



## Infant Baptism:

### *Should We Agree to Disagree?*

Once, after a worship service, a brother in the Lord was speaking to me about Reformed Baptists. I don't remember the whole conversation, but one thing sticks in my mind. The brother said, "Basically, Reformed Baptist is a contradiction in terms." Is he correct?

Of course, you can understand where this brother was coming from. For example, the Belgic Confession is a Reformed confession. No one doubts or disputes that. Moreover, in Article 34 this Reformed confession of ours speaks about infant baptism in a rather straightforward way:

*"For that reason we reject the error of the Anabaptists, who are not content with a single baptism received only once, and who also condemn the baptism of the little children of believers."*

The Heidelberg Catechism also insists that *"by baptism, as a sign of the covenant, they (infants) must be grafted into the Christian church"* (LD 27). So infant baptism, also called paedobaptism, is not a *may*, or a *maybe*, but a *must*. With these confessions in mind, the aforementioned brother said what he said. Either you're Reformed and you maintain infant baptism, or you're Baptist and you wait with baptism until someone has publicly professed their faith. But never the twain shall meet.

There's only one problem. The twain have not only met each other, and courted, they've also gone right ahead and got married. There are numerous Reformed Baptist churches around the world. In 1997 the Association of Reformed Baptist Churches of America was formed. As of this year over seventy churches belong to this association, some of them from Canada as well. Since 2004 there's also been a scholarly journal called *The Reformed Baptist Theological Review*. Reformed Baptist may be a contradiction, but it's a contradiction that is alive and well.

One influential theologian, Wayne Grudem, has even suggested that *"one way forward could be for paedobaptists and advocates of believers' baptism both to come to a common admission that baptism is not a major doctrine of the faith, and that they are willing to live with each other's views on this matter and not allow differences over baptism to be a cause for division within the body of Christ."*<sup>1</sup> So, should we follow Grudem's advice and agree to disagree over infant baptism?

### **What's in a name?**

So what exactly does a Reformed Baptist believe? As you might expect, there are different varieties of Reformed Baptists, but they all agree that only those who sincerely profess faith in, and submission to, Jesus Christ should be baptized. This is also called credobaptism. Since babies cannot yet make such a profession, Reformed Baptists teach that they should not be baptized. This is based on Mark 16:16: *"Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved."* The sequence of words in that verse determines their practice: first profession of faith, then baptism. This accounts for the "Baptist" half of their name.

At the same time, Reformed Baptists do not want to be Pelagian or Arminian in their theology. In fact, they love the same five solas that we cherish: *sola Scriptura*, *sola fide*, *sola gratia*, *solus Christus*, and *solus Deo gloria* (by Scripture alone, by faith alone, by grace alone, Christ alone, and to the glory of God alone). This explains the Reformed part of their name.

Many Reformed Baptist churches make use of, or even subscribe to, the Second London Baptist Confession of Faith (1689). In structure and content this confession is similar to the Westminster Confession of Faith (1648). The most obvious difference is, of course, in the article about baptism (Chap. 29). Still, a pertinent question remains: is it permissible to substitute in credobaptism for paedobaptism, all the while leaving the rest of Reformed theology unaltered? We need a solid, scriptural answer to that question. However, first there are a few other matters that need attention.

### **Before we go any farther**

There are at least three factors that deserve mention. For lack of a better term, we'll call the first one the Spurgeon-factor. Charles Haddon Spurgeon was a gifted and influential British preacher in the nineteenth century. He preached over three thousand sermons, often to thousands of people at a time. His sermons are still widely read and quoted today. Spurgeon was also a Reformed Baptist, or Particular Baptist, as they were known at that time. We have some contemporary Spurgeons as well: men such as John Piper and John MacArthur. Like Spurgeon, these men are popular preachers. They have websites with hundreds of sermons. Like Spurgeon, they have some familiar sounding, Reformed themes in their preaching. Like Spurgeon, they reject infant baptism. So, the argument runs like this: is rejecting infant baptism really so bad if these preachers are so good? The simple response is this: even good preachers can make serious mistakes. When that happens, we ought to address it, not overlook it. That's the approach that the Apostle Paul took with Peter (Gal 2:11-16). We should do the same.

Next there is the *show-me-the-verse-factor*. If you've ever had to defend infant baptism, you likely had someone say to you, "Just show me the verse in the Bible where God commands us to baptize infants." Well, there is no verse in the Bible which says, "Baptize babies." So, the underlying yet overarching implication is that paedobaptism must be wrong. However, this show-me-the-verse shoe pinches just as much on the other foot. For some two millennia, ever since the days of Abraham, the LORD made it abundantly clear that children were included in his covenant (Gen 17:7). Therefore, the challenge could also be launched: "Just show me the verse in the Bible where God commands us to stop including infants in his covenant." Well, there is no verse in the Bible which says that either. So, we need to step beyond this show-me-the-verse mentality and start looking carefully at what the LORD does actually say.

Finally, there is the *infant-baptism-breeds-laxity* factor. Many people resist infant baptism because they are afraid that these baptized babies will grow up to be spiritually sloppy individuals. They're concerned that baptized youth (or adults!) will feel rather comfortable with immoral, worldly lifestyles since, after all, they're baptized and, in the end, all will be well and forgiven. However, baptism is a sign of the covenant and God's covenant does not give anyone a license to indulge in the ways of the world. Behold, God's covenant has two parts: promise *and* obligation (Rom 6:1-4). Beware, God's covenant has two pronouncements: blessings *and* curses (Heb 10:26-31). Therefore, abandon laxity and embrace holiness.

### **Now let's turn to Scripture**

When the Holy Spirit converts someone, turning him from rebellion and unbelief to repentance and faith, then that person should also be baptized. The Lord Jesus Christ clearly teaches this in Matthew 28:19 and Mark 16:16. That's also why we have a Form for the Baptism of Adults, which incorporates the Form for Profession of Faith, in the back of our Book of Praise. Defined and understood properly, credobaptism has always been maintained by the Reformed church.

However, what does the Lord say about the children of baptized believers? Should they, too, be baptized? *That* is the critical question. As mentioned earlier, in the days of Abraham, the LORD explicitly included the children of believing parents in his covenant. In fact, the LORD was so strong on this point that if anyone failed to administer the sign of the covenant, that is, circumcision, to his infant son, he would be guilty of breaking the covenant (Gen 17:14). Clearly, this was a major doctrine with enormous implications, not a minor point of ecclesiastical practice. In the old covenant, the LORD left no room for agreeing to disagree over circumcision.

However, does that change in the new covenant? Reformed Baptists would argue that it does. Often they will say that the genealogical aspect of the old covenant was needed in order to bring Christ, the Mediator, into the world; however, after that, the new covenant is made with regenerate individuals, not the households of believers.

Now, it is true that there was something wrong with the first covenant. The Holy Spirit himself says,

*"If there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another."*

(Heb 8:7)

Yet please note the next verse: *"But God found fault with the people and said, 'The time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant.'"*

(Heb 8:8)

Moreover, the following verses, quoting from Jeremiah 31:31-34, indicate that it was the stubborn sinfulness of the people which was "the fault." In the old covenant, the blood of bulls and goats could never deal effectively with that iniquity (Heb 10:4). Therefore, the LORD ushered in the new covenant with the long foreshadowed solution. The promised blood and Spirit of Christ achieved what animals sacrifices could never accomplish. In other words, in moving from old to new, the LORD did not change the structure of the covenant. With the coming of Christ he did not begin excluding the previously included children. Rather, he changed the sacrifice for sin from shadows to substance, from livestock to the Lord Jesus Christ.

That young children are still included in the new covenant can be demonstrated by familiar passages like Luke 18:16 (*"Let the little children come to me"*), Acts 2:39 (*"the promise is for you and your children"*), and 1 Cor 7:14 (*"your children ... are holy"*). We should also remember the household baptisms recorded in the New Testament (Acts 16:15, 31-33; 1 Cor 1:16), as well as the connection between circumcision and baptism (Col 2:9-11).

However, there is another passage which is often overlooked: 1 Corinthians 10:2. In this passage the Apostle Paul teaches us about the baptism into ... no, not Christ, but Moses! But, you say, baptism is a new covenant sacrament, and Moses is the mediator of the old covenant. Indeed, but the new sacrament was already foreshadowed in the old dispensation, at the Red Sea. *"They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea."* A cloud contains water. According to Exodus 14:19, the special glory cloud of the LORD, which to that point had gone in front of the people, moved and stood behind the people, separating the Egyptians from the Israelites. Thus God's holy people and their enemies were distinguished by a wall of water, and *"throughout the night the cloud brought darkness to the one side and light to the other side"* (Ex 14:20). And if that was not dramatic enough, next the LORD miraculously used the water of the Red Sea to both save his people and defeat their enemies (Ex 14:22, 28). These waters of separation and salvation were the baptism into Moses.

Who, then, was baptized into Moses? All of God's people were baptized into Moses, male and female, older and younger, including the little infants, being carried in the arms of eager parents who were race walking to safety on the opposite shore of the Sea. Therefore, since the babies were baptized into Moses, surely they should also be baptized into Christ, for Moses was faithful as a servant, but Christ is faithful as Son (Heb 4:5-6).

So, yes, we baptize adults whom the Lord, in his grace, converts. And yes, we also baptize the children of believing parents, with whom the Lord, in his grace, covenants. Why? Precisely because this is what the Lord teaches us in his Word.

### **Where do we go from here?**

To begin with, agreeing to disagree over baptism is not the way forward. Contra Grudem, baptism is a major doctrine. At baptism a minister pronounces someone's name and says, *"I baptize you*

*into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."* Surely, since the holy name of our Triune God is directly involved, it must, of necessity, be major.

The doctrine of infant baptism is also intricately related to many other doctrines. Baptized children receive, and need, the promise of forgiveness because they inherit a sinful nature from their parents (BC 15). The doctrine of original sin is linked to the sinless conception of our incarnate Saviour (LD 14). Baptism is also entwined with the doctrine of the covenant which is inextricably connected to the doctrine of the church (LD 27). And, lest we forget, there is the sensitive matter of children who die in infancy (CoD 1:17). Baptism, original sin, incarnation, covenant, church, and the life hereafter: there's a lot at stake here.

The way forward, then, is to keep teaching and defending the baptism of covenant children. We can be thankful that Reformed Baptists embrace the five solas, for they are scriptural. At the same time, we must be resolute in upholding infant baptism since it is equally scriptural. It's a matter of obedience, not options.

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#### Endnotes:

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<sup>1</sup> Grudem, Wayne. *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1997), 982