

THE CASE FOR INFANT BAPTISM

Introduction¹

The issue of infant baptism today is again confusing and dividing the Church, just as it did in John Calvin's day. Calvin expressed his distress about this in the *Institutes*:

Since in this age certain frantic spirits have grievously disturbed the church over infant baptism, and do not cease their agitation, I cannot refrain from adding an appendix here to restrain their mad ravings.²

The primary question is: 'Can we justify infant baptism in the light of the New Testament?'

A chief argument of those who answer 'No' to this question is that the New Testament nowhere expressly mentions infant baptism. Such an argument from silence is, however, really inconclusive. The reason for the New Testament's silence may well be that when the Christian movement began, it took infant baptism for granted, because in Jewish practice infants were circumcised and the children of proselytes were baptized. Thus the *argument* in favour of it was also taken for granted; no special mention of it was felt to be necessary just because there was no controversy about it.³ As Calvin points out, to insist that such silence means the rejection of infant baptism would imply, for instance, that we must forbid women from taking Communion, because the New Testament nowhere mentions that they were admitted to it. So 'who in his senses can reason from this that they [children] were not baptized?'⁴

Jesus and the Children

The Old Testament commanded that all Hebrew boys be circumcised one week after birth as a sign of their inclusion in God's covenant with his people (Lev.12:3 cf. Lk.1:59). It would have been strange then if Jesus, who, in Calvin's words, 'came to enlarge rather than to limit the Father's mercy',⁵ excluded children from the community of the new covenant. Indeed he chided the disciples when they tried to stop parents bringing their little children to him and laid his hands on the children and prayed for them (Matt.19:23-15). Opponents of infant baptism deny that this act has anything to do with baptism, arguing that it merely suggests that we pray for children and bless them. Presumably they would be persuaded to a different view only if Christ had baptized the children. But Christ and the disciples were not baptizing at this time. And in laying hands on the children and commending them to the Father *he specifically stated that such children belonged to the Kingdom of heaven* (Matt.19:4). Jesus on

¹ This paper on 'Infant Baptism' was first drafted by C.J. Jongeleen, then convener of the Doctrine Committee of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa, and presented as part of that committee's report to the PCSA Assembly in 1985. (See the *PCSA Papers for General Assembly 1985*, p.52-61.) Since then its bibliography has been updated here and there, and it has been lightly revised and in places supplemented.

² Calvin: *Institutes* IV.xvi.1. For Calvin's discussion of baptism see IV.xiv-xvi: it well repays careful study. By 'an appendix' Calvin meant chapter xvi.

³ See G. de Ru: *De Kinderdoop in het Nieuwe Testament*, p.12, and C. de Beus: *Het Oudste Christendom en de Antieke Cultuur*, I, p.354.

⁴ Calvin: *Inst.* IV.xvi.8.

⁵ Calvin: *Inst.* IV.xvi.7.

another occasion even called a child into the midst of the disciples and stated:

Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself [to become] like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me. (Matt.18:3f.)

If children are citizens of the Kingdom and indeed models for those who wish to be great in the Kingdom, then, how can we deny them membership in the covenant community? What a contradiction that is! As Calvin states:

If it is right for infants to be brought to Christ, why not also to be received into baptism, the symbol of our communion and fellowship with Christ? If the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to them, why is the sign denied which, so to speak, opens to them a door into the church, that, adopted into it, they may be enrolled among the heirs of the Kingdom of Heaven? How unjust to of us to drive away those whom Christ calls to himself! ... To shut out those whom he willingly receives!⁶

Nor can it be argued that these children were old enough to believe. The Gospels specifically state that they were *brephē*, new-born children, or infants, and *paidia*, little children (Lk.18:15, Matt.19:14, Mk.10:13). Some scholars⁷ indeed argue that these stories were preserved in the early oral tradition of Jesus' sayings primarily in order to emphasize that children *should* be baptized.

The *Oikos* Formula

Even though the New Testament nowhere specifically mentions infant baptism, it frequently mentions *the baptism of households or families*, in the so-called *oikos*, or household, texts, of which there are several (Acts 10:24,47f. 11:14, 16:15.; 16:33f.; 18:8; 1 Cor.1:16). For the precise meaning of the Greek term οἶκος used in these texts ('house, home, household, family') we need to go back to its Hebrew equivalent in the Old Testament, *bayith* (e.g. Joshua 2:12f.; 6:17,22f.; 1 Sam.22:16 cf.19.) Thus Joshua 6:17 refers to the killing of *everyone* in Jericho. And 1 Sam.22:16 records Saul's words to Ahimelech that he and his father's whole household (*kol beth 'abhika*, Septuagint *su kai pas ho oikos tou patros sou*) would be killed. V.19 specifies that this household included men and women *and their children and infants*—indeed even their cattle, donkeys and sheep!

G.A. Hoffner in the *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*⁸ states that *bayith* includes the father, his wife, his own and adopted sons and daughters, his dependant relatives, his clients, his manservants and maidservants and any sojourners in the house. When the word 'whole' is added to it, it underlines that no member of the family was excluded. E. Stauffer in a special study of the *oikos* formula likewise concluded that the

⁶ Calvin: *Inst.* IV.xvi.7.

⁷ E.g. J. Jeremias. See below.

⁸ *TDOT*, vol.II, p.113, under *bayith*.

frequent Old Testament formula 'he and his (whole) house' was associated with the cultic language of circumcision. It included every soul in a house and specifically the children, not least any small children. The *oikos* formula in the New Testament is merely this Old Testament formula in Greek and therefore has the same meaning. Paul and Luke could not have applied the formula if they meant that only adults were baptized.⁹ Thus the reason why the New Testament nowhere (apart from Ac.2:39) specifically mentions children with regard to baptism is because the solidarity of the family was taken so much for granted.

Corporate Personality

We need to be aware how much the extreme individualism of the modern mindset that we have inherited from the Enlightenment tends to skew our view of the biblical evidence. Hence we need to make a conscious attempt to adjust our perspective in order to understand Scripture on its own terms. By contrast with our mindset family solidarity was fundamental to the mindset of the ancient Near East, including Israel, and so also in that of the earliest Christian congregations. The family was felt and experienced to be much more of a unit than we feel it to be in our day. All its members lived together every day. All members of a family knew themselves to be in solidarity; they formed *one unit* and felt themselves to be one before God. Thus the father represented the whole family in religious as in other matters. As a result the faith of the father, or head of the house, normally determined the faith of the family as a whole, and if the father turned to a new religion the household as a whole did.

We find a typical example of this in Acts 16:30-34. There the jailer asks, in the singular, 'What must I do to be saved?' Paul replies, 'Believe (*pisteuson*—singular) in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you *and your household*.' He addresses the call to believe to the jailer, but automatically sees his response as affecting the whole household: the decision of the householder involves his whole household as a unit before God. Even servants and slaves may have been baptized in solidarity with the householder, unless they specifically declined.

Besides the examples cited above, 1 Cor.10:1f. is also relevant: 'For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers, that our forefathers were *all* under the cloud and *all* passed through the sea'. This speaks of a baptism that even embraced a whole tribe, a whole nation, *including all the children in it*. The children are not seen as isolated individuals who have to decide for themselves at a later stage whether to be baptized or not; they are included in the one corporate baptism of the whole nation at the start. True, Paul is here writing about the nation of Israel, but he is using this corporate 'baptism' of Israel as a *type*, or foreshadowing paradigm, of *Christian* baptism (see v.4). He is 'warning' (v.11) the Corinthian congregation that their having all been baptized does not mean that all are

⁹ E. Stauffer: *Die Kindertaufe in der Urkirche*, p.152-54. On the other hand it is also true that the Catholic scholar Raymond Brown thinks that while 'passages like Mk 10:14 and Mt 18:3 make it plausible that sometimes, and perhaps often, children were baptized as part of a household (Acts 16:15; 16:33)' it is 'less sure that new-born infants were baptized in NT times' (R.E. Brown: 'One Baptism for the Remission of Sins', P.C. Empie and T.A. Murphy, eds: *Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue I-III*, Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1965?, p.14). (Lev.26:41, Dt.10:16, 30:6, Jer.4:4, 9:26, Ezk.44:7,9, Ac.7:51, Ro.2:28f., Phil.3:3).

automatically redeemed: the individual must live out his/her baptism in faith and obedience for it to be a spiritual reality—just as the same was true of circumcision in Judaism

Infant Baptism in the Church Fathers

Outside the Bible the historical evidence that infant baptism was practised in the early Christian Church is as follows:

(a) *Polycarp*, Bishop of Smyrna, was martyred c.156 AD. As he stood in the public arena, the proconsul called on him to renounce and revile Christ in order to escape death. Polycarp replied, 'For eighty-six years I have been his servant, and he never did me any wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?'¹⁰ Polycarp could not have meant since conversion or baptism as a believer: that would have made him nearly 100 years old or more, too old for (so vigorous!) a bishop. Possibly he meant since birth, but *birth* does not make one a servant of Christ as King. Most probably then he meant since baptism as an infant. In a time when baptism was taken very seriously as a dedication to Christ that would have been a natural way of speaking. This would then be a case of infant baptism as early as c. 70 AD.¹¹

(b) *Justin Martyr* (c.100-c.165 AD) in his *First Apology*, addressed to emperor Antoninus Pius between 140 and 150 AD, mentions 'many men and women now in their sixties and seventies' who 'became disciples of Christ in childhood (or have been disciples since childhood, *emathēteusan ek paidōn*); and I boast that I could produce such from every human race'.¹² The aorist verb *emathēteusan* ('became/ have been disciples') probably refers to baptism (as elsewhere in Justin and other early Fathers) and thus to their having been baptized as infants (which would have been as early as 70-90 AD).¹³

(c) *Irenaeus* (c.130-200 AD), bishop of Lyons, as a boy heard Polycarp speak. Polycarp in turn had enjoyed 'fellowship with John and with the rest of those who had seen the Lord'. In his book *Against Heresies* Irenaeus declares that Jesus passed through, and so sanctified, every stage of human life. 'He came to save all persons through himself, all, that is, who through him are regenerated [or born again] unto God (*renascuntur in Deum*): infants (*infantes*), toddlers (*parvulos*), children (*pueros*), juveniles (*iuvenes*) and older people (*seniores*)'.¹⁴ The expression *renasci in Deum*, especially when applied to infants in this way, seems to refer to baptism. This is so especially when we remember that on the basis of Tit.3:5 the early Church used the term 'regeneration' as a synonym for baptism. Indeed later in the same work Irenaeus himself interprets Mt.28:19 with its reference to baptism as referring to Jesus 'giving the disciples the power of regeneration unto God'.¹⁵ It seems safe to conclude that the baptism of small children was traditional in Irenaeus's time.

¹⁰ *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*, ix.1.

¹¹ See the discussion in J. Jeremias: *Die Kindertaufe in den ersten vier Jahrhunderten*, p.70-72.

¹² Justin Martyr: *Apology* I.15. The active verb means either 'to become or to be a disciple'. It is used here in the active aorist.

¹³ See W. Wall: *The History of Infant Baptism*, vol.I, p.36, and G. de Ru: *op. cit.*, p.13.

¹⁴ Irenaeus: *Against Heresies*, II.xxii.4.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, III.xvii.1.

(d) *Tertullian* (c.160-220 AD) gives us the first incontestable specific reference to infant baptism in the extant writings of the Fathers. In his treatise *On Baptism*, written about 200 AD, he states: 'it is more salutary to delay baptism...especially in the case of infants'.¹⁶ This statement reveals that infant baptism was already practised in the Church, even if not yet universally and even though Tertullian opposed it. Tertullian held that *all* Christians, and 'especially' infants and 'the unwed', should delay baptism.¹⁷ This resulted from his belief that baptism remitted only all one's previous sins and that to a person who sinned after baptism God allowed an act of 'penitence' for the forgiveness of sins 'only once'.¹⁸ He nowhere denies that the Church had in fact practised infant baptism from the beginning.

(e) *Hippolytus* (c.170-c.236 AD) was the most important theologian at Rome during the third century. Early in that century (c.215 AD) he wrote in his *Church Ordinance*: 'Firstly you should baptize infants.... For those who are unable to speak, their parents should speak or someone else who belongs to the family.'¹⁹ (The alternative of 'someone else who belongs to the family' would apply when the parents, or the believing parent, had died.) 'The bishop blesses the water; and he or a presbyter first baptizes the children of Christian parents, the parents answering on their behalf if the children are too young to do so.'²⁰

(f) *Origen* (c.185-254) was the most learned scholar of all in the 3rd century Church and the Church's first systematic theologian. He travelled widely to Rome, Greece, Syria, Cappadocia, and Arabia. His forefathers had been Christians for several generations, and he stated plainly: 'It is the custom of the Church that baptism be administered even to infants.'²¹ In his commentary on Romans he emphasized: *Ecclesia ab apostolis traditionem accepit etiam parvulis baptismum dari* ('The Church has received from the apostles the tradition to baptize also infants').²² In other places too he justified the practice of infant baptism.²³

(g) *Cyprian* (c.210-255), bishop of Carthage, was asked at a conference of 66 bishops whether a child should be baptized before it was eight days old. His reply was:

The grace and mercy of God are to be denied to no person that is born.... But as to the case of infants, whereas you judge that they must not be baptized within two or three days after they are born and that the rule of circumcision is to be observed so that none should be baptized and sanctified before the eighth day after he is born, we in our assembly were all of the contrary opinion.²⁴

What is to be noticed here is that the question at issue was not *whether* infants were to be baptized but *when*. There was no dispute or difference

¹⁶ Tertullian: *On Baptism*, xviii.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Tertullian: *On Penitence*, 7.

¹⁹ *Cit. ap. J. Jeremias: Die Kindertaufe*, p.87f.

²⁰ *Cit. ap. J. Mackinnon: From Christ to Constantine*, p.409.

²¹ *Selections from the Commentaries and Homilies of Origen* (Madras, India, 1929), p.10.

²² Origen: *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, v.9.

²³ Origen: *Homilies on Leviticus*, viii.3.

of opinion about infant baptism as such: whether during or at the end of the first week of the life of infants, it appears to be the normal practice.

(h) *The Third Council of Carthage* in 253 BC formally confirmed the practice of infant baptism.

(i) *Augustine* (354-450) was the great 'doctor' of the western Church. In his *On Baptism against the Donatists* he writes:

If anyone seeks for divine authority in this matter...what is held by the whole Church, and that not as a result of being instituted by the Councils but as a matter of invariable custom, is rightly held to have been handed down by apostolic authority.²⁵

The conclusion Calvin draws from the testimonies of the early fathers is therefore substantially correct:

The opponents of infant baptism spread among the simple folk the notion that many years passed after Christ's resurrection during which infant baptism was unknown. In this they are most shamefully untruthful. For indeed, there is no writer, however ancient, who does not regard its origin in the apostolic age as a certainty.²⁶

Old Covenant and New

The Old and New Testaments form a unity. Both speak of a covenant that is a covenant of grace. This grace is undeserved, but not inactive. The covenant of God with Noah, for example, has two sides to it: a promise and a demand (Gen. 9:1-7). It also includes a sign of the covenant (Gen.9:12-16). The same applies to God's covenant with Abram.

The word 'covenant' implies a dual relationship; it focuses our attention not only on God in his relationship with human beings but also on human beings in their relationship with God. Yet God's covenant with Abraham also bears a unilateral character. God took the initiative, and God alone determined what the stipulations of the covenant would be.

In Gen.12:1-3 we see the preliminary formulation: God will make Abram into a great nation—that is the *promise*. First, however, Abram has to loosen his ties with his family—that is the *demand*. In Gen.15 the promise is formulated more precisely and combined with the promise of possessing the land of Canaan. In Gen.17:1 we read of a new demand, 'Walk before me and be blameless.' In the same chapter we also learn of the *sign* of the covenant: *circumcision* (17:10-14). The promise concerns Abraham and his descendants (vs.7). Therefore God instructed Abraham *to circumcise every male descendant who was eight days old* (vs.12).

It is important to note that the covenant is a golden thread that runs right through the Scriptures. The covenant between God and Abraham is of a *permanent* nature (Gen.17:7), as Paul states in Gal.3:14-29. (Cf. Acts 2:39: 'The promise is for you and your children', where 'your children' means 'all your descendants'.²⁷) J. Koopmans rightly defines God's

²⁴ *Cit. ap.* W. Wall: *The History of Infant Baptism*, vol.I, p.61.

²⁵ Augustine: *On Baptism. Against the Donatists*, II.24(32). Cf. *Augustine's Answers to Letters of Petilian*, II.102(231).

²⁶ Calvin: *Inst.* IV.xvi.8.

²⁷ B. Newman and E. Nida: *A Translator's Handbook on the Acts of the Apostles*, p.60.

covenant in terms of 'the continuity of God's grace through the centuries'.²⁸

Circumcision is the first sacrament under the old dispensation. At a later stage we hear of the second sacrament: the Passover (Ex.12). Both sacraments involve the shedding of blood, which points forward prophetically and typologically to the shedding of the blood of Christ.²⁹

This implies that the old covenant is the covenant of promise, and the new the covenant of fulfilled promise. In the New Testament baptism and Holy Communion as the new signs of God's grace do not include the shedding of blood, but both are interpreted with reference to the death of Christ.

Louis Berkhof points out,

There is no *essential* difference between the sacraments of the Old, and those of the New Testament.... The names of the sacraments of both dispensations are used interchangeably; circumcision and passover are ascribed to the New Testament Church (1 Cor.5:7; Col.2:11), and baptism and the Lord's Supper to the Church of the Old Testament (1 Cor.10:1-4).³⁰

Even a modern Jewish theologian at the University of Jerusalem, Professor D. Flusser, accepts that circumcision finds its continuation in Christian baptism *via* proselyte baptism, and the Passover its continuation in the sacrament of Holy Communion.³¹

The *locus classicus* relating baptism to circumcision in the New Testament is Col. 2:11-12:

In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead (ESV).

Paul here draws a parallel between circumcision and baptism. (It is possible to interpret the Greek of these two verses in different ways,³² whatever the precise interpretation, however, the parallel remains.)

Calvin commenting on Paul's words says, 'His object is to show that baptism is the same thing to Christians that circumcision formerly was to the Jews.'³³ Against the argument that in Scripture baptism signifies, and therefore must always follow, repentance and coming to faith he pointed out that Scripture in different places also speaks of circumcision as a sign of repentance (Deut.10:16, 30:6, Jer.4:4) and of faith (Rom.4:11); yet that did not prevent circumcision being administered to infants.³⁴ In similar vein L. Berkhof writes that Col.2:11-12 'clearly links up circumcision with baptism and teaches that the Christ-circumcision, that is circumcision of

²⁸ J. Koopmans in his book, *Nederlandse Geloofsbelijdenis*.

²⁹ G.W. Bromiley: *Children of Promise*, p.17.

³⁰ L. Berkof: *Systematic Theology* (1941), p.619.

³¹ D. Flusser: 'Die Sakramente und das Judentum', *Judaica*, May 1983.

³² See C.F.D. Moule: *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Colossians and to Philemon*, CGTC (London: CUP, 1957), *ad loc.*

³³ Calvin: *Inst.* IV.xvi.2.

³⁴ In his *Genevan Catechism*: see J. Calvin: *Theological Treatises, Library of Christian Classics*, vol.XXII (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954), p.134.

the heart, signified by circumcision in the flesh, was accompanied by baptism'. (Cf. also Gal.3:27,29.)³⁵

Besides Col.2:11-12 other texts in the New Testament relate baptism to circumcision, e.g. those where we find the word 'seal' as either a noun or a verb (e.g. Jn. 6:27; Rom.4:11; 2 Cor.1:22; Eph.1:13, 4:30; Rev.7:2; 9:4). In rabbinical circles circumcision was called 'the seal of the holy covenant', 'the seal of Abraham'³⁶ or 'the seal of God' (Rabbi Akiba, 50-132 AD)³⁷. The prayer said during the circumcision of an infant was: 'Blessed is he who seals his progeny with the sign of a holy covenant.'³⁸ In a parallel way 'seal' in 2 Cor.1:22 and being 'sealed' in Eph.1:13 refer to baptism. According to Jn.6:27 God the Father set his 'seal' on Jesus. Again the reference is probably to his baptism.³⁹

Rev.14:1 speaks of the 144 000 who had the Lamb's name and his Father's name 'written on their foreheads'. G. Quispel refers to Rev.7:2,4 and concludes that the name was 'sealed' upon the forehead during baptism, similarly to the way sheep were stamped with an initial or symbol of their owner's name. Hence in the early Church baptism was also called 'the reception of the name' and 'sealing'.⁴⁰

Sealing is a mark of ownership. 'Through circumcision Israel was marked with God's own seal. Circumcision is the external mark of belonging to God's peculiar people.'⁴¹ Here again the similarity in the terminology used for circumcision and baptism is obvious. In baptism God puts his stamp on his people, just as in circumcision he put his seal on the people of the old covenant.

In view of the foregoing we can say that *the essence of baptism is that thereby one is admitted into God's covenant of grace* as a member of his Church, the body of Christ, the community in which the covenant with Abraham has come to its glorious fulfilment.⁴²

Thus the early Fathers also interpreted baptism as the equivalent sign in the new covenant to circumcision in the old. Origen wrote that Christ 'gave us circumcision by baptism'.⁴³ So also John Chrysostom (c.347-402) equated circumcision without hands (Col.2:11-12) with baptism. He wrote, 'Our circumcision, I mean the grace of baptism, gives cure without pain and procures for us a thousand benefits.'

In view of the parallel so explicitly made between circumcision and baptism the practice of circumcising all male children born within the covenant would quite logically have persuaded the first Christians to have their infants baptized—including the girls, because in proselyte baptism

³⁵ L. Berkof: *op. cit.*, p.634.

³⁶ Cf. *Theologisches Begriffslexikon zum Neuen Testament*, p.1135ff.

³⁷ Strack-Billerbeck: *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament*, vol.III, p.120.

³⁸ G. de Ru: *op. cit.*, p.211.

³⁹ See C.K. Barrett: *The Gospel according to St. John* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 2nd ed. 1978) p.287:

In view of the aorist it is natural to look to a particular act of sealing; this should probably be found in the baptism of Jesus, or rather, since John does not record the baptism itself, in the descent of the Spirit upon Jesus. See especially 1.33f. This suggestion is to some extent supported by the fact that σφραγις, σφραγιζειν were clearly used to describe Christian baptism (e.g. 2 Cor. 1.21f.; Eph. 1:13; 2 Clem. 7.6; Acts of Paul and Thecla 25).

⁴⁰ G. Quispel: *The Secret Book of Revelation*, p.60, 84, and E. Lohse: *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, which also refers to 2 Cor.1:22; Eph.1:15; 4:30 in connection with baptism. See the texts referred to in the previous footnote.

⁴¹ A. Nygren: *Commentary on Romans* (London: SCM, 1952), p.172.

⁴² G. de Ru: *op. cit.*, p.214.

⁴³ Origen: *Homily 5*.

both sexes were baptized and in Christ the gender distinction was overcome (Gal.3:27-29). If children received the sign and seal of the covenant in the old dispensation, the presumption was surely that they had a right to receive it in the new. Their exclusion from this would have required a clear and unequivocal statement that they were *not* included in the covenant of grace and had no right to the sign that admitted people to it. So far from suggesting this, however, the New Testament clearly suggests the contrary: Matt.18:2-6, 19:13-15; Mk.9:36f.; 10:13-16; Lk.18:15-17; Acts 2:39; 1 Cor.7:14.

Thus Gregory of Nazianzus (329-389) wrote in his *Homily on Baptism*,

It is better that they be sanctified without their own sense of it, than that they should die unsealed and uninitiated. And a ground of this to us is circumcision, which was given on the eighth day, and was a typical seal (or baptism) and was practised on those that had no sense of reason.

Likewise Chrysostom wrote, 'Circumcision was to be given on the eighth day; baptism, however, has no determinate time, but it is lawful that one receives it in infancy.'⁴⁴

W.F. Flemington draws the conclusion:

Here again it is probably true in regard to infant baptism, as it was of Christian baptism generally, that the determinative influence came from the side of Judaism. It was as natural to regard children as included within the new covenant as it had been to regard them as included within the old covenant. If we give due weight to this analogy, it becomes easier to understand why there seems to have been no early pronouncement on the question. Among those whose religion was grounded in the Bible there was no need for any 'authorization' of infant baptism.⁴⁵

Proselyte Baptism

Did Jewish proselyte baptism influence the early Christian Church in the baptism of infants?

In order to become a full convert to Judaism it was necessary for a male Gentile proselyte to be circumcised, to be baptized along with his family and (before the destruction of the temple in 70 AD) to offer sacrifice.⁴⁶ Proselyte baptism included the baptism of children of any age together with their parents; all were accepted as Jews because of the nature of God's covenant with Israel. The position a father held within the family here again made his will decisive in matters which concerned the well-being of the whole family.⁴⁷

According to Strack-Billerbeck the earliest evidence of the baptism of proselytes is found in a controversy between the two rabbinic schools of

⁴⁴ Origen, Gregory and Chrysostom are all quoted in W. Wall: *op cit.*, vol.I, p.90, vol. II, p.261.

⁴⁵ W.F. Flemington: *The New Testament Doctrine of Baptism*, p.131.

⁴⁶ J. Hastings (ed.), rev. by F.C. Grant and H.H. Rowley (eds): *Dictionary of the Bible* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963), p.811, and F.F. Bruce: *The Acts of the Apostles*, p.85.

⁴⁷ R. de Vaux: *Hoe het oude Israel leefde*, vol.1, p.49.

Hillel and Shammai (both of whom lived when Jesus did).⁴⁸ By the time of this controversy baptism had already become a fixed institution. Consequently we may date its origin as pre-Christian. This is confirmed by the discovery at Qumran of *The Testament of Levi*, an ancient Aramaic document which dates from 100 BC or even earlier, according to J. Jeremias. The document objects to the baptism of proselytes, on the grounds that it will promote mixed marriages.

J. Jeremias and G. de Ru point to the similarities between the baptism of proselytes and Christian baptism, especially in the common terminology associated with them:

- a) A proselyte was far from God before his conversion but has now come near to God. (Cf. Eph.2:13: 'But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ'.)
- b) A proselyte had been dead. (Cf. Eph.2:1: 'You were dead in your transgressions' and Rom.6:1-4.)
- c) A proselyte had been raised from the dead. (Cf. Col.3:1: 'Since, then, you have been raised with Christ....' and Rom.6:5.)
- d) The past had come to an end. (Cf. 2 Cor.5:17: 'The old has gone, the new has come.')
- e) A new creation had taken place. (Cf. Gal.6:15: 'What counts is a new creation', and 2 Cor.5:17: 'Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.')
- f) The proselyte was called a neophyte (νεόφυτος), or 'recent convert'. (Cf. 1 Tim.3:6: 'He must not be a recent convert.')

These remarkable parallels between early Christian baptism and proselyte baptism make it evident that early Christian baptismal terminology originated from proselyte baptism. This close connection further enhances the likelihood that in baptizing infants and toddlers Christian practice followed the example of proselyte baptism.

Baptism and Faith

Everyone accepts that in the New Testament baptism is related to faith. Some Christians, however, want to insist on the chronological sequence: faith-baptism. The question of the sequence of faith and baptism can be answered only when we know whether baptism is a seal of faith or not. If it is a seal of *faith*, then faith must precede baptism. In the New Testament, however, it is quite clear that baptism points back to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the saving work God has accomplished for us. It points forward to a life of personal faith and renewal. Thus baptism is not a confirmation of something in a human being, namely, his or her faith. Rather it is a confirmation of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ and of the grace he gives us in the gospel. This is true, even though

⁴⁸ Strack-Billerbeck: *op. cit.*, p.vol.1, p.102, 109. The controversy was about whether baptism should be administered immediately after circumcision or not.

⁴⁹ J. Jeremias: *Die Kindertaufe*, p.43, and G. de Ru: *op. cit.*, p.148, 156.

what is proclaimed, signified and sealed by baptism can be received only through faith.⁵⁰

Some opponents of infant baptism—Anabaptists, Pentecostals and some Neo-Pentecostals—appeal to Mark 16:16, 'Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe, will be condemned.' Even Karl Barth refers to this verse.⁵¹ However:

- a) Mk.16:9-20 are lacking in the best and most ancient Greek manuscripts of the Gospel according to Mark, and their Greek style and vocabulary differ from the rest of the Gospel. There are hardly any traces of these verses before the 4th century either in ancient Greek manuscripts of the Gospel or in the fathers. All reputable biblical scholars today agree that they were not written by the original author of the Gospel but were added to it by a different author, or editor, at a later stage.⁵²
- b) The text's real concern is to warn that where faith is lacking, judgement and damnation follow. (Cf. John 3:18.)⁵³

The question is, May we exclude children from baptism because of their lack of faith? Is believer's baptism the only valid baptism in the light of the New Testament? In approaching this question, let us ask another: Is personal faith always necessary in cases of blessing, forgiveness, healing, in short of salvation through Christ?

The New Testament recounts several instances of healing where not the person who is healed or delivered himself but someone near him has faith:

- a) Matt.9:1-8 and par.: The healing of a paralytic after his sins were forgiven. V.2 tells us that 'when Jesus saw *their* faith' he pronounced the forgiveness and went on to heal him. This clearly refers to the faith of the friends who carried the paralytic.⁵⁴
- b) Matt.8:5-13: the healing of the centurion's servant. Jesus healed the servant, because nowhere in Israel had he seen such great faith (v.10). The faith referred to is the faith of the centurion (vs.13). His servant is not even depicted as aware that his master was going to Jesus.
- c) Gen.18:16-33 and 19:21: Sodom and Gomorrah might have been spared if ten righteous men had been found in them (18:32), and Zoar is spared because of Lot. This was not, however, on account of the merits of the righteous, but in response to pleas for God's grace. God is far more inclined to forgive than to judge. 'Mercy triumphs over judgement' (Jas.2:13).⁵⁵

Taking all this into consideration the argument against infant baptism that faith *must* precede a person's baptism does not seem to stand up. The above examples support the principle that infants may be baptized on the strength of the faith of the parents and of the congregation. When that faith is present, the children fall within the covenant of grace made with

⁵⁰ L. Floor: *Kinderdoop, Grootdoop en Herdoop*, p.24.

⁵¹ *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, IV/4, p.140.

⁵² See W. Michaelis: *Einleitung in das Neue Testament*, p.57, or any other modern introduction to the New Testament.

⁵³ F. Reinecker: *Das Evangelium des Markus*.

⁵⁴ F. Reinecker: *Sprachlicher Schlüssel zum Griechischen Neuen Testament*, p.25.

⁵⁵ A. van Selms: *Genesis*, I, p.261.

the community of faith. Within that community the Holy Spirit draws those who have been baptized as infants under the dominion of Christ. So it is not faith in the child, but *the faith of the family, or home, in which the child is raised* that is decisive. Because of the faith of the parent(s) the children are 'made holy', i.e. are sanctified as 'saints' or members of the holy community (I Cor.7:14—which may actually allude to paedobaptism). Even Baptists recognize this to the extent that they have come to 'dedicate' infants to God. On their own premise that one must have faith before one can belong to God and be one of his people that does not seem to make sense. But the point is that such 'dedication' really grants this principle behind infant baptism.

We should also bear in mind the words of Jesus in Luke 10:21, 'I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the learned, and revealed them to little children (νηπιοῖς).' This Greek word normally means very young children, or even babies.⁵⁶ The point of the saying is that God reveals these things to people who humanly speaking could not have expected it.⁵⁷ The gift of such things to small children illustrates that grace and salvation are not of ourselves but are wholly God's gift (Eph.2:8). Indeed J. Douma argues that if God can fill a child with the Holy Spirit already from the womb (Lk.1:15), he can certainly regenerate in infancy. We can at least say that God can certainly place children within his covenant. For God has called us and our children into his covenant, and our children have a place in that covenant. God's grace and call precedes all faith, both in adults and in infants.⁵⁸

Baptism thus speaks to us of *gratia praeveniens*, God's prevenient grace. God always takes the initiative in entering a covenant relationship with human beings. However, a covenant has two sides to it, and this covenant demands the human response of *faith*. For 'without faith it is impossible to please God' (Heb.11:6). So the sacrament of baptism asks for the response of *faith*. True, in the sacrament promise and faith belong together, yet ultimately the promise precedes and faith follows. Let us also not forget that *the effect of baptism extends over one's whole life*. As the UPCSA Confession of Faith puts it, 'Whenever received, it remains effective for the whole of a believer's life; its promise is permanent.'⁵⁹ Baptism is and remains a question to us: 'Do you really believe? God first reached out to you and claimed you for his own; have you responded by surrendering to God's claim?' Thus whereas believer's baptism most clearly proclaims that baptism demands faith, infant baptism most clearly proclaims God's prevenient grace.⁶⁰

Oscar Cullmann writes,

Everything that the New Testament implicitly teaches concerning a *gratia praeveniens* (Rom.5.8-10; John 15.16; I John 4.10 and 19) applies in heightened measure to baptism.... The grace of baptism is

⁵⁶ W. Bauer et al.: *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 1979², p.537.

⁵⁷ G.W. Bromiley: *op. cit.*, p.72, and I.H. Marshall: *The Gospel of Luke*, p.434.

⁵⁸ J. Douma: *Infant Baptism and Regeneration*, p.31.

⁵⁹ Article 8.8.

⁶⁰ Cf. G.C. van Niftrik: *Kleine Doqmatiek*, p.335.

not only a 'picture' of *gratia praeveniens* which God has applied to us at Golgotha. It is more: a once-for-all event, *entirely dependent on Golgotha*, and also a *new and special* manifestation of the *same gratia praeveniens*. The divine act of salvation advances into the time of the Church.⁶¹

Under the old covenant infants did not comprehend what the sign meant when they were circumcised. They were nevertheless circumcised, as Calvin puts it, 'to the mortification of their corrupt and defiled nature, a mortification that they would afterward practise in mature years'. Likewise with infants, who 'are baptized into future repentance and faith'.⁶²

In Rom.4:11ff. Paul asserts, 'Abraham was firstly father of all the uncircumcised and later on the father of all circumcised.' We could regard Abraham as a proselyte, someone from a foreign country, who because of his faith was circumcised.⁶³ Thus the Lord, when he chose Abraham, did not commence with circumcision, in the meantime concealing what he meant by that sign, but first announced that he intended to make a covenant with him and then, after Abraham put his faith in the promise, made him partaker of the sacrament. Why does the sacrament come after faith for Abraham, but precede all faith or even understanding in his son Isaac? It is right that Abraham, who is admitted to the fellowship of a covenant as an adult, should learn its conditions beforehand; but it is not so with the infant born to him. According to the terms of the promise, *the infant is included in the promise by hereditary right* from his mother's womb.⁶⁴ Thus in Abraham's case faith preceded circumcision, but for Isaac circumcision preceded faith. Moreover circumcision demanded repentance, faith and obedience or else no such hereditary right or circumcision counted (Matt.3:9f.||Lk.3:8f., Rom.2:28f.). The parallel between all this and the baptism of adults who believe and their children is obvious.

We have already referred to the rejection of infant baptism by the great 20th century Reformed theologian, Karl Barth. Barth has apparently influenced some Presbyterian ministers. Prof. Adrio Konig of the University of South Africa, however, replied to Barth's arguments in two articles under the title 'Karl Barth se Finale Verwerping van die Kinderdoop'.⁶⁵ Against Barth he points out that:

- a) in baptism it is God who is acting in grace, not human beings responding to God's grace; and
- b) baptism is a sacrament, and both exegetically and theologically Barth has failed to prove that it is not. It surprises Konig that despite the fact that Barth's theology is a covenant theology, it fails to draw the consequence for infant baptism. The reason for this is that Barth contrasts the old covenant as a covenant with a community based on natural descent and the new covenant as a covenant based on a spiritual relation. But does Scripture draw such an exclusive contrast?

⁶¹ O. Cullmann: *Baptism in the New Testament*, p.33f.

⁶² Calvin: *Inst.* IV.xvi.20.

⁶³ A.F.N. Lekkerkerker: *Gij Zijt Gedoopt.*, I, p.181.

⁶⁴ Calvin: *Inst.* IV.xvi.24.

⁶⁵ *Theologia Evangelica*, March and June 1971.

In traditional Reformed theology the meaning of baptism can be summarised as follows:

- a) Baptism asserts, and so testifies to, the dominion of the risen Lord. Jesus Christ is Lord over all the powers that exercise dominion over our lives—Satan, sin and death.
- b) Infant baptism signifies that God stretches out his arms to the child while the child does not yet understand anything, because God's grace does not wait for certain conditions to be fulfilled first.

When an infant is baptized, God places him or her under the dominion of the Lord who has been crucified and risen also on his behalf. As a king seals his property, so baptism is the seal of the King of kings, to whom all power in heaven and on earth is given. By it we are made to belong to him. (Cf. Ps.127:3; 1 Cor.3:23).⁶⁶

Calvin thus writes with some point:

It is precisely this which Satan is attempting in assailing infant baptism with such an army: that, once this testimony of God's grace is taken away from us, the promise which, through it, is put before our eyes may eventually vanish little by little. From this would grow up not only an impious ungratefulness toward God's mercy but a certain negligence about instructing our children in piety. For when we consider that immediately from birth God takes and acknowledges them as his children, we feel a strong stimulus to instruct them in an earnest fear of God and observance of the law. Accordingly, unless we wish spitefully to obscure God's goodness, let us offer our infants to him, for he gives them a place among those of his family and household, that is, the members of the Church.⁶⁷

Calvin here touches upon a very important factor, the training of children in piety or bringing them up 'in the fear of the Lord'. This is explicitly required in orders for the baptism of children, at least in the baptismal vows.⁶⁸ In practice, however, this aspect of baptism is sometimes taken lightly or even overlooked. If such training were properly done, as Calvin maintained, 'there would be greater agreement in faith among the Christian people, and not so much ignorance or rudeness; some persons would not be so readily carried away by new and strange doctrines; in fine, it would furnish all with a methodical arrangement of Christian doctrine.'⁶⁹

We should note what the consequences can be, when baptism is not followed by faith and obedience. 1 Cor.10:1-13 tells us that all the Israelites without exception—men, women and children of every age—were under the cloud and all passed through the sea. Thus all were baptized into Moses (vs.2-3). In such events of the Exodus Paul sees 'types', or foreshadowing paradigms, (v.6) of the later sacraments. There

⁶⁶ G.C. van Niftrik: *op. cit.*, p.342.

⁶⁷ Calvin: *Inst.* IV.xvi.32.

⁶⁸ As in the Order for the Baptism of Children approved for use in the UPCSA. See the *UPCSA Papers, Proceedings and Decisions of the Executive Commission 2007*, p.135.

⁶⁹ Calvin: *Inst.* IV.xix.13.

is no ground for the hypothesis that Paul assumes that all the Israelites were conscious and true believers. Some obviously were children, and the whole argument of the passage is that even unbelievers and the disobedient among the Israelites received the gifts of grace, but they did not benefit from this. 'God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered over the desert' (vs.5). The Israelites are an example and a warning to the Christian Church. The Israelites did not make the right response to the *privilege* of their baptism; in other words they did not respond with faith and obedience, and consequently they were destroyed.⁷⁰ In the history of Israel we find many unbelievers within the covenant community side by side with genuine believers in God. (For example in 1 Kings 19:14-18 Elijah complains, 'The Israelites have rejected your covenant...', and God answers, 'I reserve seven thousand in Israel—all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and all whose mouths have not kissed him.')

Similarly not all children of professing Christians in fact work out their covenant membership with repentance and personal faith in Christ Jesus. To participate in the sacraments, therefore, is no guarantee of salvation (whether for children or adults). The prevenient grace of God must always be followed by the response of faith. 'Faith in relation to the grace given in baptism is always a following, responding faith,' as Oscar Cullmann puts it.⁷¹ That is true both in paedobaptism and in believers' baptism.

In spite of the unbelievers and apostates within Israel it remained the people of the covenant. A remnant was preserved even when the situation became so bad that, Scripture tells us, God cast off a majority of the people and ejected them from the land of promise because of their disobedience (2 Kings 17:7-23). The unfaithfulness of one part of a generation could not defeat the indefatigable grace and faithfulness of God in his fatherly love. So also, the failure of some to live up to their baptism as infants does not invalidate the grace of infant baptism as such.

Even when baptism is given only after careful screening and insistence on a credible profession of faith, no guarantee exists that a genuine conversion has taken place. It is all very well to talk about believer's baptism, but since God alone knows the heart (1 Sam.16:2) who are we to say for sure that any person is genuinely committed or not? Simon the Sorcerer received believer's baptism on what seemed to be a sincere profession of faith, but subsequently showed that the inner reality was far removed from his outward expression of it (Acts 8:13-24).⁷² The golden rule of ecclesiastical discipline still applies: *De internis ecclesia non iudicat* ('The Church does not judge the inner life').

The Scottish theologian John Heron maintains that those who have had first hand experience of the life of the Church in a missionary situation in non-Christian countries cannot fail to recognize the inevitability of including the children in a family that is baptized.

⁷⁰ G. de Ru: *op. cit.*, p.253.

⁷¹ O. Cullmann: *op. cit.*, p.41-49.

⁷² G.W. Bromiley: *op. cit.*, p.46.

With the conversion of the parents the life of the whole family, including that of the children, is removed from one religious and spiritual context and brought into a distinctively Christian one. The children are brought within the sphere of the operation of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ through the conversion of their parents. There is therefore something wrong with any system of doctrine which denies them the seal of membership in the people of God.⁷³

In the words of Paul, 'We have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died' (II Cor.5:14). Christ *for* us is prior to Christ *in* us. The French Reformed baptismal liturgy expresses this well:

Little child, for you Jesus Christ has come, he has fought, he has suffered. For you he entered the shadow of Gethsemane and the horror of Calvary. For you he uttered the cry 'It is finished!' For you he rose from the dead and ascended into heaven and there he intercedes—for you, little child, even though you do not know it. But in this way the word of the gospel becomes true. 'We love him, because he first loved us.'⁷⁴

Aberrations

Especially as a result of Pentecostal, Neo-Pentecostal and Barthian influences, our Church faces several aberrations in relation to baptism today. These include (1) rebaptism, (2) dedications, (3) rites for the reaffirmation of baptismal vows and (4) insistence on baptism by immersion. When one overemphasises the *subjective* and the *dramatic show*, this sooner or later places in question Reformed doctrine, with its contrary emphasis on the objective grace of God.

1. Rebaptism

The wish to be rebaptized often originates in a desire to have a *special or conscious experience*. The danger then is that for such people the *experience* of faith becomes the foundation of baptism and indeed of faith itself. Our experiences, however, should never be made the measure of our faith and doctrine. People carried away by emotional experiences often regard their 'intuition' or 'feelings' as the constitutive element in their religious life—as the German Romantic theologian, Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), did. This is to relapse into radical subjectivism. The Word of God itself then loses its objective character, as it did for Schleiermacher.

Some people also argue that because they have come to the light only as adults, their baptism in infancy was invalid and ineffective. They may fear that their parents were unconverted when they took the vows on behalf of their children or even the minister who baptized them may have been. So they regard themselves as in effect unbaptized and want to be baptized now.

Let us look again at circumcision. God nowhere instructs that anyone be re-circumcised. If a Jew rejected his circumcision as invalid, he thereby

⁷³ J. Heron: 'Christian Initiation' in *Studia Liturgica*, vol. 1, no. 1, (Nieuwendam: Studia Liturgica Press, 1962), p.40.

⁷⁴ Quoted by J.B. Torrance: *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1996), p.63.

automatically rejected the covenant. A person who seeks rebaptism similarly, and also wrongly, thereby expresses that his previous baptism has no meaning or validity for him. As baptism really is a divine, not a human, sign, and God's act, not a human act, rebaptism is a very serious matter. A person baptized in infancy and rebaptized at a later stage thereby expresses that what God has done for him and to him is insufficient for him.

Because baptism is the sacrament of the *once-for-all* death and resurrection of Christ, to repeat it is to signify that the Son of God is crucified afresh and put to open shame (cf. Heb.6:4-6). Because baptism is solemnly administered in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, *to reiterate it is to call in question the authority, and to doubt the promises, of the Trinity* in its primary administration.⁷⁵ Prof. T.F. Torrance has written, 'As the Reformers used to insist to the Anabaptists, 'What is at stake here is the biblical doctrine of the unconditional grace of God *sola gratia*' (by grace alone).⁷⁶ Prof. Edward Dowey therefore calls rebaptism 'a high insult to Divine Grace'.⁷⁷

Karl Barth himself, even though he rejects infant baptism as 'an execution without a victim', recognizes that it cannot be called invalid: 'This baptism may have been administered in a way which is highly doubtful and questionable, because irregular. Nevertheless, one cannot say that it is invalid.'⁷⁸

Rebaptism is unfortunately not a *novum*, or new thing, in our Church. In his closing address in a disciplinary case before the Presbytery of Port Elizabeth the late Rev. Harold Munro, a former leading minister of the Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa, condemned rebaptism as 'heretical'. Referring to Mark 16:16 he pointed out:

If this means believers' baptism is the only form, then he that believeth not shall be damned... [T]he inference of this whole case against infant baptism is that they [i.e. infants] cannot be baptized, because they are not yet believers. Of course, then, all children dying before the age at which Mr X and his fellow believers are prepared to baptize them are damned....

Does it matter if infant baptism is denied? Sometimes one feels despondently of the modern Church that it does not matter whether anything and everything is denied. Does it matter what Christians believe, or whether they believe anything? I put it to you that one of the great weaknesses of modern Christianity is just that in some quarters it is no longer a great and impressive framework of belief about God and man and the world, guiding and explaining the life of man against the background of eternity, but it has become a mass of flabby sentimentality and cheap emotionalism. If people can say, 'Surely we do not talk of heresy nowadays, surely it does not matter what a man

⁷⁵ H.J. Wotherspoon and J.M. Kirkpatrick: *A Manual of Church Doctrine according to the Church of Scotland*, revised and enlarged by T.F. Torrance and R.S. Wright, p.28. Also O Cullmann: *op. cit.*, p.11.

⁷⁶ T.F. Torrance in a letter to the editor in *Life and Work*, Jan. 1983.

⁷⁷ Report of the Life and Work Committee of the General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church in the USA, 1975, p.2ff.

⁷⁸ K. Barth: *Church Dogmatics*, IV/4, p.189.

believes as long as he is earnest,'...when we hear that sort of thing we cannot ignore the danger.... Does it matter that a man is baptized twice? We are very familiar with the disrepute into which Christian marriage is come by people entering it casually twice or three times. And it is not a sacrament of the Church. Must we maintain our *standards* in the central sacraments of the Church or not? Are these things holy or are they not? Is there any single thing on which a modern Christian is to stand firm or is there to be nothing? If you answer in the affirmative, what will you find more central than the sacraments [in the life] of the Church?⁷⁹

A spirit of latitudinarianism is widespread in the Church today, and among many Christians doctrinal issues are no longer very popular. The Pastoral Epistles in particular, however, repeatedly warn us of the importance of holding fast to 'sound doctrine' (e.g. 1 Tim.6:3; 2 Tim.1:13; 4:3; Tit.2:1). The Letter to Titus, for instance, calls on the church leaders to 'hold firmly to the faithful word that accords with the teaching, so that he can encourage others with sound doctrine and refute (or reprove/correct/discipline) those who speak against it' (1:9). In his Letter to the Romans Paul warns us 'to watch out for those who cause divisions and put in your way obstacles that are contrary to the teaching you have learned' (16:17). Sound doctrine or teaching is not a mere hobby of the Church; it is a fundamental biblical instruction.

To maintain its doctrinal standards, its historic faith and its witness and to preserve its unity the Church needs to act against those who undermine these things by propagating rebaptism or undergoing it themselves. The Westminster Confession of Faith declares, 'The Sacrament of Baptism is but once to be administered to any person.'⁸⁰ Similarly the World Council of Churches' document, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, states, 'Baptism is an unrepeatable act. Any practice which might be interpreted as "rebaptism" must be avoided'.⁸¹ Likewise the *Manual of Faith and Order* of the United Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa maintains that:

Baptism in the name of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit is administered only once to any person. The act of baptism must not be performed a second time on anyone, because baptism is the sacrament that initiates us into the death and resurrection of Christ as an event that was once for all (Romans 6:1-11, Hebrews 9:11-10:18).⁸²

According to the doctrinal standards of most Presbyterian Churches to 'rebaptize' constitutes a breach in one's ordination vows and therefore requires discipline.⁸³

⁷⁹ H. Munro in his documented address, p.3,13f.

⁸⁰ Westminster Confession, ch.XXVIII.7. See also the Belgic Confession, Art.XXXIV.

⁸¹ World Council of Churches: *One Baptism, One Eucharist and a Mutually Recognized Ministry*. WCC Lima Document, Faith and Order Paper No. 111 (1982), IV.A.13.

⁸² *The Manual of Faith and Order of the UPCSA 2007*, par.3.18. Cf. also par.1.6.

⁸³ On the stand of the General Assembly of the PCSA concerning the disciplining of people who are rebaptized, people who rebaptize or encourage others to be rebaptized and people who persist in encouraging rebaptism see the PCSA *Proceedings and Decisions of General Assembly 1985*, p.235.

2. Dedication

Some ministers and parents substitute for infant baptism a service of dedication. This is a human invention, however. Neither the Old Testament nor the New provides any precedent for a service of this kind. The dedication of children like Samuel (1 Sam.1) and Samson (Jdg.13:7) was not the same thing. They had already been circumcised and initiated into the covenant, and *on this basis* they were now being dedicated to a *special* kind of *service*.

Harold Munro condemned such services of dedication in unambiguous terms:

This is a shoddy modern invention to escape the clear consequences of a harmful belief without a shred of scriptural or other warrant except the inventiveness of men who found their doctrines repugnant to human instincts and to their other beliefs about the nature of Christ's Kingdom.⁸⁴

The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa went so far in 1975 as to recognize the right of parents to choose between infant and believer's baptism for their children, but it made no room for dedication in its decision:

The Assembly recognises the duty of Christian parents either to have their children baptized in infancy and thereafter to seek to lead them to their profession of their own faith and the confirmation of the vows made at their baptism; or to seek to lead them to profess their own faith and accept baptism at a more mature age. At the same time, the Assembly commends to parents the ancient practice of Infant Baptism; believing that in a Christian family it is a means of grace both to the faithful parents in the fulfilment of their vows and to the growing child facing the temptations of life.⁸⁵

In 1998 the General Assembly of the PCSA reaffirmed a ruling made in 1979 that no services of dedication were to take place in PCSA churches.⁸⁶

3. Dramatic rites for the reaffirmation of baptismal vows

Any dramatic rite for the reaffirmation of baptismal vows is unnecessary, because it can contribute only more confusion. This is especially so when it is coupled with immersion in water, as some Presbyterians from New Zealand once proposed. Such a rite is basically a doctrinal compromise, and many will inevitably interpret it as in effect re-baptism. Let us rather remember that 'God is to be trusted'; what God proclaims in Word and in sacrament, therefore, is 'not a mixture of Yes and No' (2 Cor.1:18f.). We on our side should obey the exhortation of our Lord, 'Simply let your Yes be Yes and your No be No' (Matt.5:37).

⁸⁴ H. Munro: *op. cit.*, p.15.

⁸⁵ PCSA *Proceedings and Decisions of General Assembly 1975, Yearbook*, Vol.II, p.90.

⁸⁶ See PCSA *Proceedings and Decisions of General Assembly 1998*, p.383, 442f., 447. Prohibition of the ritual dedication of a child does not, however, exclude special thanksgiving and prayer for (blessing on) a child. In fact the UPCSA *Manual of Faith and Order* makes provision for such a service of thanksgiving and prayer when parents do not meet the requirements to have the child baptized or where they insist on wanting the child to be baptized later, as a believer. See the *Manual of Faith and Order*, par.3.19-20, p.115.

4. Insistence on baptism by immersion

Some people who are inclined to the dramatic feel that immersion is the only right way of administering baptism. Calvin, however, answers them in this way:

Whether the person being baptized should be wholly immersed, and whether thrice or once, whether he should only be sprinkled with poured water—these details are of no importance, but ought to be optional to churches according to the diversity of countries, although the term baptize means to immerse, and it is clear that the rite of immersion was observed in the ancient church.⁸⁷

L. Berkhof and Karl Barth fully agree with Calvin's view that the mode of baptism is quite immaterial. It may be administered by immersion, by pouring or affusion, or by sprinkling. The Reformed faith has always held that all these modes of baptism are valid (though some Lutheran Churches demur against *sprinkling*). We therefore do not need to be involved in any conflict between immersion and affusion. After all, Jesus did not prescribe any specific mode of baptism.⁸⁸

Calvin's assertion that immersion was the form used by the primitive Church is actually disputable, as is his translation of the Greek verb *baptizein* as 'to immerse'. *Baptizein* can mean 'to immerse', but it can also sometimes mean 'to dip in' or only 'to wet with a handful of water'.⁸⁹ In the Greek literature of ancient Judaism it usually, in a religious context, referred in fact to sprinkling.⁹⁰

It is interesting that the Old Testament sometimes prescribes a bath and sometimes just a washing. For instance, in Lev.16 the high priest has to have a full bath before entering the Holy of Holies, on pain of death. But in Ex.30:17-21 all that he has to do to enter the Tent of Meeting is to wash his hands and feet, also on pain of death. Likewise whereas in Zech.13:1 Israel is promised the eschatological gift of a 'fountain' to wash away its sins, in Ezk.36:25 the eschatological cleansing will be merely a 'sprinkling'. This promise of a sacramental cleansing by sprinkling is, of course, fulfilled in Christian baptism. The Reformed Church has therefore always taken it that even sprinkling suffices for baptism.

Did the early Christian Church practise baptism by total immersion only? Before we answer this question, we may as well ask: 'Was the baptism of John (always) by immersion?' The earliest inscriptions and pictures of Jesus' own baptism suggest rather that he was baptized by the pouring of water. Moreover the evidence in the New Testament also suggests pouring:

a) Jn.13:2-11: When Peter wanted Jesus to wash not only his feet but also his hands and head, Jesus said, 'One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is entirely clean' (v.10, NRSV). Some ancient manuscripts omit the phrase 'except for his feet', which *may* thus have been a later interpolation. It is possible that the word

⁸⁷ Calvin: *Inst.* IV.xv.19.

⁸⁸ K. Barth: *op. cit.*, p.44f., and L. Berkhof: *op. cit.*, p.629f.

⁸⁹ A.G. Luiks: *Baptisterium*, p.12.

⁹⁰ H.J. Wotherspoon and J.M. Kirkpatrick, *op. cit.*, p.28.

translated 'bathing' refers to baptism (as in Heb.10:22 cf. Eph.5:26, Tit.3:5). But Jn. nowhere suggests that the disciples had all been baptized. The word also means (thorough) washing and may refer here to cleansing by the *word* (see 15:3, the only other text in Jn. that uses the word cleansing, and 6:63)⁹¹ or by the *blood* (I Jn.1:7) of Jesus. The *partial* washing with water may then symbolize baptism. (Cf. also 12:3, where anointing the feet is a sufficient anointing for the whole body.)

- b) Acts 2:41: 'Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.' The only place in Jerusalem where so many baptisms could have been administered by total immersion was the pool of Siloam. But the people filled their vessels from this pool to drink from the water and for other human use. The Jews would therefore not have permitted a multitude to be immersed there.
- c) Acts 8:36-38: 'As they [Philip and the eunuch] travelled along the road, they came to some water (*ti hudōr*).... They both went down to the water, and Philip baptized him.' This was on a desert road (v.26). It is thus unlikely that the baptism was by total immersion.
- d) Acts 9:18: This account of Paul's baptism does not create the impression that it was by total immersion.
- e) Acts 10:48: 'So he [Peter] ordered that they be baptized in the Name of Jesus Christ.' The text seems to suggest that water was brought into the house from outside. Here again it seems unlikely that the baptisms were by total immersion.
- f) Acts 16:33: The jailer and his family were baptized early in the morning. 'Prisons of the first century were certainly not equipped with baptismal pools!'⁹²
- g) Many protagonists of baptism by total immersion cling to Rom.6:4, 'We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.' However, this text does not actually prove that Paul thought of baptism as necessarily by total immersion, since in antiquity a burial could be symbolised by sprinkling some sand on the body.⁹³ In the early Church baptism was frequently practised with a threefold pouring of water—interpreted sometimes as a symbol of the Trinity and sometimes as a symbol of burial, parallel with the three handfuls of earth used at the interment of a body in the grave.⁹⁴
- h) 1 Cor.12:13 is a puzzling text, 'For in (or 'by') one Spirit we were all baptized into one body...and all *epotisthēmen* one Spirit.' The Greek word is in the aorist indicative passive. What does it mean? The simple

⁹¹ 'The true cleansing agent is the word that Jesus speaks' (C.K. Barrett: *op. cit.*, p.442).

⁹² H. Munro: *op. cit.*, p.11. The *Contemporary English Version* of the Bible renders this verse as follows: 'While it was still night, the jailer took them to a place where he could wash their cuts and bruises. Then he and everyone in his home were baptized.' This inexact translation may give the impression that they left the jail for some other place. But the Greek states literally, 'And taking them with in that hour of the night he washed their wounds, and he was baptized and all his family straight away.' This surely merely means that the jailer took him out of his cell. There is no suggestion of moving to other premises. The jailer would have had water in the room(s) where he slept and would not have been permitted to abandon the jail at night without relief. Only later (in the next verse) does he leave the jail and go home.

⁹³ A.G. Luiks: *op. cit.*, p.8.

⁹⁴ H.J. Wotherspoon and J.M. Kirkpatrick: *op. cit.*, p.28 n.3.

infinitive *potizein* means 'to give to drink, make drink' (Matt.5:35), but it also has the meaning 'to water, irrigate', i.e. *to pour water on* (a plant)' (I Cor.3:6). The usual translation is 'were made to drink'. But Paul is speaking of baptism, not Communion, here. One does not 'drink' the Spirit at baptism—or for that matter at Communion. Such a rendering is therefore very problematic and unlikely. The intended imagery becomes immediately straightforward and understandable, however, if the word is given the same meaning here as earlier in the same letter (3:6). Paul is then using an image from the rite of baptism (or at any rate of some baptisms): the pouring of water at baptism signifies the pouring of the Spirit on the baptizand. (Note too that Isa.44:3, Ezk.39:29, Joel 2:28f., Zech.12:10 and Ac.2:17f. all use the image of the Spirit being 'poured' on God's people, even though the Septuagint and Ac.2:17f. use other Greek verbs for this image.)

For the mode of baptism in the early Church we have evidence in the *Didache*. In its present form this work was compiled somewhere around 150 AD, perhaps in Alexandria, but its section on church order (6:3-15:4) appears to have originated as early as between 90 and 100 AD in Syria.⁹⁵ Chapter 7, which falls within this section, speaks of baptizing in 'living' (i.e. running) water or if that is not available in other water, and in cold water or if that is not available in warm (presumably meaning in thermal baths). If neither was available, it advised *pouring water upon the head three times* 'in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit'. The long history of controversy over the mode of baptism thus seems entirely unnecessary, as the early Church sanctioned and practised different methods. Baptism in running water from a fountain or in a stream or in still water, in cold or in hot water, and by immersion or pouring all seemed to be acceptable.⁹⁶

Archaeology also upholds the statement in the *Didache*. The oldest extant baptistry, excavated in Capernaum and from the early 2nd century, provides evidence of baptism by pouring. Its size and the jar found with it make baptism by immersion highly improbable.⁹⁷ Dr A.G. Luiks visited 89 excavations of baptistries in northern Africa. From this he concluded that Christians always tried to use running water at baptisms. That water was led to the baptistries by means of pipes, and the minister used a jar to pour it over the people baptized.⁹⁸

The earliest Christian evidence suggests that baptism usually involved a descent into water up to the ankles or knees and a pouring of water upon the head of the person baptized.⁹⁹ The earliest surviving church building is one unearthed by archaeologists in an ancient Roman garrison town named Dura-Europos that was abandoned in 257 AD. The town was on the banks of the Euphrates in modern Syria. The building was a house with a room set aside as a worship room with space for an altar and a chair and some 60 people. To one side was a smaller room decorated as a baptistry

⁹⁵ C.C. Richardson in C.C. Richardson (ed.): *Early Christian Fathers, LCC*, vol.I, p.161-166.

⁹⁶ H. Rimmer: *Crying Stones*, p.99f.

⁹⁷ This information was supplied by the late Prof. A.S. Geysler.

⁹⁸ A.G. Luiks: *op. cit.*, p.145ff.

⁹⁹ H.J. Wotherspoon and J.M. Kirkpatrick: *op. cit.*, p.28 n.3.

chapel and decorated with scenes of the resurrection. The large basin at the end of the room for baptism was big enough for someone to stand in but not to be immersed in.¹⁰⁰

Is there any essential difference between baptism by immersion and baptism by pouring or sprinkling? As baptism is a sacramental *sign*, the quantity of water used is not decisive. 'Christian baptism was not a rite of ceremonial cleansing by ablution but a rite signifying cleansing through the Blood of Christ.'¹⁰¹ We need to remember that where the old covenant was confirmed, the blood of sacrificial animals was *sprinkled* on the people (Ex.24:8). A photograph does not fail to be a good likeness because it is smaller than the object it depicts. Nor do we have to consume a full meal, as the apostolic Church did, in order to celebrate Communion (Ac.2:46, 6:1, 20:7,11, 1 Cor. 11:17-34, 2 Pet. 2:13, Jde 12).

Conclusion

The problem, then, is not that there is no case for infant baptism; there is a very strong case for the baptism of infants, if they are the children of practising believers. The real problem is that the sacraments generally should play a much greater and more meaningful role than they do in our congregations and in the spiritual consciousness of most Protestants. In particular ministers should include teaching on baptism in their sermons and bring home its meaning and significance *whenever* they baptize—and frequently when they preach on the death and resurrection of Jesus, on salvation, on regeneration, on conversion, on assurance, on unity with Christ, on the work of the Holy Spirit, on sanctification, on perseverance etc. For baptism is the sacrament that visually symbolizes *and applies* these things to us! Instead ministers fail to do this. Many have themselves fallen away from the high doctrine of the sacraments in Scripture and in the teaching of Luther and Calvin and come to see them in a way much closer to Zwingli. The loss of significance that baptism has suffered is symbolized even physically in some churches, where the font is pushed into a corner instead of standing prominently at the entrance or in front!

It is precisely the failure to take the significance of baptism seriously and to preach on this frequently, in this way, that has led so many of our members to lose a proper understanding of what baptism means and so lose the sense of the significance of their own baptism. As a result they are vulnerable to the propaganda that especially the 'new', or 'independent', Churches make against infant baptism. For these Churches have a very Zwinglian view of the sacraments: they see baptism as basically an act of obedience and confession on the part of the believer, not as an effective means of God's grace toward us. Thus when young people, especially, come to faith and are confronted with this view of baptism, they naturally tend to come under strong conviction that they must be rebaptized as an act of obedience and accept the idea that infant baptism is not real baptism at all.

¹⁰⁰ For an excellent photograph, in colour, see M. Collins and M.A. Price: *The Story of Christianity* (London: Dorling Kindersley, 1999), p.49.

¹⁰¹ H.J. Wotherspoon and J.M. Kirkpatrick: *op. cit.*, p.28 n.3.