 41, why were they excluded from the same group in verse 42? And why is there no explanation of the exclusion? Why the silence? The reality is, no infant was included in the three thousand who were baptised. (I will return to this). But on the infant baptiser’s own argument, why is there no explanation to tell us that those infants who were baptised, who joined the church, who

person taking the supper who was not baptised, or who was baptised and did not take the supper? What scripture tells us that between baptism and the supper ‘there is the greatest difference’?

¹⁰ Westminster p267. Note the difference in the nature and quality of qualification required for the two ordinances. In the Scottish Highlands in the 19th century, all that was required for baptism was absence of ‘ignorance and immorality’ (in the parent – or the person, if an adult was applying for baptism), whereas ‘careful examination of life and experience’ was required for the supper (Wright: *What...?* p4). Why? Why this difference in the two ordinances?

¹¹ But even here there is movement. See end note on p185 for excursus: ‘Recent developments in children partaking of the Lord’s supper’.

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came under the apostles' doctrine, naturally did not partake of the supper? Why the silence?¹²

Having hinted at the proper force of silence in the episode with the mothers who brought their infants to Jesus, I now ask, why, in Acts 15,

¹² Infant baptisers argue that since Baptists allow women to partake of the Lord's supper, even though we have no explicit biblical example of it, they are right to baptise infants even though, as they admit, there is no biblical example of it. See, for instance, Calvin: *Institutes* Vol.2 p534. Two things are wrong with this argument. The qualification for partaking of the supper is that the person should be converted, baptised and in fellowship with the church in question. We know that women were converted, baptised and made church members in the New Testament – to cite references would be superfluous. Naturally, therefore, these women took part in the supper – as they did in the prayer meetings, discipline meetings; indeed, in the entire range of church activity. This is the first point. The second is to note the infant baptiser's huge leap of logic – the massive assumption – without any biblical warrant or example – simply to assume that children were baptised. There is no parallel at all with women. Finally, the question I raised above still stands. On the infant-baptiser's argument of silence, why do they not allow – glory in, indeed – allowing infants to break bread? Why are so many of them reticent to follow their own logic? They glory in the baptism of infants, and rebuke Baptists for their denial of it to infants – why not go the whole hog and do the same for the supper? After all, these baptised infants are church members!

Andrew Fuller: 'If persons are admitted to baptism without any profession of personal religion, or upon the profession of others on their behalf, their admission to the Lord's supper will in most cases follow as a matter of course. Indeed, it *ought* to follow... Neither Scripture nor the practice of the [New Testament] churches affords a single example of a baptised person, unless his conduct was grossly immoral, being ineligible to communion'. Again, replying to an infant baptiser: 'That the plea for infant communion is equally valid with that of infant baptism, you will not expect me to dispute. If I could be convinced of the one, I see no reason why I should scruple at the other'. The infant baptiser must 'point out the grounds for admitting the former while he rejects the latter'. As for 'households', Fuller asked why the infant baptiser did not '*prove* that some of them at least were infants? If he could have done this, all his other arguments might have been spared'. Dealing with Acts 16:31, Fuller quite rightly remarked that Paul was saying that 'if [the jailer] and his house believed, they should all be saved'. As for passages such as Eph. 6:1-4, Fuller observed that they were 'addressed not to ministers or churches, but to parents. Nor is there... in all that is written in the apostolic letters, to parents or children, a word which implies the latter to have [been] church members' (Fuller: *Practical* p729; *Essays* pp852-853, emphasis his).

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when circumcision was under discussion, and was proving so thorny an issue, did nobody state the obvious – ‘baptism has replaced circumcision’? Why the silence? It would have solved the problem at once, but nobody said it. Why not? Because it is not true; baptism has not replaced circumcision.

The truth is, the New Testament is not silent on the issue of infant baptism without reason. Since, in the New Testament, there is a great deal of evidence for the change of the covenant, and the spirituality of the new covenant, the fact that there is no explicit command not to baptise infants is not a weakness in the Baptist position at all. With the change of covenant, the old system based on physical descent was abolished. I have supplied plenty of evidence. The silence which ensued indicates that the baptism of infants was never even thought of in the New Testament. Nobody dreamed of it. That is why they were silent about it. Infant baptism was only thought about after the age of the apostles, when it was invented by the Fathers. Of course the New Testament writers said nothing about it! Just as they said nothing about the motor car. It never crossed their mind. Why not? Because it hadn’t been invented!

Warfield admitted that the earliest testimony for infant baptism is that of the Fathers, and that this is always linked with baptismal regeneration. Understandably Warfield squirmed; he but feebly addressed the vile and evil error of baptismal regeneration, yet clung to the Fathers’ ‘testimony to the prevalence of infant baptism in their day’, grasping at the straw. Reader, the historical truism is not denied. Among many other errors, infant baptism was invented by the Fathers, yes. Even so, as I have noted, it was not for some time. But listen to Warfield’s obvious anxiety as he was forced to own the weakness of his position: ‘We admit that their day is not the apostles’ day. We could well wish that we had earlier witness’.¹³ Yes, but it is not only an earlier witness which is ‘wished for’. A biblical, a New Testament, witness, an apostolic witness is *required!* And *that*, infant baptisers do not have! Although they claim that the New Testament silence is a powerful argument in their favour, nothing could be further from the truth. Furthermore, it does not appear that they are quite as convinced as they would like others to believe. Warfield admitted that he would

¹³ Warfield p402. Yet again, what now of the Regulative Principle?

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have been glad of apostolic testimony for the practice of infant baptism! There is no doubt about it – he would have preferred apostolic warrant to apostolic silence! But he didn't have it!