

The Covenant Baptism of Infants

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For my children. To explain why you were baptised and to help you give a reason for the hope that we trust will be in you.

Foreword

Why have I taken so much trouble over the issue of baptism? It is probably because I have been forced to take a special interest in it myself. I was baptised as a child in the Church of England without my parents having given any evidence that they themselves were believers at that time: possibly it was just the done thing. When I became a Christian in my teens I was intermittently put under some pressure by Baptist friends to submit to re-baptism. At the same time I had developed a love for the Reformers and their successors.

I remember reading Martin Luther's Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians and thinking that he knew and had experienced exactly the sorts of things that I was going through, and that this had caused him to take the stand he did against the corruption of the Roman Catholic church of his day.

I also knew that he, together with all the Reformers, and many in the Reformed world today, still regard infant baptism as an important issue. In short, I wanted to know whether the Baptist criticism of them was true: that their defence of infant baptism represented a failure to fully shake off the superstitions of Rome and could not be justified from Scripture.

In addition, I want you, my children, to know in your minds and hearts, and come to rest upon God's Covenant of grace, in all its richness. This covenant with His people in Christ is the central theme of the Scriptures. Without an understanding of it you will never properly understand the Scriptures. Covenant infant baptism is important because the Bible teaches that God deals with families and not just individuals throughout both the Old and New Testaments.

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1. Introduction

“What, you don’t believe that, do you? I’m astonished; I can’t believe it!” remarked a friend when we first discussed the baptism of infants. Among many Bible-believing evangelicals in the free churches in Britain today, Baptist thought has gained ground even amongst those who do not call themselves Baptists. (In this booklet I use the term Baptist as a shorthand term to refer to all those Christians who believe that only adults who are capable of expressing personal repentance for their sins should be baptised. I will refer to believers in Covenant infant baptism by the technical term: paedobaptist).

Even some churches which were founded on the basis that both Covenant infant-baptism and adult believers’ baptism could be practised in their midst, have become increasingly intolerant of infant baptism. It is clear from the experience in the evangelical scene in Britain over the last few decades that unless the positive Scriptural view of infant baptism, as grounded in the Covenant of God with believers and their seed, is consistently preached, people tend to drift towards the Baptist position. Infant baptism is then viewed as an unbiblical tradition or is associated with Roman Catholicism and the idea that the act of baptism itself confers salvation and the gift of the Holy Spirit (baptismal regeneration). The thought that infant baptism for the children of believers might be the Scriptural way is scarcely considered. Baptists are sometimes inclined to ask, why, if their practice is not Biblical, has it tended to increase? The argument from numbers is, of course, a perilous one at the best of times; often God’s truth has been all but submerged in a sea of error. Nevertheless, there are several possible reasons.

Undoubtedly the most important is that its leading ideas are very simple. As a pastor friend remarked: it is easier to see the Baptist position. The idea that baptism is always mentioned in connection with repentance and faith and therefore can only be applied to adults is very compelling. On the other hand, to appreciate the case for infant baptism requires a broader knowledge of God’s dealings with His people in both the Old and New Testaments.

Secondly, it is so much more in accord with the spirit of the age. In the Western world, since the French Revolution, there has been a growing emphasis on individual human rights. Likewise, Baptist thought emphasises God’s dealings with individuals and so is congenial and easy for people to grasp. Paedobaptists, on the other hand, emphasise that God also deals with people as members of families. God puts people in the family He does because of His purposes towards them. Indeed God saves children precisely because of His covenant with their family as a whole. This is less congenial to the modern mind and so it is much less easy to grasp, even though it should be the obvious conclusion a reasonably observant Christian would reach when one reflects on the life chances that some children have that others are denied.

Thirdly, most English people’s understanding of infant baptism is probably coloured by the Church of England’s practice (now in relative decline) of indiscriminately baptising the children of anyone who wants it, irrespective of any credible profession of faith on their part. This is a practice that has no Biblical foundation.

Finally, most people’s view of right and wrong is influenced by the world around them and particularly by those they respect. Christians are no different. When the majority of evangelicals use Baptist categories of thought, it takes real effort to look any further, but this does not make it right. Baptist thought has gained ground not so much because the evidence is on its side, but through the power of the constant, confident repetition of a

simple message. As marketing managers the world over know; if a message is kept simple and repeated often enough people start to believe it.

Is infant baptism really important enough to argue over?

Well, firstly, Baptists think so. They do not regard infant baptism as a valid form of baptism and insist on re-baptising all those who want to become members of their churches who have already been baptised as children. They also insist that the only true method of baptism is by total immersion. In these circumstances, it is important for those of us who believe in the Bible's teaching about Covenant baptism for the children of believers to understand why we believe what we do.

Secondly, only by holding fast to this doctrine can we fully understand the unity of God's promises and, therefore, the unity of the Scriptures. God has revealed only one Covenant in the Scriptures; Christ was promised only one bride, which is church, Old and New Testament. God's covenant promises to his bride remain the same from Genesis to Revelation: they are made to believers and their seed, in Christ. Baptists, on the other hand, talk of two peoples of God: Old Testament Israel and the New Testament church. Baptist thought hinges upon the idea that Israel lived under a temporary national covenant in the Old Testament. This covenant, it is said, has now been superseded by a new covenant with the church based upon more spiritual promises.

Thirdly, only this doctrine fully preserves the precious Bible promises that are given to the believer about the salvation of their children and grandchildren down the generations. The question is: should we as believers expect our children to be able to share with us in worshipping and having fellowship with God throughout their childhood years, according to their developing capacities? Should we, in charity, judge that they are God's people unless and until they prove themselves to be unbelievers? And does God promise to save a people from amongst our children, and their descendants? As believers in the Covenant of God with believers and their seed, this should be our approach. Or should we, as Baptist logic would dictate, regard our children as unbelievers, or at least as uncommitted, throughout their childhood years, in which case we will basically want to "evangelise" them like we would any other unbeliever. There are no lambs in Baptist churches; only sheep. Baptist thought at this point is confused, and some shades of it are simply inhumane. It has no consistent idea of how children fit into God's promises. A respected pastor friend once said to me: the Bible doesn't say much about children. At best Baptists may regard their children as potential Christians. At worse – and more consistently – they are little heathens to be evangelised like any other unbeliever, not fit to share in the worship of God's people until they have a "conversion experience". And what then of their fate if they die in childhood? Baptist thought can only point to a vague, general mercy of God in which to place our hope. Believers in God's covenant dealings with his people and their seed know better and look to solid and specific Scripture promises upon which to base our hope.

Finally, only the doctrine of the baptism of the children of believers does full justice and honour to the sovereign grace of God in the gospel. It focusses the sacrament of baptism where the Bible focuses it: on God's grace alone. Baptist thought tends to focus it upon man's repentance and thus detracts from God's glory.

Some say that because this issue has been a source of division within the church ever since the Reformation, it will and can never be resolved. This is unbiblical. In giving the Scripture to us for reproof, for correction, (and) for instruction in righteousness, that the

man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works (2 Timothy 3:16-17), God gives us sufficient information to conduct the whole of our church life properly, including our practice of baptism. With the aid of a good concordance, diligent and prayerful study of the Scriptures and building upon the works of others, I believe anyone who wants to, can reach a clear understanding of the meaning of baptism and the place of the baptism of infants in the life of the church.

In order to demonstrate that infant baptism as practised by the churches following in the Reformed tradition is the Biblical way it is necessary to examine two issues. Firstly, should baptism be by sprinkling or by immersion? Secondly, should infants and children be baptised? Paedobaptists generally maintain that the most Biblical method of baptism is by sprinkling, and that believers have a duty to bring their children for baptism. Our critics say baptism should only be by immersion and do not accept the baptism of infants as a valid practice.

We will examine each of these issues in turn from both an historical and a Biblical point of view.

2. The Early History of Infant Baptism

“Well, I’d like to see you prove that the Bible says we should baptise infants”, is the common first reaction of Baptist friends. Actually, for both Biblical and historical reasons, the burden of proof rests with them to prove that the infants of believers shouldn't be baptised.

As Bible believers, the Bible should be our only ultimate reference point, but it is still important to take notice of the practice of the church in the very earliest times, and particularly in the first two centuries when people who knew the apostles or their immediate successors were alive. If their practice overwhelmingly supports infant baptism, it creates a strong presumption that this was also the practice of the apostles, unless, that is, we can find strong evidence that their practice had already become corrupted. On this basis, the evidence for the practice of infant baptism being an apostolic practice is overwhelming. Even most Baptist commentators on church history have been prepared to admit that there is no hint in the records from the church of the first two centuries AD (other than what they claim to find in Scripture) of the existence of the teaching of adults-only baptism. After that, it is beyond dispute that the orthodox churches all regarded infant baptism as the norm and practised it universally. No recognised Christian leader ever seriously questioned the Biblical or apostolic nature of the practice, though periodic opposition did arise in some fringe movements.

In trying to find an explanation for this remarkable fact, Baptists claim that the practice of infant baptism only arose, admittedly very early in church history, because of the teaching that the act of baptism itself conferred the forgiveness of sins (baptismal regeneration). In an age when many children died in infancy, it is said this led to such pressure to baptise infants (because otherwise they couldn't be saved), that the original apostolic practice of adults' only baptism died out rapidly and without trace. Is this explanation plausible? The facts of the case are entirely against the Baptist argument.

Firstly, the early church fathers – i.e. those leaders of the church who lived in the first two or three centuries after the apostles – did not teach baptismal regeneration. In order to understand their attitude towards baptism, it is important to appreciate, in Calvin's words,

the extravagant way in which they often describe the sacraments. Baptism is frequently referred to as regeneration (i.e. being born again), and was so closely identified with the spiritual reality it signified that the formal start of the Christian life was invariably traced back to one's baptism. This is not surprising given that Scripture seems to do the same (for example, Romans 6:3, *so many of us as were baptised into Jesus Christ were baptised into his death*), but it can sound to modern ears very much like the Roman Catholic teaching of baptismal regeneration. In fact, they make a very clear distinction between the act of baptism itself and the new birth which it signifies. Augustine talks about this distinction thus: "Men put on Christ, sometimes to the extent of partaking in the sacrament (baptism), and sometimes to the extent of holiness of life."¹ Again, in talking about only the elect amongst the Jews benefiting from the sacrament (of circumcision), he says: "though the sacraments were common to all, the grace was not common: yet grace is the virtue of the sacrament. Thus, too, the laver of regeneration (baptism) is now common to all, but the grace by which the members of Christ are regenerated with their head is not common to all."² In other words, the outward act, devoid of faith in the inward grace means nothing and confers no benefits. Again, he says: "as it is servile weakness to.... take the sign for the thing signified, so to interpret the signs as of no use is an extravagant error."³

Secondly, there was no time for such a process as Baptists suggest to take place. If infant baptism was not the apostolic practice, some evidence of strong opposition to it by influential figures in the church should exist. There is no such evidence. The apostle John is known to have died almost certainly some time in the AD 90's. He and the churches under his influence must have made a vigorous defence of adults' only baptism, as must many influential leaders elsewhere in the church, who either knew John's teaching or had met one of the other apostles and known their practice. There no evidence of this either in the writings of the early church fathers or in the practice of the churches.

As a matter of historical fact, we know that many of the Jewish Christians in the early decades of the church's existence continued to observe the Mosaic law strictly. This seems to have been true of the apostle Paul (Acts 21:23-25). James, the leader of the church at Jerusalem was known as "James the Just" precisely because he observed the law of Moses so strictly and held it in such high regard. Now, one of the most important aspects of the Mosaic ritual was circumcision, because it signified that the child was now a member of God's covenant people. Circumcision, along with the rest of the Old Testament ritual, existed side by side with baptism in the early Christian communities, especially in Palestine. But it was eventually forced into extinction by baptism. Why? Because it was obvious to everyone that baptism had replaced circumcision. Now, given the way in which the ingrained respect for the Mosaic rituals gave even the apostles so much difficulty, is it likely that circumcision would have been given up so easily by Jewish Christians when its replacement – baptism – specifically excluded their children? It is most unlikely. They would have regarded it as being a significant change for the worse, because, if the practice was for only adults to be baptised, it implied that their children stood outside God's covenant promises, where once they had stood inside them. They would have clung onto circumcision all the more tenaciously in these circumstances and there would certainly have been some record of the disputes about it. In fact, baptism replaced circumcision quite peacefully. The strong inference is that this was so because baptism was seen as a direct replacement for circumcision, and carried all the benefits for believers and their children that circumcision had once done.

The earliest writings of the fathers we have date from perhaps 30-50 years after John's death. Admittedly, the very earliest writings do not contain anything explicit about

baptism, but strong inferences can be made, and by the late second century, there is abundant evidence that infant baptism was the universal practice. There is no trace of hesitation about infant baptism as a result of lingering Baptist principles or any evidence in any of the writings of the fathers that they thought a different practice than their own had once existed.

The church historian, Papias, writing prior to his martyrdom at Pergamon in the AD 150's or 160's, claimed to have taken every opportunity to learn and collect from visiting church representatives the traditions their churches remembered from the apostles themselves. This collection is now largely lost, though it is thought to have still been extant in the thirteenth century. Although he is acknowledged to have been somewhat "credulous and of limited comprehension,"⁴ the fact that he was probably a personal friend of the apostle John and also of Polycarp gives his testimony weight. There is no mention by any church historian, or commentator who quotes him, of his ever having come across any controversy over the issue of infant baptism. In view of the importance of baptism to the church, this is remarkable, and indeed unaccountable, if there had been any such controversy.

In the middle of the second century, we find Justin Martyr referring to the capability of "all"⁵ men to be spiritually circumcised by baptism. Since he is speaking, at the time, to a Jew, we can infer that he includes children and infants in this comment. He also says that old men and women of 60 and 70 years of age have been childhood disciples of Christ's. Given that baptism marked the start of the Christian's union with Christ we can also infer that their baptism took place as children or infants.

The next inference is from Polycarp, another personal acquaintance of the apostle John. He was bishop of the church in Smyrna to which John addressed one of the letters in his Revelation, and with which John was associated towards the end of his life. At his martyrdom some time in the AD 150's or 160's, he testifies that he had served Christ for 86 years and would not now abandon his faith. This again must be taken as a reference to his baptism as a child. If this is accepted – and the inference is very strong – this testimony takes us right back to the practice of the last surviving apostle!

Polycarp's disciple, Irenaeus, is our next witness. In the latter half of the second century he says, Christ passed through all the stages of life to sanctify them all and came to redeem "all who through him are born again unto God, sucklings, children, boys, youths and adults".⁶ Given the tendency in the fathers to speak of baptism as regeneration (the new birth) this must be taken as another clear testimony to the practice of infant baptism from someone who had been taught by an acquaintance of the apostle John. Origen and Cyprian, whose ministry flourished in the early third century, both testify to having been baptised as infants. This must have taken place during the lifetime of Irenaeus and strengthens further the inference from the comments of Irenaeus. Thereafter, historical testimony to infant baptism as the universal practice is widespread and explicit.

The only hesitant voice during this period is that of Tertullian. He flourished at the end of the second century, somewhat later than Irenaeus but earlier than Cyprian or Origen. He seems to accept infant baptism as the norm but hesitates, not upon Baptist principles that it is a corruption of an earlier tradition of believers' baptism, but rather on the basis of his belief that more serious sins committed after baptism were difficult or impossible to wash away. Accordingly, we find him advocating the postponement of baptism until late in life, especially for the unmarried, lest they should be drawn by youthful lusts into serious sin, which could not be atoned for, after their baptism. It is for this reason he also

counsels delay in baptism in the case of healthy children, by virtue of the power of baptism to wash away all previous sins. In the case of sickly children he urged their early baptism in order that if they died they would be saved. His testimony, therefore, also tells against the Baptist case.

We have seen that Baptist historians accept that this evidence is very powerful, but try to counter balance it by claiming that the practice of adults' only baptism was extinguished rapidly and without leaving any traces by the spread of the doctrine of baptismal regeneration.

Is this a credible claim? Is it credible to accept that the doctrine of baptismal regeneration, at least in its diluted second century form, caused the practice of adults' only baptism to be sunk without trace within at most 100 years and possibly as little as 50 years after the death of the last surviving apostle and during the lifetime of many that had known him personally?

True, by the end of the second century, baptism was called regeneration. However, we always need to remember that the battles we have to fight were not the battles they did. They did not have to battle against the fully blown Roman Catholic doctrine of baptismal regeneration, and did not teach it, as Augustine clearly shows, although in the light of more modern controversies we could wish they had chosen their words more carefully. Baptist theology at this point has to over-emphasise the degree to which baptismal regeneration was taught by the fathers.

Moreover, we have seen in Tertullian that the second century understanding of baptism was as likely to exert a pressure away from infant baptism as towards it. The pressure for infants to be baptised was only there in the case of sickly infants. In the case of healthy ones, the pressure was in the opposite direction. Thus, in fact, many adult converts delayed their baptism to as near their death-bed as they dared, the Emperor Constantine being one such.

Thirdly, there was not enough time for the practice of believers' only baptism to be eclipsed without some remaining hints of it. The inferential testimony to the prevalence of infant baptism by men with either direct acquaintance of or only one generation removed from the apostle John is too strong. In addition, the more limited means of communications in those days would inhibit the rapid spread of new practices, particularly in relation to critical parts of Christian practice.

But, says the Baptist, Biblical teaching on baptism did become obscured: that at least is clear. Paedobaptists accept this. But it is one thing for the meaning of a ceremony to become distorted or misunderstood; it is quite another thing for the ceremony itself to be changed so dramatically, without any evidence of lingering opposition (this would certainly not be possible in a Baptist church today!). People may misunderstand the meaning of something, and that misunderstanding may quickly become the accepted teaching; but they can far more easily recognise when a ceremony has been changed (to include infants and children who had been specifically excluded previously) and are likely to put up vigorous and lasting opposition, particularly in the case of something as important as baptism was to the early church.

Thus we have to conclude that the historical case for infant baptism as an apostolic practice is overwhelming. Therefore, the burden of proof rests squarely with those who try

to deny the Biblical and apostolic nature of infant baptism. The benefit of any doubts or uncertainty must be given to the defenders of infant baptism.

Nevertheless, any believer in the Bible must ultimately base his practice, not in the history of fallible men and churches, but in Scripture as God's complete, sufficient and final revelation of His will. The faith delivered "once for all" to the saints must be the final touchstone for any doctrine or practice.

3. The Sacrament of Baptism

The words translated "baptism" and "to baptise" in the Scriptures simply refer to washing or dipping. We will examine this issue more fully when we consider the claims for immersion. The act of baptism was well known throughout Old Testament times. It was basically an outward washing which was intended to symbolise the fact that the person has been set apart for the service of God.

This setting apart is accompanied by and symbolises an inward cleansing from sin. The Levitical priests were set apart for the service of God through baptism by the sprinkling of water upon them. Baptism is invested with new meaning in the New Testament because of the command of the Lord Jesus. Since no man can cleanse himself inwardly (Matthew 7:17-18), baptism always testifies not so much to the action of the person in setting themselves apart, but to the grace of God which sets them apart. New Testament baptism points clearly to the fact that this setting apart is only possible through a union with Christ. Man can do nothing to contribute to his salvation (John 11:3). Even repentance itself is a gift of God (Acts 5:31; 11:18; 2 Timothy 2:25). Uppermost in all baptisms, therefore, is not the testimony that is given to man's repentance but that which is given to God's covenant promises to that person.

God's covenant promises to His people in Christ involve the promise of the restoration of a bond of friendship and love between God and man on the legal basis of Christ's work whilst He was on earth. Christ acted on behalf of, and in the place of His people, to win for them the forgiveness of sins by His death on the Cross and everlasting righteousness by His obedient life. He it is who chooses us before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4). He calls us, in time; grants us the ability to repent; justifies us; makes us holy; and will glorify us (Romans 8:29-30). All these things He promises in our baptism, without us having the least ability to fulfil any conditions ourselves: all is of grace from beginning to end. (John 1:13; Ephesians 1:4-5; 2:8).

We must also understand that this is not a covenant between equal parties. God chooses quite freely, and without any constraints, to make promises to man. He formalises these promises in a covenant, much as we formalise our last wishes in our Last Will and Testament. Man has no say in the terms of God's covenant promises. They are imposed upon him. If they did rely upon man in any way, they would fail because of the wickedness and weakness of the human heart (Romans 4:16). In order to give us added reassurance of the reality of these promises, which, after all, are invisible to us, God has given us the visible Sacraments.

St. Augustine, the greatest of the early church fathers, defines a sacrament as a visible sign of a sacred thing or a visible form of an invisible grace.⁷

John Calvin, likewise says: “the Lord calls his promises covenants (Genesis 6:18; 9:9), and sacraments signs of the covenants. He goes on to describes sacraments as an external sign, by which the Lord seals on our conscience his promise of good-will towards us, in order to sustain the weakness of our faith.”⁸

David Engelsma⁹ goes further and points out that the covenant God makes with man in Christ consists of an indissoluble bond of friendship between God and the believer: God promised Abraham and the church, Old and New Testament, that he would be their God and they shall be my people (Jeremiah 31:31ff). This bond of friendship is described by different analogies in Scripture, including:

- a marriage union: Ephesians 5:28-33: “....for this cause shall a man leave his father and mother and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh. This is a great mystery but I speak concerning Christ and the church”
- a father-son relationship: Exodus 4:22: “Thus saith Jehovah, Israel is my son, even my firstborn.”

This bond of friendship is of the most intimate and indissoluble type. Engelsma makes the point that when a person enters a marriage he or she does so by making a vow, but the vow is not the marriage. The marriage is the subsequent life together. So it is with the Covenant: God promises to the believer a life of intimate and eternal fellowship with Him. It is this fellowship and union (pictured in marriage) with the triune God which is the substance of the Covenant. The legal basis of it is God’s promise and the work of Christ on behalf of his people. The visible sign of it is baptism, much as the ring that is often given at the time of marriage symbolises the promises that have been made in the marriage ceremony.

In summary, a sacrament is a visible sign of something God does or promises. It is given to us to aid our faith by focusing our minds upon God and His faithfulness to His promises. It is not a sign of anything that man has done by way of repentance or faith. This is a crucial point. All authentic Biblical thinking focuses only upon the grace of God in Christ, which is signified and sealed by the external act of baptism.

In Baptist thought, however, a significant element of baptism is the testimony it gives to the repentance of the individual. Attention is drawn away from the grace itself – ie. God’s promises in Christ – and focuses upon man’s response. This has serious practical consequences. In particular, it can lead many to wrongly emphasise the place their own choice has played in them becoming a Christian. It can also lead many to slip into the habit of thinking that the new birth can only occur when a person reaches the age of rational thought, and can have a “conversion experience”. This leaves Baptists in the sort of dilemma expressed by the pastor friend who claimed the Bible had “little” to say about children and their salvation. Carried to their logical conclusion, Baptist beliefs would exclude all infants, (who are obviously physically and psychologically incapable of repentance) from salvation. Baptists, however, do not believe this. They prefer to hope in some general mercy of God.

It is worth noting at this point that what we have said so far implies that baptism should be for believers and their children only. We have to acknowledge that much damage has been done to the Biblical doctrine of infant baptism by its indiscriminate application to any children on whose behalf it is requested. There is no Biblical justification for the baptism of any child unless the parents give credible evidence themselves of being true

believers. Since the practice does take place, however, are we to regard these baptisms as valid? And what about the Baptist insistence on re-baptism as an adult in the case of those who were baptised as infants and wish to join their churches?

Our answer to these questions remains the same as that given by the Reformers when pressed with the question of whether to re-baptise people baptised in the corrupt and superstitious Roman Catholic church. John Calvin says that a sacrament is not to be estimated by the hand of him by whom it is administered, but is to be received as from the hand of God himself, from whom it undoubtedly proceeded. We may hence infer that its dignity neither gains nor loses by the administrator.¹⁰

He further makes the point that when the great Old Testament revivals took place under Josiah and Hezekiah, men were not called to circumcise themselves anew. The circumcisions performed by the corrupt priests were valid ones because they were done in accordance with God's command. The same holds true of baptism. God in baptism promises the forgiveness of sins and will undoubtedly perform His promise to all those to whom He sends it. Neither the disposition of the person baptising nor of the one being baptised is the ultimate criterion about whether or not it is a valid baptism. Let God be true but every man a liar (Romans 3:3-4). The only passage which might support the idea of re-baptism is Acts 19:3-5. In this passage the people said they had been baptised into John's baptism, though they knew nothing of the Holy Spirit. Until he heard this, Paul's intention seems not to have been to baptise them again.

Since John's one great purpose was to draw attention to the baptism of the Holy Spirit which his baptism foreshadowed, it seems unlikely that these people were baptised by John himself. Paul may have doubted whether their baptism had been the initiation into a life of repentance and faith which John's baptism was intended to be, and therefore he took the unusual step of baptising them again. This is the only clear example of re-baptism in the New Testament. Apollos, who was also ignorant of the Lord Jesus was not re-baptised and neither were any of the other apostles, nor their converts, so far as we can tell. (It could be argued that some of the thousands baptised after Pentecost must have been baptised by John but there is no proof of this). At any rate, it must be admitted that this incident was unusual and probably unique.

Finally, it is worth noting why there are only two Biblical sacraments. To be a sacrament, an action or sign must have been commanded and instituted by Christ as a perpetual reminder of Him, and confirmed by the usage of the apostles. This is why footwashing, though done by Jesus, is not a sacrament, nor is marriage or any of the other Roman Catholic "sacraments". Neither Jesus, nor the apostles commanded these to be repeated by the church in remembrance of Him. There are, therefore, only two sacraments: baptism and the Lord's Supper. Between them, they are intended to symbolise our whole Christian life. Baptism symbolises the entrance of God's people into the way of salvation and into his visible church in the same way as circumcision in the Old Testament. The Lord's Supper symbolises the fact that fellowship with God is to be had only through the shed blood of Christ, in the same way as did the Passover and the other sacrifices in the Old Testament.

4. The Mode of Baptism: Immersion or Sprinkling?

Whilst different practices exist (for example, parts of the Eastern church conduct baptism by immersion), in the Western church baptism of infants has traditionally taken place by

sprinkling water over the infant. Modern Reformed Christians often defend sprinkling as the most Biblical method of baptism, though they do not deny that a baptism conducted by immersion is valid. The way in which baptism is administered is not a critical issue for them. It is very different for the Baptist, however. Immersion is said to be the essential and only valid method. It can be established that sprinkling and not immersion is probably the most Biblical method of baptism by reference to early church practice, the Biblical usage of the words “baptism” and “to baptise”, and by reference to the symbolism of baptism itself in the Scriptures.

(a.) The Early Church Practice of Baptism

Although we have insisted that the case for or against sprinkling can only be finally established from Scripture we do well to take notice of the early church practice. If it consistently points in one direction, it creates a presumption that the practice stretches back into apostolic times, unless convincing evidence or argument can be produced to the contrary. Sources of evidence which shed light on this include:

- church lectionaries and the writings of the fathers.
- artistic representations of baptism on monuments or at Christian sites such as the catacombs in Rome.

Some authors, in arguing for sprinkling as the most Biblical method of baptism, have noted the link between the baptisms by total immersion conducted by many heathen religions within the Roman Empire. It appears these heathen rites may have had some impact upon Christian baptism by the time of the fourth century, as there is some evidence that candidates for baptism in Rome had to present themselves naked, in much the same way as the heathen. However, B.B. Warfield, a Presbyterian writer, adopts a more generous position: “If we neglect for a moment the usages of minor divisions of the church, we may say that the practice of the church is divided into an Eastern and a Western mode. Broadly speaking, the East baptises by a triune immersion; the West by affusion (sprinkling). When we scrutinise the history of these differing practices, however, we quickly learn that.... the usage of the East runs back into a high antiquity; while there are indications on the surface of the Western usage that it is comparatively recent in origin and survivals of an older custom persist side by side with it.”¹¹ In other words, Warfield acknowledges the historicity of the practice of immersion.

But was it full immersion in the Baptist sense? The evidence has appeared contradictory to many historians on both sides of the argument. Although there is clear liturgical evidence of the widespread use of immersion, even in the case of infants, the representations of baptisms on early monuments predominantly show candidates for baptism (including those depicting Christ’s baptism), standing in water, with water being poured over them. In arguing for full immersion, some have suggested that the monuments depict the moment after baptism when the candidate has risen from the waters. Against this is the fact that many representations picture the candidate standing in water too shallow to allow for full immersion and in some instances water is being poured on them.

Warfield concludes: “The only known theory.... which seems to do full justice to both.... the literature.... and the monuments.... is that normal baptism was performed in the early church by a mode which united immersion and aspersion in a single rite.”¹² He quotes as

representative a passage from Gregory of Nyassa, in which the candidate descends into the water, in imitation of Christ's death, has water poured upon him to symbolise Christ's burial, and steps out of the water to symbolise his resurrection. For Warfield, this mixture of partial immersion and sprinkling seems to account for the development of all the later differences in the rite in different churches and locations.

(b.) The Biblical Origins of New Testament Baptism

Baptists sometimes argue that New Testament baptism has its origin in Jewish proselyte baptism. When a person wished to become a Jew, they had to undergo a baptism. In later times this seems to have been by full immersion. Therefore, it is argued, New Testament baptism must also have been by immersion. This argument can easily be discredited from Scripture. New Testament baptism has clear origins in the Old Testament not in Jewish proselyte baptism.

There is no direct evidence of the existence of proselyte baptism as a rite of initiation earlier than the mid-second century AD. However, Delitzsch, an eminent Biblical scholar, remarks that the practice presupposes the existence of the Temple. The Mishna, a Jewish code of religious practice and interpretation, queries whether the heathen belongs to the class of the simply unclean who through the plunge bath became clean by the evening of the same day, or to the class of the unclean-from-a-dead-body whose uncleanness lasted for seven days.¹³ In other words, this may point to the origin of these Jewish proselyte baptisms not as a rite of initiation, but in connection with ritual uncleanness prior to partaking in the sacrifices of the Temple. Like other persons, such as menstruating women, the converted heathen could not partake of the Temple sacrifices and worship without having first ritually cleansed himself by washing in the Levitical way. The question was, though: for how long was a former heathen ritually unclean and unable to take part in the Temple worship after their baptism: one day or seven days? Only when the Temple was destroyed in AD 70 was the link with the Temple sacrifices severed and it became an independent initiatory rite. Delitzsch goes on to conclude: "There is no reason to assume that the baptism of John or Christian baptism originated in proselyte-baptism...." ¹⁴ Indeed, we have every reason to think it could not have done so. Why would God choose to develop a ritual derived from the practice of the Pharisees of all people?

These people and their traditions were the subject of the most scathing denunciations from Jesus during his earthly life. Insofar as the Jews in later times did require that converts be baptised they did so merely out of tradition, and not with any warrant from the Scripture. All the Old Testament required of converts was that they be circumcised (Exodus 12;48). God would not therefore give his blessing to such a practice by building the practice of New Testament baptism upon it, even if the practice itself could ever be shown to have existed in John's day.

Where then should we seek the origins of New Testament baptism? The answer is simple: in the Old Testament. Delitzsch continues: "John himself assigns the choice of this symbolic rite to divine appointment (John 1:33)"¹⁵ In other words, we must look for the origin of John's baptism in the Old Testament where John himself located it. The people who went to him for baptism would have understood it in those terms. This is implied by the question they ask John when he denies that he is the Christ or Elijah: John 1:25: "*then why are you baptising, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?*" In other words, had he been one of these figures they could have understood the legitimacy of his

activity. Such figures would have been expected to have baptised people. Why? What would they have done this for and how would they have done it? It was a symbol of cleansing: Ezekiel 36:25: *“Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean.”*

This text also points us to a further proof of the Old Testament origins of Christian baptism and to sprinkling as the preferred method. Nowhere in the Old Testament is the Messiah ever predicted as coming to immerse anyone, but there are a number of references in prophecy to the purification and sanctification of the people by the Messiah as taking place through water (baptism) and Spirit. The work of the Spirit in inwardly purifying the heart through the new birth is prophesied as being accompanied by the outward cleansing of water baptism. The analogies used to describe this activity are sprinkling (Ezekiel 36:25) pouring (Isaiah 44:3) and a fountain (Zechariah 13:1), all of which are depicted better by sprinkling than by immersion.

In addition, the Jews had many baptisms and they knew they signified the inward purification that results from the atoning sacrifice of Christ (Hebrews 9:23) and the application of the benefits of that sacrifice to us. Hebrews 9 demonstrates clearly that the Old Testament picture for this was sprinkling, not immersion.

(c.) The Meaning of the Word “Baptism” / “Baptise”.

The claim that the New Testament word *“baptizo”/“baptizein”* can only mean to immerse is the most important claim made against the case for sprinkling as a valid method of baptism. The attempt to demonstrate its truth is the central thesis of Carson’s monumental work: *“Baptism in its Modes and Subjects”* Carson claims: *“ ‘Bapto’ has two meanings; ‘Baptizo’ in the whole of the Greek language has but one. It not only signifies to dip or immerse, but it never has any other meaning.”*¹⁶ Associated with this claim is the observation that in several New Testament baptisms people are spoken of as going into and coming up out of the water. It is said this implies that immersion took place.

In fact, it is surprisingly easy to demonstrate from Scripture how ill-founded Carson’s contentions are. We can do so by examining both the main texts upon which they attempt to rest their case, and other examples in Scripture where these words simply cannot mean to immerse and must mean simply to wash or perhaps even sprinkle.

First of all. let us examine the main texts upon which the Baptist case rests to see whether they support their claims.

i. Acts 8:38-39: *“....and they went down both into the water, both Philip and the eunuch; and he baptised him. And when they were come up out of the water...”*.

Here, it is said, the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch must have involved immersion because both parties are described as going down into the water.

In response to this we can make two comments:

Firstly the words translated “into” and “out of” could also reasonably be translated “to” and “from”. The same words are translated this way in John 20:4: *“....the disciple did outrun Peter, and came first to the sepulchre”*; and in Luke 12:36: *“....when he shall return*

from the wedding....". In other words, they may not even have gone beyond the edge of the water: they simply approached it and then moved away without going in it.

But even if we accept that they went "into" the water, it must be clear to any impartial reader that what is being described is what happened before and after the actual act of baptism; nothing is said about what happened in the water. To read immersion into this is merely to read into it one's own prior assumptions. There is no more reason to believe that the eunuch was immersed than Philip himself. Both are said to have gone into and come up out of the water in the same way. As a matter of fact, we know that, in the absence of flash flooding, there is no river or pool in that part of the desert sufficiently deep in which to immerse a man. It is more than likely therefore that the baptism was not by full immersion. Certainly there is nothing in the text to say it was. It is quite possible that Philip and the eunuch stood in shallow water and Philip poured water over the eunuch's head.

ii. John's baptism: Matthew 3:6; Mark 1:5; John 3:22ff

The second set of passages relate to John's activity by the Jordan and the baptism of Jesus himself. In Matthew 3:6 and Mark 1:5, the people are said to have been baptised "in" the Jordan. Baptists usually insist that this clearly indicates that the people were taken into the river itself and fully immersed by John. However, any neutral reader of these passages will immediately see that Scripture doesn't say this. Of course, it could be what happened but we simply don't know. The Scripture doesn't tell us. Various possibilities exist. They might only have stood at the edge of the river and had water poured over them; or they might have stood in the river and had water poured over them; or they may even have knelt by a small fountain or spring (Aenon means "fountains") and dipped their heads into the water.

Baptists try to insist that John chose Aenon as the scene of his activity because there was "much water" there. Here is proof they say of immersion: John needed plenty of water to immerse the people. The one insuperable problem with this is that Aenon means "streams" or "fountains"! According to Christy, unfortunately for those who are accustomed to find here proof of immersion, these springs trickling through the marshy meadow land on their way to the Jordan, as they do to this day, offer little or no facilities for immersion!¹⁷ Furthermore, he asks why John would leave the main Jordan river itself to baptise at Aenon. Christy suggest it may have been because the Jordan river, especially when in flood, was likely to be more muddy. John needed clean water in order to comply with Old Testament symbols and requirements (Ezekiel 36:25). This interpretation seems to be supported by the fact that in the account in John's gospel, John's disciples get into a discussion about purifications when discussing Christ baptising and drawing everyone to him. Why? Because they knew that Jesus' (and John's) baptising activity was all about symbolic purification. And we have already seen that Old Testament purifications were by sprinkling!

But what about the baptism of Jesus? Those same passages speak of Him going "into" the Jordan and "coming up" out of the Jordan. Surely, this must mean He was immersed; and if He was immersed then so must all the others. But why? Remember, the Greek words could mean "to" and "from". But even if we accept that Jesus went into the water the descriptions only tell us what happened before and after the moment of baptism. They say nothing about what happened when He was actually in the water. He may have been fully immersed but He may have gone in only a little way and had water poured

upon Him. We simply cannot tell from these verses. Is there any other indication in the circumstances of His baptism which may shed light on the precise mode of His baptism? Yes, there is, and this points clearly to the fact that Jesus could not possibly have been baptised by full immersion. He had to have been baptised by sprinkling!

Jay Adams¹⁸ makes the following point. In Matthew 3:15, Jesus answers John's objection that he is not worthy to baptise Jesus by the comment: "...for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness". The question is: "to what could Jesus be referring?" Righteousness for Jesus and for John always related to God's law as it was recorded in the Old Testament. It was that very law which He came to fulfil as He himself stated in Matthew 5:17. What law was He therefore fulfilling in being baptised by John? You will recall that Jesus was baptised when He was 30 years old, precisely the age the Levitical priests of the Old Testament were consecrated to their ministry (Numbers 43, 47). This consecration was undertaken by another priest (Exodus 29:9) by the sprinkling of water (Numbers 8:6-7). The Old Testament priesthood and all its rituals were intended to point to and picture the ministry of the Lord Jesus. Jesus must, therefore, have been formally consecrated to His public ministry as our great High Priest in the same way as had been predicted and pictured in the Old Testament: by sprinkling. Further proof of this interpretation is found in a consideration of Jesus' response to the religious leaders' demands that He demonstrate by what authority He took it upon himself to cleanse the Temple (Matthew 21:25; Mark 11:30; Luke 20:4). He asked of them whether or not John's baptism was from God. In other words, He was claiming that His baptism by John constituted his High Priestly authority to exercise control over the public worship of God in the Temple! Had this not taken place in the prescribed Levitical form, we may be sure that the Jewish leaders would have been quick to point this out as invalidating His claims! Jesus' baptism cannot have been by immersion. He was sprinkled as the law required! Whilst all this would seem far more than is necessary to contradict Carson's central thesis as to the meaning of "*baptizo*", let us examine some more texts bearing upon his claim in an attempt to bury it once and for all, at least in the eyes of those who are prepared to have an open mind on the subject.

Before turning to other Biblical evidence it would be good to give one example from Jewish history. Since Carson claims there is no example in all of Greek literature in which "*baptizo*" means to immerse, here is one! In the Greek translation of Ecclesiasticus 34:25 (an Apocryphal writing from at least 150 BC) it says: "He that baptizeth himself after the touching of a dead body, if he touch it again, what availeth his washing?"

Now, Numbers 19:13 tells us: "*Whoso toucheth the dead body of any man that is dead, and purifieth not himself, defileth the tabernacle of the Lord, and that soul shall be cut off from Israel: because the water of separation was not sprinkled upon him, he shall be unclean*".

The baptism referred to was a sprinkling. What else, though, does the Bible itself say about Carson's claims?

(a) Mark 7:2-5 and Luke 11:38

In these examples, Jesus is being criticised for not washing prior to a meal. In Mark 7:4 it is said of the Pharisees and all the Jews that when they come from the market, except they wash ("*baptizo*") themselves they eat not. And many other things there be, which

they have received to hold, as the washing (“*baptizo*”) of cups, and pots, brazen vessels and of tables.

In both of these the Authorized Version translates a derivation of “*baptizo*” as “to wash”. In both instances Jesus had been in public places and had then sat down to eat without first washing in the manner of the Jews. According to Edersheim and Lightfoot, two universally respected Hebraists, the Jews washed their hands, not their whole bodies before eating. They had two ways of doing so: either by dipping the hands into water or by pouring water over them. In the Jewish Talmud, which admittedly cannot be totally relied upon to reflect the exact practice of Biblical times, hand washing takes place in the following way: “Hands become unclean and are made clean as far as the wrist. How so? If he poured the first water over the hands as far as the wrist and poured the second water over the hands beyond the wrist and the latter flowed back to the hands, the hands nevertheless become clean.”¹⁹ Accordingly, Edersheim²⁰ remarks that the words in Mark 7 can only refer to the Pharisees not eating except they wash their hands to the wrist. The main point about these passages is that to any independent reader the natural reading is that Jesus had not washed his hands in the prescribed fashion. The Baptist must interpret these passages to mean that Jesus was being criticised for not having fully immersed himself in a bath! A far fetched explanation which most ordinary Baptists would not be aware that their theology compelled them to believe!

Bear in mind also that only the palaces of the very rich would be furnished with private bathing facilities. There would be no facilities for ordinary Pharisees to bath themselves by full immersion at home and probably no water to do so, anyway, certainly in the summer months.

The second point in connection with these passages (see Mark 7:3-4; Matthew 15:1-2 compared with Luke 11:38) is that baptizing – “*baptizo*” – is used interchangeably with “washing”. What is described as washing by Matthew is described as baptising by Mark and Luke.

The third point is that one of the things said to be the subject of baptisms is tables. Now it is impossible to conceive how they could be talking about the immersion of tables or possibly couches (ie: those upon which they used to recline whilst eating their meal).

Even in twenty-first century Britain, who has ever been known to put a table or a couch in the bath to wash it by full immersion? Obviously what is being referred to is the wiping of the table or couch. John Gill, the great Baptist commentator, determined at all cost to justify his immersionist position in the face of all the Biblical evidence, rather weakly suggests that the couches could have been specially made so as be capable of being regularly dismantled in order to immerse them in a bath. As Hodge²¹ remarks this and similar attempts to evade the force of these Scriptures represent an act of desperation and not an attempt at sensible exposition.

(b) 1 Corinthians 10:2

A further passage we could appeal to is 1 Corinthians 10:2. Here the Israelites were said to have been “*under the cloud, and all passed through the sea*”; furthermore, they were said to have been “*baptised (“baptizo”) unto Moses in the cloud and the sea*”. John Gill says that it was a figure of baptism by immersion; as the Israelites were under the cloud, and so under water, and covered with it, as persons baptised by immersion are; and

passed through the sea, that standing up as a wall on both sides them, with the cloud over them; thus surrounded they were as persons immersed in the water, and so said to be baptised.²² Leaving aside the question about what is meant by the waters being a wall unto them to the right and to the left (though, since Scripture says God used an east wind to drive back the sea, traditional depictions of the Israelites walking through what amounts to a passageway through water towering above them on either side must be rejected), it is clear that the Israelites had no contact with the water at all: they walked through on dry ground. And surely the cloud referred to is the pillar of cloud that had always gone before them in the wilderness. In neither case can it mean immersion in any recognisable sense of the word. The only people that were immersed in this incident were the Egyptians! It is only because of the strict necessity forced upon the Baptist by his theory that such a forced reading of this passage must be advanced.

(c) 1 Peter 3:20-21

Another passage we might note is 1 Peter 3:20-21. Here Noah and seven other souls were said to have been “*saved by water, the like figure whereunto even baptism (“baptizo”) doth also now save us*”. Here the waters of the Flood are said to parallel our baptism and its effects: they symbolise union with Christ and salvation from judgement. Now in the Flood, the only people that were immersed were the wicked world: Noah’s only possible contact with the water was when it rained on them or splashed the top of the Ark. If the parallel between the water of the Flood and baptism is to be followed literally then the lesson surely is that the Biblical mode of baptism is sprinkling!

(d) Hebrews 9:10-23

A final passage to which it would be worth referring in this connection is Hebrews 9:10-23. In verse 10 the words “*divers washings*” (“*baptizo*”) occurs, obviously referring to the various washings which achieved ritual purification under the Levitical laws. The verses following contain three references to specific rites of purification and cleansing:

- v.13: sprinkling by the blood of bulls and of goats;
- v.19: the sprinkling of the book and the people;
- v.21: the sprinkling of the tabernacle and the vessels of the ministry.

All these instances teach sprinkling as the appropriate method of baptism and clearly exclude the idea of immersion altogether. The Baptist must try to argue that the reference in v.10 to “*divers washings*” (“*baptizo*”) is to some other Old Testament rituals, but this clearly ignores the context and is forced. As John Murray concluded: “If the Baptist contention is correct the ‘*divers baptisms*’ must exclude the most significant lustratory rites and actions of the old economy.... this is arbitrary.”²³

Let us note two final practical considerations which tell against the insistence on immersion.

Firstly, it would have been impossible to carry out some of the New Testament baptisms by full immersion on practical grounds. In Acts 2:41, 3000 people are baptised in one day; and in Acts 4:4, 5000. In summer in Jerusalem there was no river other than the tiny Siloam, and the city was supplied from cisterns and public reservoirs too deep to allow people to easily step down into them. Where could they possibly have immersed such

large numbers in such a short space of time, and without any interference from the authorities who were always on the look out for potentially riotous situations? Baptists sometimes try to argue that this must have taken place at the Pool of Solomon, the only possible location if immersion was to be the method. But the water from this pool was brought from a distance via an aqueduct and was carefully guarded as one of the main public water supplies, to which people were constantly coming to draw water. It is frankly unbelievable to any but those with a powerful vested interest in the argument to think that the authorities, who would have been able to view proceedings from the nearby Tower of Antonia (built specifically so that soldiers could overlook the Temple area and be ready to quell any riotous situations) would allow such an event to take place particularly so shortly after the tumultuous events of Good Friday.

We can perhaps assume that Peter could not have finished his sermon much before late morning. The candidates for baptism would not have been baptised in their ordinary clothes if they were to be immersed: modesty would have prevented it. Did they first have to go home for a change of clothes? Where were there private facilities for separate female and male drying and changing to allow this to take place with modesty? Remember, their views about such matters would be far stronger than modern ones!

Moreover, how could the disciples baptise at the speed that would have been necessary throughout the afternoon till nightfall by full immersion? It would hardly have presented a dignified sight even if it had been within the physical strength of the disciples to keep up the necessary pace.

The same problems can be adduced for John's baptism. Could all the land of Judea, and they of Jerusalem have been baptised by immersion by one man? Could the crowds have waited the hours and days that this would have entailed? Aenon, where John baptised, denotes "fountains", and the words "*much waters*" simply mean "many streams" or "fountains". Is it not reasonable to infer that John chose this place because the fountains provided the ready means of baptising so many, so quickly, by sprinkling whilst standing in the clean, shallow water?

Another example holding practical difficulties for the Baptist case is that of the Philippian jailor and his household. Where were the facilities in the middle of the night? The account implies that the whole evening's events took place either at the prison or at the house where no running water or bathing facilities would be available. Nor is it likely in the circumstances that they would have thought it wise to travel down to the local river, even if they could sneak past the town guards! And don't forget, the apostles had only recently had a severe lashing and would have not been in a strong enough physical state to walk any distance and then conduct a baptism by immersion!

A final practical consideration is that baptisms throughout the New Testament usually happen there and then, wherever a person professes faith: whether it be in the desert, in the centurion's home, in the prison at Philippi, or the room in Damascus where the literal reading of the Greek is "*standing up, he was baptised*". How could Paul have been baptised standing up on the spot!

Baptists have to assume that the person was taken to a water source as soon as possible. But this is not the natural reading of the texts. It is more likely that the water was brought to them and baptism took place by sprinkling wherever they happened to be.

(d.) The Symbolism of Baptism

On this issue again the Baptist considers he has a strong case, but once again, it can be demonstrated that the Biblical evidence points decidedly in the opposite direction.

Baptists claim that only immersion can fully do justice to the representation of Scripture in Romans 6:2-6 and Colossians 2:11-12 of baptism symbolising burial with Christ.

Romans 6:4 says: *"Know ye not that so many of us as were baptised into Christ were baptised into his death. Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead ...even so we also should walk in newness of life."*

Colossians 2:11-12 says a similar thing. According to the Baptist argument, what clearer picture could we have of the Scriptural symbolism of baptism? The believer repents, believes in Christ and is baptised by full immersion as a sign that he too shares in Christ's death and burial. He then comes up from under the water to symbolise that he too has risen to new life, just as Christ did.

This is indeed a very precious picture, which no evangelical paedobaptist would want to deny. We also agree that the sign should point to the reality it symbolises and, therefore, that the method of water baptism should say something about the way in which Holy Spirit baptism takes place. But does immersion or sprinkling best represent the spiritual reality of which baptism speaks?

Firstly, immediately after the favourite Baptist text, Romans 6:4, believers are also said to be planted together in the likeness of His death (Romans 6:5). It is hard to see how immersion can act as a fitting symbol of being planted into Christ.

Secondly, it should be clear to anyone that the baptism referred to by Paul is primarily the inward baptism of the Holy Spirit and the new birth. Some paedobaptists would wish to argue that this is all Paul is referring to, and therefore any reference to water baptism is excluded. I am not convinced that this is a sound argument. We have already noted that the Scripture has a tendency to equate the outward baptism with the inward one. The one is the sign of the other. Indeed this is the essence of the sacrament. But the question remains: just because Paul uses this analogy of baptism here, is this the only analogy used in Scripture? No. In fact, a range of different analogies are used in connection with baptism, none of which contain any reference to the idea of burial or immersion.

i. Matthew 20:22-23

Jesus, referring to His death, says He has a baptism to face. Now if baptism can only mean immersion and nothing else, it is difficult to conceive of what He means by being "immersed" in death. This has to involve the thought that death somehow submerged Him so that He went completely under it. But we know this is not true: on the Cross He was never under the power of death to such an extent that He was overwhelmed and disappeared under it. How can God, the one who is Life die in the sense of being submerged under it? The Cross was a victory: on it, He put to open shame all His enemies by triumphing over death (Colossians 2:15), declaring at the end His victory: *"It is finished"*, meaning I have completed my task: I have won the victory for all the sheep whom God has given me. And with that He dismissed His Spirit: He did not succumb, helplessly, to death as any ordinary human does. He is the one who said: *"I have power to*

lay down (my life) and I have power to take it again" (John 10:18). And when He had dismissed His Spirit, He went in Spirit straight to His rightful place in heaven, there to receive the thief on the cross who that day He had promised would be with Him in Paradise.

It is much more natural to interpret Him to be making a general reference to the fact that He was to experience death fully in all its aspects, both physical and spiritual, and in all its horror as the punishment for sin against a holy God; but to be submerged under it? No! Perish the thought!

ii. Galatians 3:27

"As many of you as have been baptised into Christ have put on Christ". This refers to the fact that the believer has become so identified with Christ as to be clothed with Him like a garment. The obvious Scriptural analogy that occurs is Zechariah 3:4-5, in which the filthy clothes of the High Priest are replaced by clean ones, symbolising complete cleansing and the imputation of the righteousness of Christ. Immersion is not a fit way to represent this.

iii. 1 Corinthians 12:13

"For by one Spirit we were all baptised into one body". This text again cannot be forced to mean immersion. The reference is clearly to the fact that we become part of one body: part of an organic whole. We can be an integral part of that body, but we are not immersed in it

iv. Hebrews 9:13-14,22; 10:22; 12:24; 1Peter 1:2

All these passages clearly speak of baptism as symbolising the application of the blood of Christ for the removal of the guilt of sin. Several of them refer explicitly to sprinkling as being the way in which people were thus baptised.

v. Matthew 3:11

Here, baptism symbolises the baptism in the Holy Spirit. This is the leading feature of John's explanation of what he was doing. His baptism pointed to and was a preparation for the baptism of the Holy Spirit by Jesus. The Holy Spirit is represented in Acts 1:8 as coming upon the disciples, not immersing them. The account of the events at Pentecost itself provides another decisive rebuttal of the immersionist theory: *"And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them"*. Occasionally Baptists try to argue that the *"it"* filling the room was the Holy Spirit, baptising them as it were by immersion. This is so weak an argument as to be hardly worth refuting. It is clear that the *"it"* was the sound referred to just previously. Sprinkling or pouring is by far the most apt symbol of the Holy Spirit's coming upon them in tongues of fire.

Likewise throughout the Old Testament, Pentecost is promised in terms of pouring out, shedding forth, or sprinkling (Isaiah 32:15; Joel 2:28; Proverbs 1:23; Ezekiel 36:25-27). It is never referred to as an immersion.

It must be clear from the variety of expressions used that the Spirit speaking in Scripture uses the word "*baptizo*" and its derivatives quite freely. In some instances, immersion is a part of the thought; in others, it is clearly excluded, and sprinkling is by far the most appropriate thought. What is common to all the various ways in which "*baptizo*" is used, however, is that it describes being brought into the closest possible contact with something so as to be joined to it without specifying how that contact comes about. We can safely conclude therefore that Christian baptism symbolises union with Christ, but the way in which that union is brought about is not restricted to a single symbol of burial. If we were to follow the majority of relevant passages we would insist on sprinkling as the most Scriptural method.

In fact, paedobaptists have never argued that baptism cannot be by immersion. Some parts of the Orthodox Church administer the rite to infants in this way, and the vote in the great Westminster Assembly in the 17th Century which produced the Westminster Standards, the subordinate creed of the Presbyterian churches of the world, voted very evenly on whether to retain immersion. Even the Anglican church has also retained this option in its liturgy in the past. What we maintain is that sprinkling is decidedly the more Biblical way, for the reasons outlined above.

It is not without justification that Carson admitted that all the commentators and lexicographers are against me!²⁴ Perhaps it was because he was so clearly wrong!

As MacIntyre concludes, rather frustratedly, after reviewing the lack of evidence for the use of immersion in the New Testament: "We now leave the doctrine that immersion is the only legitimate mode of baptism to those who are capable of holding or determined to hold it.... against evidence. None else can hold it."²⁵

5. The Scriptural Basis for the Covenant Baptism of Infants

In order to understand the Scriptural nature of infant baptism for the children of believers, we need first of all to set it in the context of the whole Bible. When we do this, we see that God has always dealt with children as members of families and not just as individuals. We also see that, throughout Scripture, there is only one people of God. This people has always included all age groups. Israel of the Old Testament is the church; and the church is the Israel of God.

God's covenant people in the Old Testament included the children. The same must therefore be true in the New Testament. We must regard our children as covenant children.

We then need to establish that the position of the children of believers really does remain the same in the New Testament as it is in the Old Testament. We can also note in this context that, although not explicitly stated, there is strong evidence of infant baptisms have taken place in the New Testament.

Fourthly, we need to examine the promises relied upon by New Testament believers and note that they are the same as those relied upon by Old Testament believers. These

promises were made to believers and their children as well. Since the promises haven't changed, neither has their application to the children of believers.

Finally, we must establish the connection between circumcision and baptism. The sign of God's covenant promises in the Old Testament was circumcision; in the New Testament it is baptism. Both signs point to exactly the same promises and spiritual reality and therefore must be applied to the same people: believers and their seed.

If the paedobaptist can prove these things, the Baptist explanation of the few New Testament texts that might support their argument cannot be correct and the case for infant baptism is established because it is the only one which harmonises all the Scriptural evidence.

Against this, Baptists have to show that God's attitude to the children of believers has changed fundamentally. Throughout the Old Testament they have a relationship to God's promises of grace not enjoyed by the children of unbelievers. If the Baptist explanation of New Testament baptism is true, they no longer occupy this position. They are treated strictly as individuals: perhaps enjoying the advantage of being brought up in a Christian home, but certainly not being entitled to any formal recognition that they are Christ's sheep until they are old enough to make a mature and intelligent profession of faith.

To prove this, they must show that the promises made to the Old Testament saints, and particularly to Abraham, were made to the Jews, not primarily because they were a spiritual entity like the church, but because they were a nation state with an identity based upon natural birth and promises made to them by God of earthly blessings in the land of Canaan. Circumcision can then be viewed as a sign of national and racial identity, not comparable to New Testament sign of baptism. Because it has to rely on such an argument, Baptist thought, even in its most Reformed manifestations, is guilty of what is called Dispensationalism: that is dividing the Old and New Testaments so that what applies to God's people in the Old Testament doesn't always apply to New Testament believers. It is thus guilty of destroying the idea of the oneness of the Old and New Testament churches, the oneness of God's promises throughout Scripture, and of Scripture itself. This is one of the reasons why the relevance of the Old Testament is so little understood today, and why, for example, the singing of Psalms, which is commanded by Paul (Colossians 3:16) is neglected. Because men can treat these psalms as those of an Old Testament saint, living in different times and circumstances, and under different rules of behaviour, they can dismiss them as, in some cases, not fit to be appropriated by the Christian as their own.

1. God is a God of families.

(a.) God makes promises to families in both the Old and New Testaments.

That God deals with mankind not only as individuals but also organically, as members of families, tribes and nations should be the common sense conclusion of any reasonably observant person. The nations of the Old Testament were given over to their sins because they did not like to retain God in their thinking (Romans 1:28). Children born into families within these nations therefore were at a severe disadvantage, compared to a Jewish child, because they had no access to the revelation of God which had been vouchsafed to the Jews only (Romans 3:2). As such, Gentile children suffered for the sins of the fathers, and

from membership of their particular family and national group. The same is true of the New Testament. The children of the unbelieving Jews did in fact suffer by having the blood of the Lord Jesus brought down upon their heads (Matthew 27:25), and have continued to do so for the last 2000 years. Since Jesus was on earth, perhaps the majority of people who have lived in this world have lived and died without ever having had the chance to hear the gospel. One may well ask, as one does of many unfortunate children today, born in the world's trouble spots or into abusive or anti-Christian families: what chance did they have? It is not the purpose of this booklet to attempt to explain why God deals with men in this way; merely to observe the fact that He does so.

In particular, we must notice that God dealt with mankind as members of families from the very beginning. His original covenant with mankind was established with Adam as the head and representative of the whole human family. Adam's actions would result in either God's blessing or God's curse coming upon not only himself but upon all his descendants as well. This is why in Adam all die. Because he sinned, the whole human race was counted to have sinned in him. We are held responsible for that first sin too: we are regarded as children of a criminal, as a result of which we have been delivered over to the power of sin. This is taught both by Scripture and experience. Rom 5:11ff teaches that it was the one sin of Adam – not our own individual sins – that resulted in us being regarded as sinners and subject to the curse of God. Part of this curse is that we are born with a sinful nature and go on to commit our own individual sins. He who commits sin is a slave to sin.

Paul speaks of this aspect of the curse in Romans 6:6-8. In that little understood verse – *he that has died is freed (justified) from sin* – he explains that sin no longer has a judicial, or lawful, hold over us. The penalty has been paid by Christ and so, although we still struggle with sin, it no longer has any legal right to hold us under its dominion. In that sense, therefore, we are free from sin, and must go on to work out the implications of this by daily making progress against it in our Christian lives. But where did sin obtain its original legal rights to reign over us? By virtue of Adam's sin. Hence, David could say, "*In sin did my mother conceive me*": not that there was any impropriety in his conception, but that he was a sinner from the moment of conception, though psychologically incapable of personal sin for many years afterwards. We all know that we don't have to teach a child to be naughty: it comes naturally. This is the effect of sin brought upon it by the curse upon Adam and all his posterity.

God then gives Adam a very special promise, in spite of the ruin he has just brought upon himself and the whole human race. (Genesis 3:15). He informs him that henceforth there will be two seeds: the seed of the serpent, that is, the devil; and the seed of the woman, that is the seed of promise. He tells the devil that he shall bruise the heel of the seed of promise but shall in turn have his head bruised. Now quite rightly, this verse is always referred to as the first intimation to mankind of the Lord Jesus, and His work as a representative head of the redeemed human family: the church. But we can go further than this: John Calvin²⁶ points to the fact that "seed" is a collective noun, and that the verbs used imply a continual process of struggle between the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman. Moreover, in Acts 9:4, the Lord Jesus identifies so closely with His people that persecution of them is said to be persecution of Him. There will be a constant bruising of the heel, and of the Head, coming to a climax on Calvary, but also continuing in a lesser sense throughout human history through the conflict of the respective seeds. The Apostle John refers to these two seeds in 1 John 3:7-10 as "*the sons of God and the sons of the devil*". The work of the devil throughout history, through his seed, is to promote the work of sin. The task of Jesus is to destroy this work, and His people have to

share in this struggle. Often, the struggle will involve violence and persecution, as in the time of the bondage in Egypt or in some Muslim lands today; sometimes it might be by more insidious temptations, as in Solomon's day or our own Western world. But it is always the same struggle: not that the victory is uncertain – it is finished and He must reign until He puts all his enemies under his feet – but we are called to engage in the struggle in this life. For our purposes the crucial point is that, in God's purposes in election, these two different seeds always develop along family lines. We can trace this through Scripture.

This becomes evident in the lives of Cain and Abel. Eve seems to have thought Cain would be the chosen seed. His name – *I have gotten a man* – suggests this. In fact he proved to be just the opposite. In killing faithful Abel, it appeared as though the seed of the serpent had triumphed. But later, Eve gives birth to another son, Seth – meaning “*appointed*”. In thus naming him, she recognised that it was through him that God's covenant promises would be fulfilled. It is for this reason that the sons of Seth, and their progeny, are called “*the sons of God*” (Genesis 6:2). Whilst they kept themselves separate, they remained faithful to the Lord (Genesis 4:26), but gradually intermarriage with the children of the Cainites (Genesis 6:1-2) brought unbelief and unfaithfulness into the families of the Sethites, to the point where God's covenant promises were confined to but one family in the whole of the world: the family of Noah. The rest were destroyed in the Flood.

Now Noah was also a type or picture of Christ. Peter explains that the Flood which saved Noah and his children corresponds to baptism. How so? Well, baptism represents union with, or initiation into, Christ, with all its benefits for us. The waters of the Flood must represent the same thing, in picture language: the salvation that comes from being united to Christ.

Noah and his family were saved by the waters of the Flood (baptism) through the faith of Noah (1 Peter 3:20-21) even though not all of Noah's family seemed to have had a personal faith. Unbelieving Ham, too, benefited from his father's faith by virtue of his being a member of the family. God spared him immediate judgement in the Flood (Genesis 9:22 *cf.* with Genesis 9:25).

Even after the Flood, the covenant promises descend only through the family of Shem – although later Japheth's descendants would also be grafted in (Genesis 9:26-27). All the other families of the earth are rejected.

We see that the same process of spiritual decline takes place within Shem's family in that the covenant line becomes reduced to one family: that of Abraham. And even then, he is sunk in idolatry before God calls him. God's promises to Abraham then run through his family line, although only through that part of it which descends through Isaac (Genesis 17:19) until Jesus came.

In the Old Testament we always see God making promises to and saving families.

The usual objection to extending this teaching into the New Testament is that it cannot be true because not all the children of believers make a profession of faith. This is based upon a misunderstanding. Nowhere in Scripture does this teaching imply that all one's natural children will be saved, though we each hope and trust they will. The covenant line runs in families, for the most part, but does not necessarily include all the natural children.

There is good evidence from his behaviour and Noah's subsequent curse on his son, that Ham remained an unbeliever; whilst Paul explicitly states that the promise was not to all the natural children of Abraham but, "*in Isaac shall thy seed be called*". It never was so in the Old Testament and we have no reason to believe this has changed in the New Testament.

(b.) The church is identical in both the Old and New Testaments, although organised in different forms.

A second important point to be clear is that, not only are the promises to which the church looks those to which Abraham and all the Old Testament saints looked, although seen in a clearer light, but the church is a continuation of Old Testament Israel: it is one organic body, the body, or bride of Christ. There is only one people of God throughout all ages. Israel of the Old Testament is the church; and the church is the Israel of God. The New Testament church, therefore, must include children in God's covenant just like the Old Testament church (Israel) did. This can be proved from:

i. The church and Old Testament Israel are specifically said to be identical in Scripture.

In Acts 7:38 Israel is referred to as "*the church in the wilderness*". In Galatians 6:16, Paul describes the New Testament church as "*the Israel of God*". In relation to individual believers, Paul says in Romans 2:26-27: "*if the uncircumcision keep the righteousness of the law shall not his uncircumcision be counted for circumcision.... for he is not a Jew which is one outwardly.... but he is a Jew which is one inwardly*". Such texts as these teach the oneness of the church with Israel. We now are the real spiritual Jews; we are Abraham's real spiritual children; we are heirs of the promises, and therefore so are our children.

ii. The Gentile church is not a separate growth but is grafted onto the original olive tree of Israel

In Romans 11:16-17, Paul is addressing the problem of the unbelief of the majority of the Jews. He says: "*If the root be holy, so are the branches. And if some of the branches be broken off and thou being a wild olive tree wert grafted in among them, and with them partakest of the root and fatness of the olive tree; boast not against the branches. But if thou boast, thou bearest not the root, but the root thee*".

In other words, the Gentile church has not been engrafted onto some new and different promises and root stock. It was engrafted into the commonwealth of Israel (Ephesians 2:12); the same promises made to Abraham and his seed now apply to us and our seed in just the same way, because we are no longer strangers from the covenants of promise but partakers of them. They are the charter which God has given to us and our children that we are heir to the exact same promises as Old Testament Israel.

iii. All the prophecies in the Old Testament made to Israel have their fulfilment in the church.

Many of the prophecies of blessing to Israel are said to have been fulfilled in events which happened to the church. For example, the great promise to Old Testament Israel in Joel 2:27-30 is said by Peter to have been fulfilled by the outpouring of the Spirit upon the church at Pentecost. All the Old Testament prophecies of blessing to Israel will be fulfilled in blessings to the church, into which it is possible that some day many of the Israel after the flesh will return.

The promise to which the twelve tribes looked, instantly serving God day and night, (Acts 26:7) is the promise upon which Paul and the New Testament church rely.

Amos 9:11-15 seems on the face of it such a clear testimony that God still has purposes for the natural seed of Abraham: *"In that day will I raise up the tabernacle of David that is fallen, and close up the breeches thereof; and I will raise up his ruins, and I will build it as in the days of old: that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the heathen, which are called by my name, saith the Lord that doeth this. Behold the days come, saith the Lord, that the plowman shall overtake the reaper, and the treader of grapes him that soweth the seed; and the mountains shall drop sweet wine, and all the hills shall melt. And I will bring again the captivity of my people of Israel, and they shall build the waste cities, and inhabit them; and they shall plant vineyards, and drink the wine thereof; they shall also make gardens, and eat the fruit of them. And I will plant them upon their land, and they shall no more be pulled up out of their land which I have given them, saith the Lord"*.

This clearly seems to refer to renewed earthly blessings for the nation of Israel, and indeed many modern commentators interpret it in this way. However, at the council in Jerusalem, James fixes the true interpretation. He says these promises are fulfilled in the New Testament church. The question at that council was not whether the Gentiles could be saved. No-one ever doubted that. Gentiles had always been able to become part of God's covenant people, but only by circumcision and by becoming Jews. The question was whether Gentiles could be saved without becoming Jews and taking upon themselves the burden of the ceremonial law. James' summary indicates that he judged that the building of the tabernacle of David and the consequent salvation of the Gentiles was fulfilled in the establishment of the church, the preaching of the gospel to the Gentiles and their consequent faith.

This interpretation gives us a key to the way we must also interpret the many other parallel passages in the Old Testament which appear to speak of the blessings God will bring to the nation of Israel. These too must ultimately find their fulfilment in the New Testament church.

Christ and the apostles constantly taught that His coming was the fulfilment of the Old Testament prophecies and the Mosaic institutions. All the types of the Old Testament, prophet, priest and king, which were central to the functioning of the state of Israel, are fulfilled in Christ's relationship to the church. Indeed, the whole nation state of Israel, its civic and religious institutions, were designed as one big portrait of Christ's work and kingdom. Once the reality had come, the picture (Old Testament Israel) could fade away, leaving the church to shine forth as the bride of Christ, chosen from every tribe and nation.

Ephesians 5:26 tells us that Christ gave himself for His church that He might sanctify and cleanse it by the washing of water by the word. This is a reference to the outward sign and inward reality of baptism, which is here applied to all the church. If the church is identical to Old Testament Israel it must include all ages of person, young, middle-aged

and old. All ages must, therefore, have been cleansed both inwardly and outwardly (baptised) for this text to apply to them.

2. God includes children in His covenant in the New Testament too.

Some “Reformed” Baptists might agree with much that we have said so far in this chapter so far as the Old Testament is concerned, but they would then argue that the New Testament presents an entirely different picture. One in which family ties no longer play such a significant part in God’s dealings with people.

If they are correct, there should be some positive command or suggestion to that effect in the New Testament. If, on the other hand, there was to be no such change, there would be no reason for God to draw particular attention to it. Instead, we should find incidental comments which assumed that things continued as they always had done rather than any direct comments or commands about it. We should also find evidence that the baptism of infants and its consequences for their inclusion in the covenant of God are assumed. This is precisely what we do find in the New Testament. There is no evidence at all in the New Testament that God meant to exclude the children of believers from his covenant family, the church. Indeed, the evidence is quite to the contrary.

(a.) In the Ten Commandments, God describes Himself as the God of families.

The Ten Commandments were distinguished from all the other Mosaic laws by being written in stone by the hand of God himself. This symbolised their permanent and enduring nature. They are always referred to in theology as the Moral law. All other laws are included within them (see Romans 13:8-10). The Ten Commandments are a legal document which is still in force. Therefore, this self-revelation of God as a God of families remains binding for the New Testament church.

In two of the Commandments His nature and purposes as a God of families and of children is set out clearly. In Exodus 20:5) it states: *“I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me, and showing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments”*. God describes himself as dealing with children in their family relations as well as in relation to their own conduct. We might say that God places them in the family He does because of His purposes towards them.

Experience also teaches us that this is true. Do we not often say of a child: what chance did they have? By the same token, are not the backbone of many churches, people who have been brought up in Christian homes? This is becoming even clearer now that society as a whole is becoming noticeably less Christian. Some Dutch Reformed believers can trace a Christian seed in their family line going right back to the Reformation!

Of course, there are always branches being grafted in and branches being pruned, but the Divine Husbandman works according to the same principles always.

Furthermore, the Commandments are explicitly addressed to a redeemed people. (Exodus 20:1) *“I am the Lord thy God which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt,*

out of the house of bondage". God calls them to observe His laws because of what He has already done in redeeming them. And since the church is Israel, they are also addressed to the church on this basis too: on the basis of its redemption out of the bondage of sin, typified by the bondage in Egypt. In the fifth Commandment, God commands children and young people to "*honour thy father and thy mother*" on this same basis. This Commandment is addressed specifically to redeemed children. We must go on to ask: if they are redeemed, why are they not entitled to be baptised in formal recognition of the fact by the church?

(b.) New Testament children are exhorted as and classed among the saints: Ephesians 6:1,4; Colossians 3:20-21.

In both these passages, Paul exhorts all the various classes and ages of person likely to be present in the congregation when the epistle is read out. He addresses each class of person: husbands, wives, servants, masters and children specifically as Christians. In each case the exhortation is appropriate to their station in and time of life. He doesn't even include children as an after-thought; they are right there in the middle of the list. He exhorts children, in their capacity specifically as Christian children. He regards them as having a relationship with Christ and as susceptible to being motivated by this to good works.

In Ephesians 6:1, children are specifically exhorted to obey their parents in the Lord. In other words, since they are Christian children, since they are in the Lord, they should behave as becomes children who belong to Christ. Paul is exhorting them to do a specifically Christian duty on the basis of motives that would only influence a Christian. Others, who are strangers and aliens from the promises could never be exhorted to do something in the Lord. Furthermore, in Ephesians 6:4, fathers are urged to bring their children up "*in the nurture and admonition of the Lord*". Again, Baptists are apt to view this as a general pious exhortation that could apply to Christian or non-Christian parent alike. But the text is specific to Christian parents of children that belong to the Lord. The nurture and admonition is that of the Lord himself. It is the responsibility a Christian parent owes to covenant children precisely because they are covenant children, to bring them up not according to the dictates of human reason but as belonging to Christ: "*the children whom thou hast born to me*" (Ezekiel 16:27).

In Colossians 2:20, Paul has exhorted the whole congregation in verse 12 in their capacity as the elect of God. He goes on to say, in verse 17, "*Whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord, giving thanks to the Father by him*". He then elaborates this thought further in relation to each specific class and age of person who would be liable to be in the congregation: wives, husbands, fathers, servants, masters. Again each is exhorted to do their duty as Christians: children are to obey parents because this is well pleasing in the Lord. They are Christian children addressed as being susceptible to motivation in this way.

(c.) Children of believers are called holy by the apostle Paul: 1 Corinthians 7:14.

This has always been a difficult text for Baptists. The most erudite attempt to explain it away is from the great John Gill. He claims that "sanctification" in this context refers to being duly and legally married and quotes several Jewish authorities who describe

someone as being sanctified when they married. To be “*holy*”, in his view, means to be legitimately married; for the children to be holy simply means they are legitimate. He thus concludes: “the children are holy in the same sense as their parents are, that as they are sanctified, or lawfully espoused together, so the children born of them were in a civil and legal sense holy, that is legitimate wherefore to support the validity of their marriage and for the credit of their children it was absolutely necessary they abide with one another.”²⁷ The only Scripture he quotes in favour of this interpretation is Job 1:5, in which he says the Jews interpret Job’s sanctifying of his sons as them marrying. Dr Strong²⁸ argues differently and claims that Paul would have been bound to mention their baptism as a source of evidence that they were “holy/set apart” if they had been baptised as infants. This latter is a weak argument since the whole passage assumes the holiness of children, rather than setting out to provide evidence for it. John Gill’s explanation is the more powerful. The great difficulty with it, though, lies in the fact that Gill is unable to produce any Scriptural evidence that to be holy means to be a legitimate child.

Throughout Scripture, holiness has a reference to God; it is to be set apart from common use to the service of God. It does not imply inward purity, necessarily: the lamb consecrated for sacrifice was no different from any other lamb; but it was consecrated to God’s service and so was called “*holy*” (set apart). The Hebrews were set apart for God; their children were likewise holy, as were all who joined them. Gill’s explanation is based entirely on Paul referring to Jewish tradition. The Holy Spirit would not be interested in Jewish tradition. The question Paul was addressing was not whether their marriages were legitimate or not, but whether it was now appropriate for them to remain yoked to an unbeliever. The natural explanation of this verse is that the pagan husband, in virtue of his union with a Christian wife, although he remained a pagan, was sanctified – (*ie.* he was part of a covenant family). He was now the parent of children who by virtue of their believing mother were children of the covenant. The basic assumption is that since the children are holy – set apart – by membership of the family, so too must be the parents. On the other hand, if the parents were unclean then the children would be too. Paul presents the greatest possible encouragement to a Christian wife or husband with a still unconverted spouse; that spouse is now part of a covenant family to whom God has made covenant promises.

Of course this does not mean that the unbelieving spouse or the children are necessarily born again; it is a holiness of connection and privilege. They are within a family with whom God has covenanted to be their God and the God of their seed after them.

(d.) Infants and children are capable of being, and indeed must be, born again if they are to be saved.

Throughout the New Testament it is assumed that infants too are capable of being born again. David Engelsma says: “Neither is the conversion of the children of the covenant as a rule a sudden, dramatic change in teenage years, or even in later life. The history of the conversion of the penitent thief and Saul is not the norm for elect children born and reared in the covenant. Usually they are converted from earliest childhood. This is the implication of the Fifth Commandment of the law. From earliest years, the children are converted to God so that they are able to honour their parents from the motive of the fear of Jehovah God who has redeemed them.”²⁹ When I raised this issue in my church Bible study it was as though I was promulgating some new, hitherto unheard of doctrine. Why is this? Because the influence of Baptist thought tends to compel people to think in terms

of children only coming to Christ as a crisis conversion experience usually some time in their teens or later adulthood. Children from church backgrounds are encouraged to look back to the day they gave their lives to Christ, as though somehow they were not Christians previously. They themselves begin to think of their experience in this way and talk about “when I became a Christian”. The testimonies of those who are prepared to insist they always trusted in Christ as far back as they remember don’t quite fit into the scheme, but their voices are marginalised.

The New Testament assumes infants and children are capable of a spiritual relationship with Christ before they are capable of psychological repentance. As their faculties of understanding will ripen, so does their awareness of consciously committing themselves to him.

What evidence is there for this?

Firstly, the new birth is the result of the work of the Holy Spirit alone, without any co-operation from man. He is not dependent upon the capacities of man, psychological or moral. He produces the new birth in an infant, just as in an older person, according to His sovereign purpose and without any reference to the age, capabilities or merits of the person: John 1:13: “....*which were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God*”; Acts 16:14: “....*whose heart the Lord opened*”. In John 3:5-6 the Saviour himself categorically states that anyone, no matter whom, must be born again if they are ever to enter into the kingdom of God. Since he doesn’t exclude any age or class of persons this must apply from the moment of conception.

Secondly, in Luke 18:15-16 (and the parallel passages in the other gospels), Jesus tells his disciples to suffer little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God. Verse 15 tells us that these children were “infants”. In other words He is saying that infants are capable of being members of the kingdom of God: indeed this must be so if they are to go to be with Jesus should they die in infancy. John Gill says of this: “the reason given for suffering little children to come.... is to be understood in a figurative and metaphorical sense: of such who are comparable to children for modesty, meekness and humility....”³⁰ He then cites (or rather misquotes) Calvin as agreeing with him. Well of course no-one would disagree that this is the application Jesus intends us to make as regards adults, but we must go on with Calvin to say “....under this term Jesus includes both little children and those who resemble them; for the Anabaptists foolishly exclude children, with whom the subject must have commenced.”³¹ Jesus is asserting that the kingdom of God belongs to little children and that they are members of it, not that the kingdom of God belongs only to adults who resemble little children.

John Murray³² gives several reasons why this is the only interpretation that can be placed upon this passage:

- the situation which evokes this comment from the Lord Jesus was the refusal of the disciples to allow infants to be brought to him. His response was directed specifically to the position of the infants who were being refused: “*suffer the little children and forbid them not to come unto me*”.

- the word “*them*” clearly refers to the infants. The children were not coming on their own, they were being brought; and the blessing being sought was a real spiritual blessing. His words were words of power and were accompanied by inward grace and power to

accomplish what they promised. When He blesses the children, therefore, it is with a real blessing of saving grace, not simply with words and pious hopes.

That Jesus indicated they should “*come*” indicates that they were capable of receiving a spiritual blessing from Him even in their infant state. Kingdon tries to preserve the traditional Baptist interpretation by claiming that there is no evidence here that Jesus is referring to blessings He gives to covenant children, but rather He is referring to the fact that these children, and all children like them, form a picture of the ideal response to the Lord’s invitation in the Gospel (p86).³³ In this way he hopes to evade the clear teaching of the text that these children were capable of and indeed did receive a real spiritual blessing from Jesus, which was effectual for their salvation. He states there is not a word in the passage which would oblige us to restrict our Lord’s statement to “covenant” children. He does not say that to covenant children belong the kingdom of God, but to children without distinction (p86).³⁴ He thus succeeds in making the passage say the exact opposite of what it actually does say. The point is that these were all covenant children. They were all born to Israelite mothers who, by bringing them to Jesus, whom they saw as the Messiah, were expecting him to convey the blessings of the covenant of salvation to them. So it was that Jesus indicated that the blessings of the covenant belonged to these infants specifically, and also to all who would receive it in the same childlike way.

Thirdly, in 1 Corinthians 15:22, Paul explicitly states that “*...in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive*”. Now to be “*in Adam*” is to be in our natural state, outside of Christ, not having any share in His promises or blessings. If we die in that state we die in our sins. To be in Christ is to be united to Him in a saving spiritual relationship. Paul knows of no intermediate state during infancy and childhood: either we’re in the one or the other. Scripture is quite clear: all who die in Adam die unsaved at whatever age; all who die in Christ at whatever age, even as an unborn foetus, will live in Him. Praise God, and amen, say all God’s saints who have lost little ones in this way. They too can have a saving interest in Christ’s blood.

Fourthly, in Mark 9:37-42, the “*little one*” is an infant or small child and is said to believe in Christ. He cannot be a teenager to have been taken in Jesus’ arms. The little one is the focus of Jesus’ attention and comments here. He “*belongs to Christ*” (v.41); he is the one who believes in me, even in his childish state, and is not to be offended by a refusal to receive him as one of Christ’s. He should be received in my name (v.41): that is “on my behalf” and as one of mine. This is precisely what Baptists won’t do.

The point about all these passages for our purposes is found in the words of Peter when he was at the house of Cornelius: “*Can any man forbid water, that these should be baptised, which have received the holy Ghost as well as we?*” (Acts 10:47). Though Peter shirked from depriving some of Christ’s of the outward sign of membership in His body in this way, Baptists insist upon the point! Baptists refuse to let the church recognise that Christ has lambs in her midst as well as full grown sheep.

This brings us back to a point we made at the beginning. Baptism should focus entirely upon God’s grace not upon man’s response. It is only by changing the focus that Baptists can argue for the exclusion of infants.

As Pastor Ron Hanks³⁵ says: “The Baptist view is that baptism is a sign or mark of what we have done in repenting and believing. The Reformed position is that baptism is a sign or mark of what God has done in regenerating us. It does not mark our response to grace,

but the work of grace itself. Baptism.... is a picture of the washing away of sins by the blood of Jesus. This is what God does in saving us, and He does it first. He does it when we are incapable of responding to his gracious work.”

Looked at in this way we can easily see that baptism is equally applicable to both infants and adults since all share in the same spiritual incapacity to repent. It is only by God's grace that we are enabled to do so.

(e.) Household baptisms.

In the New Testament, three of the twelve Christian baptisms recorded are of households. This suggests the procedure was quite typical. On each occasion in Acts 16 the event occurs there and then immediately upon the conversion of the head of the household, with no mention of active faith on the part of any other member of the household.

Baptists say that the faith of the others is assumed, and that there must not have been any infants or small children in the household. In fact, these accounts cannot be reconciled with Baptist beliefs. They also clearly show that the way Baptists practise baptism in their churches is not the New Testament way.

Firstly, the whole household was baptised there and then upon a mere profession of faith. There was no time for any testing out of the reality of that profession. Nor is there mention of the faith of anyone else in the household other than that of the head of it. By contrast, months and years will often elapse before Baptists will baptise the immature Christian, certainly in the case of those of teenage years.

Secondly, there is no mention of any systematic additional teaching that took place to win the hearts of the other members of the household; it certainly could not have involved more than a brief conversation (in the case of the Philippian jailor with a household that had probably been roused from sleep).

Thirdly, on Baptist principles, it is impossible to baptise households at all. Even if several people in a family are baptised together in a Baptist church they are baptised as individuals, professing their faith individually, not collectively.

Fourthly, in those days of typically large families, with many children of all ages, is it not strange that in all of the three cases, the whole household was baptised. It stretches credulity to ask us to believe that there was not even one pre-teenage child in any of the households who wasn't judged to have a sufficient faith, or be too young to participate.

Finally, in the account of the Philippian jailor in Acts 16:31, Paul announces with confidence: *“Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved and thy house.”* Of course Baptists have to insert into this passage: and thy house “if they too believe”. The passage, however, does not say this. The more natural meaning is that Paul knew and promised that if the jailor would believe, then not only he but also his house would be saved. On what basis could he possibly say this? On the same basis that Joshua in the Old Testament could say as for me and my house we will serve the Lord. There was no doubt about it in Joshua's mind. Not only he but also his house would serve the Lord. How did he know? Because he knew that God's purpose was and still is to save in the lines of continued generations.

3. The promises relied upon by New Testament believers are the same as those relied upon by Old Testament believers.

These promises were made to their children as well. The promises haven't changed, neither has their application to the children of believers.

Baptists have traditionally tried to argue against the evidence presented above. With what justification, I will leave to the reader to judge. However, in this generation a new and more subtle challenge has been mounted. In his book "Children of Abraham", which has been lauded by "Reformed" Baptists as unanswerable, and in his subsequent writings and lecturing, David Kingdon concedes most of what we have demonstrated so far. The basic contention (of Reformed paedobaptists) is correct – the covenant of grace is one in all ages (p21).... the substance of the covenant is declared in both Testaments to be the blessing God graciously bestowed upon his people, as contained in the promise "*I will be your God*" (p38).³⁶ He even goes further and concedes that circumcision, like baptism, has a spiritual significance: "We cannot interpret circumcision as a sign only of Israel's national separation to God. It was this, of course, but its significance as a sign is not exhausted by describing it as a merely national sign. Whilst it was taken up into the Mosaic covenant it preceded it as the covenant sign by many generations, and thus it cannot be interpreted exclusively as a national sign.... Baptists must recognise the analogy between baptism and circumcision." (p27-8)³⁷

On the face of it, this seems to concede all the crucial ground to paedobaptists, but in fact this is not so. Although he admits what many Baptists have been loath to admit, he still retains the old Baptist notion of a temporary national covenant with Old Testament Israel. He says the covenant with Abraham has both an Old Testament and a New Testament fulfilment: in the Old Testament dispensation the promise of the land to Abraham and his descendants (Genesis 17:8) was fulfilled in the gift of Canaan, but in the New Testament age of the Spirit, it is fulfilled in the believers' inheritance in Christ which, unlike the land, is "*incorruptible, and undefiled and that fadeth not away.*"³⁸

In other words, Kingdon says that the promise to Abraham was two fold: spiritual and earthly. On the one hand, there was a promise of eternal life to Christ and his seed (Gal 3:16) – *ie.* only to those Israelites who were of the elect. Alongside this was the promise of an earthly Canaan made to all Abraham's natural children, both elect and reprobate. In the New Testament the earthly, and all that is associated with it, drops away and only the spiritual promises remain. What remains is a promise of eternal life to the elect. What drops away are all those aspects of the promise which were made to the elect and reprobate alike amongst Abraham's children. This includes the promise of the land of Canaan, the sign of circumcision as a sign of incorporation into that nation and the idea that salvation is confined to the Israelites and their natural seed. Not that he doesn't think that the covenant is still with Abraham and his seed in the New Testament: he does. His explanation of this is given in a further article: "The interpretation that the apostle Paul gives to the concept of the "seed of Abraham" establishes the principle that the ordinance of baptism should now be applied only to those who show credible evidence of being in union with Christ, for only those in union with him are Abraham's seed (Galatians 3:29). It follows therefore that it would be out of harmony with the character of the new dispensation to require a natural connection of a typical character, as a prerequisite for now bestowing the sign and seal of baptism. Such a connection was appropriate to the old dispensation, but it is inappropriate to the new. What is now required is a prerequisite which more clearly and directly represents the spiritual character of the covenant, to

which the typical relationship for so long pointed. The New Testament leaves us in no doubt that such is nothing other than a credible profession of faith in Christ.”³⁹

In other words, all that was purely national and racial drops away, leaving the spiritual promise only, made to Christ and his elect. A spiritual promise now demands a spiritual sign: baptism. The spiritual sign should now only be administered to those who give evidence of being elect by demonstrating personal repentance. Baptism must therefore be administered to believers only. To add further substance to this argument, Kingdon sees a progression in the Old Testament according to which the spiritual aspect of the covenant gradually comes to the fore and the natural aspect recedes. He traces this development in the concept of the “remnant” (p.74-5). “The Old Testament teaching about the faithful remnant comes, of course, to its most pointed expression in the promise of the new covenant. The new covenant (Jeremiah 31:32) is expressly distinguished from the old Sinaitic covenant in that it is to be written, not on tablets of stone, but upon the fleshy tablets of the heart. The new covenant people were to be distinguished from the old in this respect: *‘they shall all know the Lord’* (v.34), *‘from the least of them to the greatest of them.’* Again it is surely obvious that the promise of the new covenant brings about a change in the basis on which the godly can be members of the covenant people. After making every allowance for the spiritual import of circumcision it still remains true that membership of natural Israel was conditional upon natural birth, whereas membership of the new covenant people is dependent upon spiritual re-birth. Both the concept of the remnant and the promise of the new covenant mark the transference of religion from a nationalistic to an ecclesiastical basis. So long as religion remained upon a nationalistic basis a child was related to the covenant people through birth into an Israelite family and by no other means. With the shift from a nationalistic to an ecclesiastical basis, a shift which begins to take place in the Old Testament but which is only completed in the New, the place of the child within the people of God undergoes a change.... we must not select the Mosaic period of revelation as if the last word about the church membership of children was said at that time.”⁴⁰

Now in Kingdon’s argument there is much with which a Reformed believer can agree. What we cannot agree with, however, is the notion that the promises made to Old Testament Israel were ever made to the reprobate amongst them. Paul emphasises this in Romans 9:6-7: *“In Isaac shall thy seed be called.”* The promises in the Old Testament were made to Christ’s elect only, in the same way as they are made to Christ’s elect in the New Testament. It also follows that there was no development of religion from a “national” to an “ecclesiastical” basis later in the Old Testament as Kingdon tries to suggest. Paul, in Romans 9:6-7, draws his argument about the covenant of God being with the elect within Israel not from the later prophets but from the original covenant with Abraham. The covenant always had an essentially ecclesiastical basis, though it ran in family lines, for the most part. This is exactly what true (paedobaptist) Reformed believers insist still happens in the New Testament.

Indeed, this one covenant which God has reveals in Scripture does not even commence with Abraham. It was made in the counsels of the Godhead before time began. It is a spiritual covenant with Christ, his people and their seed. All the other covenants in Scripture – eg. with Noah or Abraham – are designed to shed light upon some facet of it. It is revealed most fully in the Old Testament in the covenant with Abraham. In Galatians 3:19-20, Paul says the promise was made to Abraham’s seed, that is Christ. He contrasts this covenant with the Mosaic covenant, which needed a mediator (Moses). The covenant with Christ needed no mediator because there is no need for a mediator between the God the Father and God the Son.

The terms of the covenant involved God the Father sending the Son to rescue and redeem a people for himself out of the ruin caused by Adam's fall (John 17:6), in order to demonstrate the glory of his grace to the whole of Creation. The people whom the Father would give to the Son as his bride (the church) were chosen before the foundation of the world without any reference to any of their good works, or meritorious response to his grace, that God foresaw. God "foreknew" them, not in the sense that he knew beforehand how they would respond to his grace but that he loved them. As he contemplated them in eternity, he contemplated them as the bride He had chosen for His Son (Romans 8:29).

In his turn the Son undertook to act as their representative before God, taking upon Himself, as a husband would for his bride, all their debts to God as a result of their sin, and granting them all the privileges that flow from being a royal bride; not least of which was to be clothed in the white robes of His righteousness, enabling them to dwell forever in the presence of God, as sons and heirs of all that is God's (John 17:19). In doing so, the Son would also rescue and redeem the Creation which had been made subject to bondage (Romans 8:9-21).

The Holy Spirit undertook to apply the saving work of Christ in the daily lives and experience of the believer, leading them safely to their heavenly home and preparing them for it by his sanctifying power through all the experiences they face in this life (John 16:7-15).

The parties to the covenant remain the same throughout Scripture: namely, the seed of Abraham (Christ), of whom Abraham himself was a type, together with his bride, the church. The elect children of believers are part of this bride in the New Testament as they always were throughout the Old Testament, since otherwise they cannot be saved at all if they die as children. If they are included within the covenant they should be entitled to the outward sign of that covenant, which was circumcision, but is now baptism.

Let us trace this covenant as it is unfolded to us in the Scripture. In Isaiah 49:3-9 we have a record of the Father and the Son discussing the terms and scope of the covenant. The Son is promised a people from the Gentiles as well as the Jews.

At the start of human history, we find Adam, the representative of all his posterity, and as such a picture of the Mediator of the one eternal covenant, the coming heavenly representative, upon whom men could trust, and who would not fail them. What happens to him will also befall his children after him. The parallel between Adam and Christ is mentioned frequently in the New Testament. Christ is the Second Adam (1 Corinthians 15:47). Just as Adam stood in the place of and represented his people, so does Christ. As in Adam all are constituted sinners in God's eyes, infants included, so in Christ all those that are His are constituted righteous (including infants), and are then progressively made so in readiness for heaven (Romans 5:11ff.). Christ's intervention was not God's "Plan B" once Adam fell. *"Known unto God are all His works from the beginning of the world"* (Acts 15:18).

The first clear intimation of Christ's coming is in Genesis 3:15, when the seed is promised who would obtain the complete victory for His people over the forces of evil. The subsequent institution of sacrifices (Genesis 3:21) was intended to point to how this seed would accomplish His task at Calvary. We next see in Noah a further picture of other facets of this everlasting covenant. Noah saves his people through the Flood. The waters of judgement in destroying the old world separate Noah from its wickedness and bring

him into a new world. The flood waters equate to the waters of baptism. Baptism brings him out of the old world and into the new: a symbol of the new heavens, new earth and our inheritance in them. Noah's flood also symbolises the fact that Christ's work will benefit not only mankind but also the whole of Creation. The creation awaits the revealing of the sons of God so that it too can be released from its present state in which it is characterised by death and decay (Romans 8:19-22).

The clearest view of this covenant in the Old Testament is through the covenant with Abraham and later on in the life of the Jews under the Mosaic dispensation. There are several things we can learn from it:

(a.) It is unconditional.

It is entered into by God without any conditions attached as far as Abraham is concerned. God proposes the covenant, and also it is God alone who walks between the two halves of the offering (Genesis 15:1-21). It is He alone who makes the promises and it is He alone who is the subject of the curse should the covenant remain unfulfilled. Clearly had God required something from Abraham too, Abraham would have been required to walk through the two halves of the offering and to assume to himself the curses in the event that he could not fulfil his side of the covenant. In promising that He will be the God of Abraham's seed, God also implies that He will fulfil all the conditions necessary for that to happen, including bestowing the necessary repentance and faith. It is all of sheer unmerited grace. We will say more about this later.

(b.) The covenant in Genesis 17 is made with Christ.

The covenant with Abraham is recorded in Genesis 17: *"As for me, behold my covenant is with thee, and thou shalt be the father of many nations.... and I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee. And I will give unto thee, and to thy seed after thee, the land wherein thou art a stranger, all the land of Canaan for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God."*

Now Paul, in Galatians 3:16 makes it clear that this whole promise, including the promise of the land, was directed to Christ. *"Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, and to seeds, as of many: but as of one, And to thy seed which is Christ."* This Covenant did not need a mediator, because it was made within the Godhead and what need is there to mediate between God the Father and God the Son (Galatians 3:20). Christ was not promised an earthly kingdom, but a heavenly one. The promise of the land of Canaan pointed to the real substance of what was promised to Christ and his seed: the heavenly Canaan (Hebrews 11:8-10).

(c.) It is an everlasting covenant.

Genesis 17:7-8 says *"And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee. And I will give unto thee, and to thy seed after thee, the land wherein*

thou art a stranger, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God."

There are two points to note in this passage which bear upon David Kingdon's position:

Firstly, the covenant is said to be an everlasting one with the successive generations of Abraham's children. Now if this is so, parts of it cannot simply drop off so as to be no longer valid in the New Testament. All parts of it must still be in force. This includes the part which refers to the children of believers in their generations. It also includes the promise of the land.

It is crucial to Kingdon's case that both these aspects of the promise are purely earthly and contain no permanent spiritual promise. This text contradicts both these claims. The promise of the land too was part and parcel of the spiritual promise designed to last forever (not just some secondary and temporary promise). This interpretation is confirmed by the writer of Hebrews 11:8-10 God is here promising Christ and his people an eternal inheritance.

(d.) All those who belong to Christ are heirs to the promise God made to Christ, in the person of Abraham.

Galatians 3 is an extended commentary upon the fact that we are heirs to exactly the same promises as Abraham – not modified ones which exclude our children. The question is, though: which promises to which children?

Kingdon claims that two different kinds of promise were made to Abraham's seed: a spiritual promise (of heaven itself) to Isaac, and the elect; and a promise of an earthly Canaan to all Abraham's natural children, both elect and reprobate, on condition of a certain obedience to the law. This latter promise falls away with the coming of the New Testament. Further Biblical evidence against this claim includes:

Firstly, if the promise of an earthly Canaan was made to all the natural children of Abraham upon condition of their obedience it is clear that God was promising an impossibility. Hebrews 11:6 makes clear that without faith it is impossible to please God. The reprobate always are displeasing to God because they do not trust in him: the obedience required for the fulfilment of the promise would never be forthcoming.

Secondly, as a matter of fact, not all the natural children of Abraham were the subject of the promise. Ishmael did not inherit the promise: *"In Isaac shall thy seed be blessed."* Nor did all Isaac's children inherit the promise of the land. Esau was excluded. What is the implication of this? God nowhere in Scripture applies the promise of Abraham to all his natural seed. The seed of Abraham is nowhere said to be all the natural children of Abraham. On the contrary it is clearly taught by Jesus and the apostles that only those with faith, like Isaac, are the children of promise. (Romans 9:6-8; John 8:39) Jesus specifically denies that the Pharisees were children of Abraham. Now of course they were children by natural descent, but not by spiritual descent. And because this was so they were not heirs to the promises and neither had their reprobate forefathers been throughout Jewish history. The grant of the land of Canaan was always meant as a picture and a seal of the promise of a heavenly inheritance, no less in the Old Testament than in the New. The promise of the land of Canaan was actually meant to help the faith of the

elect in Israel by helping them look to and wait for their heavenly inheritance as Abraham did (Hebrews 11:8-10). Like the rest of Jewish national life, religious and civic, the grant of the land pointed to spiritual realities. The Temple sacrifices spoke of Christ's atonement; the institutions of the Judges and Kings spoke of Christ's office as a king; the prophets prefigured Jesus as the great and final Prophet, promised by Moses; and the land itself and their continued presence in it, which rested upon their continued obedience, taught them that their heavenly inheritance was only to be won and kept by continued obedience and holiness.

In Galatians 3, Paul proves the promise to Abraham and his seed is the very same promise upon which New Testament believers rely. He insists that this promise, once made, was inviolable (Galatians 3:17). If it was inviolable, Kingdon cannot be correct in his assertion that part of it falls away in the New Testament. Its terms could never be altered. Paul explicitly says the promise remains valid in its entirety for New Testament believers (Galatians 3:29). We have to conclude therefore that the promise to Abraham was a spiritual promise. It was made only to those who had faith like Isaac. All the other natural children of Abraham who did not have faith were never the subjects of the promise: this was true throughout Old Testament times just as much as in the New Testament (Romans 9:8). Ishmael, Esau and all the other unbelieving seed of Abraham were never the children of the promise. Not all Abraham's physical children were also his spiritual children (John 8:39): Jesus told the Pharisees, who were the descendants of Abraham: *"If ye were Abraham's children ye would do the works of Abraham."*

The promise was to Abraham and his elect seed: *"In Isaac shall thy seed be called."* The terms of the promise have not been changed and indeed cannot be changed. The spiritual children of Abraham (ie: the church) inherit exactly the same promise as he did. This includes their children in exactly the same way as it included his: not all his physical children, necessarily, but all the elect children to whom the promise was made: and if ye be Christ's then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

(e.) Abraham recognised the promise was primarily spiritual.

Paul says *"...the Scripture seeing that God would justify the heathen through faith preached the gospel unto Abraham saying, in thee shall all the nations be blessed"* (Galatians 3:8). Abraham knew that the promises were spiritual and not physical. It was to this that his hopes were directed primarily, as Jesus testified: *"Abraham rejoiced to see my day and he saw it and was glad."* (John 8:56). He only saw it afar off and through the shadows of the Old Testament but nevertheless he clung to the same spiritual promises we do. These promises encompassing the gift of eternal life. In Matthew 22:32, Jesus argued that the fact that God promised to be Abraham's God constituted a promise of eternal life: *"I am the God of Abraham.... God is not the God of the dead but of the living."* We can also extend Jesus' reasoning to say the promise to be the God to our seed after us constitutes a promise of eternal life to them too.

That Abraham himself interpreted the promise this way is clear because it is said of him: (Hebrews 11:10): *"For he looked for a city which hath foundations whose builder and maker is God."* In receiving the promise Abraham was not distracted by the earthly blessings of the land of Canaan. He realised that they were just a picture of the real spiritual substance of the promise. To that he directed his faith and hope.

The blessedness that comes to believers' is the very same blessedness that came to Abraham on the basis of his faith. It is the same promise and the same blessing. If it is the same blessing as Abraham, it must extend to our children as well: Galatians 3:14: *"....that the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles through faith in Jesus Christ."* What was that blessing? Genesis 17:7: *"I will establish my covenant.... to be a God to thee, and to thy seed after thee."*

4. Circumcision was the sign of this spiritual covenant; not a badge of national identity. It is in every way identical to baptism in the New Testament.

Although Kingdon accepts that circumcision was a sign of a spiritual covenant and not simply membership of a racial group, many Baptists are reluctant to do so. It is, therefore, worthwhile to look at the spiritual focus of circumcision. We can show that it was a badge of spiritual rather than national identity quite easily from a number of considerations:

(a.) Circumcision was given to well before the Jewish nation was formally constituted as a nation under Moses. (Romans 4:10-13).

(b.) Circumcision is called the covenant: Genesis 17:13: *"And my covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant."* Stephen also reflects this when he says *"And He gave him the covenant of circumcision"* (Acts 7:8). It is true that the spiritual blessings of this covenant also carried with them external privileges and it marked off the Jews as a distinct national and racial entity (*cf.* Genesis 12:2; 46:3; Deuteronomy 4:7). But we have already seen that the whole public life and institutions of Israel were designed to point to the importance of this spiritual covenant. Circumcision, as a sign, was fundamentally and primarily a sign of a spiritual covenant.

(c.) Circumcision, as an outward ritual, was repeatedly taught as being a sign of the cleansing from inward defilement which was necessary in order to enjoy God's covenant blessings.

Deuteronomy 10:6: *"And the Lord thy God will circumcise thine heart, and the heart of thy seed to love the Lord thy God."* In itself it availed nothing. To be a Jew, without being circumcised in heart was of no value, Jeremiah 6:10, *"their ear is uncircumcised and they cannot hearken"*; John 8:39, *"If ye were the children of Abraham ye would do the works of Abraham."* The true circumcision to which the outward ritual pointed was the important thing: Colossians 2:11, *"in whom ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ."* Thus Paul can say *"we are the circumcision, which worship God in the Spirit and rejoice in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh."* (Philippians 3:3).

(d.) Circumcision is specifically said to be the seal of the righteousness Abraham had by faith. Romans 4:11: *"And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness which he had yet being uncircumcised."*

(e.) The very nature of the sign was calculated to emphasise the spiritual nature of the covenant. Abraham's greatest temptation had been to help God's promises along by having a son by Hagar, his wife's maid. What more appropriate sign that he and his seed should trust in the promises of God and not upon the flesh for all the covenant blessings? It was also appropriate that the Old Testament sign should be a bloody sign – pointing

forward to Calvary – whereas the New Testament sign should be unbloody, pointing to the cleansing effect of Calvary on the heart. As Hodge⁴¹ concludes: “Its main design was to signify and seal the promise of deliverance from sin through the redemption to be effected by the promised Messiah. All along, the problem of the Jews was that the unspiritual among them viewed circumcision as a sign of a national covenant based upon family ties, without any reference to its spiritual nature. Time and time again the Jews are criticised by the prophets, and by the New Testament for this very thing: yet Baptists would try to persuade us that this is the way we too should view circumcision. We, however, should treat circumcision in the way Paul does: *‘for he is not a Jew which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision which is outward in the flesh: but he is a Jew which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart.’* The outward rite of circumcision was of no benefit except insofar as it symbolised and accompanied a circumcision of the heart.”

One major objection that Paul faced was that if, in circumcision, God promised to be a God to His people, had His promises failed since most Jews rejected the Lord Jesus and thereby they incurred God’s wrath? One of the main Baptist arguments against covenant infant baptism is exactly the same. What is the value of baptising someone who does not go on in adult life to follow the Lord Jesus?, it is said. Paul anticipates this in Romans 9:5-6. In Romans 11:29, he affirms that the gifts and calling of God are without repentance. In other words, if God has promised a thing he will perform it. He promised Abraham’s seed would be saved and so they will! In Romans 9:5-6, he says that although most of Israel are now under the judgement of God, this does not mean that God’s promise of eternal life to Abraham’s children has failed. Why? Because *“In Isaac shall thy seed be called.”* That is, not all the physical descendants of Abraham were the subject of the promise, only Isaac. Paul’s argument is that this is true in every generation of Israelites. The true Israel – the Isaac’s, the ones to whom God’s infallible promises are addressed – is often only a small, elect remnant within a wider apostate nation; it is they and they only, not the Ishmael’s or Esau’s, who are the real recipients of the promise. Paul’s argument is exactly the one which undermines Kingdon’s two-covenant theory. Circumcision was a sign of this spiritual covenant with the elect within Israel, the true spiritual seed of Abraham, who shared his faith.

5. New Testament baptism is in every way equivalent to Old Testament circumcision and so must be administered to the same people.

We need now to go on to establish the final link in the chain to prove the Scriptural case for the baptism of the children of believers, and that is to establish that baptism is exactly equivalent to circumcision and so must be administered to the same people: believers and their children. We have seen that, unlike many other Baptists, Kingdon acknowledges the spiritual nature of circumcision. We have also noted his claim that just as the promises had a dual reference, so does circumcision. He claims that in addition to its spiritual significance circumcision also had a national significance. In the New Testament only the spiritual significance of the covenant remains. All that was purely national has dropped away. Included in what has dropped away is the idea that God makes covenant promises to the seed of believers by virtue of their family connection. Therefore, the New Testament sign – baptism – should reflect only the spiritual realities it is intended to represent, not family or national identity. Therefore, it can only be administered when children show solid evidence of being united to Christ, not simply because they are born into a Christian family.

We have seen in our previous discussion of the nature of the promise to Abraham that there is no evidence that any element of the promise has fallen away as a result of Jesus' coming. The entire promise to Abraham and his seed, including that relating to the land (the heavenly Canaan) still stands and is confirmed in Christ.

Nevertheless, we still have to demonstrate that baptism replaces circumcision for the children of New Testament believers. This can be done by observing that baptism fulfils exactly the same function in the New Testament as circumcision in the Old.

Circumcision represented one's initiation into the ranks of God's covenant people and into a life of communion with God and repentance from sin. (Romans 4:11). In Abraham's case this had been the characteristic of his life for many years: in Isaac's case, this only became true as he grew to maturity and became psychologically capable of these things. Baptism signifies the same thing in the New Testament. It points to God's covenant promises to believers and their families to be their God. It also points to the inward cleansing associated with the new birth and union with Christ by which this fellowship with God is to be had. Galatians 3:26 informs us that for as many of you as have been baptised into Christ have put on Christ. Putting on Christ outwardly through the waters of baptism is a sign and a seal of the inward union with Christ. Furthermore, Romans 6:3-6 tells us we are buried by baptism into his death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we should walk in newness of life. Paul is answering the objection: shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? He says it impossible. Our union with Christ and our new nature will not permit it. As Herman Hanko says: "That which baptism signifies, therefore, is actually accomplished by the operation of the Spirit in the heart of God's elect."⁴² This promise of blessing in Christ is the essence of the original promises to Abraham, to which circumcision pointed. The fact that we and our children are still beneficiaries of the same promises is spelt out by Peter in Acts 2:39, and by Paul in Galatians 3:29. Infants and children can only be saved upon the basis of these promises There are no others. We must apply these promises to them just as much as to teenagers or adults.

As Calvin says: "If the word of baptism is designed for infants, why should we deny them the sign which is an appendage of the word."⁴³

Secondly, Paul in Colossians 2:11-12, equates baptism with circumcision. This is often said to be the only evidence in the whole New Testament, and a doubtful one at that, for infant baptism.

I hope that it can be seen from what we have written so far that the practice is far more robustly grounded in Scripture than that. Nevertheless, it is an important text, and being a rather long sentence the import of it is often lost.

Paul is facing a situation in which the Colossians are being tempted to think that although they have believed in Christ they now need to adopt other rules and practices which will enable them to move onto a higher plane of Christian living. Christ alone is not sufficient for that. The particular things they are being encouraged to add to their faith seem to include not only a worship of angels but also a mix of legal rituals and observances probably derived from Old Testament Jewish practices. What Paul is saying is that they have all things in Christ and do not need to go back to these "shadows".

Amongst the things they have in Christ is circumcision, in its fullest spiritual meaning: they do not therefore need to go back to have the outward sign of circumcision. How have

they come to enjoy this? When they were baptised. Baptism is to Christians all that circumcision was to the Jews. One of the important promises symbolised by circumcision was the promise of eternal life to the seed of believing Abraham. This aspect of circumcision, Paul's argument must imply, is also present in baptism. If not, an important aspect of circumcision would not actually be included within the New Testament ordinance of baptism – as indeed Baptists claim – but then Paul's argument about baptism replacing circumcision would not be entirely true.

Of course the leading thought in the passage is a comparison between the true circumcision of heart and the true baptism in the Holy Spirit, but Paul does not distinguish the outward sign from the inward grace: both are comprehended in what he says. Indeed, it is particularly against the temptation to undergo the outward ceremony of circumcision that Paul is warning them, so the water baptism they have undergone cannot be excluded from Paul's remarks.

Absolutely the only difference between the two outward signs is that circumcision points forward to Christ because of the shedding of blood involved (Hebrews 9:22). Once the blood of Christ was shed there could be no more shedding of blood (Hebrews 10:12), so baptism becomes a necessary substitute to symbolise the inward cleansing that the blood of Christ accomplishes.

One final difficulty now remains to be removed. If baptism is the sign of God's unconditional promises, surely it should be administered only to believers, as Baptists claim, and not to children who may later turn out not to be believers. The solution to this difficulty should now be apparent from our previous points.

Circumcision was a sign of faith (Romans 4:11), even though it was applied to all Abraham's children before they were capable of exercising it for themselves. It was applied firstly to Isaac, not on the basis of his faith, because he was only a child at that time and was not capable of it, but on the basis of God's promise to be Abraham's God and the God of his seed after him. In fact, Abraham already knew that Isaac was a child of the promise, in the fullest spiritual sense of those promises: *"In Isaac shall thy seed be called."* Circumcision was also applied to Ishmael even though Abraham already knew that the spiritual promises it symbolised did not apply to him. We can see this from Abraham's response to God's initial promise: *"O that Ishmael might live before thee"* (Genesis 17:18). The same was true of Esau in the following generation. God wished for both Isaac and Esau to be circumcised not because either of them possessed the faith of Abraham at that point (being still infants) nor because they would both receive the gift of repentance and faith, but as a sign that they were members of a family with whom God had entered into covenant. This is exactly the same basis upon which we should also baptise our covenant infants.

The question remains, however: What is the point of baptising, or for that matter circumcising (in the Old Testament), a child who cannot and may not go on to demonstrate a personal faith.

6. What is the Value of Baptising Infants?

The question has often been raised as to, if infant baptism is the teaching of the Scripture, why do we not have a clear understanding of its value? Associated with this is

the observation that many children who are baptised in all sincerity by believing parents have gone on to reject the Lord Jesus. Of what value is it then?

First of all it needs to be said that even if we don't understand a practice, it is no excuse for not engaging in it, if it is done at God's command. It is one thing to know that a practice is Biblical; it might be less easy to interpret its precise meaning. Nor is it only us that have the problem: the Jews suffered from the same difficulties over circumcision.

Leaving aside arguments about baptismal regeneration, as clearly unbiblical, we are left with three basic explanations from a Reformed perspective:

(a.) That in baptising our children we do so on the charitable assumption that they are regenerate.

This seems to have been the position of the great Dutch theologian, Abraham Kuyper. If we are to say that baptism is the exact equivalent of circumcision, I think this is clearly untenable. After all, Abraham circumcised Ishmael though he already knew he was rejected by God. The same was true later in the case of Isaac and Esau. Furthermore, we simply cannot assume that all our children are regenerate in this way. The unfortunate facts of church history in every generation weigh decisively against it being true, just as it was true of the generations of Israelites who were circumcised but remained in unbelief.

(b.) That it is a sign of a conditional covenant that God makes with every child of believing parents.

He undertakes to bring them up with many privileges that a child in a non-Christian home would not have, such as being taught the gospel from an early age, and having it lived out by their parents. For the covenant to be fully realised, however, and for the promises to be appropriated, the child must develop faith. If it does not, then God will reject that child as a covenant breaker. The analogy is sometimes used of God writing a cheque at someone's baptism, which the person needs to cash once they are old enough to do so for it to be of any value. Advocates of this approach view the covenant promises made to Abraham as having been made to all his natural children, but in some way suspended upon their faith.

The essential difficulty with this approach is that it seems to make the fulfilment of God's promises conditional upon man's response. In particular it requires that before the covenant is ratified a person has to respond in faith. Yet Scripture makes it clear that even faith itself is a gift of God and so must be part of the covenant promise. Our salvation is not a result of anything we do.

Nor does it do justice to the unconditional terms of the Abrahamic covenant. In promising to be the God of Abraham and his seed, God promised to do all that was necessary for that promise to be made eternally good, including granting the necessary faith and repentance (Acts 5:31; 11:18; 2 Timothy 2:25). If the gift of faith were not included in the promise, how is it that it could ever have been made good, since it depended for its fulfilment upon the positive response of people who were in no position to respond because they were spiritually dead and totally incapable of doing so (Ephesians 2:1; 1 Corinthians 2:14)?

It also seems to contradict Romans 9:6-8, in which the children of promise within Israel are distinguished from the rest. What promise did the others receive in circumcision? Kingdon would argue they received the promise of some temporary earthly blessings. But what of the reprobate children of New Testament Christians? What promises do they receive? There is no very obvious answer.

(c.) God promises unconditionally in baptism that he will save those of his elect people within that particular family line.

He will do all that is necessary to call them, justify them, sanctify and glorify them, including the granting of repentance and faith. He promises the parents that within their family will be those who are the children of promise. In other words, the promises are made, not to all baptised children but to those who like Isaac are the children of promise.

It is here that Paul's argument in Romans 9 helps us. Paul is attempting to deal with the problem of the apparent failure of God's promises to the families and nation of Israel. In verse 6 he poses the question as to whether the unbelief of Israel meant that God's promise to Abraham that He would be the God of his seed after him had failed. Now Paul could have easily launched into an argument along the lines of David Kingdon's, arguing that of course national and family identities counted in the past but they don't now, so Israel must stop thinking in those Old Testament ways. He could have equally launched into an explanation about how the promises were conditional upon the faith of the hearers. But, instead, he insists that God's promises cannot fail and indeed that they still stand exactly as they always have done. He argues, however, that the promises were never actually made to all Israel: *"For they are not all Israel which are of Israel; nether, because they are the seed of Abraham are they all children: but in Isaac shall thy seed be called."*

This might seem like a totally revolutionary thought to many brought up in the prevailing Arminian and Baptist atmosphere of much of British evangelicalism, yet it is the hinge of Paul's argument, and we are content to rest our case for the true meaning of infant baptism upon it. Even though Ishmael, Esau and generations of other Israelites who never actually believed were also circumcised as a sign of the promise, the promise was never directed at them as individuals. This seems to me to be the inescapable teaching of Paul at this point.

Because it will be a new thought to most readers let us emphasise and be clear about it. Abraham was circumcised as a sign not only of his faith but also of the wider covenant promise that God made to be his God and the God of his seed after him. The sign of this promise, circumcision, was applied to all his natural children. Isaac, being a child of the promise (Romans 9:8), was circumcised, but so was Ishmael, even though Abraham already knew that the promise did not apply to him. The same was true later in the case of Esau.

Likewise, throughout subsequent generations, Abraham still had (and indeed still has within the body of the church) physical descendants in each generation who are the elect remnant from the original nation of Israel. They are the true Israel, the children of promise. Alongside these children of promise, generations of Israelites were commanded to be circumcised even though by their subsequent life they merited and received God's verdict

of rejection. To be sure, they had many blessings associated with belonging to the covenant people. Paul makes this point in Romans 3:1, but their behaviour and faithlessness in the face of so many privileges showed that the unconditional promises of God were not addressed to them: they were not counted for the seed (Romans 9:8).

In the same way we who are also the spiritual children of Abraham are heirs to the promises; and in just the same way as Abraham's children were, and in exactly the same sense our own children are also said to be partakers of the promises (Acts 2:39). Our children have the privilege of being brought up with all the blessings of a covenant upbringing, having known the oracles of God and the stories of His salvation from an early age. Yet, if they reject these things, they too are like those Old Testament Israelites who were not counted for the seed.

The parallel with the New Testament and with the baptism of the children of believers must now be obvious. We do not assert that every child who is baptised is necessarily saved. If the Old Testament parallel is followed many of them will not be; but like Old Testament Israel, they have all the blessings associated with being brought up within the sphere of the covenant, such as a Christian home and education.

What then is the value of baptism for children? For those whom God calls, they can look back on it, as Isaac must have done upon his circumcision, and recognise in it the sign of God's tremendous love and grace towards them from the very beginning. It is a source of enormous comfort to them to see the promises of God extended to them at the beginning of their lives and later being fulfilled.

And what of those, like Ishmael and many of the Jews who did not follow the faith of their fathers? Their baptism will act as a testimony against their ungodly behaviour. God will say, as He said of the vineyard in the parable: "*What could have been done more?*" They have had many special privileges and yet have rejected me (Isaiah 5:4).

Why baptise them in the first place then? We may as well ask the same question about Ishmael, Esau, and all the other Old Testament Israelites who were not the children of promise.

In the first place, because God commands it. Ishmael was circumcised by God's command, though Abraham already knew he was rejected by God. The same was true of Esau. Also, in the picture of baptism seen in Noah's salvation through the Flood (1 Peter 3:20-21), Ham was baptised in the Flood though he seems not to have been a godly man.

In the second place, because we are not to know God's secret purposes. God calls Israel His people, His vineyard, though within the nation as a whole Paul says there were many who were not true Israelites. It is rather like the farmer who, looking out upon his wheat field, does not hesitate to refer to it as his wheat field and to the crop as wheat, even though there might be as many weeds in it as there is wheat. We are not to know at that point that they will reject God. God calls a covenant household His own, even if there are weeds and tares in it.

A covenant household should act as a picture of the rest and fellowship of heaven, just as the nation state of Israel did. Those who share in the outward privileges are meant to see that and to trust those promises for themselves. If they do not, the privileges they have had will testify against them.

All this makes a vast difference to the way we regard our children and bring the things of God to them. On the Baptist argument, we must accept that the New Testament promises, which are meant to be clearer and better, are certainly far less generous and certain as far as our children are concerned. There are now no special blessings for them as a result of their parents' faith in the way that there were in the Old Testament. At best, we would regard our children as "potential Christians" to be "evangelised" like any other. The children are dead in their trespasses and sins; utterly incapable of responding to the most conscientious of parental teaching and exhortation. And what if the child dies before it reaches the age at which they can make a fully independent and intelligent profession of faith? And what is that age, anyway?

Usually the mid to late teenage years are thought to be the appropriate age, but how immature is the judgement of a person at this age! All that we are told we have to fall back upon is the general mercy and kindness of God but we and they have no specific promises to hold onto. What a bleak and cheerless prospect.

And what are we left with if we do not baptise our infants? I do not wish to hurt anyone's feelings but this is the fact of the matter.

Baptists feel the need to do something to recognise God's gift to them, and to express their hopes that God will bless their child. They therefore light on the idea of "dedicating" the child to God; a practice which God does not sanction or command in the New Testament; a practice which has no promise of God attached to it; and a practice which focuses much of the attention on the faithfulness and thankfulness of the parents and does nothing to bring glory to God by reminding them of God's promises to the children of believers, or to that child in particular.

From a Biblical and Reformed standpoint, however, like Abraham and all his godly successors after them, we should bring up our children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, as actually belonging to the Lord; as ones with whom God has covenanted to be their God. We therefore urge them to trust and rest upon him from the earliest age, expecting that God will perform His covenant promises towards those of them who are the children of promise. We expect them to be able to worship the Lord and enjoy fellowship with Him alongside us from the very earliest ages, according to their childish capacities (Psalm 8:2). When we read the stories of the Bible to them, we do so trusting that their hearts have already been enlightened to be receptive to and rejoice in the spiritual truths they contain. And should they die in infancy we have every reason to believe that God's has made specific promises to them as covenant children from covenant families. We have solid Scriptural grounds for believing that God has indeed covenanted to be their God too. Even if they never lived to see the light of day we have a solid hope that they too will see their redeemer in their infant flesh.

And to those who prove not to be children of promise by rejecting the Lord, they have enjoyed the privileges of being brought up within the sphere of the covenant. They have known the ways of the Lord but have rejected them. The church should exercise discipline when it becomes necessary to either recall them to repentance or to ensure that the church itself does not suffer.

What a blessing for the children of believers to know that God has promised to be their God for the sake of their parents' faith, in the same way as He did for Abraham; and for Christian parents who have lost children or infants to death, to know that God's promises

extend to their children too. God says of these our children, like covenant children of old: *"Thy sons and daughters whom thou hast born unto me."* (Ezekiel 16:20; 23:37).

7. The Baptist View of Baptism

For all the Scriptural, and historical, evidence for the covenant baptism of the infants of believers, the Baptist critique remains attractive to many. Its attraction is summed up by a comment from the then General Secretary of my union of churches when I was discussing with him our intention to have our first child baptised. "It's so much easier to see the Baptist position," he said (somewhat apologetically for the leader of a denomination that formally at least practices infant baptism).

At its heart it has three very simple ideas. It is perhaps their very simplicity which accounts for the power of their attraction. They require no knowledge of the Old Testament, and can be grasped by a quick reading of a few parts of the New Testament. However, once these ideas are subjected to close and impartial study they can be shown to be unsustainable Biblically.

What then are they ?

Firstly, it is said that there is no recorded example of infant baptism in the New Testament. Baptists require a positive example or a command that we should do so.

Secondly, it is said that the New Testament always portrays baptism as taking place in the context of repentance and faith. Therefore, it can only be applied to adults since children are not psychologically capable of either.

Thirdly, it is said that the symbolism of baptism – dying and rising with Christ – is such that it can only possibly be applied to believing adults.

A closely connected idea is that the church is made up of born again believers. Baptists sometimes refer to their churches as "believers' churches," implying that any other church than their own has both believers and non-believers in membership. Of course, this is nonsense. At best, Baptist churches can be called "professors'" churches, in that every member has made a confession of faith of sorts. Moreover, the charge that the Reformed are willing to tolerate an impure church is simply untrue, at least as far as those churches are concerned who have maintained their Reformed heritage faithfully. To keep the church pure is the function of church government and discipline. The Reformers insisted that one of the marks of the true church was right discipline.

Baptist churches have not been more successful than others at resisting the heresies and unbelief that afflict the church. The less attractive side of this coin, which they are less ready to focus on, is that logically, Christ has, and can have, no lambs in Baptist churches, only sheep. The children of believers cannot be considered as belonging to Christ until they demonstrate mature faith and repentance, usually in their teens or later.

Most ordinary Baptists have probably never thought beyond these simple ideas, and would find it difficult to understand how anyone could raise any objections to them.

We have already dealt with the symbolism of baptism and noted that it symbolises a variety of things, the majority of which are more properly pictured by sprinkling. In this

chapter, we will examine the other two points, upon which their case chiefly stands or falls.

(a.) There is no command to baptise infants, nor any example of it in the New Testament.

John Gill says: "It is strange.... that among the many thousands baptised in Jerusalem, Samaria, Corinth, and other places, there should be no one instance of any of them bringing their children with them to be baptised, and claiming the privilege of baptism for them upon their own faith, nor of their doing this in any short time after."⁴⁴

On the face of it, this is a very powerful argument, but there are a number of things which must compel us to reject it.

Firstly, just because children are not explicitly mentioned does not mean they were not amongst the numbers baptised. It is quite possible that they were. All the accounts of baptisms, including the mass baptisms by John, are very short and are obviously not intended to give much detail. We, therefore, simply cannot tell what part children played in these baptisms and certainly must not assume they played no part. Indeed, it could well be that the accounts are short precisely because the New Testament merely followed well understood Old Testament usage and that the place of children needed no special explanation. In these circumstances, the argument for children being part of the proceedings would be strengthened.

Secondly, silence is not enough to prove the Baptist case. The onus is upon the Baptist to prove that infants shouldn't be baptised, for both historical and Biblical reasons. If we refuse baptism to infants we cut across all the Old and New Testament evidence that God deals with children, not simply as individuals, but also as part of families, and all the historical evidence for the practice of infant baptism being an apostolic ordinance.

We have to try to understand what baptism meant to the New Testament believers. In the early church, most church members came from a Jewish background. They regarded themselves and their children as heirs of God's covenant promises. For them, it was natural, and Biblical, to think of their children as sharing in God's covenant blessings, privileges and responsibilities. The outward expression of this participation was the ordinance of circumcision, which was administered to all male children at the age of 8 days. When a foreigner converted to Judaism both he and all his family, infant boys included, were circumcised on the basis of his faith. They would have rightly rejected with contempt the idea that God's promises could not apply to their children, or that their children could not be formally regarded as part of God's covenant family until they were old enough to make an intelligent profession of faith for themselves. This was, and remains, a completely unbiblical notion.

We have also seen that this principle of family solidarity is a Scriptural principle from the very beginning. The Patriarchs of Genesis were priests on behalf of their whole family; Job presented sacrifices for his children; and going right back to the beginning, Adam represented all his posterity before God. Most significantly, in the Ten Commandments themselves, God reveals himself as the God of families: (Exodus 20:5) "*I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and*

fourth generation of them that hate me, and showing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments."

The Ten Commandments, which include this self revelation of God as a God of families, remains binding for the New Testament church. Yet, the Baptist case depends on a contradiction of this very point. Baptists would not want to think of their children as children of the devil – (yet that is the only other Biblical option open to them) – but will not recognise them as heirs of God's promises. This confusion and contradiction runs right through the heart of all Baptist thinking. There is no middle ground of "if's and maybe's" that children of believers can occupy until they are old enough to make their own minds up. Either they are the subjects of God's covenant promises or they aren't. Either they are the children of God or the children of the devil.

The Bible makes it clear that a person either has a stake in God's covenant promises or he is a stranger to them. (Ephesians 2:12). The Gentile Christians of Ephesus (and their children) were aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise prior to their conversion. Their conversion changed this. Paul tells them that now they have trusted in Christ, all the Old Testament promises now belong to them. These promises extend to the children of believers in the Old Testament and must do so in the New. God has not deleted the clause that refers to their children! If children were now to be formally excluded from any special covenant promises by virtue of their family connection, there should be some mention of it within the New Testament in view of the radical change for the worse it represented. Jewish opponents would also have been quick to seize any opportunity to criticise such a departure from the Old Testament faith and practice, but there is no evidence of such criticism. Moreover, Jewish Christians, as we have seen, would have been less ready to give up circumcision for the less generous sign (to their children) of baptism. For us to dare to think that our children are not now included in the commonwealth of Israel with us and are still strangers to the covenants of promise even though we ourselves are not; and, in order to begin to think of God as dealing with children only as individuals and no longer as members of families, we would require a specific command of God. Has He deleted the clauses in His promises that refer to the blessings upon our seed? Emphatically not! He emphasises that the whole of the promise to Abraham, which included his seed, now belongs to us (Galatians 3:29).

The reason for the silence of the Scripture and history on these matters, far from supporting the Baptist argument, is that no such changes took place to the status of children. New Testament children continued to enjoy the same relationship to baptism and the promises it symbolised as the children of the Old Testament always had done towards circumcision and its associated promises.

Thirdly, the absence of an actual example of infant baptism is really no argument at all. There is no example in the New Testament of either a command to or an example of women partaking of the Communion but no-one doubts they did. A well grounded deduction from Scripture is just as binding as one based on a clear example.

Fourthly, using the same argument, it is strange that there is no example in the New Testament of believers bringing their teenage children for baptism when they were old enough to make their own independent profession of faith. Baptists don't have any difficulty assuming this must have happened, in spite of the silence of Scripture.

Fifthly, a fair reading of Scripture leads to the conclusion that children of believers were baptised in the New Testament:

(i.) Of the 12 Christian baptisms mentioned in the New Testament, three – the Philippian jailor, Lydia, and the Centurion of Caesarea – were of whole households. This suggests household baptisms were quite common – one quarter of the total. Now in those days of typically large families it would be extremely unlikely that none of these households contained young children or infants at the time of baptism. We will look at these passages again later.

(ii.) Apostles describe as real baptisms events in the Old Testament in which infants and children were undoubtedly present. For the parallelism to be effective it must follow that they assumed the presence of baptised children and infants in the churches they were addressing.

a. The clearest example of this is found in 1 Corinthians 10:1-2.

This verse occurs in the context of Paul warning professing church members not to fall away from the faith. The passage refers to the crossing of the Red Sea and Israel's subsequent wanderings for forty years. At every stage he draws a parallel between the experience of the Jews of Moses' time and that of the Corinthians. The Jews were baptised (*baptizo*) into Moses (in that from then they accepted his leadership and law-giving authority) just as the Corinthians had been baptised into Christ. Moses here was a type or picture of Christ leading his people out of bondage. In every way the Jews had as great privileges as the Corinthians, so the Corinthians are warned to be careful because God was displeased with many of the Jews. The same could, therefore, happen to the Corinthians.

The points of this passage for our purposes are these:

- Paul's argument relies upon the exact parallelism between the two sets of people. The Jews of Moses' time are even referred to as the fathers, signifying that they were the spiritual fathers of the Gentile Corinthians. They are our fathers; our family; participants in the same covenant promises and responsibilities as we are. In other words, Paul knew nothing of the Baptist teaching of a national covenant with Israel, which was somehow different from his covenant with the New Testament church.

- He describes the event in the Red Sea as a baptism equivalent to the Corinthians' baptism. The implication is they were baptised into Moses (the type of Christ) just as we were baptised into Christ. The baptism into Moses symbolised exactly the same thing as New Testament baptism: initiation into the fellowship of God's professing church under the leadership of God's deliverer.

- And yet who would deny that infants were baptised in the Red Sea Exodus? For the parallel to be maintained, all ages, infants included, therefore, must also have been baptised in Corinth! If not, the parallelism which is the key to Paul's warning breaks down. To object that this incident was only a picture does not detract from it. It is referred to as a baptism; and ultimately, all baptisms are only symbolic; the point is the two baptisms symbolise the same thing to the same people: God's professing church, infants and children included.

b. The second text which speaks unequivocally of children and infants being baptised is Hebrews 9:10 with v.19.

Here the Greek word translated “*diverse washings*” is a derivation of the word *baptizo*. The writer then goes on to describe one of these baptisms as being a sprinkling of the book, and all the people, which included infants (Exodus 20:12). These were real baptisms; and they are explicitly said by the writer to symbolise the washing or baptism of the person with the blood of Christ. The writer obviously had New Testament baptism in his mind when he used the word to describe the Old Testament equivalents and he applies it to all the people, infants too! This suggests he was quite comfortable with the idea of infants being baptised. The concept of baptism is not only a New Testament concept. The Jews well knew its significance from the Old Testament and knew that it applied to children too.

(b.) Baptism in the New Testament is always preceded by repentance and faith.

Here we have arrived at the clinching argument for most Baptists. A respected pastor friend maintained this was the key argument for him. Because New Testament baptism is always administered in the context of a call for repentance and faith, Baptists argue it can only be properly administered to adults since children are psychologically incapable of these things.

To support this argument Baptists draw attention to a range of texts, which describe baptism in the context of repentance or faith. The main examples used are:

(i.) John’s baptism.

For example, Mark 1:4-5 says: “*John did baptise in the wilderness and preach the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. And there went out unto him all the land of Judea, and they of Jerusalem, and were baptised of him in the river of Jordan, confessing their sins.*”

(ii.) Accounts of the Great Commission.

In Matthew 28:19, Jesus tells his disciples: “*Go ye therefore and teach all nations baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.*”

The parallel passage in Mark 16:15-16 says: “*Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptised shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned.*”

(iii.) Peter’s Pentecost sermon.

Peter concludes his sermon in Acts 2:38 by the exhortation: “*Repent and be baptised every one of you.... for the remission of sins.*”

Now to Baptists, these texts have a clear message. Baptism always follows teaching, repentance and faith. To the casual reader, one could say that this is the natural way these passages should be read. We would also go further and say that were we to have no more information in Scripture to help us interpret them than what is contained within

these statements and their immediate context, it would be the probable, though not the only, interpretation that any reasonable person might adopt.

What can possibly said in response to the Baptist position at this point?

We first need to remind ourselves about some key rules of Biblical interpretation using the example of the another text, say: *“For as in Adam all died, so in Christ shall all be made alive”* (1 Corinthians 15:22). To understand these words we have to follow three steps:

- First: we must establish what the words themselves mean.
- Second: we must look at their immediate context.
- Third: we must look to the rest of Scripture to see whether the Spirit has spoken anything else which might help us understand what he means here.

Following this sequence of thought, we will find that the words themselves could be explained in two ways: Either Paul is saying that as everyone died because of Adam’s fall, so everyone will be saved in Christ no matter what they believe or do. Or he is saying that as all those whom Adam represented (those in Adam – *ie.* everyone) died, so those whom Christ represented on Calvary (those in Christ – *ie.* a specific group of people who come to believe in Him) will be made alive with Him.

If we then look to the immediate context we find nothing that helps us to decide conclusively which is the correct meaning. If we look beyond the immediate context to what the rest of Scripture says on the subject we immediately recognise which is the correct interpretation. There is a profusion of passages which teach that only those who trust in Christ for the forgiveness of their sins will be saved (for example, Jn 3:18). It is clear then that our verse can only mean one thing: the second all refers only to those whom Christ represented and who come to believe and trust in him. We must apply exactly the same procedure to these passages.

Evangelical Baptists will agree wholeheartedly with this principle and will even accuse infant baptists of latching onto one verse – Colossians 2:11-12 – as the only verse in the New Testament remotely favourable to the infant-baptist case; and they will tell us that we should not build a whole doctrine around it. In fact, it is actually the Baptist who is guilty of this error. The Baptist starts with these verses. The impression given is of adults being urged to repent and be baptised. Children are not explicitly mentioned. Therefore, according to the Baptist, this is the way it should always be, for everyone. Any subsequent study they may do on the issue of baptism is governed by this foundational conviction and is made to fit with it. What they should be doing instead is letting the rest of Scripture help them to interpret these particular passages. This is what the paedobaptist does.

Before considering these verses in depth we need to make two introductory points:

Firstly, we ought to suspect the correctness of the Baptist interpretation of these verses because it causes them to practice in a way which is obviously completely different from the way the New Testament practices baptism.

Take the example of Simon, the sorcerer, in Acts 8:13, compared with 8:20-22. He would never have been baptised by a modern day Baptist. New Testament baptisms all occur immediately after an initial profession of faith; there is no lapse of time between profession of faith and baptism being administered. It is done, there and then. Now why

do Baptists not practice like this?

Is it not because they are so constrained by the idea that they must baptise only true believers? For this reason they prolong the time before the sacrament can be administered to give time for extensive teaching of the “convert” and time for him/her to demonstrate to everyone else’s satisfaction that they really have truly repented and believed and are likely to carry on in the faith. Even the children of believers who have reached their teens and show signs of continuing in the faith can be subject to delays for years on these grounds.

We have to ask the question: if someone’s core principle – adult believers’ baptism – causes a church to practice in a way which is so obviously different from the New Testament, ought we not to suspect that the principle underlying their actions is itself not Biblical?

Secondly, in considering these passages in detail, it is also well to remind ourselves that nowhere in the whole debate do one’s own prior assumptions play a more considerable part in one’s interpretation of texts than with these passages. These verses are the bedrock of the Baptist case. Baptists are so confident about the truth of their interpretation of these verses that the glaring weaknesses apparent throughout the rest of their case are often simply ignored. If their interpretation proves inadequate at this point, therefore, the whole Baptist case collapses. If they can establish that their interpretation is the only reasonable one then they have won the argument. For the infant baptist however, these verses are far less critical to the determination of whether or not infants should be baptised.

But you say, what other explanation but the Baptist one is there? Well, first of all, imagine for a moment a man listening to a sermon, not by Peter at Pentecost but by a faithful Jewish teacher prior to the coming of Jesus. The preacher cries out: “You must repent, trust in the coming Messiah, and be circumcised!” Imagine further that the man comes to the teacher and expresses an heartfelt desire to repent and to submit to circumcision as demanded by the preacher. He is then asked by the preacher whether he has any male children. “Yes”, says the man, “actually, I have two: one is aged 5 and the other is just three months old.” “Well,” says the preacher, “they must be circumcised too according to our law: the promises belong to them too now that you have believed.” “But,” says the man, “neither of them were old enough to understand you: they are not able to repent and believe as you commanded: I thought they would not be entitled to circumcision.” “Of course they are,” says the preacher, “when I was preaching I was preaching to the adults in the crowd: those that could understand me. I wasn’t referring to the children at all. God loves his covenant people so much that he promises to save their seed after them: and he wants the sign of circumcision to be applied to them too.”

In actual fact, this is exactly what did happen in Old Testament times. When the head of the household was converted all the male children were also circumcised on the strength of the man’s faith. They too were ingrafted into the fellowship of the covenant people by circumcision: in that sense they were no longer aliens and strangers to the covenants of promise (Ephesians 2:12). Children are not referred to, because Peter is speaking to adults. If someone had gone up to him and said: “But what about my children?” he would have replied just as our imaginary Jewish preacher did. “Of course they must be baptised too; I wasn’t referring to their position at all.”

Nor is this a far fetched analogy with no parallel in Scripture. Elsewhere there are commands which, if we were to interpret them in the way Baptists interpret these texts, would make for nonsense. In 2 Thessalonians 3:10, Paul says "*If any would not work, neither should he eat.*" Are we to conclude, as Baptists do with these "baptism" texts, that children should not eat because they cannot work? Of course not: children are simply not in view in the text. Nor are they in view in the texts before us. Though Baptists insist they are, they have no grounds for doing so: it is all assertion and no evidence.

In actual fact, one of these passages provides very firm evidence for the paedobaptist position. In Acts 2:39, Peter says the adults should repent because "*....the promise is unto you and to your children.*" Now, Baptists say this means that the promise is to you, if you believe, and to your children, if they in their turn believe, implying that before the children believe, there is no promise to them and no access to be had to the rite of baptism. Kingdon⁴⁵ draws particular attention to the subsequent clause "*....to as many as the Lord our God shall call*", thinking to show that Peter here recognises that not all the children of believers are the subjects of God's promises, and therefore they should not be baptised until it becomes clear in adulthood which of them are the children of promise. This cannot be the correct interpretation of Peter's meaning because:

- The Jewish hearers would have assumed God was still going to deal with them as families. Peter would have had to explain this was not what he meant, and that in the New Testament age, believers' children could expect to be treated simply as individuals and not as members of a covenant family.

- The covenant promise Peter refers to is that made with Abraham. It is the promise to and blessing upon Abraham which New Testament believers inherit (Galatians 3:14-19 and 29). God in His sovereign grace promised to be the God of Abraham and his seed after him. Centrally, that seed was Christ, but the full blessing of Abraham is explicitly said by Paul to come upon all believers. This blessing extended to Abraham's natural seed in their generations, and therefore it must to ours too. Moreover, the covenant was unconditional. There were no conditions attached on Abraham's part. God would perform it even to the extent of granting the faith necessary to receive the promise. A godly seed would be preserved, no matter what. Now if you want to insert into this statement of Peter's: "and to your children, if they too repent", you make the covenant conditional. It becomes conditional upon their repentance and faith. This is not what the covenant with Abraham involves and it is not what Peter says here. He says that God promises that if the hearers will repent God will see to it that not only will they inherit the promises but also they will have a seed after them who will likewise be heirs of the promise. God will grant their children the necessary repentance and faith in their turn. What a glorious promise, which is lost completely if we accept the Baptist misinterpretation!

- Peter's advice is given in response to a specific query: What shall we do to be saved? Now to a modern man, brought up in an individualistic or Baptist atmosphere, the import of that question seems clear enough: what must we as individuals do to be saved? Whilst that is certainly part of the question, it was not the only question that came into a Jewish mind. For them the question is not simply, what is going to happen to me, but what is going to happen to my family and also to my nation, God's covenant people? They well knew that God was a jealous God visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon their children. They knew that many innocent men had perished in the siege of Ai because of the sin of one man, Achan. They knew that throughout their history the whole nation, including the righteous, such as Jeremiah and Daniel, had shared the punishment that God inflicted upon the nation because of the sins of the wicked. They were naturally worried about

what was going to become not only of them but also of their children as a result of their slaying of the Messiah. His blood would be on their children's heads as well as theirs (Matthew 27:25). The subsequent history of the Jews shows such fears were eminently justified. It is only because we view their question and Peter's response through the individualistic eyes of modern man that we can interpret them in the Baptist way. Interpreted in the light of the rest of Scripture, we can see that Peter's response was calculated to give them the greatest possible assurance not only about their own fate, but also about that of their children after them. God's covenant promise still remained, in the same way it always had: to both them and their children after them! – in spite of their crime.

– As to Kingdon's point about not all the children of believers in their generations inheriting the promise, we have to say: who ever doubted it? We can be no different than Abraham in this respect. He saw Ismael grow up to be unbelieving. Experience teaches us the sad fact that this is so. But the point is God's calling takes place within family lines. The promise is to families not simply to individuals.

Although the passage in Acts presents a fuller context to the call to repent and be baptised, the same reasoning applies to all the other passages currently under consideration. Children are simply not the subject of discussion and so the passages tell us nothing about whether or not we should baptise infants.

In addition, there are some further considerations which enable us to understand why children do not receive a mention in the passages describing the mass baptisms of John. Even if we accept, purely from a practical point of view that the wilderness in which he baptised was too far from the major population centres of Palestine to allow many women and children to attend, does this have a bearing upon the question of infant baptism? Not necessarily.

We must remember that the ministry of John the Baptist took place at an historically unique moment. He ministered during a transitional phase in Bible, and covenant history. The Old Covenant, symbolised by circumcision, still applied. Children of people baptised by him were already covenant children, enjoying covenant promises. Their inclusion in the covenant was symbolised already by their circumcision. Baptism had as yet not taken over as the sign of the covenant. In the forefront of John's mind when approached by the Pharisees was to warn them that natural kinship with Abraham counted for nothing in God's eyes (and never actually had done in and of itself): Matt 3:9: *"Think not to say within yourselves, we have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children to Abraham."* His ministry was calculated to emphasise the importance of repentance as critical for membership in God's kingdom. The Jews, of course, should have already been aware of this, but the washing of baptism made it even clearer. The Old Covenant was going to give way shortly to the New, in which there would be no excuse at all for claiming membership of the kingdom on the basis of natural ties only, as the Jews did. Hence the emphasis in the gospel accounts falls on the link between baptism and repentance. This does not at all alter the terms of the covenant, however. The covenant was still with them and their children. As yet, however, the children did not need a new sign of their inclusion in the covenant. They already had a perfectly valid one in circumcision, which had not yet given way to baptism. There was, therefore, no pressing need for them to receive a second sign until baptism had taken the place of circumcision as the only valid sign of the covenant (after the resurrection of the Lord Jesus).

Having said this, it would be surprising if the description of all the land of Judea, and they of Jerusalem includes no children or young people: but we simply do not know; and ultimately it does not affect the validity of the paedobaptist case.

By contrast with John's ministry, when it comes to Pentecost, Peter is careful to stress the continuity of God's covenant promise which will be extended to their children as well if his hearers believe and are baptised: "*The promise is unto you and to your children.*" By now, baptism had assumed its full significance as the sign of the New Covenant, replacing circumcision. Peter, therefore, emphasises that the promise to believers and their seed remains intact, in its entirety.

Let us also look at some other pointers to the inadequacy of the Baptist interpretation of these passages. Consider the Great Commission as recorded in Matt 28:19 and Mark 16:16. Now here Baptists insist that the words describe the process of conversion in the strict order in which it actually happens.

To take Mark 16:16: "*Preach the gospel to every creature, he that believeth and is baptised shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned.*" We are told: first a person has to be taught, then they have to believe, then they are to be baptised. Well, let's assume that we have to deal with the verse in this way. We must complete the verse first: teaching-leads to-repentance-leads to-baptism-leads to-salvation! Are we really to believe that salvation comes only after baptism? Of course not! But what then is the logic for insisting on a strict time sequence earlier in the verse, and suddenly changing the ground rules half way through the verse? And, if we're being strictly literal about it, since infants can't believe and can't be baptised, then they can't be saved either. Of course, we can't interpret the verse like this and yet this is what Baptists do, at least in the part of the verse where it suits their case to do it.

In fact the passage says nothing about the order in which these things should happen. Scripture lists things in certain orders for different reasons than the order they happen in time. For example, 2 Peter 1:10 lists calling before election, not because it happens first in order of time but because that is the way people experience it.

First of all one becomes aware that God is calling; later on one realises that it is not I that have chosen Him, but He who has chosen me. So in Mark 16:16, the order is as it is because it is the order of importance. Faith is more important than baptism; in fact, faith is the key thing, as evidenced by the fact that the last part of the verse only mentions faith; there is no repetition of baptism.

The same argument also applies to the parallel passage in Matthew 28:19. No order is specified as to the teaching and the baptism. In fact a strict translation of the verse would be: teach all nations whilst baptising them. The teaching has to go hand in hand with the baptising, but no order is specified.

Moreover, Jesus is talking here about teaching nations not individuals, whilst baptising them. Whilst you are teaching nations, you are to be baptising them. Nations include infants; the baptism of infants, as of all other classes and ages must go on as part of your teaching and baptising activity within nations. There is nothing in this verse which precludes the baptism of the infants whilst the teaching is going on! To read a prohibition of infant baptism into these verses is simply reading into it one's own prior assumptions!

Furthermore, especially with Matthew, who was writing for a Jewish audience, we must always notice what Old Testament prophecy is fulfilled by the events he is recording. Pastor Hanko remarks that the most likely texts are in Isaiah 52:15: “*So shall he sprinkle many nations*”; Isaiah 49:22: “*...and they (the Gentiles) shall bring thy sons in their arms and thy daughters shall be carried upon their shoulders*”; or Isaiah 60:4-5: “*And the Gentiles shall come to thy light.... thy sons shall come from far, and thy daughters shall be nursed at thy side.*” The imagery of these texts is of nations including infants, coming to Christ.

Two further points can be made about the Baptist claims for these verses:

Firstly, in Acts 19:4, Paul speaking of John’s baptism says that he told people he was baptising that they should believe on Him who should come after him. John’s baptism was done with a view to faith not on the basis of an existing faith. Baptism here precedes faith. Yes, you say, but it had to because Jesus had not yet come. Well, if you want to insist that true Christian baptism must always be preceded by intelligent faith then you’re in danger of saying that John’s baptism was not really a true baptism. In that case you will have to get rid of over half the New Testament references to baptism, or accept that baptism can precede faith. Now if faith is not a condition for people to be baptised before Christ came (because they weren’t in a position to trust in someone who had not yet revealed Himself), it is easy to see how infants can be baptised with a view to faith. Obviously, if one’s view of baptism places the focus upon repentance (ie: man’s response) this is impossible. If, however, you accept that baptism symbolises primarily God’s gracious promise then it is easy and natural to see it applying to children as well. In God’s grace, elect infants and children will grow in faith in the same way John the Baptist did as a child, as their psychological capabilities grow. This is the way the Jews raised their children within the covenant. They didn’t talk about evangelising their children, who were meanwhile regarded as little heathens. They were brought up from birth as covenant children, with all the responsibilities and privileges that entailed.

Secondly, you say, “But at least repentance had to come before baptism in the case of John’s baptism.” Indeed, John’s baptism is sometimes termed a baptism of repentance (Mark 1:4). However, the word “of” could easily mean having its source “in”, suggesting that the baptism is with a view to repentance. Indeed Matthew 3:11 spells this out explicitly: it is said to be a baptism “*unto*” repentance, which has the idea, according to Pastor Hanko,⁴⁶ of motion towards. The idea then is that baptism is meant to lead to and is with a view to a life of repentance. Baptism represents our initiation into a life of repentance and faith. In the case of an adult the repentance must obviously have commenced, but it is a life-long process from that point on, not a one-off event. For the elect infant it is no different: it is a process which develops as its psychological and renewed spiritual capacities develop. But it is a process that is never perfect and always depends upon the grace of God for its continuance. That an infant is not at that moment capable of repenting is besides the point. As its capacities grow it begins to exercise faith and repentance, more and more consciously. The focus at the point of baptism, however, is not upon the infant’s (or indeed the adult’s) capabilities or lack of them, but upon God’s grace. After all, if we are being Biblical about it, neither adults nor children are capable of repentance; it is a gift of God (Acts 5:31; 11:18). An adult is no more capable of repenting in a spiritual sense than an infant. Moreover, would anyone dare to say that our repentance is perfect from the first day it becomes a conscious activity? Is it not something that grows, as we become increasingly conscious of the depth of sin in our hearts, and are we not always constrained to say, with David, “*Cleanse thou me from*

hidden faults”? Who can know the heart? It is desperately wicked, and deceitful above all things. The same is true of infants and adults.

Of course, not all covenant children are converted from the womb, but this is often the Biblical way. In Psalm 71 the covenant relationship goes right back to birth (v.6); God is the trust of the covenant child from early on (v.5 and v.17). Nevertheless, it is not so much the fact that God has already given the new birth to the infant that we signify in baptism, so much as the fact that God has covenanted with them to do so.

What we say and symbolise in baptism, whether of infants or of adults, is not that we have repented but that God has extended his promise to us: exactly the same promise He extended to Abraham: that He would be our God and the God of our seed after us. To focus upon repentance is to focus upon the flesh: and God will not have us glory in the flesh: how could He then give us a sacrament which points to a fallible human response?

There is only one further minor difficulty in relation to what we have said. If baptism and the Lord's Supper are the equivalents of circumcision and the Passover, why can infants not partake of the Lord's Supper, since it is assumed they partook of the Passover?

In response to this we can say several things:

Firstly, it is not clear that infants or young children did partake of the Passover. That children when they were old enough to ask: “*What mean ye by this service?*” (Exodus 12:26) and were able to understand its meaning did partake of the Passover, is clear. But these are different from infants and very young children. Infant baptists generally don't refuse to admit to the Lord's Table children of sufficient age and understanding to know its meaning.

Secondly, we have said all along that we would require a positive command of God to deny children baptism. In the case of the Lord's Supper we have what comes close to it in 1 Corinthians 11:24-29: only those who can discern the spiritual meaning of the sacrament are to partake. There is no comparable warning when it comes to baptism.

Thirdly, baptism signifies what infants may possess as well as adults, and must possess in order to be in a state of salvation. The Lord's Supper involves a commemoration and intelligent communion with Christ. Scripture makes these essential prerequisites. Infants and young children are incapable of these things. No such conditions are attached in the case of baptism.

8. Conclusions

What then is our conclusion?

As to the mode of baptism, we have seen that the baptism of Jesus must have taken place by sprinkling. We have also seen that sprinkling represents a far more effective picture of the things that are happening in baptism than immersion, and that the word “*baptizo*”/“*baptizein*” simply cannot mean to immerse in several New Testament texts. We have to conclude, therefore, that whilst the mode of baptism is not perhaps crucial, sprinkling is the more Biblical practice. In any event, the claim that baptism must be by immersion can be confidently dismissed as groundless. Such a claim can only be put

forward by those who either have never studied the matter, or who are determined to hold onto it against all the evidence.

In relation to the issue of infant baptism itself, we have also seen that Baptists rely on three main arguments: the absence of any evidence of infant baptism in the New Testament; the passages which speak of baptism as being preceded by repentance and faith; and the symbolism of baptism. They then build all their other theology of baptism and of children around their interpretation of this data. In doing so they are forced to ignore all the many strands of contrary evidence in both the Old and New Testaments.

Believers in the covenant baptism of infants, on the other hand, give due weight to all the data throughout Scripture and ensure that a proper balance is struck when interpreting the one set of texts. These are primarily five-fold:

Firstly, all the historical evidence points to the fact that infant baptism was an apostolic practice. This places the burden of proof squarely on the opponents of infant baptism to prove their case beyond reasonable doubt.

Secondly, there is good evidence in the New Testament that infants and children must have been baptised, as witness the large proportion of household baptisms in the total recorded, the way the apostles refer to Old Testament events involving children as baptisms and Peter's comment in Acts 2.

Thirdly, God always deals with people not simply as individuals but also as members of families. He speaks of himself in this way in the Ten Commandments, which remain binding upon the church today.

Fourthly, the New Testament church is grafted into Israel: indeed, it is now the Israel of God. As such it contains infant and child members, just like the Old Testament church did.

Finally, the promises New Testament believes rely on are the very same promises Abraham relied on: these are promises made, not to Abraham alone, but also to his seed. The same is true of us.

Thus, although, at first sight, the Baptist critique of infant baptism is compelling, upon a closer and impartial examination it cannot be correct because it fails to harmonise all the relevant Scriptures. The paedobaptist case is the only one that can do this and so it must be the true teaching of the Bible, since God's Spirit, speaking in Scripture, never contradicts himself.

May God vindicate his truth and fulfil his sovereign promises in Christ to his people and their seed after them. Amen.

Footnotes

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