

## *Infant Baptism: An Introduction*

Where did infant baptism come from? Who started it? Very briefly, the details are as follows. The apostolic practice of baptising only believers<sup>1</sup> was soon corrupted by the Fathers.<sup>2</sup> What did the

---

<sup>1</sup> 'The universal baptising of babies... took place under Christendom and supplanted the practice of believer's baptism'; the Anabaptists were 'the first significant modern advocates of long-lost dimensions of New Testament baptism'; 'the norm of baptism is faith baptism... shorthand... for baptism on personal profession of faith... which is in good measure a summary [more, it is *the* summary, the only summary] of the New Testament witness to baptism'; 'baptism upon personal profession of faith is the most clearly attested [more, it is the *only*] pattern in the New Testament' (Wright: *What...?* vii, pp4,6,14,15,36). Bearing in mind Wright's standpoint, this testimony, albeit too cautious in places, cannot be ignored. See also Bradshaw pp101-115; Lane pp139-145; Tidball pp157,159. Lloyd-Jones put it more simply and directly: 'The teaching of the New Testament is that the people who are to be baptised are those who have already given evidence that they are regenerate; it is believers who are baptised in the New Testament' (Lloyd-Jones: *Romans* 6 p31). Yes, and only believers. 'I only have a right to be baptised because I am regenerate... Those who are to be baptised should be adult believers. I cannot see the case... for infant baptism' (Lloyd-Jones: *The Church* pp38,46). Sadly, Lloyd-Jones contradicted this clear-cut statement by what he said in the same context: 'In the New Testament there is no clear evidence that children were ever baptised. I cannot prove that they were not, but I am certain that there is no evidence that they were; it is inconclusive. The statements are such that you cannot make a dogmatic pronouncement' (Lloyd-Jones: *The Church* p41). I object to the 'clear'; as he himself recognised, there is no evidence at all that infants were baptised. What is more, since the unmistakeable teaching of the New Testament means that only believers can be baptised, a dogmatic statement can be made, and ought to be made.

James Bannerman admitted: 'An examination in detail of Scripture practice... will sufficiently bear out the conclusion... that at least a profession of faith is necessary as a prerequisite to the scriptural administration of the ordinance... The ordinance ought to be dispensed to those alone who "profess their faith in Christ, and their obedience to him"... That a profession of faith is required, both by the scriptural commission given to the apostles to baptise, and by the apostolic examples in this matter, on the part of the person to be baptised... there is no room for doubt'. The only way Bannerman could still argue for infant baptism, was to say this New Testament doctrine, practice and

## *Infant Baptism: An Introduction*

introduction of infant baptism lead to? It was not long before the Papists developed a full-blown doctrine of baptismal regeneration through the sprinkling of infants at the hands of a priest, so that these infants became members of the Catholic Church and, supposedly, members of Christ.<sup>3</sup> The Church of England preserved – and continues to hold<sup>4</sup> – this wicked notion of baptismal regeneration. ‘Seeing now... this child is regenerate, and grafted into the body of Christ’s Church’, are words in the Church of England *Book of Common Prayer*, words which are regularly repeated to this day over sprinkled infants who will prove that they are anything but regenerate.

And what about the Reformers? François Wendel’s testimony concerning Calvin, the prince of Reformed teachers, should not be forgotten:

Throughout [his] reasoning [on infant baptism in his *Institutes*], Calvin is following Bucer’s line of argument... Most probably... it was in reliance upon the patristic evidences adduced by Bucer... Since it was not possible for him [Calvin] to adduce a single New Testament passage containing a

---

‘language applies primarily to the ordinary case of adults, and not to the exceptional case of infants’ (Bannerman pp64-66,104-105). This is nothing but special pleading, begging the question. Primarily? Ordinary? Exceptional? Adult? We are talking about the New Testament doctrine and practice of baptism, about which there is no question of such qualifiers as ‘primarily, ordinary, exceptional or adult’. The New Testament knows only the baptism of believers. Full stop! So, although I am glad to be able to repeat Wright’s testimony of ‘the widespread and still spreading recognition’ by infant baptisers in recent years that ‘faith in Jesus Christ’ is ‘the norm... of Christian baptism, both in theology and in practice’ (Wright: ‘Christian’ p163), I baulk at ‘norm’ – if this is taken to mean ‘custom’ or ‘usual’; it is *the* practice in the New Testament, the *only* practice. Furthermore, I baulk also at Wright’s softening even of ‘norm’; namely, ‘the norm, in an appropriately qualified sense’.

<sup>2</sup> See end note on p43 for excursus: ‘History of infant baptism’.

<sup>3</sup> See Wright: *What...?* for the most damning account of the history of infant baptism I know, and that in short compass. Tidball, speaking of Wright’s book: ‘At long last a responsible scholar outside the Baptist tradition has had the courage to say what many have thought: “When it comes to infant baptism, the Emperor has no clothes”’ (Tidball p157).

<sup>4</sup> Though changes in the ritual are afoot, the situation is still ‘bizarre’, and ‘perpetuates... incongruity’. Other Churches are changing, too, sometimes for the oddest reason or ‘strange notion’ (Wright: *What...?* pp57-62).

clear allusion to infant baptism, he had to be content with indirect inferences and analogies drawn from circumcision and Christ's blessing of the children. Calvin has been much reproached for the weakness of this reasoning... and he himself seems to have been aware of the defects of his exegesis upon this point. He was debarred, however, from using any other, from the moment when he undertook to defend, on scriptural grounds, an institution of later date than the New Testament writings, and to [try to] justify an ecclesiastical tradition after having proclaimed that all tradition, to be valid, must be based upon certain scriptural proof... [If he had taken his own medicine, it] would have enabled him to come to the [right] conclusion... frankly acknowledging that one cannot find an acceptable basis for it [infant baptism] in the Scriptures.<sup>5</sup>

Things did not get any better. The Reformers, *including the men at Westminster*, not only kept the practice of infant baptism by sprinkling, but made statements which, as I shall show, get very close to baptismal regeneration. Indeed, they taught it.<sup>6</sup> It stands today in the Westminster Confession.<sup>7</sup>

Infant baptism – is it easy to explain and understand? Certainly not! Indeed, at this point, I must offer an apology. I am truly sorry this book is as complicated as it is.<sup>8</sup> I try to write in a way which is easy to understand, but this time I am bound to fail to a certain extent. I have to wrestle with involved arguments and complex reasonings. Why? It is inevitable; and the responsibility for it lies at the door of infant baptisers. The truth is, some of their defences of infant baptism are tortuous, and their invented concepts are very difficult for non-experts

---

<sup>5</sup> Wendel pp326,328-329. While I will have more to say on some of these themes, see end note on p44 for excursus: 'The leading Reformers and baptism'.

<sup>6</sup> See end note on p48 for excursus: 'The Reformed, their Confessions, and baptismal regeneration'.

<sup>7</sup> See end note on p51 for excursus: 'The Reformed, their Confessions, and the weight they place on them in defending infant baptism'.

<sup>8</sup> Castelein: 'Reformed and Presbyterian theologies approach baptism and salvation within the framework of an incredibly complex system of Calvinistic theological beliefs [that is, their own invented covenant theology – DG]' (John H. Armstrong pp83-84). I agree. In my book, therefore, I cannot avoid trying to follow this 'complex system'. There is also some repetition, but my purpose is polemical not academic. What is more, some repetition is inevitable – rising out of the way certain arguments recur across the range of infant-baptiser claims.

to follow. One needs to be a first-rate metaphysicist to unravel the fine detail. I really do wonder how many parents who baptise their infants have actually sorted out all the essential ramifications of the logic required for what they consider to be a proper use of their system. To my mind at least, it is all very far removed from the simple directness of the New Testament, where baptism is a perfectly straightforward matter. So how does the complication arise? Not only do Reformed infant-baptisers badly expound various passages of Scripture, they get the debate about the continuity/discontinuity of the Testaments wrong, and lean heavily upon their invented covenant theology, thus erroneously forcing the Old Testament into the New. In this way, they produce complex arguments which, in this book, I am duty bound to try to follow, if I am to expose their unbiblical nature.<sup>9</sup> My wish, however, is that we might get back to that simplicity where we do not need to be academic theologians to understand all the niceties concerning infant baptism. The Christian religion in general, and church life in particular, are designed for those who are best described by 1 Corinthians 1:26-27.

Some infant baptisers, however, do not like the suggestion that their practice needs complicated reasoning to support it. John Legg, for instance, asserted: ‘This is not, as is often alleged, a complicated belief’.<sup>10</sup> In flat contradiction we have the words of another infant baptiser, James Bannerman. He admitted that ‘the subject is a delicate and a difficult one, and demands a more than usually earnest investigation... The difficulty that stands in the way of infant baptism lies on the very surface of the question; and [those who oppose infant baptism] have the advantage of an argument on their side which is both popular and plausible’.<sup>11</sup> Just so! This is why my book is as difficult as it is – infant baptisers have made it so. Some of them, at least, admit it.

A similar testimony came from William Cunningham who, in his defence of the practice of infant baptism, wrote:

---

<sup>9</sup> In my forthcoming book on the law, I will examine covenant theology more fully. For a very brief overview, see Davies Vol.2 pp311-313.

<sup>10</sup> Legg p2.

<sup>11</sup> Bannerman p67. I dissent, however, from Bannerman’s ‘plausible’. The biblical argument for believer’s baptism does not merely *seem* reasonable and persuasive. It is both – because it is biblical.

## *Infant Baptism: An Introduction*

There are undoubtedly some difficulties in the way of applying fully to the baptism of infants the definition usually given of a sacrament, and the general account commonly set forth of the objects and ends of baptism – we are very apt to be led to form insensibly very erroneous and defective views of the nature and effects of baptism, as an ordinance instituted by Christ in his church, or rather, to rest contented with scarcely any distinct or definite conception upon the subject.

With friends to write like this, infant baptism hardly needs opponents! Cunningham went on to speak of the need to modify the subject to accommodate infants, and to say that this necessity leads to disastrous consequences unless the modifications and limitations are fully understood by those who practise infant baptism. The upshot is to ‘leave the whole subject in a very obscure and confused condition in their minds’, he admitted. Quite! He went on to observe that infant baptisers ‘are apt to rest contented with very obscure and defective notions of the import and objects of baptism’. No wonder! What is more, he pinpointed the source of the complication. Cunningham had to confess that ‘minute and detailed expositions of the reasons and the effects of infant baptism are unwarranted by Scripture’. He acknowledged that it is impossible to explain the ‘bearing and effect of baptism’ in relation to infants. ‘Scripture really affords no adequate materials for doing this’, he said. Exactly! As soon as we stray from Scripture we move into error, and make things very complicated.

Cunningham concluded his arguments for infant baptism by speaking of ‘the difficulties which undoubtedly attach to it, and with the obscurity in which some points connected with it are involved’.<sup>12</sup> Here we have it. The explanation of infant baptism is acknowledged to be difficult and obscure, and this is admitted by those who advocate it. I wonder, once again, since those who are expert in infant baptism find it as difficult and obscure as this, what is the average parent in the pew supposed to make of it?

As examples of the non-scriptural complications and obscurities which infant baptisers introduce, what do ‘federal holiness’, ‘presumptive regeneration’, ‘elect or church’ seed, ‘internal, external or organic’ covenant, mean to the average Christian? Very little I suspect. I think I have been fair in saying that the arguments for infant baptism are tortuous. ‘Out of their own mouths’.

---

<sup>12</sup> Cunningham pp145-146,148,150,154.

### *Infant Baptism: An Introduction*

But the arguments are not only elaborate and difficult – far worse, they are downright dangerous! In the next chapter, I will prove it!