

1

Baptism and the Covenant of Grace

In this chapter, I want to examine what is meant by the term ‘covenant theology’ as it is understood by our reformed paedobaptist brethren. Unless we are clear about what they understand by covenant theology, we shall not appreciate why they are so sure that the practice of baptising the infants of believers has scriptural warrant. Furthermore, it is important that we realise that covenant theology involves, as we shall see, a certain understanding of the relationship between the Old and New Testaments. This matter I believe to be a key issue in the debate between us. We should also be aware of the type of inferential reasoning (to be examined later) which is employed by reformed theologians to establish the paedobaptist case.

Assertions of Covenant Theology

To illustrate what is meant by covenant theology in general and the argument for infant baptism which is based upon it, I can, I think, do no better than quote a statement by Professor John Murray. He writes:

The argument for infant baptism rests upon the recognition that God’s redemptive action and revelation in this world are covenantal. In a word, redemptive action is covenant action, and redemptive revelation is covenant revelation. Embedded in this covenantal action of God is the principle that the infant seed of believers are embraced with their parents in the covenant relation and provision. It is this method of God’s administration of grace in the world that must be appreciated. It belongs to the New Testament as well as to the Old. It is its presence and significance that grounds infant baptism. And it is the perception of its significance that illumines for us the meaning of this ordinance.¹

Now, if we analyse his statement, we find that he makes several very important theological assertions.

Firstly, he says that God deals with that people whom he purposes to redeem on the basis of covenant; that is, in his sovereign grace he binds himself to save his church, by declaring and manifesting himself to be their God (Gen. 17:7). On their part, his people take upon themselves the obligation, as vassals of the only Potentate and King of kings, of covenant loyalty, that is, the obligation to render homage, worship, obedience and service to Almighty God. The covenant demands that accompany the revelation of covenant grace are summed up in the command which immediately follows God's identification of himself to Abraham as the Almighty God: 'walk before me faithfully and be blameless' (Gen. 17:1). It is not, of course, man's promising obedience to God that constrains God's favour to man, since there can be no question here of a covenant between equals, or of sinful man offering his service to God in order to obtain God's favour; rather, it is the manifestation of grace which, as the New Testament clearly shows, calls forth the loving obedience of those who enjoy the blessings of the covenant (e.g. Rom. 12:1).

Secondly, Professor Murray states that the infant seed of believers are embraced with their parents in the covenant relation and provisions. In other words, the blessings of the covenant are promised not to believing adults only, but also to their children who do not yet believe, who are nevertheless included within the covenant along with their parents. The classical proof of this belief is found in Genesis 17:7-10, with its repeated emphasis on 'you and your seed' (or 'descendants'). Reformed paedobaptists would claim the operation throughout the Old Testament of the principle that to believers and their seed are promised the blessings of the covenant.

Thirdly, Professor Murray also states that the principle that the infant seed of believers are embraced with their parents in the covenant relation and provision is not set aside in the present dispensation (i.e. the 'last days', Hebrews 1:2, in which we live) which has been inaugurated by the advent and redemptive ministry of the Messiah. Rather it is carried over from the old into the new dispensation. 'It belongs,' he says, 'to the New Testament as well as to the Old.'

Fourthly, it is this principle which supplies the *raison d'être* for the practice of infant baptism and gives it its meaning. The argument as it is usually put runs like this: since in the Abrahamic covenant the covenant sign of circumcision

was applied to his seed, baptism which is one sign of the new covenant (the Lord's Supper being the other) ought to be given to the infant seed of believers. In the same way that circumcision was given in the old dispensation to the infant seed of believers, baptism which has come in the place of circumcision ought to be given to the infant seed of believers in the new.

Baptist Reaction

Now the reaction of many present-day baptists to the type of reasoning expounded here is to dismiss it very simply in one sentence as 'Old Testament' teaching. The assumption is that it has no relevance to the New Testament. When confronted by the analogy between circumcision and baptism, they deny that there is any connection whatsoever between the two ordinances; the one, they say, is Old Testament, the other New Testament. Yet they do not dismiss the analogy between the Passover and the Lord's Supper in the same way. Now such a reaction on the part of non-reformed baptists is calculated to earn the scorn of any well-instructed paedobaptist of the reformed tradition, and rightly so! He will point out to baptists who argue in this way that the view of the Old Testament which they espouse is as old as Marcion, the second-century heretic, who, thinking to exalt the superiority of the New, dismissed the Old Testament as Jewish and inferior. But if one writes off the Old Testament in such a fashion, what then becomes of the unity of the Bible? How could the apostle Paul have argued, as he does, that the Abrahamic covenant was not only not disannulled by the Mosaic, but is operative now (Gal. 3:14–29, especially vv. 17 and 29)? How could Peter declare, 'You are heirs of the prophets and of the covenant God made with your fathers. He said to Abraham, "Through your offspring all peoples on earth will be blessed"' (Acts 3:25)? Those who so sharply distinguish between the Old Testament and the New are at a loss, I suggest, to explain these statements and many more which presuppose a basic unity between the two testaments. However, present-day non-reformed baptists and reformed paedobaptists need to become aware of the fact that, historically speaking, there is a powerful stream of baptist apologetic which, while it issues from reformed theology, exposes the weaknesses of the covenantal argument for infant baptism. Thomas Patient in his pamphlet *The Doctrine of Baptism and the Distinction of the Covenants* (1654) was one of the first Particular (calvinistic)

Baptists to attempt a rebuttal of paedobaptism. Patient has been followed by a notable succession of calvinistic baptists who have accepted covenant theology without losing their hold on believers' baptism in any way. The names of John Bunyan, John Gill, Abraham Booth, Alexander Carson and C. H. Spurgeon are representative of a Particular Baptist tradition which is consistent with covenant theology.

If we are to understand the continuing appeal of the case for infant baptism based on covenant theology, we must take note of the following points and reckon seriously with them.

A Non-Sacramentalist View of Infant Baptism

Firstly, *covenant theologians have put forward a non-sacramentalist interpretation of infant baptism*, in contrast to Anglo-Catholicism and Lutheranism. The Reformers answered the medieval Roman Catholic doctrine of '*ex opere operato*', according to which the blessings of regeneration and remission of sin are automatically tied to infant baptism, by asserting the principle '*nullum sacramentum sine fide*', that is, where faith is not to be found there is no sacrament. This principle might, at first sight, appear to concede the case to baptists who have always insisted that faith in Christ as Saviour should precede baptism, but in fact reformed theologians have generally held that faith may either precede, coincide with, or follow baptism. They have emphasised that the above-mentioned principle is not to be understood as requiring that faith must be operative in the recipient prior to baptism; rather, it is urged that the benefits of the sacrament of baptism are appropriated through faith without regard to any necessity that faith should precede baptism.

Baptists have not always understood that the position held by these Reformers was worked out in antithesis to the view of Rome. They have, therefore, failed to appreciate that the Reformers were not labouring to establish the baptist position, that faith should come before baptism, but rather they were endeavouring to express a non-sacramentalist view of the Lord's Supper and baptism. Zwingli, who is one of the key figures in the history of covenant theology (indeed he might be called the father of it), was well aware that his reasoning marked a radical departure from the theology of the medieval Roman Catholic Church. He stated:

In this matter of baptism—if I may be pardoned for saying it—I *can only conclude that all the doctors have been in error from the times of the apostles*. This is a serious and weighty assertion, and I make it with such reluctance that had I not been compelled to do so by contentious spirits [i.e. by the Zurich anabaptists] I would have preferred to keep silence and simply to teach the truth. But it will be seen that the assertion is a true one: for all the doctors have ascribed to the water a power which it does not have and the holy apostles did not teach. They have also misunderstood the saying of Christ about water and the Holy Ghost in John 3. Our present task is to see what baptism really is. *At many points we shall have to tread a different path from that taken by either ancient or more modern writers or by our own contemporaries. We shall be guided not by our own caprice but by the Word of God.*²

Zwingli had to fight, as I have already implied, on two fronts; on the one hand he had to oppose the Roman Catholic view of baptism as necessary to salvation, and on the other hand he wanted to maintain the practice of infant baptism against the attacks and objections of the anabaptists. In short, Zwingli was under the necessity of advancing a case for infant baptism based upon a non-sacramentalist view of the rite, whilst at the same time attempting to provide for it an adequate biblical basis. Since Zwingli's time his arguments have been refined, but the motive has never been changed, namely, the desire for a biblical, non-sacramentalist foundation for infant baptism, which will be in harmony with the evangelicalism of the Reformation.

Now, while it may be true that some reformed theologians have exhibited a tendency to move in the direction of the Roman Catholic doctrine of baptism, it will not do for fervent baptists to assume that the practice of infant baptism inevitably requires a belief in baptismal regeneration. In my opinion Klaas Runia's statement cannot be controverted: 'In Reformed theology there is no place for baptismal regeneration in the proper sense of the word. Fully acknowledging the sacraments as primarily divine acts, it nevertheless rejects any idea of an infusion of grace, i.e. regeneration, by the sacraments themselves. There is no inclusion of grace in the sacraments or amalgamation between the sign and the matter signified, so that the sacraments may be seen as channels of grace.'³

I have spent some time on this point because baptists must appreciate that reformed paedobaptists are not simply being perversely blind in the face of

undeniable evidence in favour of believers' baptism. Unless they do appreciate this, they will not take covenant theology seriously, as the only possible alternative to the baptist position which will comply with the basic evangelicalism of both baptist and reformed traditions. Present-day baptists will do well to heed and indeed ponder Paul Jewett's judgment:

The theological conception sometimes called covenant theology which undergirds the Paedobaptist argument at this point, is too grand, too challenging, too persistent to be ignored with impunity. The dogmatician who slights it despises his own reputation. This is perhaps to concede that the Baptists as a whole have not been outstanding theologians; the stream of their rebuttal has run so thin at this juncture that only the hollow eyes of predisposition could fail to see its inadequacy and judge the counter arguments superior.⁴

The Unity of the Bible

The second reason why the argument for infant baptism based on covenant theology continues to make such a strong appeal is because *it takes seriously the unity of the Bible*. Its starting point is that there is one covenant of grace which has been operative in human history since the Fall, the substance of which is the divine promise made to elect sinners, 'I will be your God and you shall be my people'. From the first disclosure of grace in the *protevangelium* (Gen. 3:15), to the final vision of John the apostle, 'Look! God's dwelling-place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them ... and be their God' (Rev. 21:3), Holy Scripture shows that there is but one covenant of grace throughout all ages. From the unity of the covenant certain conclusions follow:

1. There is one church of God, purchased with the blood of Christ, which embraces the people of God in all ages and in all places.
2. There is one way of salvation, namely, repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the mediator of the eternal covenant.
3. There is one destiny of the saints, Mount Zion, the heavenly city, the new Jerusalem.

A great deal of baptist apologetic, so it seems to me, has failed to come to terms with the indubitable fact that the covenant of grace, although it exhibits

diversity of administration in the time of promise and in the time of fulfilment, is nonetheless one covenant. As we shall see in a subsequent chapter, reformed paedobaptists argue from this fact to a wrong conclusion, namely, that as children were circumcised under the old economy, so they ought to be baptised under the new. Nevertheless their basic contention is correct—the covenant of grace is one in all ages. In my view baptists will never seriously disturb reformed paedobaptists until they see this. The divisive, atomistic approach of so much contemporary baptist apologetic is about as effective at this point as a shot-gun against a Sherman tank.

Theology of Believers' Children

Another reason why the covenant argument for infant baptism continues to be so appealing is that it seeks to *provide a theology of believers' children*—and perhaps, after all, this is its chief appeal. It must be admitted that baptists generally have given little thought to this matter. Whilst I dissent very strongly from some of the conclusions of the report published by the Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland entitled, *The Child and the Church* (1966), I think that the thrust of the following quotation cannot be denied:

Baptists have rejected infant baptism without facing the problems created by the rejection of it. We have upheld believers' baptism, the necessity of conversion and the concept of a regenerate Church without apparently realising that all these great truths do not answer all the questions which confront men in the life of the people of God. Even when members of Paedobaptist communions feel the force and attractiveness of the case for believers' baptism they still feel that Baptists leave unanswered important questions concerning children. We can scarcely deny that this is true. The conversion theology which dominates Baptist doctrines of baptism and of the Church is, in itself, silent about the infant; it looks forward to the time of his response to Christ, but on his present state it does not speak. But what if he does not live to the age of response, what is the status of those who have not had opportunity to believe and who are therefore not dealt with by this conversion theology? For the sake of the denomination as well as its testimony to others, Baptists need to look at such questions.⁵

Although I find myself unable to agree with the answers given in the report, I think its authors are, at least, asking the right questions.

For three main reasons then, the argument for infant baptism which is grounded in covenant theology continues to exercise a very real attraction in reformed circles. Firstly, it provides a non-sacramentalist rationale for the practice of infant baptism. Secondly, it regards with utmost seriousness the unity of the covenant. Thirdly, it seems to provide a theology for believers' children. If the far-reaching challenge of the reformed paedobaptist position is to be met, reformed baptists must do some hard theological thinking. In particular they must consider the following matters. Firstly, they must deal with the relationship between the administration of the covenant of grace under the old economy and under the new. Secondly, they must address themselves to the question of the undoubted analogy between circumcision and baptism and they must inquire as to the exact significance of that analogy. Thirdly, they must give attention to the position of believers' children.

Notes

1. John Murray, *Christian Baptism* (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1972), p. 2.
2. Ulrich Zwingli, *Of Baptism*, in G. W. Bromiley, ed., *Zwingli and Bullinger*, Library of Christian Classics, vol. XXIV (Westminster Press, 1953), p. 130 (emphasis added).
3. 'Baptismal Regeneration', in *The Encyclopedia of Christianity* (National Foundation for Christian Education, 1964), 1:541.
4. 'Baptism (Baptist View)', in *Encyclopedia of Christianity*, 1:524.
5. Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland, *The Child and the Church* (Carey Kingsgate Press, 1966).