

Letter to the Editor

Dear Editor,

I read with interest your editorial on the subject of baptism in issue 40 of the *British Reformed Journal*, and I would like to take up your invitation to respond from a baptist perspective. Rather than seeking to change the views of paedobaptist readers, I hope simply to make a few points that may help them to understand better the position of baptists who adhere to the doctrines of grace. If the result is to persuade any of your readers that their baptist friends are not being wilfully obtuse, this letter will have served its purpose. I deliberately have not entered into any of the substantive arguments between holders of the two positions.

1. While I cannot speak for all baptists, I do not believe that there are many for whom the mode of baptism is a major issue. Almost all hold to total immersion. While godly and learned men assure them that this is the meaning of the Greek word *baptizo* and other equally godly and learned men assure them that it is not, they are unlikely to change their view. If the weight of evidence forced them to do so, however, this would not involve major changes to their understanding of the meaning of the ordinance of baptism or of the circumstances in which it should be administered. The baptist church of which I am a member is content to baptize elderly or infirm believers by pouring, and I would personally object to any attempt to rebaptize someone who has previously been baptized as a believer by pouring or sprinkling in a Presbyterian or Anglican church. (I also note, from the other direction, that the Church of England's *Book of Common Prayer* recommends "dipping" for the majority of infants, and reserves pouring for those who are sickly.)

2. Most Christians belong to a particular local church or denomination for reasons of personal history rather than because of any carefully thought-out ecclesiological position. Those who become or remain baptists by conviction often do so because of the importance they attach to the "gathered church" principle (i.e., seeking to ensure, so far as humanly possible, an exclusively regenerate church membership) as much as because of their convictions on the importance of believers' baptism per se. The discussion over baptism is therefore part of a wider ecclesiological debate.

3. Most baptists have never given any serious thought to the arguments put forward by Calvin and the Reformers, and by the Presbyterian tradition, for baptizing the infant children of believers. This is not entirely their fault. The paedobaptists they meet in England are mostly members of the Church of England which, in general, baptizes infants on request without regard to the spiritual state of their parents. In some cases those putting forward the paedobaptist case also believe in baptismal regeneration. If baptists discuss the issue with evangelical members of the Church of England they will normally

hear infant baptism defended, not on the grounds of the covenant status of the children, but on the basis of arguments very similar to those advanced by many baptists for services of “infant dedication;” i.e., in terms of an opportunity for parents and church members to give thanks for the birth of the child, to pray that he or she will in due course come to faith in Christ, and to commit themselves to discharging their own responsibilities in that regard. When they ask about the need for personal faith in Christ they will often receive a muddled response suggesting that in some way infant baptism plus confirmation is broadly equivalent to believer’s baptism. As most baptists see confirmation as entirely without biblical warrant, and many would see the pretensions of the bishop to confer the Holy Spirit on the candidate as positively blasphemous, this does not advance the paedobaptist case. That is, of course, not the fault of the constituency represented by the British Reformed Fellowship.

4. English baptists who love the doctrines of grace stock their bookshelves with works by American and Scottish Presbyterians, and are troubled to find that on the issue of baptism they are not at one with these godly men whom they so much admire. They make a genuine effort to understand the arguments, and willingly concede that there is a much better case for infant baptism than most baptists are aware of. However, in the last analysis, while they respect this position they find themselves unable to agree with it because of basic differences that have been well rehearsed on both sides, and which I will not repeat. The point at which they find the paedobaptist argument most difficult to follow is in ascertaining the precise status of believers’ children within the covenant. If the promise is “to you and to your children” in a literal sense (rather than the spiritual sense understood by most baptists) are all children of believers guaranteed salvation? If so, how is this to be reconciled with the observable fact that many children of believers make no profession of faith and live ungodly lives? If on the other hand the guarantee is to most, but not all, such children (so that all the paedobaptist can say of his children with certainty is that they might be saved, but they might not be), in what sense is this a promise? My problem here is not that I disagree with the paedobaptist position (though I probably do) but that I am never at all sure that I have understood it correctly. For anyone seeking to persuade me to a different view on the wider issue, this might be the point of detail at which to start.

- *David F. Williams (Middlesex)*