

Is Infant Baptism Scriptural?

John Murray (1898-1975)

BAPTISM is an ordinance of the Christian church. In accordance with divine appointment it is administered by the church, and it is the rite that initiates into the membership of the visible church. The argument for infant baptism, therefore, is very close related to the question of the nature of the church.

In the strictest sense the church is the company of the regenerate or of the faithful. The facts of regeneration and faith belong, however, to the realm of the invisible and spiritual, and for that reason no man is able infallibly to determine who belong to the church nor to determine what the exact limits of such a body are in any one place or generation. Consequently when we are speaking of the church in this its strictest sense we speak of it as the church *invisible*.

But the church is never wholly invisible to human apprehension. Those who by the facts of regeneration and faith constitute the body of Christ give observable expression to that faith they possess. This they do not only in their individual capacity as members of the body of Christ but also in their collective relations and obligations. In accordance with divine commandment and inward necessity they associate with one another. They organize for purposes of testimony, worship, the administration of the sacraments, mutual edification and encouragement, and for the exercise of discipline. This visible organization or association is not the dictate of human devising but rather of divine institution. So we have also what is known as the *visible* church.

Now although the church invisible in any one place or generation consists exclusively of the regenerate, the church visible does not consist exclusively of such. This is just saying that the visible church is not, either numerically or morally, the exact reproduction of the invisible church. Since no man can infallibly read the heart, the visible church is constituted of those who make an intelligent and consistent profession of faith in Christ and promise of obedience to Him. This profession of faith, though a profession that only a true believer can truly and honestly make, is yet of such a nature that those who do not have true faith may make it to the satisfaction of those responsible for admission into the visible church. The visible church, then, is circumscribed not by the line of regeneration but by the line of intelligent and consistent profession.

The Church in the Old Testament

A distinction will, of course, have to be drawn between this visible church as it existed under the Old Testament dispensation and as it exists under the New. Such a distinction was surely implied in the words of our Lord to Peter when He said, "Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church: and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:18). He was referring to the new form and character that the church was to assume as the kingdom of God or kingdom of heaven in consequence of His Messianic mission and work. He calls it "*my church*."

But while full allowance must be made for the distinction and for the new form of administration that was ushered in specifically by the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ and the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost, nevertheless this distinction does not warrant the denial of the existence of the church in the more generic sense under the Old Testament. There is indeed a deep unity and identity between the church in the Old Testament and the church in the New.

To the people of God under the Old Testament pertained, as the Apostle Paul tells us, "the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the service of God, and the promises" (Rom. 9:4). The New Testament church is the extension and unfolding of the covenant made with Abraham and is, therefore, founded upon it. This is clearly the argument of Paul in the Epistle to the Galatians when he says that "they which be of faith are blessed with faithful Abraham," and that "the covenant, that was confirmed before of God in Christ, the law, which was four hundred and thirty years after, cannot disannul, that it should make the promise of none effect" (Gal. 3:9, 17). And so it is the blessing of Abraham, a blessing that was his in terms of the covenant administered to him, that comes upon the Gentiles through Jesus Christ (cf. vs. 14). The church, then, as it exists in both dispensations is not two organisms. Both stages may be regarded, as Paul expressly teaches, under the figure of one olive tree, a tree, of course, with several branches, but yet one tree and therefore growing from one root and one stock (cf. Rom. 11:16-21). The Gentiles were at one time "aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise" (Eph. 2:12), but now they are "no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow-citizens with the saints, and of the household of God; and are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone" (Eph. 2:19-20).

And so it is not only necessary but Scriptural to speak of the church under the Old Testament. There is organic continuity and unity, and any attempt to deny this, or any method of interpretation that would tend to do prejudice to it, must stand condemned on the basis of Scripture itself.

The Sign of Circumcision

Now if the church in this generic sense existed under the Old Testament, it must be admitted that in its visible organization and administration it included not only all who professed the true religion but also their children. The sign of the covenant administered to Abraham was circumcision. This sign and seal, setting forth not merely national privilege but, as we shall presently show, spiritual blessing, was by divine command administered to infants eight days old. All males born within this covenant relation, in other words, all born of parents who were within this sphere of privilege and profession, were to be circumcised.

Circumcision signified fundamentally the removal of defilement or uncleanness to the end of participation in the covenant blessings. A study of the following references will make this clear: Exod. 6:12, 30; Lev. 19:23; 26:41; Deut. 10:16; 30:6; Jer. 4:4; 6:10; 9:25. In addition to this Paul tells us that circumcision was a seal of the righteousness of the faith that Abraham had while he was yet uncircumcised (cf. Rom. 4:11). These two basic significations, the one the removal of defilement or purification, the other the imputation of the righteousness of faith, it will readily be seen, are not contradictory but rather mutually complementary.

It is well for us to pause and confront ourselves with this fact: that by divine appointment and express command the sign and seal of spiritual realities -- realities that could only be applied to men through the gracious operations of the Spirit of God -- was administered to infants.

Now we can anticipate the objection: All this is conceded, but of what avail for the doctrine in question? What has all this to do with the question of infant baptism?

It so happens that circumcision signified basically the same thing as baptism. That baptism signifies purification from the defilement of sin by the regeneration of the Spirit and purification from the guilt of sin by the righteousness of Christ -- the righteousness of faith -- appears on the very face of the New Testament. That, we have found already, is the real meaning of circumcision. There is, therefore, a basic identity of meaning and signification. Circumcision, bearing the same basic meaning as baptism, was administered to infants who were born in the covenant relation and privilege flowing from the covenant made with Abraham.

The Covenant Sign Perpetual

We already found that the gospel dispensation is in accordance with, and in pursuance of, the covenant made with Abraham. He, Abraham, is the father of all the faithful. They

that are of faith are blessed with faithful Abraham. Now if children born of believing parents under the older dispensation were given the covenant sign, a covenant sign that bears the same central meaning as does baptism, are we to believe that infants are excluded from the covenant sign and seal under the New Testament? It cannot be too much stressed that the New Testament economy is the elaboration and development of the Abrahamic covenant. If infants are excluded now, it must be understood that this change implies a complete reversal or repeal of the earlier divinely instituted practice. And so we must very seriously ask: do we find in either Testament any hint or intimation of such reversal? More particularly, does the New Testament revoke so expressly taught and authorized a principle as the inclusion of infants in the covenant sign and seal? Has a practice followed in the divine administration of the covenant of grace for some two thousand years been discontinued?

When we examine our New Testament we can find no such evidence. But, in view of the basic identity of meaning in circumcision and baptism, in view of the unity and continuity of the covenant in terms of which this covenant sign was given, we can say with confidence that evidence of repeal is mandatory if the practice or principle is to be discontinued. And so, in the absence of repeal and in the presence of evidence for continuance, we conclude that the administration of the sign to the infant seed of believers has perpetual divine warrant and authority. It is just such considerations that called forth the pointed remark of John Lightfoot, "It is not forbidden to baptise infants; therefore they are to be baptised." The divine command to administer the covenant sign to infants has not been revoked; therefore it is still in force.

Invalid Objections

The opponents of infant baptism are wont to appeal to the fact that there is no express command to baptize infants and that we do not have in the New Testament an explicit and proven case of infant baptism. The answer to such an objection is apparent. In view of the basis on which, by divine authority, the inclusion of the infant seed in the reception of the covenant sign rests, an express command or a concrete case is unnecessary.

It will also be objected that there are differences between circumcision and baptism. For example, circumcision was administered only to males; baptism is administered to both males and females. This difference, of course, is not denied. But as an objection it is rather singularly invalid. It must be remembered that this difference obtains not only in the case of infants but also in the case of adults. Of adults as well as of infants in Israel only males bore this covenant sign. In the New Testament adult females as well as adult males bear the sign of baptism. If this difference manifestly obtains among adults why should it not also obtain among infants? The abolition of the distinction between the sexes among infants is

thoroughly congruous with the abolition in this matter between the sexes among adults. Indeed, if baptism is administered to infants, then the abolition of the distinction between male and female infants follows necessarily from the proven abolition of the distinction between male and female adults.

Why in the divine wisdom under the older economy a sign was chosen that could not be administered to females it may not be our wisdom to know. But the extension of the covenant sign to include the female members of the church under the New Testament is thoroughly in accord with the enlargement of privilege that the New Testament revelation signalizes. In the fitting words of Dr. Samuel Miller, "Yet, though baptism manifestly comes in the place of circumcision, there are points in regard to which the former differs materially from the latter. And it differs precisely as to those points in regard to which the New Testament economy differs from the Old, in being more enlarged, and less ceremonial. Baptism is not ceremonially restricted to the eighth day, but may be administered at any time and place. It is not confined to one sex; but, like the glorious dispensation of which it is a seal, it marks an enlarged privilege, and is administered in a way which reminds us that 'there is neither Greek nor Jew, neither bond nor free, neither male nor female, in the Christian economy; but that we are all one in Christ Jesus' " (*Infant Baptism*, p. 14).

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