

Consequence 2

Three Testimonies

The three testimonies I have chosen to illustrate the points I have been making are: The experience of the New England churches in the 17th century,¹ and the published accounts of the experiences of Jonathan Edwards and D.Martyn Lloyd-Jones. In other words, examples from the 17th, 18th and 20th centuries. Although, in passing, I have mentioned some of these records, and quoted from them, I now return to them in a little more detail in order to underscore the grievous consequences of infant baptism.

The New England churches of the 17th century

I have already referred to men such as John Cotton and Thomas Shepard, and their defences of infant baptism and justification of non-regenerate church membership. But if I left it there I would give an entirely false impression. The New England Puritan settlers did not start out with such views. Far from it! Let me go back to the beginning. Their experience is particularly relevant to any today who are thinking of taking up infant baptism, and yet hope to avoid its nasty side-effects. It should serve as a salutary warning.

In the 1630s, the settlers were determined to set up pure churches in their new land; they had had more than enough of the mixed churches in England.² On reaching the New World, they rightly

¹ In what follows, when I speak of the churches of New England, I am thinking in the main of the churches in the Bay. I exclude the two outer wings; that is, I exclude not only the Baptists banished to Rhode Island (which goes without saying), but the churches at Plymouth which were more lax over church membership than those in the Bay (see Middlekauff pp48-49). In addition to the references below, see Bauckham.

² By 'mixed churches', I mean so-called 'visible' churches, knowingly comprised of believers and unbelievers, this mixture being regarded as acceptable, even right and advantageous. I fully accept, as I have explained, that those who insist on a totally regenerate membership do not always attain

Consequence 2: Three Testimonies

demanded marks of regeneration in prospective church members. They would only receive those who were, in their terms, visible saints; that is, those who could give good evidence of an experience of saving grace and a life consistent with that profession; any who later proved hypocrites were to be removed. Shepard, for instance, though he admitted ‘that there is and will be a mixture of close hypocrites with the wise-hearted virgins in the purest churches’, nevertheless was clear. He urged ‘all the churches of the Lord Jesus, here planted in these western parts of the world, to maintain your church chastity and virginity; you have a name of it abroad, pure, chaste, virgin churches, not polluted with the mixtures of men’s inventions, not defiled with the company of evil men; pure ordinances, pure people, pure churches... Look you maintain it’. But he had a warning: ‘Few churches retain their purity long... In the last days, carnal security either is, or will be, the universal sign of virgin churches... This is the temper [spirit, state] of the body [bulk] of the churches’. Even so, this did not mean the New England churches should accept it. He spoke of ‘that diligent and narrow search and trial, churches here do, or should, make of all those whom they receive to be fellow-members with them... None have [a] right to Christ and his ordinances but such as shall have communion with Christ at his coming to judge the world; hence, if we could be so eagle-eyed as to discern them now that are hypocrites, we should exclude them now; as Christ will [when he comes], because they have no right [to be members]; but [although] that we cannot do [that is, we cannot find every hypocrite]... Yet let the churches learn from this to do what they can for the Lord now’. For the fact is, ‘the ruin of a church may be the letting in of... one ill member’.

it – but they deplore the fact, and do all they can to put it right. Not all the churches in Old England were mixed – the Anabaptists, for instance – but, it goes without saying, the would-be settlers, while still in Old England would never have dreamed of touching them or their ilk with a barge-pole! Once in New England, however, they wanted to form *infant-baptising* churches composed only of those who were regenerate. They had had more than they could take of ‘mixed churches’. *This* is what I am referring to. See the note on Perkins and Preston at the close of the previous chapter.

Consequence 2: Three Testimonies

‘One man or woman secretly vile, which the church has not used all means to discover [uncover, expose], may defile a whole church’.³

So far, excellent. But these Puritans, for all their desire for pure churches, established a built-in contradiction right at the start; they baptised babies, accepting them as members!⁴ Of course, in their zeal for purity,⁵ they would baptise only babies born to church members; they had had more than enough of that promiscuous infant baptism they had left behind in Old England!⁶ Naturally, since they had large families, many baptisms followed, and thus the churches grew. True, these baptised infants, although church members, were barred from the supper until they gave evidence of a saving experience for themselves; even so, they were members.

But time has a habit of passing. Men and women grow old and die, even the godly. Baptised babies who are church members grow up, and, whether or not they prove to be elect, in turn they marry and have children. Thus, grandchildren were born to the original settlers in New England; in their turn, they had children; and so on. Now it is a sad but undeniable fact – whatever claims men make about the covenant and infant baptism – not all who are baptised as infants prove to be elect when they reach adulthood. So it turned out in New England. However

³ Shepard pp32,78,144,241; Morgan p114. Shepard preached *The Ten Virgins* from 1636 to 1640. The dates, I remind you, reader, are all-important.

⁴ It was (and is), as I have explained, more complicated than that. Richard Mather: ‘We do not believe that baptism makes men [babies] members of the church, nor that it is to be administered to them that are outside the church, as the way and means to bring them in, but to them that are within the church, as a seal to confirm the covenant of God unto them’ (Perry Miller p87; but see Middlekauff p75).

⁵ I do not intend any note of scorn. I think I have made it clear that I am a stickler for pure churches myself.

⁶ The Presbyterians in Old England who, if they had gained power, would have baptised babies virtually indiscriminately, were shocked by the (initial – see below) exclusiveness of their friends across the ocean. In New England, Hooker felt the force of their arguments, and would have liked to have baptised more widely, but could not break free from the covenant theology in which he was trapped. See Perry Miller pp84,87,89; Morgan pp119-120. As for Old England, in the Westminster debates, as Edmund Calamy reported, ‘many of the Assembly’ showed their hand when it was reported that they ‘will baptise the children of those they will not admit [to the Lord’s supper]’ (Paul p439).

Consequence 2: Three Testimonies

pure the original church, however sound and powerful the preaching and teaching, however rigorous the catechising, however strongly the parents pressed upon the growing children the profession they had ‘made’ as babies at the font, not all baptised babies came to saving faith in adulthood; no, not even in New England in the days of Thomas Hooker, John Cotton and Thomas Shepard!

The question was as I have spelled out: what to do with them? In particular, what to do with *their* children? After all, the young adults in question had been baptised as infants and become church members, but now, when they were having children, they themselves could not give evidence of saving grace; therefore, they were barred from the supper. But what about their babies? Should they be baptised and become church members? Indeed, should the unregenerate adults be allowed to remain as church members? If not, when should they be expelled? Were they, after all, in the covenant? And what about their infants? If the parents were expelled, should the babies still be baptised, or expelled? Were they in the covenant, or what? And what now of the teaching they all had received and imbibed – concerning the purity of the church and its maintenance? To keep a pure church, expulsion ought to take place. But when, and who, and on what grounds?⁷

The second generation of New Englanders were forced to wrestle with such problems. Morgan:

Given both infant baptism and the restriction [broadening!] of church membership to visible saints, it was impossible for the Puritans, either to evade the questions..., or to answer them without an elaborate casuistry that bred dissatisfaction and disagreement. The history of the New England churches during the 17th and 18th centuries was in large measure a history of these dissatisfactions and disagreements.⁸

⁷ The trouble arose because promises made to Abraham and the nation of Israel were applied to the church. The churches of New England were not nations; they certainly were not the nation of Israel. In Israel, a circumcised boy was an Israelite – whether he was good or bad – he was an Israelite. The folly of infant baptism and the covenant is to say a baptised baby is regenerate, or will be, or to work on that basis.

⁸ Morgan pp128-129. Perry Miller, speaking of the way the Presbyterians in England viewed the goings-on in New England: ‘The system pretended to admit none but saints... but if they retained the children and grandchildren, will they not have to embrace the doctrine of “baptismal regeneration”? And if

Consequence 2: Three Testimonies

The New Englanders needed to sort it out, but failed to do so. True, the Cambridge Platform of 1648 properly denied the idea that the citizens of a parish are church members – quite right! It is unscriptural.⁹ But that synod, although it had been asked to deal with the issues raised above, left them unresolved, pretending there was no problem, and so abandoned the churches without a chart upon a rising sea. Most churches shut their eyes to the predicament, allowed the non-regenerate adults to remain as members, and baptised their babies. The problem was compounded in 1657 when some Connecticut churches relaxed their stress on purity of membership, and recognised the parish churches of England as true churches, saying that members of such churches, ‘coming into New England, had a right to all church privileges, though they made no profession of a work of faith and holiness upon their hearts’. Meanwhile, their home-grown problem did not go away; rather, it naturally increased.¹⁰

It could not go on; it had to be resolved; and, at last, it ‘was’. In 1662, the New England synod declared that parents could have their infants baptised even though they themselves were unconverted – as long as they themselves had been baptised as infants, were not scandalously wicked, and were prepared to assent to certain statements of fact they were supposed to have believed when they were babies. These parents were to be regarded as church members – but without full rights, of course. It was nothing but a fudge; the membership

they cut them off, will they not have to acknowledge that saints do not persevere...? New England had walked into a trap [of its own making]; could it get out?’ (Perry Miller p89). For Samuel Rutherford’s sneer, see Perry Miller p78. I give credit, of course, to these misguided Puritans for trying to discipline. What a contrast to the foolish notion – not unheard of today – based on a misguided interpretation of Matt. 7:1 – that it is wrong to ‘judge’ in this matter. But I am commenting on the folly of trying to discipline so-called ‘*visible*’ saints according to biblical principles set out for true believers. It is a mistake – it is impossible – to apply spiritual principles to carnal men. My advice for those who are tempted to repeat the mistake is: When in a hole, stop digging!

⁹ It comes from Constantine.

¹⁰ Let me state the obvious: The numbers produced by natural generation can never be fewer than the numbers produced by spiritual regeneration.

Consequence 2: Three Testimonies

afforded to these parents was a kind of half-way membership – and came to be known as the half-way covenant, mentioned earlier.¹¹

This fudge having been adopted – not without some disagreement – much work was now done by the theologians to argue the case,¹² and to drum up evidence¹³ from the works of the founding fathers (many of whom had by this time died) to ‘prove’ that they would have supported such a resolution. But this, of course, involved a 180 degree shift!¹⁴ The now-dead Shepard, as I quoted a moment ago, had once strongly argued for the removal of hypocrites. Now another manuscript of his was dug out and published – to argue the contrary! This is the work I quoted previously – to show that despite all Shepard had said at an earlier time – when the churches were starting out on their course – he had later argued that a true church could have ‘many chaffy hypocrites and often profane persons’, and that this was no bad thing, he thought; good could come of it. I have also quoted Cotton to the same effect.

The controversy over the half-way covenant was ‘ended’ by Increase Mather’s change of mind – he was at first against it, but in 1675 produced, in addition to a work of his own, manuscripts from the founders, including his father and father-in-law (Richard Mather and

¹¹ See end note on p298 for excursus: ‘Tortuous times under the half-way covenant’.

¹² But, as I have already observed, theologians will always provide the theology (or at least some logic or formula) required to ‘justify’ the practice. The logic in this case, however, as always with infant baptism, was mind-boggling. Consider the following. On the question of applying ‘the seal of baptism’ to babies of parents who were unfit for the supper, one of the ‘solutions’ was to talk of *jus ad rem* (‘right to the thing’) as opposed to *jus in re* (‘a right in the thing’)! (Cotton Mather p303). See also Cotton Mather pp304-305 for talk of an ‘explicit’ covenant and an ‘implicit’ covenant. I wonder how many parents at the time really comprehended the difference between *jus ad rem* and *jus in re*? I wonder how many of the growing children got it?

¹³ Which was not lacking. Naturally, with the passing of time (*the great test!*), the founders had themselves seen the warning signs – but, as I have noted, the dates must be watched.

¹⁴ This explains the glaring contradictions in the works of these New England teachers, some of which I have quoted. In their early days they were dogmatic for purity in the churches; later, they were all for compromise and tolerance of the unregenerate as members. The dates, as I keep repeating, are all-important in works of this period.

Consequence 2: Three Testimonies

John Cotton), to show that they too would have been half-way covenant men; indeed, that they all had anticipated some such scheme to get round the problem.¹⁵ The capitulation of such a large and important figure, gave the *οἱ πολλοί* (*hoi polloi*) all the sanction they needed to settle down, easy in conscience, to a life of respectable carnality, and still be church members and have their babies baptised. Naturally – literally so – they gratefully accepted Increase Mather’s pronouncement. The consequences for thousands will only be known at the day of judgement.

This invention was the only way the New England churches could ‘reconcile’ infant baptism and the attempt to preserve a godly church membership. But the fact is, churches – which started out by wanting at all costs to have a pure membership – after about twenty years, found themselves stocked with an increasing number of hypocrites and non-regenerate members, and having to agree that this was right!

¹⁵ For the part played by Increase Mather, see Middlekauff pp85-86,113-138; Perry Miller pp94-109,227. Increase Mather wanted a pure church, and at the 1662 synod argued for the restriction of baptism to the babies of members in full communion. But five or six years later, he accepted the idea of the half-way covenant, because he felt he could still hold to church purity, and because he was forced to recognise that if the children of the unregenerate were not baptised, the churches would decline in membership. Increase had come to see one of the fundamental flaws in the practice of infant baptism. It is, so its advocates maintain, a seal. I have dealt with this. A seal of what? For the believer it is a seal, so it is said, of his initiation into Christ; for the child, it is a seal, so it is said, of what? Of his initiation into Christ, or into the *promise* of his initiation into Christ, or of the *desperate hope* of his initiation into Christ? These were the conundrums Increase Mather wrestled with in New England three centuries ago. But they need to be faced by infant baptisers today. Whichever solution is adopted, large consequences are inevitable for church life and beyond. The dates are significant. As I noted above, Increase’s father, Richard, dying in 1669, urged his son to baptise the infants of New England. As I asked: Was this promiscuous baptism?

When Increase Mather recognised that if there was any slowing in the rate of infant baptism then the churches would inevitably decline in numbers, he was facing up to the obvious – and the well-known. Oecolampadius, in 1527, trying to counter the Anabaptists: ‘If anyone no longer baptises children... then the number of visible Christians will immediately decline. That is a very important consideration’ (Friesen pp67-68). The love of numbers, and the justification of practices to keep them up, is not merely a *modern* god!

Consequence 2: Three Testimonies

Indeed, they found themselves baptising babies belonging to unbelieving members – who were members because of their own baptism as infants twenty or thirty years before – but who, if they had presented themselves for membership as an adult, would have been refused!¹⁶

The following generations, of course, felt little of such qualms. Being born under the system to parents who were inured to it, they themselves had been baptised as infants, grown up, married, had children, had them baptised... all the while being taught by prestigious ministers to think this was genuine Christianity. No wonder they were lulled into a carnal stupor, careless of their spiritual condition – but vehemently jealous of their church privileges and the social standing this gave them – sleep-walking into eternity.

I raise this episode as a clear warning to those who are setting out on the same course as the early settlers in New England. As I said at the start of this book, I am concerned that such people should look before they leap. For those who believe the New Testament demands a regenerate church membership – and only a regenerate membership – and yet are thinking of adopting infant baptism, I say this: It may seem a very easy matter to reconcile the two – *at the start*, where you are now. But take a glance twenty or thirty years down the road. By then the infants being baptised today will be producing their own children. What if those parents are not regenerate? Will they be church members? Will the church baptise their babies? Will *they* be members? Glance a further twenty or thirty years; your grandchildren will be bearing children. What then? The events in New England tell us of the

¹⁶ What now of the argument, based on 1 Cor. 7:14, that the baby is baptised because one of the parents is a believer? New England ended up baptising babies where neither parent was a believer! The Puritans of Old England attacked the whole affair, as might be expected. But both sets of Puritans vented their spite on the Anabaptists, the Puritans of New England being the more vitriolic. There seems to be a principle here. The Anabaptists wanted pure churches; the Puritans of New England wanted pure churches but had to live with, and try to justify, the failure of their system; the Puritans of Old England accepted mixed churches as the norm and right. The principle? The closer somebody gets to what he wants – but fails because of a systemic fault in his approach – the more critical he gets of those who more nearly get the desired result by using the right system. ‘Attack’, seems to be the watchword, rather than think about changing – jettisoning – the failed system.

Consequence 2: Three Testimonies

in-built contradiction between infant baptism and the striving after a regenerate church membership. Reader, you may feel it does work in your present circumstances. But the start of the process – and it is a process – is not the time to test the *effects* of infant baptism.¹⁷ You have to wait twenty, forty years and beyond. Are you prepared to contemplate your grandchildren in churches with many ‘chaffy hypocrite’ members, some of whom may well be elders and ministers? Are you content to think of them as ‘glass-eye-or-wooden leg ornaments and supports of the church’? Whatever you do, do not adopt Hezekiah’s policy.¹⁸ Hezekiah? Yes. Amazingly, Hezekiah was relieved that the disaster he was told of would come only after his time: ‘At least there will be peace and truth in my days’ (Isa. 39:8), he said. But what about the days – and not so far off, at that – when what you are doing now will lead inevitably¹⁹ to what I have described here?²⁰

¹⁷ Now is the time, of course, to test the *principles* of infant baptism, and to test them by Scripture. But the grievous *effects* of infant baptism will take *time* for them increasingly to impose themselves on *experience*. Which they will do.

¹⁸ Nor Pilate’s (Matt. 27:24). Pilate, of course, was working on a very different principle to Deut. 21:6-8.

¹⁹ Of course, in your case all the babies baptised now, and in every following generation, may be elect, and so will be regenerated. Or, it may be, the churches will expel the unregenerate – though how and whom and when has to be thought about long before the time arrives – and preserve a regenerate membership – and the people may accept perhaps many such expulsions without too much fuss, and without wanting their babies baptised. But these are large ‘hopes’. What if those who were once in the covenant do not accept that they are no longer? And what if they want their babies baptised? Which New Testament passage will you turn to in order to discover how the apostles dealt with this problem?

²⁰ ‘By confining church membership to those believers giving evidence of their conversions, the founders of New England had strongly endorsed experimental religion. After them, their sons had striven valiantly to maintain their fathers’ faith, yielding only to half-way membership when the people proved incapable of undergoing any but the most perfunctory religious experience. And the grandsons, addressing churches empty of believers, but full of hypocrites, felt themselves standing on the edge of the abyss as their generation spurned gracious experience in favour of carnal experience’ (Middlekauff p279). The Mathers illustrate the impasse. Richard Mather

Consequence 2: Three Testimonies

Things could only get worse in New England. And they did. Let us move on a couple of generations.

The testimony of Jonathan Edwards

In passing, I have referred to Edwards' difficulties at Northampton, New England, in the 1740s. He tried to bring the church away from the unscriptural position it had adopted down the years over its procedures for taking in members and administering the Lord's supper. Members were received without evidence of personal, saving faith; baptism when an infant, lack of scandal, and a measure of head knowledge of the Christian religion was considered sufficient. Thus the inevitable 'church within a Church' was established.

It was no new problem. By 1707, the aforementioned 'venerable Stoddard' had published his view that the non-sanctified could take the Lord's supper; two years later he declared that the table is open to those who 'be destitute of a saving work of God's Spirit on their hearts'.²¹ These downward steps, of course, ruined church life. From then on, the unconverted would have the say in the discipline of the church, including that of the converted members! Not only was this a spiritual impossibility, it confirmed many in their carnal ways, and contributed directly to their damnation. Naturally – as night follows day – the next step was to allow unconverted men into the ministry. Indeed, Stoddard argued that unconverted ministers could perform certain duties lawfully. As a result of all this:

The difference between the church and the world was vanishing away. Church discipline was neglected, and the growing laxness of morals was invading the churches. And yet never, perhaps, had the expectation of reaching heaven at last been more general, or more confident... The hold

started out all for purity but had to compromise. His son, Increase Mather, was against his father's change, but he too had to accept the compromise. And Cotton Mather criticised his father's (Increase's) resistance to his grandfather's (Richards's) change. For more on this history, see Perry Miller pp68-104; Morgan pp113-138; Middlekauff pp35-57,113-161,191-368; Cotton Mather pp276-315.

²¹ Stoddard and the Mathers (Increase and Cotton) were at daggers drawn over these matters, although a kind of peace was patched up. See Middlekauff pp115-138; Perry Miller pp226-289,467.