

Argument 1

Infant Baptisers Claim that the Children of Believers Should be Baptised because They are Holy

This unwarranted claim is based upon a faulty – incredible – interpretation of 1 Corinthians 7:14:

For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband; otherwise your children would be unclean, but now they are holy.

It is to state the obvious, but the verse does not mention baptism or church membership at all.¹ Nor does the context. This must be borne in mind. *Whatever the verse teaches, its primary application has nothing to do with infant baptism or church membership.* Nothing! Paul wrote these words, not to deal with the baptism of infants, nor to deal with church membership, but to deal with the question of a marriage where one of the partners had been subsequently converted. Any application of the verse to baptism or church membership must be incidental at best, which even some infant baptisers admit. In the light of this plain and indisputable fact, it would seem odd, to say the least, that this verse plays such an important part in the infant-baptiser's case.²

The verse teaches that if a woman is converted after marriage, and her husband is not (or *vice-versa*), then the Christian wife can continue with the marriage; she is not sinning by her continuing marriage to a pagan. The believing wife is not tainted by the unbelieving husband. Rather, the reverse; the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the believing wife. This does not mean, however, that he is saved or holy

¹ Church membership? I raise the issue only because of what Reformed infant-baptisers say about it based on 1 Cor. 7:14. Otherwise, the notion would not have crossed my mind.

² 'One of the curiosities of the use of Scripture in the church has been the use of this text to support infant baptism' (Fee: *1 Corinthians* p301).

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or acceptable to God. Nor does it mean he is a member of the church. The word ‘sanctified’ cannot bear such a meaning in this verse. It means ‘clean’, being contrasted to that which is unclean, that which must be abstained from in order to avoid impurity. Though the woman is now a Christian, while her husband remains a pagan, the marriage has not broken down, nor is the believer polluted by going on with it. Likewise the children of such a marriage are not polluted by the unbelieving father or mother. If the unbelieving husband did contaminate the believing wife, in the same way he would pollute the children. He does neither. That is what the verse teaches. But to jump from that to a full-blown doctrine of infant baptism, and the incorporation of those infants into the church of Christ, beggars belief. But that is exactly what infant baptisers do. It is amazing. It cannot be justified. It is wrong.³

Calvin, commenting on the verse, was spot on in his opening remarks:

A believer [in the circumstances envisaged in the verse] may, with a pure conscience, live with an unbeliever... [who] is sanctified [as defined in the verse], so as not to infect the believing party with his impurity. Meanwhile this [particular] sanctification is of no benefit to the unbelieving party; it only serves thus far, that the believing party is not contaminated by intercourse with him, and the marriage itself is not profaned.

So far so good. Excellent, indeed. But when Calvin reached the part of the verse dealing with children, his tone changed, and how! He wrote:

The passage, then, is a remarkable one, and drawn from the depths of theology; for it teaches that the children of the pious are set apart from

³ In the verse, please note, nothing is done to the children. Nothing! There is not a hint of a suggestion of any baptism. But, allowing for the moment, that infant baptisers are right, and something *is* done to them, notice that the children are holy *before* it is done to them; they are holy by virtue of the believing parent. Therefore, says the infant baptiser, we baptise the children – on the basis of their holiness. But, as I will show, infant baptisers are not always as confident as their trumpeted claims. Sometimes they want to stick to what they say on 1 Cor. 7:14 – that the children are baptised *because* they are holy; at other times, however, they claim that the children receive grace *by* their baptism. It is all a nonsensical interpretation and deduction from the verse, of course, but which do infant baptisers really believe? Is it *because* or *by*? Calvin, for one, couldn’t make up his mind.

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others by a sort of exclusive privilege, so as to be reckoned holy in the church.

According to Calvin, the sanctifying effect on the unbelieving husband is a relatively small matter, 'of no benefit' as he put it. But when the child comes into view, why, now we plumb 'depths of theology'! This expositional lurch is nothing but special pleading, a most inconsistent piece of work; shoddy, indeed. Rolling up his sleeves, Calvin went on to describe an enormous sanctifying benefit for the children. His words are astonishing. Referring to Ephesians 2:3 and Psalm 51:5, he wrote:

There is a universal propagation of sin and damnation throughout the seed of Adam, and all, therefore, to a man, are included in this curse, whether they are the offspring of believers or of the ungodly; for it is not as regenerated by the Spirit, that believers beget children after the flesh. The natural condition, therefore, of all is alike, so that they are liable equally to sin and to eternal death. As to the apostle's assigning here [1 Cor. 7:14] a peculiar privilege to the children of believers, this flows from the blessing of the covenant, by the intervention of which the curse of nature is removed; and those who were by nature unholy are consecrated to God by grace... But if the children of believers are exempted from the common lot of mankind, so as to be set apart to the Lord, why should we keep them back from the sign? If the Lord admits them into the church by his word, why should we refuse them the sign?⁴

In other words, Calvin asserted that all the children envisaged in 1 Corinthians 7:14 ought to be baptised because they are holy, the curse of nature – the effects of original sin – having been removed because they were born of a believing parent and are, therefore, in 'the covenant', 'in the church'. Did Calvin really intend to say this? It is a shocking statement. He has gone even further than Papists. Are the children of believers free from original sin because they are connected by birth to a believer? Words fail! I repeat my question: Are the children of believers free from original sin because they are connected by birth to a believer? Most definitely they are not! No one is free from the curse of nature because father or mother is a Christian. Does this need to be said? Surely John 1:11-13 is a sufficient statement to the contrary! What is more, if Calvin's claim for the children is true, why does the same not apply to the unbelieving husband? If the godly wife is of so great a benefit to her children, why is her husband

⁴ Calvin: *Commentaries* Vol.20 Part 1 pp242-243.

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likewise not set apart for the Lord, and all the rest of it? A consistent interpretation is needed. There is not the slightest justification for the baptism of infants from this sort of reasoning. Its practical effect is frightening.

Bannerman also wrote on the verse. He said that ‘the infants are to be accounted clean, or fit for the service of God and the fellowship of his church. The holiness of the one parent that is a member of the Christian church, communicates a relative holiness to the infant, so that the child also is fitted to be a member of the church, and to be baptised... To translate the phrase into ecclesiastical language, the child is entitled to church membership because the parent is a church member’.⁵ This is an amazing and unjustified deduction from a verse which says nothing – nothing at all – about baptism or church membership.

In order to baptise an infant, said Robert Shaw, ‘it is sufficient if one of the parents be a member of the visible church’. Not only did he unjustly force baptism into the verse, but in light of what constitutes a member of the visible church according to infant baptisers (see below), Shaw changed Paul’s reference to a *believer* in 1 Corinthians 7:14, reducing it to a mere *professor*. This in itself is a reckless exposition. A little later, Shaw wrote:

To be holy, as here used, is the converse of being unclean, and denotes that which may be offered to God. To be sanctified... is to be separated for religious purposes, consecrated to God... or to be in a proper condition to appear before God... The only appointed way in which children may be offered to God is baptism. The children of believing parents are, therefore, to be offered to God in baptism.⁶

Leaving aside the whole ridiculous and unscriptural notion of baptism being an offering to God, my question is: How is the ‘sanctified unbelieving husband’ to be offered to God? If the ‘sanctified’ children of a believing mother are to be offered to God in baptism, why is the husband – of that same woman and in that same marriage – why is he not to be offered to God in baptism, along with his children, and for exactly the same reason?

⁵ Bannerman pp90-91.

⁶ Shaw pp288-289.

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Horace Bushnell argued that although the children envisaged in this verse are not ‘actually and inwardly holy persons... [yet they are] Christian children as distinguished from the children of unbelievers’.⁷ Charles Hodge went as far as to speak of them as ‘Christian children [who] are not made holy by baptism, but... are baptised because they are holy’.⁸ The Heidelberg Catechism teaches that infants must be baptised ‘since they as well as the adult are included in the covenant and church of God’. *The Form for the Administration of Baptism* insists that ‘infants are to be baptised as heirs of the kingdom of God and of his covenant’. The children are said to be ‘sanctified in Christ, and therefore, as members of his church, ought to be baptised’.⁹ Observe what is claimed. The infants are to be baptised because they are sanctified in Christ, and members of his church. The Church of England baptises infants to make them Christians; the Reformed Church goes further and baptises them because they are! And it all comes from a totally misguided interpretation of 1 Corinthians 7:14.

I have already hinted that one reasonable deduction from these arguments is that not only should the infant be baptised because its mother is a believer, and therefore she has sanctified the child – the unbelieving husband should also be baptised because he likewise is sanctified by his wife. Infant baptisers wriggle at this point, and try to argue that the words ‘sanctified’ and ‘holy’, which are used to describe the unbelieving husband, and the unbelieving child, respectively, are different. This will not stand scrutiny. Such cavalier treatment of Scripture is reprehensible. While it is readily agreed that one is a verb, and the other is an adjective, both words have a common root. The lexicon makes it very clear. The husband is sanctified. The verb is *ἀγιάζω*. The children are holy. The adjective is *ἅγιος*. It could not be plainer. What is said of the child, is said of the husband. Therefore, on the reasoning of the infant baptisers, if the child can be baptised on the grounds of its holiness, cleanness or sanctification, so can the unbelieving husband (or wife). This is nonsense!¹⁰

⁷ Kingdon p89.

⁸ Charles Hodge: *1 Corinthians* p118.

⁹ Engelsma p11. Calvin: ‘Baptism... by which we testify that infants are included in the divine covenant’ (Calvin: *Institutes* Vol.2 p533).

¹⁰ Although I have already used strong words, perhaps this is the place where I ought to address those who object to my use of ‘nonsense’, and such like. I

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Another logical outcome of the infant baptiser's argument is that in all marriages where one partner is converted after marriage, the couple ought to produce as many children as possible, and baptise them as infants. Added to the children of marriages where both husband and wife are Christians, this would rapidly produce a generation of holy children who are members of the church. They, in their turn, would produce another generation of holy children; and so on. Within a few generations, the world would be well on the way to being wholly converted! Come to think of it, if this rigmarole is true, why – after two thousand years of post-Pentecost procreation by men and women 'in the covenant' – are there so few believers in the world today?¹¹ It is, of course, poppycock from beginning to end!

Furthermore, the pagan husband, according to Charles Hodge, is sanctified, by which he meant something more than what 1 Corinthians 7:14 asserts. He said: 'The pagan husband, in virtue of his union with a Christian wife, although he remained a pagan, was sanctified; he assumed a new relation; he was set apart to the service of God'. That is, claimed Hodge, the pagan man is set apart to the service of God by his marriage union with a Christian, even though he remains a pagan. What an astonishing assertion. Hodge also said that the child is clean, holy and sanctified, 'belonging to the church' and to be regarded as 'sacred'.¹² This raises a question of the utmost practical importance. When that clean, sanctified child, who is a member of the church, grows up and has children of his own, are they, on the basis of 1 Corinthians 7:14, sanctified, clean, sacred and members of the church as well? If so, does this continue to apply even if the first child, on

ask them to consider Wright's words (which, I admit, I have gathered into one list) as he described the history of infant baptism: 'Scandalous, confusing consequences, incurable antiquarianism or a flight from reality, failure, exaggerated historical claims, grossly misleading, lamentable, strange notion, incongruity, ventriloquist charade, absurdity, half-baked, descent into unreality, ventriloquism' (Wright: *What...?* pp4,8,9,18,20,61,62,71,72,80). He was, I agree, describing what he rightly saw as abuses. But the biggest abuse to me is to take Christ's ordinance for believers and turn it into a ritual for babies! And I find the theology behind this switch 'confusing, a flight from reality, exaggerated, misleading, lamentable, strange, absurd'. In short, nonsense!

¹¹ See the following chapter for the arithmetic.

¹² Charles Hodge: *1 Corinthians* p116.

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reaching adult age, never becomes a Christian? This is no idle speculation. It is a very real problem for infant baptisers. Ways have had to be invented down the centuries to cope with this muddle – methods like ‘half-way covenant’ churches, for example.¹³ These mistaken views and practices must inevitably produce church members who are nothing more than nominal Christians. This is admitted by infant baptisers themselves. Indeed, the probability of producing unregenerate churches (what a contradiction!) by this scheme, is simply a question of irresistible arithmetic.

Legg, for example, wrote about some of the problems for infant baptisers as far as church life is concerned. He spoke about the ‘malpractice’ which has ‘prejudiced sincere Christians against infant baptism. They feel that it gives false security to hardened unbelievers’, he said. He went on to admit that he had much sympathy with this attitude, and he deplored the ‘indiscriminate infant baptism’ which was introduced by the Congregationalists in the 19th century. He was scathing of the practice and the way it has degenerated in the 20th century into ‘little more than a tribal custom, with evangelicals trying to salve their consciences by making some evangelistic use of the Cradle Roll’, as he put it.

But it is not only ‘indiscriminate’ baptism, nor the ‘malpractice’ of infant baptism, which is at fault. Infant baptism *per se* tends to produce unbelieving church members, and infant baptisers have always had to try to handle the problem which arises even in their best-regulated churches. Legg spoke about the ‘half-way covenant’ in the churches of 17th century New England, which I mentioned a moment ago. This device ‘allowed baptism to the children of those who had themselves been baptised in infancy, but who, while orthodox and moral, could not satisfy the rigorous New England requirements for communicant church-membership... It must be obvious’, he went on, ‘that such a practice will end in indiscriminate baptism as the next generation claims the same right on the same ground, a sort of quarter-way covenant!’¹⁴ In other words, indiscriminate infant baptism can arise not only through Liberalism, as in the 1900s, or sheer ineptitude, as in the 20th and 21st centuries, but it can also occur where spiritual,

¹³ See Boorman pp73-102; see below.

¹⁴ Legg pp6-7. By now, they must be at the 0.00025th-way (or less) covenant! See the following chapter for the arithmetic.

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orthodox men try to cope with the muddle and spiritual disarray produced by infant baptism itself. These are serious criticisms from an advocate of the practice!

This aspect of infant baptism is so important, I shall return to it later. It is getting to the heart of the practical problem as far as my book is concerned. The point I have tried to make is, infant baptisers by their practice tend to produce churches which are very different to the New Testament pattern. And they do so as a direct result of their system. I fully acknowledge that many churches which baptise only believers leave a great deal to be desired; a great deal.¹⁵ In some cases, are they churches at all? But the present issue is not whether churches fall short of the standard they set themselves – my claim is that infant baptism *per se* tends to produce churches with non-believing members. In saying this, I simply repeat what the advocates of the practice maintain in their own documents. Infant baptisers really do accept, as the norm, churches made up of the regenerate and the unregenerate.¹⁶ I say this is wrong according to the New Testament, and if there was nothing else against infant baptism, this would be sufficient to stop the practice. And quick!

I close this chapter with two sacramental Baptists who, though I disagree with much they have written on baptism, got this right. Talking about the infant-baptiser's claims from 1 Corinthians 7:14, Neville Clark declared:

¹⁵ I admit the force of: 'Let us not beat about the bush... I know that [believer's baptism is] quite capable of leading nowhere in terms of active church membership' (Wright: *What...?* p85).

¹⁶ We have seen the 17th century use of the half-way covenant. In the 20th century, John Murray fell back on the unscriptural invention of two sorts of church members; 'confederate members' – that is, baptised members who are not believers; and 'communicant members' – that is, baptised members 'who exhibit godly lives' and are allowed to take the Lord's supper. Unless the discipline of the church is effective in persuading the 'confederate' members openly to avow and embrace the covenant already 'sealed by their baptism in infancy[!]', said Murray, they will not be 'in a fit state to receive[!] baptism for their children' (see Shawn D. Wright p225). I draw attention to Murray's unscriptural notion of a parent *receiving* baptism for their children. It reminds me of the present practice in the UK of parents receiving a government hand-out – a trust fund – for their new-born baby.

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Either we draw the conclusion that such children are, by virtue of birth, made members of the body of Christ, and thus baptism, which [in the sacramentalist view] effects this very thing, is redundant; or else the possession of this holiness involves something other than membership of the new Israel,¹⁷ and is not directly relevant to the initiatory rite of baptism. In the one case, we have proved too much; in the other case, too little.¹⁸

Let R.E.O.White neatly – and accurately – sum it all up:

The argument has the air of a desperate expedient, and the exegesis is hopelessly inconsistent.¹⁹

1 Corinthians 7:14 does not provide any basis for infant baptism. None whatsoever.

¹⁷ This reference to the new Israel leads us nicely into the next chapter.

¹⁸ Clark p314.

¹⁹ R.E.O.White p213.