

Infant Baptism (2)

William Cunningham (1805-1861)

The scriptural evidence, in support of the position that the infants of believing parents are to be baptized, consists *chiefly* in the proof which the word of God affords, to the following effect:—that, in the whole history of our race, God's covenanted dealings with His people, with respect to spiritual blessings, have had regard to their 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;—that there is no evidence that this general principle, so full of mercy and grace, and so well fitted to nourish faith and hope, was to be departed from or laid aside, under the Christian dispensation but, on the contrary, a great deal to confirm the conviction that it was to continue to be acted on;—that the children of believers are capable of receiving, and often do in fact receive, the blessings of the covenant, justification and regeneration; and are therefore—unless there be some very express prohibition, either by general principle or specific statement—admissible and entitled to the outward sign and seal of these blessings;—that there is a federal holiness, as distinguished from a personal holiness, attaching, under the Christian as well as the Jewish economy, to the children of believing parents, which affords a sufficient ground for their admission, by an outward ordinance, into the fellowship of the church;—and that the commission which our Saviour gave to His apostles, and the history we have of the way in which they exercised this commission, decidedly favour the conclusion, that they admitted the children of believers along with their parents, and because of their relation to their parents, into the communion of the church by baptism.

This line of argument, though in some measure inferential, is, we are persuaded, amply 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 from 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

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of baptism in particular. I do not mean to enter upon the consideration of the specific scriptural evidence in support of the different positions that constitute the proof of the lawfulness and propriety of baptizing the children of believing parents, or of the attempts which have been made to disprove them singly, and in detail. I can only advert to the general allegation, that infant baptism is inconsistent with some of the qualities or properties of the ordinance of baptism, as it is set before us in Scripture.

It is manifestly nothing to the purpose to say, in support of this general allegation, that baptism in the case of infants cannot be, in all respects, the same as baptism in the case of adults; or, that we cannot give so full and specific an account of the objects and effects of infant as of adult baptism. These positions are certainly both true; but they manifestly concern merely incidental points, not affecting the root of the matter, and afford no ground for any such conclusion as the unlawfulness of infant baptism. In the case of the baptism of adults, we can speak clearly and decidedly as to the general objects, and the ordinary effects, of the administration of the ordinance. The adult receiving baptism is either duly qualified and suitably prepared for it, or he is not. If he is not duly qualified, his baptism is a hypocritical profession of a state of mind and heart that does not exist; and, of course, it can do him no good, but must be a sin, and, as such, must expose him to the divine displeasure. If he is duly qualified and suitably prepared, then his baptism, though it does not convey to him justification and regeneration, which he must have before received through faith, impresses upon his mind, through God's blessing, their true nature and grounds, and strengthens his faith to realize more fully his own actual condition, as an unworthy recipient of unspeakable mercies, and his obligations to live to God's praise and glory. We are unable to put any such clear and explicit *alternative* in the case of the baptism of infants, or give any very definite account of way and manner in which it bears upon or affects them individually. Men have often striven hard in their speculations to lay down something precise and definite, in the way of general principle or standard, as to the bearing and effect of baptism in relation to the great blessings of justification and regeneration in the case of infants individually. But the Scripture really affords no adequate materials for doing this; for we have no sufficient warrant for asserting even in regard to infants, to whom it is God's purpose to give at some time justification and regeneration, that He uniformly or ordinarily gives it to them before or at their baptism. The discomfort of this state of uncertainty, the difficulty of

laying down any definite doctrine upon this subject, has often led men to adopt one or other of two opposite extremes, which have the appearance of greater simplicity and definiteness,—that is either to deny the lawfulness of infant baptism altogether, or to embrace the doctrine of baptismal justification and regeneration, and to represent all baptized infants, or at least all the baptized infants of believing parents, as receiving these great blessings in and with the external ordinances, or as certainly and infallibly to receive them at some future time. But this is manifestly unreasonable. “True fortitude of understanding,” according to the admirable and well-known saying of Paley, “consists in not suffering what we do know, to be disturbed by what we do not know.” And assuredly, if there be sufficient scriptural grounds for thinking that the infants of believing parents are to be baptized, it can be no adequate ground for rejecting, or even doubting, the truth of this doctrine, that we have no sufficient materials for laying down any precise or definite proposition of a general kind as to the effect of baptism in the case of infants individually.

But the leading allegation of the anti-paedo-baptists on this department of the subject is, that it is inconsistent with the nature of baptism, as set before us in Scripture, that it should be administered to any, except upon the ground of a previous possession of faith by the person receiving it. If this proposition could be established, it would of course, preclude the baptism of infants who have not faith, and who could not profess it if they had it. We are persuaded that this proposition cannot be established, though we admit that a good deal which is plausible can be adduced from Scripture in support of it. It is admitted that all persons who are in a condition to possess and to profess faith, must possess and profess it before they can lawfully or safely receive the ordinance of baptism. This can be easily established from Scripture. It is admitted, also, that the ordinary tenor of Scripture language concerning baptism has respect, primarily and principally, to persons in this condition,—that is, to adults,—and that thus a profession of faith is *ordinarily* associated with the Scripture notices of the administration of baptism; so that, as has been explained, we are to regard baptism upon a profession of faith, as exhibiting the proper type and full development of the ordinance. Had we no other information bearing upon the subject in Scripture than what has now been referred to, this might be fairly enough regarded as precluding the baptism of infants; but in the absence of anything which, directly or by implication, teaches that this previous profession of faith is of the

essence of the ordinance, and universally necessary to its legitimate administration and reception, an inference of this sort is not sufficient to neutralize the direct and positive evidence we have in Scripture in favour of the baptism of infants. The only thing which seems to be really of *the essence* of the ordinance in this respect is, that the parties receiving it are capable of possessing, and have a federal interest in, the promise of the spiritual blessings which it was intended to signify and to seal. Now, the blessings which baptism was intended to signify and seal are justification and regeneration,—that is, the washing away of guilt, and the washing away of depravity. These, and *these alone*, are the spiritual blessings which the washing with water in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost, directly signifies and represents. Faith does not 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.

Faith is, indeed, ordinarily, and in the case of all who are capable of it, the medium or instrument through which these indispensable blessings are conveyed; and there is certainly much better scriptural evidence in support of the necessity of faith in order to being saved, than in support of the necessity of a profession of faith in order to being baptized. But yet it is quite certain, that faith is not universally necessary in order to a right to these blessings, or to the actual possession of them. It is universally admitted that infants, though incapable of faith, are capable of salvation, and are actually saved; and they cannot be saved unless they be justified and regenerated. And since it is thus certain that infants actually receive the very blessings which baptism signifies and represent without the presence of the faith which is necessary to the possession of these blessings in adults,—while yet the Scripture has much more explicitly connected faith and salvation than it has ever connected faith and baptism,—there can be no serious difficulty in the idea of their admissibility to the outward sign and seal of these blessings, without a previous profession of faith.

If it be said that something more than a mere capacity of receiving the blessings which baptism signifies and represents, is necessary to warrant the administration of it, since the ordinance is, in its general nature and character, distinguishing, and it is not all infants that are admitted to it—it is not difficult to show, that not only does the admission of this general idea, as pertaining to *the essence* of the doctrine of baptism, not preclude the baptism of infants, but that we have in their case what is fairly *analogous* to the ante-

cedently existing ground which is the warrant or foundation of the administration of it to adults. In the case of adults, this antecedent ground or warrant is their own faith professed; and in the case of the infants of believing parents, it is their interest in the covenant which, upon scriptural principles, they possess simply as the children of believing parents,—the federal holiness which can be proved to attach to them, in virtue of God's arrangements and promises, simply upon the ground of their having been born of parents who are themselves comprehended in the covenant. If this general principle can be shown to be sanctioned by Scripture,—and we have no doubt that it can be conclusively established,—then it affords an antecedent ground or warrant for the admission of the children of believing parents to the ordinance of baptism *analogous* to that which exists in believing adults,—a ground or warrant the relevancy and validity of which cannot be affected by anything except a direct and conclusive proof of the absolute and universal necessity of a profession of faith, as the only sufficient ground or warrant, in every instance, of the administration of baptism; and no such proof has been, or can be, produced.

Calvin, in discussing this point, fully admits the necessity of some antecedent ground or warrant attaching to infants, as the foundation of admitting them to baptism; but he contends that this is to be found in the scriptural principle of the interest which the infants of believing parents have, *as such*, in virtue of God's arrangements and promises, in the covenant and its blessings. He says, “Quo jure ad baptismum eos admittimus, nisi quod promissionis sunt haeredes? Nisi enim jam ante ad eos pertineret vitae promissio, baptismum profanaret, quisquis illis daret.”

My chief object in these observations has been to illustrate the importance of considering and investigating the subject of infant baptism as a distinct topic, resting upon its own proper and peculiar grounds,—of estimating aright its true relation to the sacraments in general, and to baptism as a whole,—and of appreciating justly the real nature and amount of the modifications which it is necessary to introduce into the mode of stating and defending the general doctrine as to the objects and effects of baptism, in the case of infants as distinguished from adults; and I have made them, because I am persuaded that it is when the subject is viewed in this aspect, that the strength of the arguments for, and the weakness of the arguments against, infant baptism, come out most palpably, and that by following this process of investigation we shall be best preserved from any temptation to corrupt and lower the

general doctrines of the sacraments,—while at the same time we shall be most fully enabled to show that infant baptism, with the difficulties which undoubtedly attach to it, and with the obscurity in which some points connected with it are involved, is really analogous in its essential features to the baptism of adults, and implies nothing that is really inconsistent with the view taught us in Scripture with respect to sacraments and ordinances in general, or with respect to baptism in particular.

Johann Heinrich Heidegger (Swiss Reformed theologian, 1633-1698):

Adults and children are baptized: those adults who publicly confess faith in him (Christ), and those children who born in the Church's lap to believing parents rejoice in the covenant of grace and likewise rightly rejoice in the seals of it. As for the adults, outward baptism does not seal inward grace for all of them, but for those alone who bear in their hearts a faith the reverse of feigned and confess it in words. Nor yet for the children of believing parents one and all, but only for the elect is baptism the sign of regeneration and universal spiritual grace. Although it is right and godly in the case of individual children of the kind to have good hopes of the judgment in love, in the case of them all it is not so.
