

TO A THOUSAND GENERATIONS

Infant Baptism—Covenant Mercy
for the People of God

Douglas Wilson



Canon Press
MOSCOW, IDAHO

Douglas Wilson, *To A Thousand Generations—Infant Baptism: Covenant Mercy for the People of God*

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Published by Canon Press, P.O. Box 8729, Moscow, ID 83843
800.488.2034 | www.canonpress.com

06 07 08 09 10 11 12 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

Cover design by David Dalbey.

Printed in the United States of America.

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ISBN-13: 978-1-885767-24-0

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publishing Data

Wilson, Douglas, 1953-

To a thousand generations : infant baptism : covenant mercy for the people of God / Douglas Wilson.

p. cm.

ISBN-13: 978-1-885767-24-0 (pbk.)

ISBN-10: 1-885767-24-2 (pbk.)

1. Infant baptism. I. Title.

BV813.W55 2007

234'.1612—dc22

2006014723

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Preface to the Reader

This small book is published by Canon Press, which is one of the literature ministries of Christ Church in Moscow, Idaho. The subject of this book is infant baptism, a controversial subject in many churches.

As our church has worked through this issue practically, we have adopted a baptismal cooperation agreement, which for some years has enabled believers on both sides of this issue to work together harmoniously. We receive both baptistic and paedobaptistic households into membership. We practice both infant baptism and baptism upon profession of faith. We are able to do this because the membership of our church is reckoned by household, and because we all share a strong sense of the covenantal identity of each household, whether baptist or paedobaptist.

As a part of this cooperation agreement, we have stated the following in our Constitution: “Because of our commitment to the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Eph. 4:3), and because of our shared commitment to the practice of household membership as outlined in our Constitution, these differences have been procedurally resolved between us. We have agreed to work together in this way until such time as the Lord brings us to one mind on the subject of baptism.” Our assumption is that we are to *strive* for likemindedness. The cooperation is not based upon an uneasy silence, but rather on frank and charitable discussion.

Obviously, the publication of this book does not

mean that everyone associated with Christ Church agrees with the arguments contained here. Nevertheless, the elders of Christ Church have authorized the publication of this work, not because they all agree, but because of our shared commitment to remain in fellowship while we study the issue. The publication of this book invites you to study along with us.

Introduction

I must confess at the outset that this short book seeks to persuade others. The position maintained throughout the following pages is that there is a type of infant baptism which is thoroughly biblical, and which, when biblically *practiced*, adorns the gospel. But I am not seeking to persuade those who have no commitment to the teaching of Scripture, or those whose commitment is nominal. For such, there are many other topics, of a more important nature, which should be discussed first. Rather, I am addressing these comments to Christians who are serious about their faith, and who are also convinced that the practice of believer's baptism is the New Testament practice.

They are further convinced that believer's baptism is essential in guarding against the nominalism that has been the bane of genuine Christianity down through history. It must be admitted that infant baptism, as it has been administered by *some*, has been the point of stumbling for many professing Christians into a soul-destroying nominalism. But as we shall also see, nominalism afflicts baptist churches as well. The real origin of nominalism is to be found in all churches that refuse to *discipline* in terms of their baptism, whatever their practice of baptism may be.

Because evangelical baptists are my intended audience, I must begin with some background and disclaimers. I was baptized by immersion in a Christmas Eve service when I was ten-years-old in a Southern Baptist church. I grew up in a

very godly home, and never had any cause to question my baptistic assumptions. When I was grown, through a series of providential circumstances I was called to a teaching/preaching ministry in an independent, evangelical baptistic church. In the course of ministering in this church over the years, I baptized many individuals—including my own three children. All that I baptized were professing believers.

During this time, my baptistic views were reinforced considerably, although I do not believe this was the result of mere repetition. One of the common features of many of the baptisms we performed was our practice of having those who were to be baptized give their testimonies if they so desired. One of the distressing features common to many of these testimonies was heard from individuals who had come to Christ in their mature years. They had already been baptized in infancy, and had grown up in a nominally Christian “churchy” kind of atmosphere. For many of them, despite all the church and more church, they were really clueless about the meaning and import of the saving gospel of Jesus Christ. That is, they did not understand the gospel until they came to a knowledge of Christ in a setting *unrelated* to their nominal upbringing. Receiving the gift of salvation meant, for these individuals, a virtual break with what they had previously been taught about the saving grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. I think it can be said safely that as long as this kind of tragic nominalism among paedobaptists exists anywhere, there will always be, in reaction, evangelical baptists. In fairness, however, it should be said again that nominalism is not the possession of paedobaptists alone. A baptist culture is also fully capable of bringing up children who embrace the form of religion, but deny the power. Many of those who are returning to the covenantal understanding of Reformed theology are doing so precisely because of the prevailing nominalism and superficiality of American baptist culture.

My desire is to present here a case for *biblical* infant baptism. This means, in part, that there is no intention whatever to defend the many forms of *unbiblical* infant baptism. Indeed, it is important for biblical paedobaptists to attack publicly the various errors that have grown up around the practice of infant baptism. No one thinks of accusing Southern Baptists of holding to baptismal regeneration, even though the Church of Christ (also immersionist and baptistic) does hold to it. In the same way, we need to get to the point where no one would dream of accusing an evangelical paedobaptist of holding to the false and destructive doctrine of baptismal regeneration—even though the Roman Catholic church does.

But in arguing for biblical infant baptism, it is not sufficient for us to say that infant baptism is merely *consistent* with the Scriptures, or that *a* biblical case can be made for it. In order for us to be satisfied that we are being biblical Christians, we must be content with nothing less than a clear biblical case *requiring* infant baptism. In a doctrinal matter of this importance, the standards of evidence are high.

Historically, the debate between baptists and covenantal paedobaptists has revolved around the two initiatory rites of circumcision and baptism, and has concerned how much continuity or discontinuity there is between the Levitical administration of the law and the New Covenant. But both sides agree that, at the very least, there is *some* discontinuity of administration. For example, girls as well as boys are baptized, and most paedobaptist churches do not require baptism eight days after birth. Consequently, the debate reduces to *how much* discontinuity there is between the rites. And because there appears to be no explicit baptism of an infant in the New Testament, the debate roars on unimpeded. After all, could not a covenantal shift to “believer’s baptism” be seen and understood as an *administrative* change?

The debate should begin where the problem does—with

our children. The issues addressed here should operate against the backdrop of the promises and duties of Christian parents, and the status of their children. Only after a theology of parenthood is understood may we properly turn to a discussion of covenantal baptism. When it comes to child-rearing, between the Old and New Testaments there is total and complete continuity *on the subject of godly parenting.* There is no discontinuity. It needs to be emphasized again that there is continuity *in the promises of God* with regard to *parenting.* Not surprisingly, this has ramifications for the subject of infant baptism. A detailed treatment of God's promises to parents can be found in my book *Standing on the Promises.* Due to limitations of space, those arguments will be repeated here but not in detail. Nevertheless, it is important for the reader to note that certain assumptions about the covenant of parenthood lie underneath this discussion of infant baptism, and for those who want to pursue that aspect of the question further, other material is available.

And now for some disclaimers. Perhaps at the outset I may be able to reassure the baptist reader by saying there will be no "babies of the Philippian jailer" arguments found in this book. Arguments from silence not only do *not* establish the point they seek to establish, they *do* help establish the reputation of paedobaptists in making desperate and valiant attempts to find *something* in the New Testament that teaches infant baptism. And besides, the youngest child of the Philippian jailer was a fourteen-year-old girl. ("And where did you get *that*?" "In the same verse where she was babysitting the three infants.") Although the general New Testament practice of household baptism is *related* to the subject of infant baptism (obviously), and will be discussed in its proper place later, arguments from such incidents are by no means a champion of the paedobaptist exegetical cause. At best, such arguments should be like Ephraim, helping to join in the pursuit later on.

So I have sought to avoid arguments that are merely *consistent* with the practice of infant baptism. The goal of this small book is to demonstrate to evangelical baptists that infant baptism is biblically necessary, and such a task requires an approach that begins with *shared* or *indisputable* premises. Such an approach is being attempted in the following chapters. It is worth mentioning, however, that in the early sections of this essay the reader may wonder why the argument is not more compelling, and why there is not more water in view. (“I thought this was a book on *baptism!*”) One of the problems in the entire debate over baptism has been the natural mistake of deriving the doctrine of the covenant from our doctrine of baptism, instead of beginning with the doctrine of the covenant, and then proceeding to discuss baptism. Many Christians have come to baptistic conclusions because they simply took a Bible and a concordance, and then looked up every incident of baptism in the New Testament. This is objectionable, not because they studied the passages concerned with baptism, but because they did *not* look up all the passages that addressed parents, children, generations, descendants, promises, covenants, circumcision, Gentiles, Jews, olive trees, and countless other important areas. In other words, the subject is bigger than it looks.

Another disclaimer is this. For evangelical baptists one of the hardest things to overcome in a discussion of these matters is the prejudice that associates *any* form of infant baptism with the kind of paedobaptism which is practiced, for example, by the Roman Catholic church. This is honestly one of the hardest aspects of the discussion for baptists to get past. But in the arguments that follow, there is no creeping sacerdotalism or advocacy of priestcraft *of any kind*. Biblically understood and practiced, infant baptism is thoroughly and completely evangelical.

Overcoming this prejudice is not really part of the

debate, but it is something that must be addressed so that the discussion can proceed—this matter is quite a stumbling block. To an evangelical baptist, all forms of infant baptism *look* like Roman Catholicism, or like something that is headed there at a rapid clip. It therefore must be said with some emphasis and force that the arguments below are evangelical and covenantal, and *not* sacerdotal. To be explicit, all teaching that grace is somehow imparted to an infant *ex opere operato* (automatically, by some kind of ecclesiastical magic) is rejected here as sub-Christian (indeed, as will be seen, it is sub-Jewish), and detrimental to a faithful preaching of the gospel. Water baptism does not regenerate, it does not save, and it does not cleanse.

So why should we apply it to infants then? Now *that* is a good question.