



William Cunningham and infant baptism

(The place of infant baptism in the Westminster symbols)

In 1862, William Cunningham, perhaps the greatest theologian produced by Scotland, published *'The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation.'* This New College Professor of Church History put his powerful mind to work analysing the theology of some of the important Reformers of the 16th century Protestant Reformation and their descendants.

His study of the doctrine of the Sacraments is a grand clarification of the Westminster divines' intent. It is the purpose of this paper to summarise and analyse Cunningham's conclusions about the Sacraments, as they are expressed in the Westminster symbols – with a particular stress on baptism.

Cunningham shows that the Westminster symbols, when they discuss the meaning of the Sacraments, **do so with adult believers in mind.** He shows that the **sacramental principle espoused by the divines is defined with them in view.** He concludes that **it is to the regenerate that Sacraments are signs and seals** in their fullest sense. He concludes that, although this is the case, this is **not too great a concession to baptists (antipaedobaptists).**

Westminster symbols - sacramental teaching with believers in view

The sacramental principle

Cunningham begins by noting the early corruption of the Sacraments in the Christian Church. *"Even in the Second Century, we find plain indications of a tendency to speak of the nature, design and effects of the Sacraments, in a very inflated and exaggerated style, – a style different from anything we find in the New Testament (p.232)."* The outcome is seen in the Roman Catholic view. The Council of Trent concluded that grace was conveyed *ex opere operato* ("from the work done"), and thus when baptism was applied to an infant, the infant received the forgiveness of original sin and was thus justified, intrinsically holy.

The Protestants, in opposition to this, taught that forgiveness of sins, salvation full and free, was only obtained through union with the Lord Jesus Christ. This salvation was all of grace and was received by faith. The Sacraments were not, then, converting ordinances or ordinances that conveyed saving faith.

The Protestant Confessions framed statements that expressed what might be called the sacramental principle, upon which there was a great degree of unanimity. But Cunningham in his day, and surely we in ours, could say,

"We believe that there is scarcely any subject set forth in the Confessions of the Reformed Churches, that is no less attended to and less understood than this of the Sacraments; and that many even of these who have subscribed to these Confessions, rest satisfied with some defective and confused notions on the subject of baptism and of the Lord's Supper, while they scarcely have even a fragment of an idea of a sacramental principle, or of any general doctrine or theory on the subject of the Sacraments (p.238)."

The Shorter catechism states the sacramental principle, the teaching of the Scriptures on Sacraments, saying, *"A Sacrament is an holy ordinance instituted by Christ; wherein, by sensible signs, Christ and the benefits of the new covenant are represented, sealed and applied to believers (Q&A 92)."*

Cunningham stresses that it is of fundamental importance to realize that this principle undergirds or defines baptism and the Lord's Supper for Westminster.

A more specific definition of baptism

The catechism goes on to describe, more specifically, the meaning of baptism. *"Baptism is a Sacrament; wherein the washing with water in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, doth signify and seal our ingrafting into Christ, and partaking of the benefits of the covenant of grace, and our engagement to be the Lord's."*

Some have concluded from this statement that the Westminster divines have taught baptismal regeneration. And if you take this statement above on its own, it does suggest that the person being baptized actually is or becomes a converted person, a Christian with a real heartfelt interest in Christ. And since children are baptized, then they too must be said to possess Christ in the same saving way. But there is a mistake that is being made with this line of reasoning. Cunningham points it out. The statements on the Sacrament of baptism and of the Lord's Supper indeed do have in mind those who already believe and not infants or the unsaved. This can easily be demonstrated in the Shorter catechism. The general statement of the sacramental principle says that Christ and the benefits signified are represented, sealed and applied **to believers**.

Instituted and intended for believers

Cunningham states, *"It has always been a fundamental principle in the theology of Protestants, that the Sacraments were instituted and intended for believers, and produce their appropriate beneficial effects, only through the faith which must have previously existed and which is expressed and exercised in the act of partaking of them (p.244)."*

Therefore, if we come to the statements in the Confession or the Larger and Shorter catechisms not realizing that this is the principle on which the divines have elucidated the doctrine of the Sacraments, we will end up being confused and perhaps distort the truth about the use of the Sacraments. And so only those who are properly qualified to be in the Covenant (as a communion of life) will benefit from the signs and seals of the Covenant of Grace. And these people are believers. So in speaking of the meaning of baptism, the framers of the Confession and catechisms are talking about only *believer's* baptism. As the Shorter catechism says in the very next question and answer, *"The Sacraments become effectual means of salvation, not from any virtue in them, or in him that doth administer them; but only by the blessing of Christ, and the working of his Spirit in them that by faith receive them (Q & A 91)."*

We have been looking at the Shorter catechism thus far. But does not the Larger catechism state the sacramental principle differently? In Q & A 162, a Sacrament is described, as *"an holy ordinance instituted by Christ, in His church, to signify, seal and exhibit unto those that are within the covenant of grace, the benefits of His mediation, to strengthen and increase their faith."* As Cunningham points out, clearly children are not included in this phrase *"those that are within the covenant of grace,"* even though sometimes we speak of children of believers as being in the covenant of grace. This is quite plain when the catechism says the Sacraments are to *"strengthen and increase their faith."* Clearly only believers are comprehended in this statement. Reformed theologians make a distinction between children and professing adults in respect to the covenant of grace, which is helpful to keep in mind. Children of believers are said to be in the covenant of grace as a legal relationship, while believers are in the covenant of grace as a communion of life. Calvin in his commentary on Genesis 17:7 puts the distinction like this...

"Here then a twofold class of sons present itself to us, in the Church; for since the whole body of the people is gathered together into the fold of God, by one and the same voice, all without exception, are, in this respect, accounted children; the name of the Church is applicable in common to them all, but in the innermost sanctuary of God, none others are reckoned the sons of God, than they in whom the promise is ratified by faith. And although this difference flows from the fountain of gratuitous election, whence also faith itself springs; yet since the counsel of God is in itself hidden from us, we therefore distinguish the true from the spurious children, by the respective marks of faith and of unbelief."

Cunningham also notes that the statements of the other Reformers should also be read in this way. There seems little doubt that this was the mainstream view of the Protestant Reformers.

Mainstream view

Cunningham shows from the writings of two of the Scottish Commissioners to the Westminster Assembly, Samuel Rutherford and George Gillespie, that what he has explained up to this point was indeed the teaching of two of the assembly's most important divines (p.279).

The third use of the Sacrament as defined by the catechisms is to exhibit or apply Christ and his benefits. Gillespie on this subject writes, "*I answer that exhibition, which they speak of, is not the giving of grace where it is not (as is manifest by the a fore quoted testimonies), but an exhibition to believers, a real effectual, lively application of Christ, and of all His benefits, to everyone that believeth, for the staying, strengthening, confirming and comforting of the soul. Our divines do not say that the Sacraments are exhibitivie ordinances, wherein grace is communicated to those who have none of it, to unconverted or unbelieving persons.*"

That this view was the mainstream view of the Scottish Reformed Churches is confirmed in John McLeod's *Scottish Theology*. Speaking against the high Sacramentalists who taught baptismal regeneration, he says the same thing as Cunningham.

"This they (the high sacramentalists) did oblivious of the twofold fact that the statements of those standards deal primarily with what baptism is in the normal instance of its administration, that is, in the case of believers who are baptised on their own profession; and that the baptism of children as members of Christian households, though thoroughly well warranted on its own grounds, is not the normal and regulative example of the administration of the Sacrament (p. 303)."

Cunningham's conclusion here is worth quoting. "*There can be no reasonable doubt that the 'Shorter catechism' in defining or describing a Sacrament restricts itself to the case of adult believers; and the only way of reconciling the definition with its teaching on the subject of infant baptism is by assuming that it is not to be applied absolutely and without all exception in other cases; and that infant baptism though fully warranted in Scripture, does not correspond in all respects with the full sacramental principle in its utmost extent and clearness, as exhibited in adult baptism and the Lord's Supper, and must therefore be regarded as occupying a peculiar (meaning special), and supplemental position (p.251)."*

Cunningham also concludes that this is the approach taken by the Westminster Confession and other Reformed Confessions, although with different degrees of clarity.

It is to the regenerate that Sacraments are signs and seals in their fullest sense

As a sign the Sacraments are "*merely, to use an expression which Calvin and other Reformers applied to them, appendages to the gospel, – that is merely means of declaring and bringing before our minds in another way, by a different instrumentality, what is fully set forth in the statements of Scripture (p.254)*". In other words the Sacraments are visible words. They are another way of preaching.

Baptism teaches us of the need to be washed clean of guilt and sin and that this is provided for us through Christ's shed blood and his poured out Spirit. The Lord's Supper is describing that Christ's body has been broken and his bloodshed to restore us to God's favour and also enables us to receive spiritual nourishment. But even as elements that are symbolic of or signify the truths they express, they can also be viewed as **seals**. A seal strengthens and confirms the belief (faith) in the truths contained therein. And of course these truths that are sealed are explained in Scripture and can be summed up as the details of Covenant of Grace. John MacLeod (*Scottish Theology*) notes that in regard to children, "*...baptism can be regarded as in the full sense a seal of their oneness with Christ only when the time comes that they indeed take His yoke upon them. Then and not till then, have they the righteousness of faith of which their baptism is a seal (p.304).*"

Calvin

Ronald S. Wallace in *Calvin's Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament*, shows that Calvin too treats the meaning of baptism for believers before he addresses infant baptism.

"Calvin in his treatment of Baptism in the Institutes, considers the subject at first quite independently of any later intention of justifying the practice of baptising infants. It is only after having clearly stated his doctrine as to the meaning of the sign when it is applied to those who have faith and maturity that he proceeds to justify the application of the sign to children of believers (p. 184)."

Calvin in a commentary on Acts 8:37 says, *"Baptism is an appurtenance (an appendage or accessory) of faith, and therefore it is later in order, ... if it be given without faith whose seal it is, it is both a wicked and exceedingly gross sacrilege."*

Calvin stresses the element of faith ordinarily required for the Sacrament to be properly called a seal. *"It seems to me that a simple and proper definition (of a Sacrament) would be to say that it is an outward sign by which the Lord seals on our consciences the promise of his good will toward us in order to sustain the weakness of our faith; and we in turn attest our piety toward him in the presence of the Lord and of his angels and before men (Inst. book 4:14:1)."*

But Calvin believed it was possible for a person to be converted as a tiny infant by the grace of God. And regeneration could not be evidenced by saving faith, in such a tiny one. In opposing baptismal regeneration, he says, *"We hold that Baptism, instead of regenerating them or of saving them, only seals the salvation of which they were previously partakers (C.R. 9:101)."* When Calvin thinks of baptism as a seal in its fullest sense with regard to infants, he has in mind the possession of spiritual life in the infant. The promise of eternal life sealed and ratified by baptism was not common to all. Speaking of the promise of the New Covenant in Ezekiel 16:60, he notes, *"We know, therefore, that this promise was not common to all the sons of Abraham who were His offspring according to the flesh, but it was peculiar to the elect alone."*

Cunningham takes this view. *"A seal is something external, usually appended to a deed or document, or impressed upon a substance which forms the subject of negotiation or arrangement, and it is intended to strengthen or confirm conviction or faith, expectation or confidence. A seal, in this sense, the only sense in which it can apply to the Sacraments, is a thing of no real intrinsic value or importance apart from the engagement ratified (p.255)."*

But can we understand the Sacraments as seals objectively without faith being present? It seems not, at least not in their fullest sense as seals. *"Applying these obvious principles to Christianity and salvation, it is plain that the essential things as bearing on the practical result are arrangements and proposals, made and revealed by God, understood and accepted by men (p.255, 6)."* It is this last phrase, *"accepted by men"* which shows that the Sacrament is a seal when the thing signified is laid hold of by faith. He further clarifies this matter of sealing by noting that what is sealed to believers includes the change of state and character – which involves saving faith. *"Signifying and sealing naturally suggest the idea that the things signified and sealed not only exist, but are actually possessed by those to whom they are signified and sealed (p.278)."* Rutherford and Gillespie are also quoted by Cunningham to show that baptism is a seal, because it seals possessed saving faith (p.286). And Vitringa (Whose survey canvassed the major Reformers of the 16th century) in his summary of reformed doctrine on this point says explicitly, *"that unbelieving and impenitent persons receive only the naked signs but not the thing signified; that nothing is sealed to them...(p.265)."* He also gives as his tenth point, *"That the Sacraments do not, in the first instance, bestow grace, faith, and penitence, and are not the instruments of producing the beginnings of faith and penitence, but only confirm, increase and seal them (p.265)."*

Is this not too great a concession to baptists (anti-paedobaptists)?

In this Cunningham alleges that the Westminster divines make concessions in respect to infant baptism. Firstly they concede that the *"full and adequate idea of a Sacrament, as exhibited in adult baptism and the Lord's Supper, does not directly and thoroughly apply to the case of infant*

baptism." And that secondly they concede that it "is of more importance to bring out fully and explicitly, the sacramental principle – the true and full doctrine of the Sacraments – as applicable to adult baptism and the Lord's Supper, than to attempt to lay down some more vague and diluted view upon this subject, which might include the special and peculiar case of the baptism of infants (p.275)."

So to repeat the statement of the Shorter Catechism, "A Sacrament is a holy ordinance instituted by Christ, wherein by sensible signs, Christ and the benefits of the new Covenant are represented, sealed and applied to believers." (These words correspond with the Larger Catechism's 'signify, seal and exhibit')

Cunningham admits, "there is a great difficulty felt, - a difficulty which Scripture does not afford us adequate materials for removing, in laying down any distinct doctrine as to the bearing and efficacy of baptism, in the case of infants, to whom alone, ordinarily we see it administered. (p.245)" He goes on to say that even though we have biblical warrant for the baptism of infants, that the effect and import of baptism, "cannot be applied fully in all its extent to the baptism of infants. (p.246)" He observes that the divines must have used the expressions they did when dealing with the great truths of baptism, applying them to believers and not to infants, because they found it difficult or impossible to apply the full significance of baptism to infants.

What about infants?

Does this insight really make too great a concession to the anti-paedobaptists?

Cunningham does not think so. "It cannot be reasonably denied, that they have a good deal that is plausible to allege against infant baptism. But we are satisfied, that the plausibility of their arguments will always appear greatest, to men who have not been accustomed to distinguish between the primary, fundamental, and complete idea of this ordinance as exhibited in the baptism of adults, and the distinct and peculiar place which has been held by infant baptism, with the special grounds on which it rests."

Cunningham then lays down three "leading positions" which should be maintained in respect to infant baptism. Firstly men should, "abstain from deductions, probabilities, or conjectures, beyond what Scripture clearly sanctions." Secondly only the children of baptized believers should be baptized. And thirdly, parents should rest in the fact that their children who die in infancy are saved. They should bring up their children with a confident hope in their tasks as parents that their children would become confessing members of the Church. It also follows that parents and children should never see their child's baptism as assuring their regeneration, but that until proof of saving faith is evidenced by the improvement of their moral nature, they should be "treated and dealt with in all respects as if he were unregenerate, and still needing to be born again of the word of God through the belief of the truth (p.290)."

We must agree, I suggest, with Cunningham that the Confession and catechisms explain the meaning of the Sacraments with believers in mind. This cuts through much excess baggage that others have sought to burden infant baptism with. And it gives us a more realistic picture of the status of our children. Cunningham's advice, then, with respect to covenant children, is that we should be cautious, hopeful and realistic.

What do the Westminster symbols maintain in respect to the practice of infant baptism?

Sacraments and believers

Cunningham discusses this question in volume two of his 'Historical Theology.' And he lays down, what may seem to some startling propositions. He reiterates that the Reformers, when they discussed the meaning of the sacraments, assumed their relation to believers. He also includes "other Reformed Confessions (p.144)" with the Westminster symbols as holding this position. He then observes that **there must be some modification to Westminster's view of baptism as it applies to infants.**

What has been said about believer's baptism must be modified to some degree when we come to explain the rationale for the practice of Infant baptism

Cunningham admits that the records of the New Testament were dealing primarily with adults coming to faith, who were then baptized subsequent to their profession of faith. But since, in God's providence we normally see baptism administered to infants, he says that we need to notice, that the "*general definition of sacraments and the corresponding general description given of the objects and effects of baptism, do not apply fully and **without some modification** to the form in which we usually see baptism administered (p.145).*"

Admitting that opponents of infant baptism have much that is plausible in their favour, their argument is only plausible when the proper distinction is not made between the baptism of adults and the "*distinct and peculiar (meaning special) place which is held by the special subject of infant baptism.(p.146)*" Having noted that he does not intend to enter into a complete study of infant baptism, he quotes the WCoF 28:8:4, "*Not only those that do actually profess faith in and obedience unto Christ, but also the infants of one or both believing parents are to be baptised.*" Here he lays down a startling proposition. "*We are called to maintain nothing more upon the subject than this simple and plain proposition (p.147).*" Infant baptism as such is just an "*appendage or adjunct to the general doctrine of baptism.*" He observes that it is when the friends of truth try to describe in detail what occurs in infant baptism, beyond the need to support this simple proposition, they have come unstuck. By way of analogy, using the doctrine of the Trinity, he suggests that "*detailed explanations*" that go beyond Revelation do more harm than good.

What can we say?

If we are to support this statement on infant baptism, precisely because the Confessions, and the Scripture discuss primarily the baptisms of adult believer's, then we need to admit the modifications that infant baptism implies. Although the Scriptures give little explicit information, we know this one truth, that "*salvation through Christ is just as accessible to them as to adults (p.148).*"

Children can receive the spiritual blessings signified by baptism

The Scriptures give evidence of this in a particular context. This context is that "*in the whole history of our race, God's covenanted dealings with His people, with respect to spiritual blessings, have had regard to children as well as to themselves; so that the children as well as the parents have been admitted to the spiritual blessings of God's Covenants, and to the outward signs and seals of these covenants (p.149).*" It cannot be denied that some children do receive the covenantal blessings of justification and sanctification, and so are entitled, unless there is explicit teaching in the Bible to the contrary, to the outward signs and seals of these blessings.

Federal holiness

This covenant context also teaches us that there is a '*federal holiness.*' This federal holiness, is so called because it is a holiness that is possessed by those attached to the *foedus*, the Latin name for covenant. Children are members too of the Covenant of Grace, which is the arrangement by which God deals with men in the provision of salvation. This one Covenant of Grace undergirds the various administrations which we see in Scripture of that one Covenant. Man can either be in the Covenant as a **legal relationship**; sometimes described as the external sphere of the covenant, or in the Covenant as a **communion of life**; sometimes called the internal sphere of the Covenant. Children are at least in the legal or external sphere of this Covenant. Because the children of the Old Testament people of God were in the Covenant of Grace in the first legal sense, then they too possessed a federal holiness, which entitled them to the sacrament of circumcision. Likewise in the New Covenant (the final administration of the one Covenant of Grace), we find children referred to as holy. This cannot be a personal, intrinsic holiness, but a federal (Covenantal) holiness. We read of this federal holiness in 1 Corinthians 7:14,

*For the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her believing husband; for otherwise you children are unclean, but now they are **holy**."*

Cunningham is certain that this way of arguing, though inferential, is sufficient, *"in cumulo to establish the conclusion, that the children of believing parents are to be baptized, unless either the leading positions of which it consists can be satisfactorily proved to have no sanction in Scripture, or some general position can be established which proves the incompatibility of infant baptism, either with the character of the Christian dispensation in general, or with the qualities and properties of the ordinance of baptism in particular (p.149)."* The combination of their federal holiness and the truth that these children are, in God's grace, capable of possessing the blessings of the Covenant as a communion of Life qualifies them for the external sign and seal of the Covenant.

It is also true that we cannot be so explicit when it comes to infants

Although we can clearly say of an adult that he is not to receive baptism unless he has a credible expression of faith, we can't be so explicit with infants. As a matter of fact, as far as infants are concerned we cannot precisely and definitely lay down a relationship between infant baptism and the blessings of salvation – justification and sanctification – in respect to an individual. We just plainly do not have enough data in the Holy Scriptures to do this. We cannot say that God has regenerated any given infant prior to baptism or during baptism or after baptism.

Men always strive for certainty and this has led to two errors in the case of infant baptism. On the one hand baptismal regeneration has been taught by Roman Catholics, High Anglicans and Lutherans - teaching that every baptized infant is born again. The Baptist (anti-paedobaptist) position, in contrast has ruled out the legitimacy of baptizing infants because, in their view, the necessary ground of prior faith has not been exhibited. But quoting Paley, Cunningham sagely observes that *"true fortitude of understanding consists in not suffering what we do know to be disturbed by what we do not know (p.151)."* He wants to say that even though we do not know as much, in respect to the connection between the sign and the thing signified when it comes to infants, we should not let the fact be obscured that the Bible still does give adequate grounds for infant baptism.

If the Baptist position, of the necessity of prior faith could be proved from Scripture, *"if this proposition could be established,"* then infants who cannot show faith even if they had it, would have to be excluded from baptism. And while Cunningham openly admits that much can be marshalled in favour of the Baptist position, their evidence falls short of the minimum requirement for proof. Every one, paedobaptists and anti-paedobaptists alike, concur that the Scriptures teach by precept and example that any person who is capable of professing faith, should not be baptized until he has done so. The Scriptures show that *ordinarily* baptism follows a prior profession of faith. Cunningham honestly confesses that if this was all that we knew of the subject in Scripture then infants should be precluded from baptism. But because there is no direct teaching in Scripture, or implication that can be adduced from Scripture, that shows that the possession of faith is of the essence of baptism, the Baptist position does not do enough to negate the positive and direct evidence in Scripture for infant baptism.

Sign and seal?

Previously it was stressed that the Westminster view understands the sacraments to be signs and seals to the regenerate in their fullest sense. The reason for this is that a seal is there to strengthen and confirm faith which must already exist. When we describe baptism as a sign and seal to adult believers, it is correct to say that what is signified and sealed is the righteousness of faith and therefore the other spiritual blessings that flow from their justification, contained in the covenant of grace. Cunningham had been at pains to point out the role of baptism as a seal.

"A seal is something external, usually appended to a deed or document, or impressed upon a substance which forms the subject of negotiation or arrangement, and it is intended to

strengthen or confirm conviction of faith, expectation or confidence. A seal in this sense, the only sense in which it can apply to the Sacraments, is a thing of no real intrinsic value or importance apart from the engagement ratified (The Reformers p.255)"

In other words for baptism to be a seal, regeneration is a prerequisite.

Does this mean that it is wrong to call baptism a sign and seal when it is applied to infants? It seems not. In spite of the strong statements that show the place of faith in the correct use of the sacraments as a sign and seal, faith is not of the essence of regeneration.

Faith not of the essence

That faith is not of the essence of regeneration has to be admitted anyway if the salvation of infants who die in infancy is to be possible. Since all admit that, at least some infants (and many Baptists would say all infants who die – including C.H. Spurgeon) are saved without conscious saving faith, the blessings that baptism signifies, namely justification and sanctification (without which none can go to heaven) are possessed apart from faith. These things alone, justification and sanctification, are what is signified and sealed in baptism. Therefore faith cannot *"stand in the same relation to baptism as these blessings do, and for this obvious and conclusive reason, that it is not directly and expressly signified or represented in the external ordinance itself, as they are (p.152)."*

Calvin was also confronted with the difficulty of explaining how infant baptism, was properly a sign and seal of repentance and faith. This was a question that the Anabaptists threw at him. Since baptism is a sign of repentance and faith, how could it be applied to tiny infants who could neither repent nor believe? Calvin's solution was to stress that the efficacy of baptism was not tied to a single point in time. In his *Institutes* (Book 4:16:19, 20), he observes that the Sacrament of circumcision was also a sign of repentance (Jeremiah 4:4; 9:25; cf. Deuteronomy 10:16; 30:60). It was also the seal of the righteousness of faith (Romans 4:11). Circumcision was applied to infants and therefore so should baptism. But while this showed that a Sacrament could be applied to an infant in the Old Testament Church (Of course Baptists deny the spiritual references to circumcision when applied to infants), there was still lack of clarity as to what was signified and sealed. Calvin puts it in the same place like this.

"To sum up, this objection can be solved without difficulty: infants are baptized into future repentance and faith, and even though these have not yet been formed in them, the seed of both lies hidden within them by the secret working of the Spirit."

This is another way of saying that the Sacrament will be a sign and seal subjectively to the infant when they grow up and exercise their faith. Of course, this only applied to infants who were indeed regenerated as infants. The Westminster Confession also takes this approach, not tying the efficacy of baptism to a single point in time. *"The efficacy of baptism is not tied to that moment of time wherein it is administered; yet notwithstanding, by the right use of this ordinance, the grace promised is not only offered, but really exhibited and conferred by the Holy Ghost, to such (whether of age or infants) as that grace belongeth unto, according to the counsel of God's own will, in his appointed time (WCOF 28:6)."*

In the meantime, the parents of an infant who dies in infancy can be assured that their child possessed the reality of justification and sanctification. Baptism in this instance can be properly said to be a sign and seal of these blessings. Certainly the potentiality of their faith, which was not given the opportunity to flourish, existed with the child.

But it must be admitted that this potential faith does not lie with all infants who reach an age of discretion. Therefore the ground of faith could not apply indiscriminately to all children in covenant homes. Cunningham posits another ground.

If faith is not the ground of an infant's baptism, what is?

A major modification required in respect to infant baptism, is the need of another ground to replace saving faith. Cunningham admits, for the sake of argument, that if something more than a capacity to receive justification and sanctification is required as a ground for the baptism of infants, it can be

supplied. Certainly faith is a **necessary ground** for those who are capable of professing it, but there is something analogous in the case of infants. The federal holiness which can be proved is theirs, because of their relationship to believing parents and therefore their suitability for inclusion in the covenant, is a **sufficient ground** for their baptism. Cunningham says that this ground can be conclusively proven from Scripture and without the direct teaching that shows that each baptism recorded in the New Testament requires previous saving faith, it is sufficient to endorse the practice of infant baptism. He quotes Calvin approvingly who also pointed to this ground. Although it is not Cunningham's purpose to show in detail the Scriptural proofs to sustain his position, he feels he has nevertheless done enough to show the justification for the practice of infant baptism. Other theologians can be consulted that show this detail. Their usual line of reasoning concludes that there is a continuity between the Old Testament Sacrament of circumcision and the New Testament Sacrament of baptism. R. L. Dabney is one who stresses that infant baptism is the rite which gives access to the privileges and membership of the visible church, while retaining its significance as a sign and seal of the righteousness that comes by faith for all who believe.

The positive evidences that Cunningham refers to which support the practice of infant baptism are, of course, denied by opponents of the practice. But it seems that a Biblical argument, as Cunningham concluded in his day, that the NT initiatory rite of baptism is properly withheld from infants has yet to be proved. The federal holiness of infants, the status of infants in the Old Testament Church, the common sacramental significance of circumcision and baptism, the examples of household baptisms and the example of our Lord who received infants and blessed them, are adequate reasons for including infants in the baptismal rite. This type of argument has not been countered adequately for a man of piety and theological acumen like William Cunningham. He supports his position and the position of the Westminster symbols on the subject of infant baptism, with the gentle and ironic spirit of one who submits himself to the authority of the Word of God.

But even in his explanation of the legitimate ground for the practice of Infant baptism, Cunningham feels he has gone beyond what was required to sustain the simple proposition in the Confession, that

"Not only those that do actually profess faith in and obedience unto Christ, but also the infants of one or both believing parents are to be baptized."

Would Cunningham's discussion help a Baptist change his mind regarding infant baptism? His biggest hurdle to overcome will still be his lack of acceptance of the covenantal continuity between the Old and the New Testaments. But for those of us who accept the continuity assumed by Cunningham, we can concur with the legitimacy of the practice of infant baptism.

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