



## The ERROR of Not Baptising Children

Our title this month is somewhat controversial. The one distinctive doctrine of Baptists is that they do not baptise infants. Now we have many good friends among the Baptists. We have preached in their pulpits and they have preached in ours. We have so much in common with some of them. Yet if it is God's will that we baptise infants, as we believe it is, then obviously it is a sin not to do so.

### History

At the time of the Reformation a minority of the reformers were Baptist and were known as the Anabaptists (re-baptisers). Some Baptists are critical of the mainline Reformers saying that they simply accepted the Roman Catholic tradition of baptising children. However men like Calvin and Knox accepted nothing from Rome without checking first if it was biblical. In the days of the Puritans, the sixteenth century, again a minority were Baptist, among whom was to be found John Bunyan. In the eighteenth century here in Scotland the Baptist Haldane brothers had a blessed ministry. The nineteenth century produced perhaps the greatest Baptist of all, Charles Haddon Spurgeon. The most rapid expansion of Baptist numbers came in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The Southern Baptist Church in America is reckoned to be the largest Protestant denomination in the world.

### Immersion

Along with a refusal to baptise children almost all Baptists demand that baptism be by immersion. Non-Baptists see the mode as irrelevant and so accept sprinkling or pouring as well as immersion. The Baptist argument is based on the word used in the Greek *baptizo* which they say always means 'to immerse'. But this is factually wrong. A careful look at all the occurrences of the word and its derivatives in the New Testament and also in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament done in 250BC, will show that the word sometimes should be translated 'to wash'. For example, in Mark 7:3-4 the word is used in that way: *'For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, except they wash their hands oft, eat not, holding the tradition of the elders. And when they come from the market, except they wash (baptizo), they eat not. And many other things there be, which they have received to hold, as the washing (baptizo) of cups, and pots, brasen vessels, and of tables'*. We cannot imagine that every time the Pharisees came in from the market they immersed themselves. From parallel passages the meaning is obviously that they washed their hands. The many kinds of 'washings' (*baptiso*) of Hebrews 9:10 would include sprinkling with blood.

It is also worth noting that there is not one case of baptism in the New Testament which can be proved to be by immersion.

When Jesus is baptised by John and comes out of the water it is far more likely that He simply stood in the water and that John sprinkled or poured water over Him. It seems very unlikely that He walked away with drenched clothes. Similarly, in Acts 8:38, we are told that Philip and the Ethiopian went down both of them into the water. Again the likelihood is that Philip sprinkled or poured water over the Ethiopian. When the Philippian jailer was converted, that very night he was baptised, but it is highly unlikely that they would have a place for immersions in the prison or that they would nip out of the prison with the whole family for a baptism down by the river. The physical arrangements required in a place like Jerusalem to baptise 3000 by immersion make it hard to imagine that this took place. There is no river, lake or sea in or near Jerusalem.

## **Who are to be baptised?**

Many are tempted to argue from tradition. They have been born Presbyterians or converted in a Presbyterian church so they baptise not just believers but also their children. Alternatively they have been born Baptists or born again through a Baptist church so they only baptise adults. Scripture, however, is the only rule. The King and Head of the church has given us His Word and it must be our law.

Generally Baptists quote two or three New Testament verses, taken in isolation, and think they have proved their case. For example Peter in his Pentecost sermon states, *'Repent and be baptised'*. Baptists argue that repentance comes first and then baptism. We agree that in evangelism this is the case. In instituting baptism Christ said, *'Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost'* (Mt. 28:19). Teach first and then baptise. There is nothing here about children. The reason is of course that Jesus is dealing with a mission situation.

The problem with many Baptists is that they forget that the Old Testament exists. Many are Dispensational and think that the way of salvation in the OT was different — people then were saved by works and ritual. But Paul makes plain that by works none can be justified: *'But that no man is justified by the law in the sight of God, it is evident: for, The just shall live by faith'* (Gal. 3:11). The law instead of justifying only condemns. Nicodemus was under the old dispensation yet Jesus said to him, *'Ye must be born again'* (Jn. 3:7). The way of salvation was essentially the same under the Old Testament as it is in the New. There is only one Saviour who is able to save and there is essentially only one covenant of grace. Further the Old Testament is just as authoritative as the New. Paul's words to Timothy are very important: *'All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works'* (2 Tim. 3:16-17). If all we had was the New Testament we might well all be Baptists.

God's dealings with man have always been by covenants. I would like us to go through the Scriptures, seeing what we can learn about these covenants, what place children have in them and who were to receive the mark or token of the covenant.

### **1. First Covenant**

When God created man He entered into a covenant with him and this covenant is usually known as the covenant of works. Obedience was required and there was a promise of life and a threat of death. This first covenant included not just Adam but his children. Adam sinned and fell and the descendants of Adam sinned and fell with him. Baptists tend to be too individualistic. God deals with us as families. The second commandment which condemns idols is interesting here: *'Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me; And showing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments'* (Ex. 20:5-6). God's wrath reaches the third and fourth generations of the idolaters. His mercy reaches to thousands and this could also be understood as thousands of generations. *'He hath remembered his covenant forever, the word which he commanded to a thousand generations'* (Ps. 105:8).

### **2. First Gospel**

Man having broken the covenant of works, God made a covenant of grace with His people. The first statement of it is spoken to the serpent in the hearing of Adam and Eve while they were still in the Garden of Eden: *'And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel'* (Gen. 3:15). Here, too, children (seed) are important and have their place in this covenant. There will be hatred between the woman's children and the devil's children. We see that worked out in the history of Cain and Abel. In Genesis 6 the sons of God are the seed of Seth and the daughters of men are the children of Cain. The great Seed referred to is of course the Lord Jesus.

### **3. Covenant with Noah**

Every covenant is a covenant with people and their children. God destroyed the ancient world with a flood because of its wickedness. He saved Noah and his family. After coming out of the ark Noah offered to God a burnt offering. God smelled the sweet perfume of His Son in it and made a covenant with Noah and his children after him never again to destroy the world with a flood. *'And the Lord smelled a sweet savour; and the Lord said in his heart, I will not again curse the ground any more for man's sake; for the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth; neither will I again smite any more everything living, as I have done. While the earth remaineth, seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease. And God blessed Noah and his sons, and said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth'* (Gen. 8:21-9:1).

### **4. Covenant with Abraham**

There is a fullness in the revelation of the covenant of grace to Abraham. God calls Abraham out of Ur (Gen. 12), and promises to multiply him as the stars (Gen. 15). He says, *'I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee'* (Gen. 17:7). The children were clearly included as in all God's covenants. But this one goes a step further in that a mark of the covenant was to be placed on children. *'This is my covenant, which ye shall keep, between me and you and thy seed after thee; every man child among you shall be circumcised. And ye shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin; and it shall be a token of the covenant betwixt me and you'* (Gen. 17:10-11). What great privileges the children of Abraham enjoyed! But there was also a serious warning: *'And the uncircumcised man child whose flesh of his foreskin is not circumcised, that soul shall be cut off from his people; he hath broken my covenant'* (v.14). Not to circumcise their children was seen as a serious sin. Similarly if we as God's covenant people do not baptise our children, it is a serious sin. Remember there is essentially only one covenant of grace.

### **5. Covenant with Moses**

The Scripture books from Exodus to Deuteronomy contain God's covenant of grace with Moses and with Israel. There are many types — sacrifices, priests, tabernacle and altar — all pointing towards Christ the Messiah. There were many burdens laid upon the Israelites and yet salvation was by grace alone. The covenant included the children and they were to be circumcised as a sign of their inclusion in the covenant.

### **6. Covenant with David**

God made a special covenant with David and with his family and it is spelled out in 2 Samuel 7 and Psalm 89. David's children would be kings and it looked forward to the coming of David's greatest Son. Notice how children were included in this covenant of grace.

### **7. New Covenant**

Ezekiel prophesies that God will make a new covenant with His people: *'Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean: from all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you. A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them'* (Ezek. 36:25-27). The New Testament explains this new dispensation of the covenant of grace more fully.

All God's covenants in the Old Testament included children, so why should children be excluded from the New Testament covenant, especially when there is no specific command to exclude them? The children under the older covenant (Abraham and Moses) were marked with the tokens of that covenant, so why not under the new covenant? Baptists make much of the fact that there is no New Testament command to baptise children. Actually, what is much more significant in the light of the whole Old Testament, is the fact that there is no command *not* to

baptise children. The covenant of grace is essentially one in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. Since children were included in the covenant of grace in the Old Testament they must be included in that of the New Testament also unless specifically excluded.

## **8. Two Sacraments**

The two sacraments of the Old Testament were circumcision and the passover. These are replaced by the two sacraments of the New Testament, baptism and the Lord's supper. The supper was instituted by Christ at the close of the last proper passover, indicating that communion was taking over from passover. Similarly Paul indicates that baptism takes over from circumcision when he writes the following: *'In whom also ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ: buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with him through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him from the dead'* (Col. 2:11-12). In circumcision there is an outward cutting off of the sins of the flesh, but only those who experience inward circumcision will truly be saved. Similarly baptism involved a cutting off and burial of the sins of the flesh, but only those who experience inward regeneration will be saved. Peter makes a similar parallel between baptism and circumcision when he writes: *'The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us (not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God,) by the resurrection of Jesus Christ'* (1 Pet. 3:21). There is one difference between the Lord's supper and the passover. There is with communion a requirement that individuals must examine themselves before they eat: *'But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup. For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep'* (1 Cor. 11:28-30). This self-examination and conscious understanding of what happens would exclude very young children. There is no such restriction with regard to baptism. Baptism is administered once and can be profited from by reflection years after it took place. Those baptised as infants are unable to remember what took place yet, when told by parents, they are still able to consider that they have been baptised into Jesus Christ and must therefore live for Him. They are encouraged to seek the blessings of the covenant of grace for themselves and that their baptism should be an inner reality.

## **9. Any hints of children being included in the covenant?**

One would expect that if children are included in the covenant there would be some indications of this special relationship and indeed that is the case. In preaching the gospel on the day of Pentecost, Peter exhorts: *'Repent, and be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost. For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call'* (Acts 2:38-39). Children get a special mention as a class in their own right. In telling the way of salvation to the Philippian jailor, Paul states: *'Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house'* (Acts 16:31). The jailor's house or family will benefit from his faith. Paul makes plain that the children of true Christians are special in God's sight: *'For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband: else were your children unclean; but now are they holy'* (1 Cor. 7:14).

## **10. Any cases of children being baptised in the New Testament?**

The New Testament church is in a missionary situation where the Gospel is being preached to Jews and Gentiles, requiring of them repentance, faith and baptism. Adults listen, believe and are baptised. However we also have cases of household baptisms. When Lydia believed she and her household were baptised (Acts 16:15). Similarly the conversion of the Philippian jailor was marked by the baptism that very night, not only of himself, but of his family (Acts 16:33). Paul tells us that he also baptised the household of Stephanas (1 Cor. 1:16). There is every likelihood that children were included in these households.

Jesus said, *'Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God'* (Mark 10:14). Jesus had a special interest in children and commanded His

blessing upon them. They have a high place in His kingdom. The disciples are rebuked for pushing them away. It was a serious sin under the old covenant of grace not to circumcise children and similarly we believe that it is a sin today not to baptise children. Baptising them we claim God's covenant blessings upon them, we seek to bring them up for the Lord, are encouraged in doing that and look for them to be saved. Children who are baptised are to be told that they belong to God and must seek a personal relationship with Him themselves. If they turn away, their situation in eternity will be worse than the heathen.

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