

Infant Baptism: Three Common Mistakes

As I closed the previous chapter, I said that before we explore the theory and practice of infant baptism, some cautionary remarks are necessary. For a start, the dispute over infant baptism does not concern merely the age of a person to be baptised. No, the controversy is not over *adult* baptism as against *infant* baptism. That is to trivialise the debate. It is *believer's* baptism as against all other sorts of baptism.¹ Having made that important point, I now move on to look at three common but fundamental mistakes in dealing with infant baptism.

1. It is wrong to dismiss the practice of infant baptism on the grounds that it is 'Old Testament teaching'

It is true that infant baptisers make a great deal of the Old Testament in one way or another in the presentation of their case, and they do mistakenly rely heavily on the Old Testament rite of circumcision.²

¹ Believer's baptism is in fact a tautology, if we are talking in New Testament terms. Only believers were baptised in those days. A baptised unbeliever (Simon in Acts 8, for instance) got short shrift when discovered. The qualifying adjective is needed only because of the invention and predominance of infant baptism. 'Infant baptism took over from believer's baptism', with dreadful consequences for the history of the ordinance (see Wright's entire book, not least its title). What is more, there is a good case for the disuse of 'infant baptism' – except for serious Latinists – and calling it by its proper name, 'baby baptism'. But, for its advocates, as Wright said, the former 'retains a certain gravity', whereas the latter 'seems disrespectful, even flippant' (Wright: *What...?* pp35,47). So it does, but it is the truth, all the same.

² In the 1640s, at the Westminster Assembly, Lord Say 'complained that it was not very helpful to take their examples for the church (as the divines often did) from the Old Testament' (Paul p236). Quite right, too! However, it has taken a long time, it seems, for such a self-evident comment to sink in, but I am pleased to record that Wright could properly speak with approval of infant baptisers who are now 'taking with greater seriousness the New Testament, rather than the Old Testament, in considering a theology of baptism, since traditional defences of infant baptism have leaned heavily on the [so-called] parallel with circumcision' (Wright: *What...?* p15). I will return to the misuse

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Having said that, it is too easy – and it is totally wrong – to dismiss their arguments as ‘merely Old Testament teaching’. It is a terrible error to dismiss the Old Testament. In this book I say some strong things about its misuse, and the misguided application of it to church life, but this must not be taken to mean that I dismiss the Old Testament itself. Let me say it – and say it loud and clear – the Old Testament is a part of the infallible word of God, and it must be treated as such. However, there are substantial differences between the two Testaments, and it is vital to give these their proper weight.³ Nevertheless, this must never degenerate into dismissing the Old Testament. It is sometimes done, and it is wrong.

2. It is also wrong to regard every reference to baptism in the Bible as meaning water baptism

It is not so. In some passages of Scripture, the baptism involved cannot possibly refer to water baptism.⁴ Baptists sometimes – perhaps frequently – mistakenly take these particular verses as referring to water baptism, and then qualify the biblical statements by introducing the idea of faith and/or ‘representation’.⁵ This is wrong. The truth is,

of the Levitical order. In passing, I note infant baptisers feel the need to ‘defend’ their practice. As one who baptises believers only, I have no sense that I need to ‘defend’ my practice. Spurgeon saw no need to defend the Bible any more than he would a lion. Open the cage and let it out! Believer’s baptism is written plainly upon the pages of the New Testament. Evidently, as infant baptisers themselves admit (I will provide plenty of evidence), the same cannot be said for infant baptism.

³ I will go more fully into the continuity/discontinuity debate in my forthcoming book on the law. The continuity/discontinuity question is vital; it is *the* doctrinal issue which must be settled right from the start. A mistake here casts a long shadow, as we shall see.

⁴ Indeed, I think the only major passage in Paul’s letters (and the major only passage in the letters as a whole) which does refer to water baptism is 1 Cor. 1:13-17. I will argue my case as we go on.

⁵ Both Reformed and Baptist confuse water and spiritual baptism. See, for instance, John H. Armstrong, Thomas J. Nettles and Richard L. Pratt in John H. Armstrong pp16-18,31-33,36-38,60-61,80-81. Take one example from Nettles. He claimed that in 1 Pet. 3:21 the apostle says: ‘Baptism represents the confident reliance on the judgement Christ took for us, which judgement

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the Bible speaks of both water baptism and spiritual baptism. These must always be distinguished. The New Testament does, and in no uncertain terms. I must spend just a little time on the differences between the two.

One baptism is a physical act to do with water; the other is at least regeneration by the Holy Spirit, a baptism which unites the person to Christ (1 Cor. 12:13; 1 Pet. 3:21).⁶ In Matthew 3:11, Mark 1:7-8, Luke 3:16 and John 1:33, a clear distinction is drawn between these two baptisms.⁷ John baptised with water; Jesus baptises with the Holy

becomes our salvation' (John H. Armstrong p38). With respect, Peter does not. He speaks of a baptism 'which now saves us', not which *represents* our salvation. I will have more to say on the verse, but the question – 'Which baptism is he talking about?' – is always *the* question. Always!

Those who do introduce water baptism where it has no place have also to introduce qualifiers or glosses to avoid disastrous consequences. Take, for instance, Hendriksen on: 'As many of you as were baptised into Christ have put on Christ' (Gal. 3:27; see also Rom. 6:3). Paul does *not* mean that all who, in addition to being baptised in water, have been truly baptised by the Spirit into Christ, have put on Christ. Not at all. As I have said, water baptism is not in the verse or context. What is more, there is not a hint or a qualification in Paul's statement. 'All who are regenerate have put on Christ'. This is what he said and this is what he meant. But note Hendriksen's glosses: 'All those... who by means of their baptism [water baptism, he meant] have truly laid aside, in principle, their garment of sin, and have truly been decked with the robe of Christ's righteousness, having thus been buried with him and raised with him, have put on Christ... In Christ they have risen to newness of life. They have become united with him... And this, let it be stressed once again, is true of them all' (Hendriksen: *Galatians* p149). Note the 'have truly laid aside, in principle... have truly been'. I have no quarrel with the sentiment these words express – if we are talking about inward experience judged by outward profession. *But that is not what Paul is talking about in Gal. 3:27.* Hendriksen had to introduce the glosses because he wrongly brought in the idea of water. This must always be the case – unless those who bring in water baptism are prepared to live with the consequences and say that all who are so baptised are united to Christ – which some do!

⁶ See my book on Baptist sacramentalism for the development of 'at least'.

⁷ Contrary to Calvin: 'John... did not mean to distinguish the one baptism from the other'. But he did. As Calvin immediately went on: 'But [John] contrasted his own person with the person of Christ, saying, that while he was a minister of water, Christ was the giver of the Holy Spirit... The apostles... and... those who baptise in the present day... are only ministers of the external sign,

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Spirit. Both men were baptisers, but they baptised in different realms. Furthermore Jesus is still baptising to this very day, something which is not always appreciated. A comparison – even a contrast – is drawn between John the Baptist and Jesus Christ as to their persons (John 1:19-28; 3:26-36). One was a great prophet; the other is the Son of God. And there is a corresponding contrast drawn between their baptisms. This contrast is not between two water baptisms, but between two baptisms in two totally different realms – baptism in water and baptism in the Spirit. ‘John truly baptised with water, but you shall be baptised with the Holy Spirit not many days from now’ (Acts 1:5). I repeat, these two baptisms (water baptism and Spirit baptism) must be carefully distinguished. Infant baptisers, as well as Baptists, can confuse them, with disastrous results. I will produce the evidence.⁸

Observe this also: It is Christ who baptises with the Holy Spirit. As just noted, Christ is still a baptiser, and this fact must be given its full weight; he does not delegate it to others. He does not use his ministers (let alone priests) to baptise with the Spirit. Nor does he use his ministers to baptise with water and thereby baptise with the Spirit. No! Jesus himself baptises with the Spirit. Now, Papists believe that when a priest sprinkles an infant, Christ is baptising the infant with the Holy Spirit through and by the ministrations of the priest. And we shall see that Reformed infant-baptisers get dangerously close to saying

whereas Christ is the author of internal grace’ (Calvin: *Institutes* Vol.2 p517). In other words, John *did* contrast the two baptisms. If Calvin’s words here are not self-contradictory, I don’t know what is. Whenever John’s words are quoted in the New Testament, the contrast between the two baptisms is always made (Matt. 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:26; Acts 1:5; 11:16).

⁸ For now, see Wright: *What...?* pp83-102. Steve Wilkins: ‘The Bible teaches us that [water] baptism unites us to Christ and his body by the power of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:13). Baptism is an act of God (through his ministers) which signifies and seals our initiation into the triune communion (we are baptised *into the name* of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). At baptism we are clothed with Christ, united to him and to his church which is his body (Gal. 3:26-28)’ (Wilkins: ‘Covenant’ p55, emphasis his). This is a modern statement. I will provide plenty of evidence to show that Calvin and many others have said the same or similar. And many are still saying it. I will also return to 1 Cor. 12:13.

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something similar.⁹ Reader, before you throw my book down in disgust at that statement, I ask you to read on. I produce evidence for what I assert. But whoever says it and for whatever motive, I contend that when men say that Christ baptises with his Spirit as ministers baptise with water, they are grievously in error. Jesus is the only minister who baptises with the Spirit, and he does not delegate this work to any man. He does it himself; he does it directly. Who regenerates and renews by the Holy Spirit? Is it ministers? No! it is not. Is it Christ through ministers? No! It is ‘*God* our Saviour... according to his mercy *he* saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, whom *he* poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Saviour’ (Tit. 3:4-6). God our Saviour baptises with the Spirit through Jesus Christ. God does not do it through his ministers by water baptism. It is Christ who does the work, he is the minister who spiritually baptises.

What is more, water baptism is not only different to spiritual baptism, the one has no cause-effect connection with the other – none whatsoever. ‘Ah’, says an objector, ‘but what about those verses which speak of water or washing?’ Now it is true that water or washing is mentioned in John 3:5, 1 Corinthians 6:11, Ephesians 5:26, Titus 3:4-6 and Hebrews 10:22, for instance, but this does not refer to water baptism; the water, the washing, is figurative, in exactly the same way as the fire in Matthew 3:11 is figurative – ‘he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire’. Just because water is mentioned, we must not leap to the conclusion that we are talking about baptism. Those who think the water is literal, must be consistent and in addition to sprinkling infants they should roast them! But the water and the fire are both figurative; they are figures of the purifying, cleansing, renewing power of the Spirit of God in regeneration,¹⁰ in which he

⁹ Why is it that although ‘the Protestant Reformers had their quarrels with the Roman Catholic Church over the import and minor aspects of the practice of infant baptism... these were scarcely comparable in magnitude to their polemic against the Mass as a wholesale perversion of Christ’s supper’ (Wright: *What...?* p3)? And why, on baptism, are many of the Reformed so close to Rome today?

¹⁰ Not excluding, of course, those repeated cleansings necessary in all our approaches to God.

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gives a new, clean heart (Ps. 51:10; Ezek. 18:31; 36:25-27; Mal. 3:1-3; Heb. 10:22), nothing to do with water baptism.¹¹

¹¹ Take John 3:5. ‘Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God’. Continuing what I say above about the difference between water baptism and Spirit baptism, and that just because water or washing is mentioned in a text, it does not mean that we are talking about baptism. Note, as Robert Anderson observed, in John 3:5, Christ did not say a man has to be born of water and be born of the Spirit. Christ was not speaking of two births or two baptisms, one baptism by water and the other baptism by the Spirit. In other words, the truths I set out above have little or no relevance to John 3:5. Christ was speaking of only one baptism – baptism by the Spirit – and one birth – new birth by the Spirit, contrasting it with the old birth by the flesh, the baptism by the Spirit and regeneration by the Spirit being one and the same thing. See Anderson p222. Although water is in the passage, it does not refer to water baptism. Consequently, John 3:5 fails to establish sacramental baptism, simply because the verse does not speak of water baptism in the first place.

But, of course, Christ did bring water into the discussion. Now, whatever the water speaks of, unless he has experienced the washing it speaks of, no one will enter the kingdom; he will not be saved. Consequently, if the sacramentalist still wants to insist that the water refers to baptism, then no unbaptised person can be regenerated and saved; in particular, the thief on the cross. Rome ridiculously argues that he was baptised – by the spurting blood of Christ! Such an argument proves the paucity of the case. (See Beasley-Murray: *Baptism Today and Tomorrow* p40 for his extract from H.J.Wotherspoon on martyrdom being the spiritual equivalent of baptism). Now who will say that no one can be saved without baptism? In asking this, I am not minimising baptism, but circumstances can easily be envisaged where someone is converted, and baptism is simply not possible. The fact is, the water in John 3:5 does *not* speak of baptism. If it does, as Calvin said: ‘Then... by baptism we enter into the kingdom of God, because in baptism we are regenerated by the Spirit of God. Hence arose the belief of the absolute necessity of baptism, in order to the hope of eternal life... But it is absurd to speak of the hope of salvation as confined to the sign. So far as relates to this passage, I cannot bring myself to believe that Christ speaks of baptism... “Water” or “fire” [express the Spirit’s] power... By “water”... is meant nothing more than the inward purification and invigoration which is produced by the Holy Spirit’ (Calvin: *Commentaries* Vol.17 Part 2 pp110-111). See Newton p27.

Moreover, if John 3:5 does teach that water baptism regenerates, when an adult is baptised (to regenerate him), is he willing or unwilling? If he is willing, how does he (an unregenerate man) have the will to be baptised in

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To return to the main point: There are two baptisms, which must be differentiated. Peter, when he dealt with Cornelius, distinguished the two baptisms – by the Spirit and by water; he only thought of water baptism *after* the people had been spiritually baptised and the evidences of it were clearly visible (Acts 10:44-48). Peter later explained that when he saw these evidences which demonstrated that his hearers had been spiritually baptised, then he ‘remembered the word of the Lord’ that ‘John indeed baptised you with water, but you shall be baptised with the Holy Spirit’ (Acts 11:15-16). As Peter said: ‘God gave them the same gift’ (Acts 11:17). Notice that – God gave the gift. They were spiritually baptised by God *directly*; it did not involve water at the hands of a minister. God baptised the people with the Spirit, he gave them the gift of the Spirit – and he did so directly, without water. Likewise it was Christ, said Peter, who had poured out the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2:33) with no reference to water baptism.

Water baptism is a symbol of spiritual baptism, yes, but the two are clearly differentiated in Scripture. We know that water baptism is a baptism which is to take place at (after) conversion; in other words, leaving aside the extraordinary circumstances of the apostolic era, in New Testament terms water baptism takes place only and always after a person has been baptised with the Holy Spirit. It is true that in one or two verses spiritual and water baptism appear to be telescoped together – as in Acts 2:38 and 22:16 – but even in those verses there is no warrant to think that the water baptism produced the spiritual baptism, or that the two were identical.¹² The New Testament makes a clear distinction between the two. This distinction must not be blurred. To do so is to make a great mistake, with massive consequences. But it is done.¹³

order to be regenerated? A spiritual will can be found only in one who is regenerate (1 Cor. 2:14), surely?

¹² See end note on p33 for excursus: ‘Water baptism in Acts’.

¹³ The baptism of Rom. 6:1-11, for instance, is spiritual baptism. See Lloyd-Jones: *Romans 6* pp29-147. Paul does not here call baptism *a picture of or a symbol of* union with Christ; he says that baptism *unites* to Christ. Evangelicals who argue that Paul is speaking of water baptism, have to fight tooth and nail to avoid baptismal regeneration. But they fight in vain; *if* Paul was speaking of water baptism, he *was* teaching baptismal regeneration. The

Nor must it be forgotten, the concept of washing, cleansing and sprinkling is common in the New Testament (John 13:8; 15:3; Acts 18:6; 2 Cor. 7:1; Heb. 12:24; Jas. 4:8; 1 Pet. 1:2; 1 John 1:7,9; Rev 1:5; 7:14), without any suggestion of baptism. All the references are figurative. All!

3. It is also wrong to regard every biblical reference to circumcision as meaning the physical rite in the flesh

This cannot be right.¹⁴ After all, there is the circumcision of the heart, for example (Deut. 10:16; 30:6; Rom. 2:29), and this does not mean open-heart surgery! While there is a physical circumcision ‘made in the flesh by hands’ (Eph. 2:11), ‘outward in the flesh’ (Rom. 2:28), there is also a spiritual circumcision which is regeneration by the Holy Spirit (Col. 2:11), ‘of the heart, in the Spirit’ (Rom. 2:29). These two circumcisions, like the two baptisms, must always be distinguished. Christ is the only one who can spiritually circumcise. Only he can circumcise ‘without hands, by [better, in] putting off the body of the

fact is, however, he was speaking of spiritual baptism – regeneration by the Spirit of God. Wright, it appears, taking the baptism as water baptism, did not fight against the logical conclusion of regeneration in that baptism (Wright: *What...?* pp88-102). Unfortunately, despite the above, Lloyd-Jones was obscure (or worse): ‘The sacraments are not only signs, but are also seals of grace. They confirm the grace that we have already received. Yes, but shall we go further? They even *exhibit* it... in a sense they *convey* it’. Citing Acts 2:37-38; 22:16; Rom. 6:3-6; 1 Cor. 6:11; 12:13; Gal. 3:27; Col. 2:12; Tit. 3:5; 1 Pet. 3:21, he said: ‘In baptism’ – and he meant water baptism – ‘in baptism we are cleansed from the guilt of sin... “washing” does partly refer to baptism... it puts us into this position of union’, but went on to distance himself from baptismal regeneration. However, more clarity than this is wanted. As he himself said: ‘Care is needed’ (Lloyd-Jones: *The Church* pp30,37-39, emphasis his). Sadly, he failed to show enough of it here. Because of their importance, I will return to these verses, and Lloyd-Jones’ comments. I agree with John H. Armstrong: ‘How we understand the biblical-theological argument of texts such as Rom. 6:3-4; Col. 2:11-12; Gal. 3:26-29, will ultimately determine how we relate to a host of other questions regarding baptism’ (John H. Armstrong p163).

¹⁴ ‘Circumcision... is [sometimes] spiritualised as rebirth’ (Wright: ‘Children’ p29).

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sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ' (Col. 2:11).¹⁵ It is a great mistake not to differentiate between physical and spiritual circumcision.

In both cases, baptism and circumcision, if the physical and spiritual are confused, the most appalling price will have to be paid. Yet this is done very frequently – especially by infant baptisers.

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So much for my cautionary remarks of introduction to the subject. I now move on briefly to account for the rise of infant baptism, and what it has led to.

¹⁵ 'In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the flesh, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ' (NIV).