

LINKING SMALL CHILDREN WITH INFANTS IN THE THEOLOGY OF BAPTIZING

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In a previous article, "Indifferentism and Rigorism,"¹ I argued that we should baptize small children who give a credible profession of faith in Christ. Since Christian faith is primarily trust rather than intellectual mastery, even a young child can give a credible profession. In judging what is credible leaders must take into account the capacities of the one who is expressing faith.

As a result of change among both baptists and paedobaptists, we may hope to see some degree of rapprochement. But undeniable differences still remain. What, now, is to be done with very young infants before they can talk, or shortly after they speak their first words? We still have a troubling question here.

I. *The status of infants*

Within the Reformed tradition, a considerable number of people have set forth arguments in favor of paedobaptism (baptizing infant children of believers).² I believe that their arguments are worthy. But many people, including Reformed baptists, are still not persuaded.³ I would therefore like to explore a complementary approach. We start not with the promise to Abraham but with the preceding reflections about children.

However, our reflections still do not include infants. Nor is it possible directly to extend the argument to them. How do we know how they are

¹ Vern Sheridan Poythress, "Indifferentism and Rigorism in the Church: With Implications for Baptizing Small Children," *WTJ* 59 (1997) 13-29.

² Among the best, Meredith G. Kline, *By Oath Consigned* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968); Pierre Marcel, *The Biblical Doctrine of Infant Baptism* (London: James Clarke, 1953); John P. Sartelle, *What Christian Parents Should Know about Infant Baptism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1985); Francis Schaeffer, *Baptism* (Wilmington, DE: Cross Publishing, 1973).

³ See Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) 969-80; David Kingdon, *Children of Abraham: A Reformed Baptist View of Baptism, the Covenant, and Children* (Worthing: Henry E. Walter; Haywards Heath: Carey Publications, 1973); Paul King Jewett, *Infant Baptism and the Covenant of Grace: An Appraisal of the Argument that as Infants Were Once Circumcised, so They Should Now Be Baptized* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978).

receiving the gospel? How could the Holy Spirit be working in them before the time when they have come to some degree of mastery of at least a fragment of human language? The answer is not so clear.

People may still be influenced by a pattern that has been set in motion with respect to older children. I personally found that my own attitude altered once I began to reckon with 2- and 3- and 4-year-olds. Instinctively I could not withdraw from 1-month- and 3-month-old-infants the welcome that I have just given to children who were a little older. Perhaps my reaction was due partly to the fact that I could sense how the work of God's Spirit might mysteriously extend into regions that we cannot penetrate rationally.

We have seen already that faith is not confined to those who can verbalize their faith. An adult who is able to hear but not to speak might have faith. Faith is primarily trust in Christ, not verbal articulation of that trust. Moreover, trust can be manifested and demonstrated by nonverbal actions as well by verbal confession. Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac demonstrated the reality of his faith (James 2:21).

For very young children, the children's response to their parents is the primary avenue for expressing their relation to God. Parents represent God to their children, by virtue of their authority, their responsibilities, and their role as a channel for God's blessings. Children first learn what God is like primarily through their parents' love and discipline. The fatherhood of God is represented through a good human father. God's forgiveness of sins is represented primarily through the parents' forgiveness and patience towards their children.

It makes a great deal of difference whether the parents are Christians. If they are, they pray for their children in the name and power of Christ, they speak to them of Christ, and they endeavor to bring Christ's love to their children through their own ministry of Christian love. Children are immersed in an atmosphere of Christian ministry—we might say church ministry—from the beginning.

Thus, in theory the idea of "credible profession" might be pushed back early. Young children can demonstrate faith even through nonverbal actions of loving their parents. John the Baptist demonstrated the work of the Holy Spirit in his life when he leaped in the womb (Luke 1:15,44). For a very young child, trust in God is very much fused with trust in parents. Trust in parents is largely inchoate and inarticulate. But it is nonetheless real.

Children trust their parents in comprehensive fashion. They trust that their parents will provide for them, care for them, nourish them, love them, forgive them, and look after them in every way. And such trust, one might easily argue, implicitly includes trust in the fullness that the parents bring to bear for the children's benefit when they muster other resources besides their own. If trust is inclusive, it includes trust in the resources of the

Christian community that the parents know how to call on, and trust in the resources of God himself in whom the parents trust and whose aid they constantly invoke.

It might seem that I have pushed hard in the direction of finding genuine faith even in very young children. But it would be artificial and speculative to place any great weight on demonstrating the character of the child's response. It is much more important that we recognize that God can meet and spiritually bless such young children. Obviously the very young child is more passive, and the signs of response may be very vague. But the blessing of God, his spiritual care, rebuke, comfort, and strengthening are quite vividly real, as they come largely through the channel of the child's parents. To a large extent, these very young children are receiving the substance of the care that ought to characterize participation in the Christian community.

The experience of the Christian community also shows what happens to children who are raised in this kind of environment. Let us suppose that the parents and the larger community are diligent in practicing their faith and rearing children "in the training and instruction of the Lord" (Eph 6:4). Let us suppose that they are diligent in praying for their children to be saved and to grow spiritually. Then the children will be professing faith in Christ when they are two and three and four. There are no four-year-old apostates in a healthy Christian community.

Infants do not directly manifest their faith by verbal confession. But the prayers of their parents, the training of their parents, and the power of the Holy Spirit in the Christian community are evidence that they *will* give credible professions by the time they are a few years old. One might then argue that this evidence is in practice just as convincing as a verbal confession. There is no more danger that the children will apostasize when four years old than that an adult convert would apostasize after four years in the faith.

One might therefore argue that we should baptize infants on the grounds that their parents and the community have prayed for their salvation and have in other ways committed themselves to giving the spiritual nourishment that should accompany prayer. To the eye of faith, these prayers and the merciful character of Christ are solid evidence of what Christ will do through these children in the rest of their life. It is just as reasonable to believe that they will grow in faith as it is reasonable to believe that a newly converted adult will grow. Faith contrasts with sight, based on supposed infallible proof that someone is regenerate.

As a paedobaptist myself, I believe that we can claim God's promise made to Abraham. "I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you" (Gen 17:2). God will be the God of my children. But not everyone accepts this use of the Abrahamic promise. They may perhaps be helped to accept

it if they actually begin to *see* the effects of the promise operating in the life of the church. God *does* care for our children and bring them to trust in Christ when we are faithful to our covenantal obligations.⁴

II. *The significance of the Gospel narratives*

To make further steps in appreciating the significance of Christian community, it is helpful for us to receive the illumination of the four Gospels. The Gospels describe particular incidents from Jesus' earthly life. The incidents happened only once, but they are recorded because they show something about who Jesus is and what he does now as well as what he did then. He is the same Lord (Heb 13:8).

For example, during his earthly life Jesus ate and drank with notorious "sinners" and tax collectors. He pronounced the forgiveness of sins. The recorded incidents of this type, together with the whole tenor of the life of Jesus, are meant to speak to those who feel the weight and guilt of their sins *now*. We can present the matter quite concretely. Imagine that Jesus were present on earth now, as he was in the first century. Imagine that he came through your town or neighborhood. What would you do? Would you be willing to go to him and eat with him? Would you want to ask for his forgiveness? And what would he do in return? The entire Gospel record makes it clear that Jesus would receive you, no matter how grievous were your sins, if you came to him in repentance.

But the sinner's reaction might well be, "Unfortunately he is not physically present on earth now. How can I hear his voice, and be received by him, and be sure that I am forgiven? He is no longer here." Or is he? The ascension of Jesus to the right hand of God, and his pouring out of the Spirit, represent an advance rather than a withdrawal of his grace. He is "with you always, to the close of the age" (Matt 28:20). Of course, Christ is God, and as such has always been present everywhere. But as Messiah and human mediator of salvation, he came at first only to Palestine. Now,

⁴ Even these reflections about infants are perhaps not the whole story. I suspect that our Western individualism affects us. It seems natural to ask whether individuals have faith. But when we are affected by individualism it no longer makes sense to ask whether groups can have faith—a family, for example, or the church as a whole. Yet I do not think that the Bible teaches a bare individualism. We are not merely individual souls. By God's design, we are people who from the beginning are related to other people. And our knowledge is not merely ours individually, but to a larger extent than we realize the knowledge of those who are closest to us. See, e.g., Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Doubleday, 1966) 129-83.

Hence it is not inappropriate to think of the Christian faith as a shared family faith. Family baptism might be an appropriate response to the family's faith, as expressed through its adults. I believe that this community aspect of faith is important. But it has never been convincing to baptists, so I will not pursue it further.

through his Messianic reign and the gift of the Holy Spirit, he can be present everywhere, rather than merely in Capernaum or Cana or Jerusalem. His words of promise can be heard by people all over the world rather than merely by those within earshot of his physical body.

Thus, every repentant sinner, and not merely one sinful woman, is meant to hear Jesus' words, "Your sins are forgiven," and "Your faith has saved you; go in peace" (Luke 7:48,50). In an extended sense, through the continued ministry of the Holy Spirit who applies the words to our hearts, Jesus speaks these words to us today. We may meet Jesus today, and fellowship with him in his heavenly home, just as really and effectively as when he was physically on earth. Indeed, the present condition exceeds the earlier one, as Jesus points out. He says, "it is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you" (John 16:7).

Our situation is fundamentally different from that of the original disciples, because Jesus has died, has risen, and has gone to the Father. Yet in another sense it is fundamentally the same, because we can participate in the same reality of fellowship with him. We can come to him to be freed from the devil, as the demoniacs were healed. We can come to him for physical healing and for the spiritual healing that it symbolizes (Luke 5:20). Sometimes, indeed, physical healing is now delayed (2 Tim 4:20; Phil 2:27). But the physical healings that Christ worked during his earthly life betoken the healing of the body through the resurrection, and all who come to Christ will receive this healing (1 Cor 15:47-57; Phil 3:21; John 6:54, 58). Through the Lord's Supper we come and eat with him, in a manner that exceeds the experience of the tax collectors and sinners who sat with him at a common table.

The experience of the Christian community together is the experience of being disciples. Like the twelve disciples, we are subject to Jesus' commands, we are commissioned to go out, we enjoy his fellowship, his welcome, his instruction, and his rebukes. We gather in the presence of Jesus in his heavenly city (Heb 12:22-29), a city greater and more august than earthly Palestinian Jerusalem.

How do our children fit into this picture? Again, we may most effectively ask, "What would you do if Jesus passed through your town or neighborhood?" Would you want to take your children to Jesus as well as to go yourself? If you are a Christian, the answer is that of course you would. Would you like to bring your children to Jesus so that he could pray for them and bless them? Matt 19:13-15; Mark 10:13-16; and Luke 18:15-17 provide obvious encouragement. Christian instincts would provide the same answers even if we did not possess these specific passages. And then the same train of reasoning applies. On first thought, one might claim that nowadays "unfortunately Jesus is not here." On second thought, he is indeed here, through his continual reign and through the presence of his Spirit. He is here in the Christian community (Matt 18:20).

When Christians receive from the Lord a newborn child, what do they sense that they must do? The child is a truly awesome gift from God. At the

same time, the child is an awesome responsibility for the parents. The first impulse can only be to present the child to God, and to ask for his blessing. We ask that his grace and saving power be exerted on the entire family. Moreover, the parents are encouraged by Mark 10:13-16, or perhaps merely by their general sense that Jesus loves them and is at hand in every aspect of their lives. They bring the child to the church, the assembly of Christians, because here Jesus manifests himself most intensively, and here they can receive the ministry of Jesus not only directly but through other Christians who are channels for Christ's love.

Many baptist churches have dedication ceremonies for infants. In the presence of the assembly the parents dedicate or consecrate the child to God. Is Jesus present there to meet them? Of course he is. "You have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the first-born, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant" (Heb 12:22-24).

We sometimes underestimate the significance of how Jesus received the children in Matt 19:13-15; Mark 10:13-16; and Luke 18:15-17.⁵ Jesus not only welcomed children, but prayed for them (Matt 19:13). He blessed them (Mark 10:16). Such a blessing was not merely a vain wish that good things would happen. It was a pronouncement from the Messiah, the final mediator of God's goodness, that goodness will come to them. Aaron, the high priest, was instructed to bless the Israelites by saying, "The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace" (Num 6:24-25). Now Jesus turns to bless the children—and Jesus is the Melchizedekian priest, the high priest forever who supersedes the priesthood of Aaron and his descendants. He blesses them, we may suppose, by asking for the light of God's face and for peace, and by giving them the favor of his presence and fellowship.

When we translate this picture into the present time, it becomes if anything even more profound. Parents bring their children to Jesus in Christian worship. And what does Jesus do? Jesus receives them! He embraces them (Mark 10:16). He is the divine mediator, with all authority in heaven and on earth, who opens the way into the Most Holy Place, the throne-room of God. In priestly prayer, as the final intercessor before God, he blesses them with the blessings of God.⁶ And he says this word to us, "Let the little

⁵ I am indebted to Dr. Edmund P. Clowney for many of these insights.

⁶ The blessings are real, just as Aaron's were. But the blessings of God's goodness that Israel enjoyed were turned into curses when Israel disobeyed and despised God's offer (Deut 28; Amos 3:2). Likewise, participation in baptism and in the fellowship of the Christian community are properly blessings, but make us liable to intense judgment if we despise them (Heb 10:26-31). Properly used, baptism and Christian fellowship are channels promoting our good, our salvation. But apostates will bear God's judgment. To them, the waters of baptism no longer presage cleansing but engulfing destruction. On the judgmental aspects of baptism, see Meredith G. Kline, *By Oath Consigned*, 50-83; Allen Mawhinney, "Baptism, Servanthood, and Sonship," *WTJ* 49 (1987) 35-64.

children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these" (Luke 18:16). Here is the authoritative invitation to bring our children to him, the divine encouragement. And infant children are included (βρεφῇ in Luke 18:15).⁷

⁷ Charles H. Spurgeon, "Children Brought to Christ, Not to the Font, A Sermon Delivered on Sunday Morning, July 24th, 1864," *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications, 1969) 10:419, argues with some plausibility that these passages have in view toddlers and older children, that is, children who could walk and understand Jesus' speech. Spurgeon observes that in verse 16 Jesus called the children, "which he would hardly have done if they could not comprehend his call: and he said, 'Suffer the little children to come,' which implies that they could come, and doubtless they did come, . . ." Several points may be made in response to Spurgeon.

First, what is the meaning of βρεφῇ (NIV "babies")? The term can appropriately be applied to babies still in the womb (Luke 1:41) and to newborn babies (Luke 2:12,16; Acts 7:19). Presumably the term denotes babies with a range of ages. It is difficult without extensive evidence to determine an upper cut-off point in age. But without further evidence one cannot simply assume that toddlers are included. At the very least, the use of this more specific term instead of the more general word παῖδια ("children") puts focus on the young age of these children, not on their being old enough to walk as Spurgeon emphasizes. Moreover, note the phrase "also . . . babies" (καὶ τὰ βρέφη) in Luke 18:15. "Also, even" (καὶ) suggests that the babies are in addition to others. The use of the more general term "child" (παῖδιον) at later points in the passage makes it fairly plain that babies came in addition to children who were somewhat older. The parallel passages in Matthew and Mark, which use only the more general term "child" (παῖδιον), confirm the point. βρεφῇ in Luke 18:15 is thus specifically contrasted with the generality of "children," making it more problematic to assume that only toddlers and older children were involved.

Second, what is the meaning of Jesus' calling the children in verse 16? Spurgeon argues that the children must be able to understand Jesus' words. But the attending participial clause introduced by λέγων is a construction with an adverbial participle of means or manner (Ernest de Witt Burton, *Syntax of the Moods and Tenses in New Testament Greek* [3d ed.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1898], §443). From this construction, we may infer that Jesus called the children by uttering the words given in the subsequent clause. The quoted speech, "Let the little children . . .," thus provides us with the substance of his call. This speech addresses the disciples in the second person, and the children themselves only indirectly in the third person.

Jesus called the children, not by means of a direct address to them that would presuppose their ability to understand, but by means of an address to the disciples, who have it in their power to ensure that the call is adequately responded to. In fact, we may reasonably assume that the children included a mixture of ages, as the "also" of verse 15 hints. Older children who were walking on their own would of course be encouraged by hearing Jesus' words. Some toddlers might have asked to be carried, even if they were able to walk. They would be encouraged, though they would not have had to do anything. Parents who were carrying infants or toddlers, and parents who were coming along side their older children, would also be encouraged to continue to bring their children toward Jesus. But all these are intended secondary effects of a speech that is directed primarily to the disciples. Hence we cannot confidently deduce that all the children needed to understand in order for the call to be real. Spurgeon presupposes exactly what is not provided in the text, namely that calling the children must mean calling them by directly addressing them.

Third, what is the meaning of the directive that the children "come to me" in verse 16? The older children come by walking, the toddlers come by walking or being carried, while the infants come by being carried. The word "come" (ερχεσθαι) is in fact a quite general word for physical movement, and does not contain in itself any specific indication concerning the manner of locomotion (cf. Matt 7:25; 13:4; Heb 6:7). Spurgeon has once again assumed something more specific than the text warrants.

But in what sense does Jesus receive the children? The Pharisees grumbled that "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them" (Luke 15:2). Jesus welcomed and received inquirers. He did not meet only with people who were confirmed, mature disciples. If Jesus ate with sinners, he did not thereby indicate that they were all his disciples or that it did not matter whether they continued in sin. Hence we must distinguish between two kinds of welcome. Jesus can welcome someone as an inquirer, or else as a disciple.

Baptists have, I think, often understood the passages about children to be speaking about inquirers rather than disciples. Hence the lesson for now is that we should pay attention to children, respect them, and encourage them. But we do not receive them as disciples until they are older.

However, as I pointed out in the previous article, "Indifferentism and Rigorism," small children can be Jesus' disciples, not merely inquirers. In addition, the fact that Jesus blessed the children is significant (Mark 10:16). In almost all cases in the Bible, blessing takes place within the circle of God's people, not outside.⁸ God's justice requires that outsiders be destroyed, either in hell or through death and resurrection with Christ, leading to a new life (2 Cor 5:17). We pray that outsiders would be converted, but not that they would be blessed in a way that simply confirms their present course. Hence the fact of blessing also suggests that these children are within the circle of blessings belonging to the kingdom of God, that is, blessings including salvation itself.

III. *The heavenly assembly*

To proceed beyond this point we need to reflect on the meaning of heavenly worship in the presence of Christ. We need to be overwhelmed by the majesty of God, raptured by the praise contained in the songs of living creatures and of myriads of angels (Rev 4:11-5:14). We need to see Jesus in his glory and in his love and mercy. Together with all the saints, we need

Fourth, it seems natural to assume that the statement in verse 16, "Let the children come to me," is to be taken broadly, and does not exclude infants of any age. Does Spurgeon seriously want to argue that Jesus would *not* have been willing to embrace and bless children who were under one year old, if their parents had brought them? Thus, it seems unnecessary to establish the exact ages of the children who did in fact come to Jesus. We ought simply to acknowledge the general principle: he welcomes them when they are brought, whatever their age.

In the larger context of his sermon, Spurgeon explicitly recognizes that a passage like this one encourages parents to bring their children to Jesus now, by praying for them and instructing them in the Christian faith (*ibid.*, pp. 416-17). I agree that such actions are included among the secondary implications of the passage. But Spurgeon appears to have left out the corporate dimensions of the Christian worship. The church presents itself and its members to Christ in heavenly assembly every Sunday. Surely this assembly provides the most immediate point of contact with the instances in the Gospels where Jesus meets with disciples or would-be disciples seeking his blessing.

⁸ But Rom 12:14 and Luke 6:28 are exceptions.

in our assembling together to experience more of "how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ" (Eph 3:18), to know "the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe" (Eph 1:18-19).

When, in the assembly, we experience in-depth fellowship with Christ in heaven, the status of our children clarifies itself. How can we fail to bring them to Jesus, in accordance with his words? And do we not believe that he receives them? That he prays for them? That he blesses them? If he thereby makes them participants in the heavenly assembly, and in his mediatorial blessing, he has made them participants in the substance of Christian community. We must receive those whom Jesus receives. If he embraces them, we must also. They must be received as members of our Christian fellowship in no less a sense than all our brothers and sisters.

Baptists already do such things to a degree. They practice "infant dedication." Presbyterians and other infant baptists do these things to a degree. They practice infant baptism. But we are all woefully inconsistent with the deep realities of our Christian life together. The mere fact of going through words of dedication or a baptismal ceremony is not the whole of it. Spiritual realities are being expressed in our actions, and at best we are only half awake to them. Our faith is weak. Because blessings are often given in proportion to or in accordance with our faith, our whole life together is weak. It is as if we were providing ourselves and our children with a few scraps to keep them alive when all the time the king's table is groaning under the weight of luscious food.

In my view, infant dedication among baptists is a kind of baptism without water. They dimly sense the spiritual realities of the heavenly Zion. They know instinctively what response is required of families and of children in particular. Does it matter, then, whether we call it dedication or baptism, and whether we use water or not? Yes, it does matter. But, even the partial and faint character of our understanding, and the faulty character of our religious formalities, does not utterly abolish the goodness of God and his ability to pour out undeserved blessings.

Water is appropriate. Children are born dead in sin, born with sinful natures headed for destruction (Ps 51:5; Eph 2:3). Nothing spiritually unclean can fittingly be brought into God's holy presence. The water in baptism symbolizes cleansing. It is thus a symbol of the heavenly laver or washing basin (cf. Exod 30:17-21). Christ needs to wash us in order to receive us. He provides in heaven, through his blood, "a fountain . . . to cleanse them from sin and iniquity" (Zech 13:1). Just as the priests entered the Holy Place only after passing by the washing basin, so we enter the heavenly Holy Place only after passing through Christ's cleansing. Baptism applied to adults or to children signifies this heavenly cleansing.

The mere mechanical performance of a rite does not force God into action. But God promises to bless us and meet us through Christ when we

respond in faith, that is, when we appropriate the divinely ordained significance of the rite, when we see it as an epiphany of heavenly worship.

In this respect, baptism is meant to affect not only the person baptized, but the entire Christian community, to whom Christ addresses the symbolism. In baptism, together with the totality of Christ's address to us, Christ speaks of and betokens the totality of his heavenly ministry. Thus, when baptism is seen for what it is, as a divinely ordained symbolic communication to us, it is filled with meaning and is a channel for God's blessing to all the church. We enter into the Most Holy Place with Christ, because Christ presents himself to us and transfigures us through meeting us in baptism as his own divinely ordained action. When we ignore it or pervert it, we despise our Lord's wisdom and can expect to suffer for it.⁹

Families saw the significance of Jesus' blessing when they brought their infants to Jesus long ago. Families do so now even when their small children are passive. The children who were brought for Jesus' blessing during his earthly life were, as far as we know, circumcised as a mark of their cleansing and separation for an Israelite holy priesthood. So now, when Jesus receives children, it is appropriate to wash them with water in order to mark the cleansing of sin and to signify their entrance into the church, that one universal earthly community that has fellowship with Christ in heaven.

But an objection may once again arise. Does Jesus receive infant children as inquirers or as disciples? That is, are infants people who are outside looking in, with whom he shows friendliness, or people that he joins to his community in response to the parents' offering? One cannot "prove" an answer to the satisfaction of everyone. By nature the reasoning is analogical. We relate Jesus' past earthly life by analogy to his present heavenly life. We relate our visible actions as a church to the heavenly actions of forgiveness and salvation. Who can say with dogmatic confidence at exactly what points the analogies hold and at what points they break down?

However, I think that continued participation in heavenly worship has power to straighten out our vision in this area as in other areas. Let us

⁹ The robust ability to understand baptism as an aspect of our communion with Christ and our heavenly worship is, I believe, a key to its proper use and significance. Historically, high sacramentalist views of baptism have frequently led to the degeneration of baptism into a quasi-magical rite. The displacement of faith by magic, mechanism, or ecclesiastical arrogance then undermines the real potential for baptism to exercise its proper function as a means of spiritual communion and divine blessing.

In reaction to such abuse, low views of baptism arise. Out of understandable abhorrence for perversions, they downgrade the significance of baptism. Historically, this move has frequently led to suppression of the full force of the symbolic dimension involved in spiritual communion with Christ. Baptism is treated as mere sign of something absent, or as a mere convenient occasion for converts to testify to their commitment. Lack of faith and lack of spiritual perception here take the form of insensitivity to the depth embedded in the rite, when it is properly understood in its divinely ordained connections with the totality of Scripture. People then largely miss the force of baptism as an enacted word of Christ. It is a powerful, life-changing communication from Christ concerning his glory and mercy, and concerning the application of his death and resurrection life to us.

pursue a bit farther. Do we think that we can actually bring our children before Jesus in the heavenly assembly? Such a step is much more "dangerous" than bringing children before Jesus on earth. It is more "dangerous" than going up to the top of Mount Sinai, because even Sinai was only a shadow of the full glory of the present heavenly assembly. The heavenly assembly is holy. Only one who is perfect can enter the presence of God without dying. The only way to protect our children is to have them receive cleansing.

Hence it appears that there are only two alternatives. First, we are going to bring them, through the cleansing rite of baptism and the heavenly cleansing worked by the Lord himself. Or else we are not going to bring them at all. But we still go ourselves in order to request prayer for them. The latter situation would be like parents going to Jesus while he was on earth and requesting that Jesus pray for their children (as in Mark 7:24-30).

In addition, consider what we as parents are going to learn to ask Jesus when we come to the heavenly assembly. Do we ask only that Jesus would treat our children as inquirers? Do we ask *only* that Jesus will give them long life or material prosperity or rich opportunities to hear the gospel? Or do we ask that he will actually save them, and bless them with all the blessing of salvation? What answer does Jesus give to the latter request? What does it mean to have faith here? What does it mean to appreciate that we have access into the heavenly sanctuary, in order to bring even the most stupendous request (Eph 3:19-21)?

I personally think that infant baptism is biblically warranted. But this conclusion should be no cause for complacency or pride on the part of infant baptists. Those of us who believe in infant baptism are inconsistent with regard to the total life implications of heavenly worship. Nor should this conclusion cause impatience towards those whose practice differs. Their sins and problems and deficiencies are to a large extent our sins as well, or in some instances the mirror-image opposite of ours. We need to grow together in our union with Christ, into the full stature of Christ (Eph 4:11-16). The growth of true worship will, through the power of Christ's presence, transform us into his likeness (2 Cor 3:18). The controversies over baptism are best resolved not merely by cleverness of argument but by worship that brings the overflowing of the Holy Spirit, who will wipe away the dimness of our faith and our understanding.

Let me put matters in another way. The status of children within our communities, as well as the related question of infant baptism, is, I believe, easy to answer when our spiritual vision and our fellowship with Christ are sufficiently deep. The answer has lain smack before our eyes all the time, in the words of Jesus, "Let the little children come to me, . . ." (Luke 18:16). We have failed to appropriate the answer, or even to see it as an answer, not mainly because we lacked coherent, eloquent arguments, but because we lacked spiritual discernment. We need to see this one word in connection with the entire picture of redemption, as it is manifested in our access to Christ in heaven. Christians everywhere will inevitably come

to agreement on this subject, in both theory and practice, as we respond more thoroughly to the realities of our union with Christ at the heavenly Mt. Zion. We must therefore avoid mere wrangling about disputed issues, baptism included, and practice the instructions of Eph 4:11-16 that lead to corporate as well as individual maturity in Christ (John 17:22-23).

IV. *Responding to questions*

In order that my remarks may not be misunderstood, it is convenient for me to tie things together by responding to some common questions that may arise.

1. *Are you saying that we should presume that children of Christian parents are regenerate? Should children be baptized because we presume that they are regenerate?*

We no more "presume" that children are regenerate than we presume that adult church members are regenerate. We leave it to God to evaluate people's hearts. We ought to treat both adult church members and their children as Christians, with all the love and encouragement, the discipline and rebuke, the hopes and the warnings that we owe to Christians.¹⁰ That is, we treat them like all those who are our spiritual brothers and sisters in a common fellowship. Naturally, the particular texture of our love takes into account the uniqueness of each person, including age, sex, gifts, and previous Christian experience. We know that God may use the ministry of the church as a context in which he works regeneration in the hearts of church members who are hypocritical, that is, spiritually dead; he uses it to sustain and further transform those already regenerated; and he uses it to warn those within the church who rebel against Christ. Such is true both with respect to adults and with respect to children of all ages.

2. *Does baptism with water accomplish the regeneration of all children who are baptized?*

No. Regeneration is the work of the Holy Spirit. In principle, it may take place at the moment of baptism, or before, or after. Since regeneration is mysterious and is known to human beings only through its effects (John 3:8), we do not need to know the exact moment when it occurs. Moreover, as we know from the warnings in Hebrews (3:6; 4:11; 6:1-12; 10:26-39) and elsewhere (e.g., Col 1:23), neither baptism nor any other memorable past experience provides some magical guarantee or talisman, immunizing us against backsliding. We cannot avoid the necessity of watchfulness and diligence in continuing to receive the grace of Christ as

¹⁰ For a similar emphasis, see Charles Hodge, "A Practical View of Infant Baptism," *BRPR* 33 (1861) 692-94.

obedient disciples. Such watchfulness and obedience on our part, including the exhortations of other Christians, is one of the means that Christ the great shepherd uses to keep us safe until the end (John 10:27-29).

As many theologians have said, baptism is "a means of grace." Like prayer and Bible study, it is one of the means that God uses to bless us and others. Like prayer, its effectiveness is related to the faith of the participating community. To turn it into a mechanical, magical performance is just as bad as turning prayer into a rote, thoughtless repetition of words (Matt 6:5-15). In both prayer and baptism, we must keep in the center the vital matter of our continuing fellowship with Christ. He is the hearer and presenter of prayer (Heb 7:25), and he is the real priest and celebrant who washes and cleanses our sins. Through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit he works in and through our prayers (Rom 8:26). He also works apart from our prayers, and sometimes has to overcome our unbelief! The same is true of the church's acts of baptism. He works in and through baptism to cleanse us from sin. He may also work apart from baptism, through other means, or apart from any means.

A mystery and incalculability remains in these actions, because he is the majesty Lord of the universe, and we are not. We cannot second-guess what he is doing, and when he will do it. But when we believe his promises, we can have confidence in him, because in his promises he commits himself. For example, prayer is efficacious when it is based on God's will, which is articulated in his promises (Matt 21:22). Baptism is a kind of promise in action, in which Christ extends to us all the blessings of union with him (Gal 3:27). The promise is received by faith—the family's faith, and also, as the child grows, the child's. Both for an adult and for a child who is baptized, subsequent apostasy will make the person liable to curse for having abused the gift (Heb 10:29-30).

3. Should we baptize children of non-Christian parents?

No. We as a church can present to Jesus in heaven only what is ours, that is, only what has been entrusted to us and over which we have some kind of authority. Non-Christian parents have God-given authority over their children. As long as they themselves are rebelling against God, they cannot approach the heavenly temple, nor can they meaningfully bring their children to Jesus for blessing.

Among other things, baptism is entrance into and commitment to the fatherly discipline and instruction of God. We enter into a life of discipleship. Free adults become disciples through their own active commitment, in which they submit themselves to the presence of Christ in the Christian community. Young children are disciplined through their Christian parents. The parents bring God's fatherly care to bear on the children. By contrast, children of non-Christian parents can be received for baptism only when they are able to make a commitment of this kind for themselves, apart from parental action.

By similar reasoning, adopted children of Christian parents ought to be baptized. In some cultures, members of an extended family under the authority of a patriarch might all be baptized, as in Gen 17:23-27. This type of circumstance is obviously a difficult one for us in the Western world. But I believe that it is difficult mostly because we are not indigenous to a culture of this type. If we were a part of the culture, our own intuitions would be different. We would sense more readily the appropriateness of such an entrance of a corporate household into fellowship with God.

4. *Why don't you appeal to the example of circumcision and the covenant that God made with Abraham and his offspring?*

I believe that there is a genuine analogy between Abraham's situation and ours, and between circumcision and baptism. Reformed theological literature on infant baptism usually appeals to this analogy.¹¹ But baptist brothers and sisters often have difficulty at this point. They are aware, as all of us should be, of the vast changes that have come to the people of God when Christ came into the world, was crucified, and was raised. In view of such changes, it is more difficult for people to be sure of themselves when they look at the analogy between circumcision and baptism.

It may be helpful, then, to develop our reflections about children with the New Testament as our immediate starting point. Once it becomes clear to us that children of Christian parents are an integral part of our Christian community, we can then go back to a passage like Acts 2:39. Peter and his Jewish hearers were familiar with the practice in the Old Testament whereby children were an integral part of the people of God. The same is to be true in the New Testament church. Hence we can have confidence that this passage in Acts does indeed have in view the extension of God's Fatherly discipline to whole families. Hence there is also a legitimate connection between Abraham's practice and ours.

5. *Are not children in a different category spiritually until they reach the age of accountability?*

No. The idea of an "age of accountability" is not really in conformity with the Bible. The Holy Spirit can be at work in children even from the womb (Luke 1:15,44). Very early in life, children manifest sin and righteousness by obedience or disobedience to their parents (Exod 20:12). Very early they can begin to understand the issues of salvation as we tell simple stories about Jesus, about the creation and about the fall.

¹¹ See, for example, Sartelle, *Infant Baptism*; Pierre Marcel, *The Biblical Doctrine of Infant Baptism*; John Murray, *Christian Baptism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1962).

Naturally, their understanding needs to grow. Their mastery of language and their knowledge of the world around them are weak and partial. Hence many times it may difficult for *us* (but not for God) accurately to judge their motives or their spiritual state. They may do damage by accident, by childish lack of understanding of their environment, or by childish misunderstanding of our words. For such things they must not be held "accountable" in the same way as adults. Yet at the most basic level they are accountable to God for all their motives and their actions.

Scripture says, "Everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded" (Luke 12:48). Comparatively speaking, children have been entrusted with only a little. But that little requires a response. The smaller circle of their responsibility is not the same as having no responsibility at all. Thus, there is no fixed date when accountability begins. We ought not to shunt smaller children over into a backwater, merely waiting indifferently until they grow old enough to be like us. We are accountable to treat our children as people with limited capacities and limited development, but still as coheirs of the promises of salvation.

6. *Aren't you overlooking some important distinctions that would invalidate your argument?*

Doubtless distinctions might be introduced at several crucial points, in order to avoid the conclusions of my reflections. Infants who cannot yet talk or otherwise respond in mature, unambiguous ways are different from those who can. Children are different from adults. Articulate public profession of faith is different from inarticulate faith. Infant dedication, as it occurs in many baptist churches, may be viewed as an adaptation of the church's general ministry of prayer, and as such is different from the rite of baptism, whose significance must be fixed by the New Testament. Baptism with water is distinguishable from the union with Christ that it signifies. Christ's actions on earth are distinguishable from his present actions in heaven. And so on. I hope that I would be open to being further enlightened on these and other matters pertaining to my reflections.

However, those who invoke such distinctions might easily miss the point. I am not offering an argument in quite the conventional way. I doubt whether we will get very far if we make these matters primarily items for extended intellectual debate, dissection, and the play of logical analysis.

We need to live them out. We need to discover for ourselves in Christian assemblies the realities of heavenly worship. We need to struggle in ourselves and among other Christians with raising our children and treating them with the full range of Christian love and respect. We need to start baptizing professing children at a very young age if they have not already been baptized. We need to appreciate, not just debate, the Lord's meeting with us through baptism and the Lord's Supper.

As we do these things, I trust that our spiritual vision will become clearer. Then, and not earlier, we may find that our fine-grained distinctions were or were not terribly relevant to worshipping the Father in Spirit and in truth (John 4:23).

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