

Chapter 16

Infant Baptism--a Trivial Matter?

I the LORD do not change.

-Malachi 3:6-

While one affirms the doctrine of infant baptism, another cries, "Theological trivia!" While one insists that his infants and children be baptized, another smirks. For many, the subject of infant baptism is, in the words of William Shakespeare, "much ado about nothing." To dismiss the matter as unimportant in fact trivializes church history, for we have noted that church history is the friend of infant baptism. Of course, if the Bible itself justifies the cry of "Trivia!!", that's quite another matter. Some have assumed that water baptism *per se* is inconsequential in that Jesus did not directly administer it (John 4:2).

The Incarnation, History, & Redemption

When we acknowledge that Jesus himself did not personally water baptize the infants he blessed, let us not forget that his assignment was to administer the baptism which no other human was qualified to administer—the baptism with the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:33). And John the Baptist, six months into his gestational life was the first recipient of that miraculous baptism putting the church on notice that even life in the womb, properly regarded, is sacred and not to be trivialized (Luke 1:15, 41-44). That Jesus's conception in the womb of Mary was not a trivial matter was underscored for all future generations of the church by this miraculous event. Further, since one of God's holy angels hailed Jesus at his birth as the "Savior who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:11), we dare not trivialize the importance of

Jesus' infancy.

This infant stage of the Incarnation was not something to be passed over or dismissed as irrelevant or unimportant. The virgin birth of Christ is one of the great mysteries and fundamentals of the Christian faith, as confirmed by a certain elderly Simeon (Luke 2:25-35). Do we evangelicals no longer wish to be identified with the "Fundamentalist" cause of the early twentieth-century when the doctrine of the virgin birth of Christ came under attack? Have our seminaries progressed beyond their need to train men to defend this doctrine against the vicious attacks on it? Is the virgin birth now a trivial matter—an issue which we no longer want to press? Was God wasting time in sending his Son into the world in this manner? Was he trivializing history when he divided it into B.C. and A.D.? Or was Irenaeus right when he stated that Christ became an infant and then a child thereby sanctifying infancy and childhood? As John the apostle announced, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). Dare we trivialize the Incarnation? How could Christ's redemption have any relevance for infants and minority children had he not passed through their respective stages of life? The baptism of infants and covenant children serves as an ongoing testimony to the church and the world that human life is sacred, and that what God has given and redeemed should be offered back to him in worship. Neither we, nor our children, are mere toys to be trifled with or wasted on the altar of the pagan world. We are in fact created in the image of our maker and redeemed by our Redeemer at a great price.

To shut the door upon the infants and children of believers therefore, even figuratively by withholding the token of their admission is no trivial matter. It constitutes not only a denial of their sanctity (1 Cor. 7:14), but also, by implication, a denial of the Incarnation. It is, unwittingly, to shut the door on the Savior Himself (Matt. 18:5), or at best to regard Him in *adoptionist* terms. *Adoptionism* was condemned by the early Christian church. Adoptionists taught that Jesus of Nazareth

became the Son of God by adoption at the time of his baptism at the age of thirty, or at His resurrection (Latourette 1953, 143-144). Most of those who refuse baptism to the infant offspring of Christian believers would never think of themselves as Adoptionists. While they may not be explicitly so, they are, by implication at least, tainted by Adoptionism. And that is no trivial matter!

Water Baptism *Per Se*

Jesus' total delegation of the ministry of water baptism to his disciples underscored the uniqueness of his own ministry as the Baptizer in the Holy Spirit. John the Baptist expressed true perspective on his own ministry as the forerunner of the Messiah when he said,

I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire (Matt. 3:11).

While our Lord himself did not directly baptize with water, his disciples administered water baptism under his tutelage, and in time they were baptizing greater numbers than the disciples of John the Baptist (John 4:1-2). Jesus' included the command to baptize as part of the Great Commission of the church in Matthew 28:18-20. The book of Acts makes it clear that water baptism was never ignored or trivialized as unimportant (Acts 2:38-39, 41; 8:12; 10:47-48; 18:8; 22:16).

Did Paul trivialize water baptism in his first letter to the Corinthians when he thanked God that he had not baptized any but a few in Corinth?

Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul? I am thankful that I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius, so no one can say that you were

baptized into my name.(Yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I don't remember if I baptized anyone else.) For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel (1 Cor. 1:13-17a).

The trivialization of baptism at Corinth was not done by the apostle Paul. Rather it was the Corinthians themselves who were trivializing it by playing one baptism officiant over another. One would boast, "I am of Peter"; another, "I am of Paul"; and still another, "I am of Apollos." Perhaps the most arrogant responded, "I am of Christ"--insinuating that they had no need of any mere human leaders at all (1 Cor. 1:12). In saying, "Christ did not send me to baptize," Paul was undercutting the misplaced pride of the Corinthians. The Gospel of the crucified Christ allowed no ground for human boasting.

Paul was not suggesting that water baptism was inconsequential for the Christian church, or that baptism held no valid significance for his own ministry. Rather he was underscoring the Gospel as infinitely greater than the sign which pointed to it.

While the Word can exist and is also complete without the sacrament, the sacrament is never complete without the Word (Berkov 1932, 2:224).

The fact is that the few Corinthians whom Paul did baptize at Corinth included the entire household of Stephanas (1 Cor. 1:14-16) in keeping with his *modus operandi* in other communities both with respect to baptism and the actual preaching of the gospel (Acts 16:14-15, 31-33).

Paul himself received water baptism following his conversion (Acts 9:18), saw to it that new converts received it (Acts 16:15,33;18:8;19:5), and spoke of it's spiritual significance in his letters (Rom. 6:3-7; 1 Cor. 12:13; Gal. 3:27; Eph. 5:26; Col. 2:12; Titus 3:5b). To suggest, therefore, that a study of water baptism (much less, infant baptism) is an exercise in

theological trivia is to ignore the seriousness of those key New Testament figures who insisted upon it.

The question is not "Is water baptism important?", but rather "What does it mean?" The practice that is most biblical, and that most accurately points to the truth of the Gospel, ought to be defended. That practice that most magnifies the grace of God is to be preferred to that which magnifies the will of man (John 1:13; Eph. 2:8-9). That administration of the baptism that focuses on the *righteousness* that comes by faith is to be preferred to that which focuses on faith itself (Rom. 4:11). That application of the covenant sign that is most in keeping with the terms in which the Old Testament prophets, Jesus Christ, and the apostles set forth the gospel promise is to be preferred to that which modern man has devised (Isa. 59:20-21; Mal. 4:6; Luke 18:16; 19:9; Acts 2:39; 16:14-15, 31).

The modern tendency to trivialize discussions of baptism in general, and infant baptism in particular, is part of a general trend in the evangelical community to deinstitutionalize the Christian faith. This trend represents a subtle erosion of the Christian religion that minimizes, to the point of total concession, other aspects of divinely-instituted order as well, such as the Christian sabbath or Lord's Day, male/female roles, and the importance of the historic creeds and confessions (i.e., the church's landmark defenses against heretical attacks on biblical doctrine). In the end it reduces the covenant to a mere "personal relationship" devoid of all covenantal structure, meaning, content, family commitment, historical perspective, and ethical responsibility. The Gospel itself is thereby compromised and the church's voice muted.

God's Immutability

The defense of infant baptism is not an exercise in theological or ecclesiastical trivia--it has to do with the very character of God himself. He is the "God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" (Exod. 3:15); he is also

immutable. This was the inspired testimony of the Psalmist:

But you remain the same,
and your years will never end (Ps. 102:27).

God does not change--he is eternally the same. In the very next verse, however, the Psalmist affirmed the work of God's grace in the lives of the children of believers:

The children of your servants will live
in your presence;
their descendants will be established
before you (Ps. 102:28).

If logic means anything, we cannot deny God's covenant with the children of believers, affirmed in verse 28, unless we are, at the same time, willing to deny God's immutability, affirmed in verse 27! The Psalmist has inseparably linked these two affirmations so that to affirm the one is to affirm the other, or to deny the one is to deny the other. The two affirmations either stand together or fall together.

The prophecy of Malachi has established the same connection. The God who announced in Malachi 3:6, "I the LORD do not change" had just announced in Malachi 2:16, "I hate divorce." Why?

. . . the LORD is acting as the witness between you and the wife of your youth, because you have broken faith with her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant.

Has not the LORD made them one? In flesh and spirit they are his. And why one? *Because he was seeking godly offspring.* So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith with the wife of your youth (Mal. 2:14-15 emphasis mine).

The God who affirms his own immutability desires "godly offspring," but that offspring is destroyed when husband and wife call it quits. The sanctity of the marriage covenant is

foundational for the production of what the immutable God seeks, namely “godly offspring.” God’s immutability and the family covenant are inseparable. In the New Testament Christ and the apostles expressed the same holy disdain for divorce and the unequal yoke represented by believers marrying unbelievers (Mark 10:5-9; 2 Cor. 6:14). God is still seeking godly offspring. The marriage covenant is interlaced with the covenant of grace whereby the living God embraces the infant offspring.

To suggest, therefore, that since the coming of the New Testament God’s covenant no longer relates to the children of believers is to suppose a change in the nature of the God who does not change (Mal. 3:6; James 1:17; Heb. 13:8). Not only is this idea without New Testament support, it is flatly contradicted by the teaching of the Savior himself who said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom belongs to such as these” (Luke 18:16).

Jesus’ reception and blessing of infants demonstrated that the character of God has not changed in this regard. He who is “the image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15) shares God’s immutability (Heb. 13:8); and his blessing the infants underscores his own view of the covenant.

Infant baptism accentuates God’s covenant as it applies to households. The neglect or omission of infant baptism as the covenant sign demonstrates either ignorance or disdain for the covenant itself and disparages God’s immutability in the same neglectful process. That is no trivial matter!

The New Covenant Itself

Some may allege from the testimony of Jeremiah that, though God himself has not changed, his *modus operandi* has undergone a change as result of the institution of the new covenant, for as a kind of preface to the prophecy of the new covenant Jeremiah stated,

In those days people will no longer say,
“The fathers have eaten sour grapes,

and the children's teeth are set on edge."

Instead, everyone will die for his own sin;
whoever eats sour grapes--his own teeth
will be set on edge (Jer. 31:29-30).

Does this represent a repudiation of the household covenant concept of Genesis 17:7? A closer look will show that this is definitely not the case. This statement, taken in context, simply means that under the new covenant God's people will no longer be able to use the intergenerational principle of Exodus 20:5 to excuse their covenant unfaithfulness by blaming their deficient parents, as they had been doing under the old covenant. Under the new covenant the law would be written upon their hearts, the knowledge of God would be extended to all--"*from the least of them to the greatest,*" and sins would be cancelled through the atonement of Christ (Jer. 31:31-34; Heb. 10:18). This hardly constitutes an argument for the dissolution of the household covenant--rather it represents the fulfillment of it!

The "sour grapes" argument was eliminated by the new covenant, but the privilege and promise associated with the covenant of grace, as per Genesis 17:7, were not eliminated. The very words, "from the least of them to the greatest," certainly included the children in keeping with Genesis 17:7 and with Jesus' special regard for them in Mark 9:35-37:

Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all."

He took a little child and had him stand among them. Taking him in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcome me does not welcome me but the one who sent me" (Mark 9:35-37).

Should not Christian believers, therefore, honor God's character and welcome, first of all the children themselves, and then the opportunity to apply the new covenant sign to their

children as heirs of the promised blessing? "God's gifts and his call are irrevocable" (Rom. 11:29)--even with respect to the covenant embracing the believer's offspring. By refusing to apply the baptismal seal of the covenant to the infants and children, we are trivializing the new covenant itself as though its provision for "the least of these" were unimportant.

Christian parents should trust God's promise and be encouraged to appropriate his covenant provision concerning the spiritual needs of their children, especially since the Savior himself gave such a gracious welcome to those "babies" being brought to him, spoke such wonderful promises concerning them, and imparted such wonderful blessing to them (Luke 18:15-16)? The same Savior also warned,

See that you do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven (Matt. 18:10).

If we neglect the seal of the covenant as it applies to the infant sons and daughters, we trifle with the words of the Savior himself.

The "Once-for-All" Sacrifice

One Baptism

One unsettling and offensive manner in which the unity of the body of Christ has been trivialized is the imposition of a requirement for rebaptism of those baptized as covenant children after they have made a profession of faith in Christ. Generally this occurs after the person has moved to a new area and is about to transfer membership to another congregation.

The Apostle Paul urged Christians to "keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3) on the basis of the seven-fold unity expressed in the following passage:

There is one body and one Spirit--just as you were called to one hope when you were called--one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all (Eph. 4:4-6).

On biblical grounds, the Reformers resisted the anabaptistic urge to rebaptize.

Therefore, as there is but one God, one faith, one Christ, and one church, his body; so baptism is but one [Eph. 4:4-6], and is not a thing oft-repeated (Calvin 1960, 2:1446).

Accordingly, the *Westminster Confession* affirmed that "the sacrament of Baptism is but once to be administered unto any person" (WCF 1946, XXVIII, vii).

New Testament baptism represents a once-for-all event in the life of a Christian. Since baptism is an initiatory event signifying one's introduction by the Spirit into the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13), and marking one's identification with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection (Rom. 6:3-10), to re-administer the sign would contradict the once-for-all nature of what is being symbolized. There is a marked finality about New Testament baptism as the Christian's identification with the finished work of Christ. Such a finality became the basis for a believer's sanctification; hence, believers are commanded to reckon themselves likewise to have died "once for all."

... The death he died, he died to sin once for all...

In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin....(Rom. 6:10a, 11a).

These words notably issue from the passage on which Baptists have hung their immersion-only hats, however unjustifiably (Fairfield n. d.; Mackay n. d.). Water baptism, in the context of Romans 6:1-11, was a once-for-all event in the life of each Christian in keeping with the unique "once-for-all"

substitutionary death of Christ which it symbolizes (Heb. 9:12, 26; 10:14). For the Reformers, this was no trivial matter! Consequently, they opposed the anabaptist movement much as they opposed the repeated sacrifice concept represented by the Roman Catholic mass.

F. F. Bruce noted only a single reference to a rebaptism in the entire New Testament. Twelve disciples at Ephesus had only experienced a water baptism centered in the person and ministry of John the Baptist. Paul's intention, in their case, was to re-orient their baptism into the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ introducing them to the New Testament ministry of the Holy Spirit (Acts 19:1-7; Bruce 1954, 386).

Matthew Henry suggested that the first water baptism of the atypical twelve in Acts 19:5 may simply be viewed as a deficient version of John's baptism. Their baptism, accordingly, would have been performed by some of John's disciples, such as are mentioned in John 3:26, who were jealous of Jesus' increasing popularity (Henry 1706, Acts 19:1-7). Such a deficient baptism would certainly have lacked the focus upon the Messiah that had characterized John's ministry as the Messiah's forerunner. It did not, therefore, qualify as Christian baptism anymore than if the subjects had been baptized into the name of the Apostle Paul (1 Cor. 1:13; Henry 1706, Acts 19:1-7).

John the Baptist himself disclaimed any intentions of forming a religious cult centered around his own personality or ministry. Rather John called men to "behold the Lamb of God" (John 1:36). As for being personally threatened by Jesus' growing following, John could only say,

A man can only receive what is given him from heaven. You yourselves can testify that I said, "I am not the Christ but am sent ahead of him." The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is now mine, and it is now complete. He must become greater; I must become less (John 3:27-30).

Zwingli argued that Paul was using the term "baptism" in Acts 19:3 for "teaching," as Christ did in Matthew 21:25 when he asked the Jews, "The baptism of John, was it from men or from God?"

Here it is manifest that Christ is not speaking of the baptism of water, for that is decidedly of earth, whereas the teaching had come down from heaven (Zwingli [1929] 1981, 194-5).

Those twelve irregular disciples, therefore,

. . . having believed up to this time that they held the teaching of John correctly, ...found, as Paul recited its essentials, that they were still far from the completed teaching. They are baptized, therefore, that is, led by Paul into Christ (Zwingli [1929] 1981, 196).

John's *water* baptism, as Zwingli understood it, did not have to be repeated. As an outward sign, it qualified as Christian baptism--anticipatory and introductory as it was.

Since, therefore, we nowhere see that the disciples were baptized by Christ (for He baptized not), and at the same time see that His disciples baptized, it is not likely that they baptized others, but had never been baptized themselves. Since, then, they were baptized, they were baptized with no baptism but the baptism of John; for Christ baptized not. Since, therefore, Christ received the baptism of John and made no change in it either in his own case or that of the Apostles, it is clearly established that baptism had its beginning under John, and that there was no difference between the baptism of John and that of Christ, as far as the nature, effect, and purpose are concerned. . . . Since . . . He wished by means of the baptism of John to commend baptism to us and made no change in it, it is apparent that the baptism of John and that of Christ are the same baptism (Zwingli [1929] 1981, 192).

Following Zwingli's thinking, those truly baptized by

John would not have come up short. For he did not leave them ignorant of the one who would baptize in the Holy Spirit whose shoe latchet John was not worthy to loosen (John 1:27,33-34; Acts 19:2). John prepared the way for the Lord Jesus whose identification with sinners was made all the more complete in his baptism (Isa. 53:12b; Matt. 3:15). In Jesus' baptism, baptism's triune significance (Matt. 28:18-20) was established as well, as the Father spoke words of affirmation in an audible voice, and the Holy Spirit descended upon the Son in the form of a dove (Matt. 3:16-17).

If Zwingli was right, the *rebaptism* in Acts 19:5 posed no challenge to the "one baptism" concept of Ephesians 4:5; nor did it violate the symbolism of the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ (Rom. 6:10). For in that case, the rebaptism simply consisted of further instruction concerning the full meaning of John's baptism.

John Murray took exception to the position espoused by Zwingli. Murray insisted that the baptism of John may no more be identified with the ordinance instituted by Christ than may the ministry and mission of John with that of Christ (1980, 2). Oscar Cullman agreed with Murray. Citing such passages as Mark 1:8, John 7:39, and John 16:7, Cullman argued that Christian baptism became possible only from the point when the salvation events were completed. "Christian baptism is in fact practiced only after Pentecost."

That this is the hour of the birth of Church Baptism is congruous with the temporal course of salvation history: The atoning work of Christ is completed here. The temporal center of all history, the death and resurrection of Christ, is also the center of Baptism. But Pentecost represents the decisive turning point. . . . The Church is here constituted as the locus of the Holy Spirit, as the Body of Christ crucified and risen [mystically speaking, presumably]. Thus the baptismal death of Christ completed once for all on the cross passes over into Church Baptism (Cullman 1950, 22).

From the perspective of John Murray and Oscar Cullman, even John's baptism properly administered was deficient when compared with the Christian baptism that was administered from Pentecost on. Yet to acknowledge its deficiency is not necessarily to require the re-administration of water, but may simply express the imperative of receiving the Holy Spirit in the full New Testament sense. In that case the baptism of the atypical twelve at Ephesus "into the name of the Lord Jesus," as Calvin suggested, represented the completion of Christian baptism in its most essential element--the coming of the Holy Spirit much as he had come upon the 120 disciples gathered in the upper room on the day of Pentecost. Calvin argued that Paul did not rebaptize the twelve disciples of John at Ephesus with water but that Luke's words--"they were baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus"--were simply descriptive of the spiritual blessing that followed, when Paul laid his hands upon them (Acts 19:5-6; Calvin 1960, 2:1318).

However the baptism of the atypical twelve of Acts 19:5 be understood, therefore, it did not violate the "one baptism" affirmation of Ephesians 4:5. And infant baptism, administered to the children of Christian believers in the name of the triune God, should not on pretext of Acts 19:5 give rise to rebaptism by anyone purporting to stand in the apostolic tradition.

As Calvin noted, to argue rebaptism of infants on the basis of Acts 19:5, or any other passage for that matter, is rendered absurd inasmuch as circumcision was the sacramental prototype.

. . . when the Lord invites the Jewish people to repentance, he enjoins no second circumcision upon those who . . . were circumcised by an impious and sacrilegious hand and lived for a time entangled in the same impiety; but he urges only conversion of heart (Calvin 1960, 1317).

Those who had been circumcised as infants Jeremiah simply exhorted, "Circumcise yourselves to the LORD, circumcise your hearts" (Jer. 4:4).

Tertullian, who recommended delaying baptism until the

child was old enough to request it, could not be considered an Anabaptist in any sense. He stated,

We enter, then the font *once*: *once* are sins washed away, because they ought never to be repeated. But the Jewish Israel bathes daily, because he is daily defiled: and, for fear that *defilement* should be practiced among *us* also, therefore was the definition touching the one bathing made. Happy water, which *once* washes away; which does not mock sinners (with vain hopes); which does not, by being infected with the repetition of impurities again defile them whom it has washed (Roberts & Donaldson 1885, 3:376)!

If infant baptism represents biblical obedience on the part of believing parents, that is, if the promises of the covenant of grace pertaining to the believers' offspring are sealed by the sign of baptism, then to repeat the sign is to trivialize the unity of the church and especially the “once-for-all” atoning sacrifice of Christ.

Peter's Anabaptistic Urge

Peter's request in John 13:9--"Lord, not just my feet but my hands and head as well"--appears to have represented an overly zealous request for rebaptism when Christ had only wanted to wash his feet (Henry 1706, John 13:9-10). The Lord's answer to Peter is most informative to those driven by the anabaptistic urge.

A person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet; his whole body is clean (John 13:10).

Certainly baptism is regarded as a "washing" in the New Testament [Acts 22:16; Heb. 10:22].

Leon Morris, commenting on John 13:10, stated,

...Jesus applies this to the spiritual situation of his followers, "He that is bathed" points to a permanent character: he is not simply one who once upon a time was washed, but one who continues in the character of "the washed one."

In a note Morris added,

Such appears to be the force of the perfect *holoumenos*. The verb properly applies to the bathing of the whole body as against *vipsasthae*, which is rather the washing of a part (1971, 618).

The force of Morris's above comments seems to support the once-for-all nature of baptism. Surprisingly, however, Morris suggests that to identify this bathing with baptism is to read into the narrative what is not really there--noting further that "we have no evidence for thinking the apostles were baptized (unless with John's baptism)" (Morris 1971, 618-19). Tertullian, on the other hand, understood John 13:9-10 to be a clear reference to baptism and the "once-for-all" nature of it (Roberts & Donaldson 1885, 3:675)

Morris was hesitant to affirm what was apparent both to Tertullian and to Zurich Reformer, Zwingli, viz., that Peter and the other disciples were baptized by John. Otherwise, he would not have dismissed what has appeared to others an obvious reference to baptism in John 13:10.

Matthew Henry wrote,

...Peter had gone from one extreme to the other. At first he would not let Christ wash his feet; and now he overlooks what Christ had done for him in baptism, and what was signified thereby, and cries out to have his hands and head washed (Henry 1706, John 13:10).

With the best of intentions (like Peter on this occasion), Anabaptists, sow seeds of confusion concerning the meaning of baptism. Ironically, in their urge to purge baptism of its perceived Roman trappings by rebaptizing infants, Anabaptists

do something analogous to the Roman Catholic repetition of Christ's once-for-all sacrifice in its doctrine of transubstantiation. In both cases the once-for-all character of the central Gospel event, the death of Christ is trivialized (Heb. 10:18-22).

Someone will ask, however, "Does not Hebrews 6:2 speak of 'instruction about baptisms,' so as to contradict the 'one baptism' idea?" This verse must be understood within the context of Jewish ceremonial law of which the Hebrews epistle has much to say. The Greek word *baptismos* rendered "baptisms" (genitive plural) in the New International Version is rendered "ablutions" in the Revised Standard Version, and "cleansing rites" in the New English Bible. In its two other New Testament occurrences it refers to Jewish ceremonial washings (Heb. 9:10; Mark 7:14). The word normally employed by the New Testament writers for baptism is *baptisma*. In the Hebrews 9:13-28 passage, the ceremonial purification of Numbers 19 and the cleansing associated with the giving of the law (Exod. 24:1-8) are treated as the temporary foreshadowing of the "once for all" spiritual cleansing of Christ's atonement (Bruce 1964, 114-15).

Various legalistic groups flourished during the early New Testament era, among them the Qumran community (or Essenes) associated with the Dead Sea Scrolls. Such groups clung tenaciously to Old Testament ceremonial ablutions; and it would have been very fitting for new Jewish converts to Christ to receive instruction concerning ceremonial washings.

Beasley-Murray realized that Hebrews 6:2 was not a pretext for grinding the anabaptist axe, but noted that the Greek word employed was not the usual term for New Testament baptism. The writer intended to contrast Christian baptism and the other religious washings familiar to the Jews (1963, 243).

The new covenant fulfillment of these ceremonial washings was certainly thematic for the author of Hebrews.

After he [Christ] had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven (Heb. 1:3b).

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great high priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water (Heb. 10:19-22).

...You have come ...to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel (Heb. 12:23b-24).

Concerning the Hebrews 10 passage, Beasley-Murray noted that a contrast was being made between an internal and external cleansing, the one through the atoning blood of Christ, the other through baptism (1963, 248). The "once for all" sacrifice of Jesus Christ (Heb. 10:10) rendered efficacious the "one baptism" of Ephesians 4:5 as a seal of the new covenant. It fulfilled, and rendered obsolete, the multitude of Jewish "baptisms" of Hebrews 6:2. Thus, it is quite evident that Hebrews 6:2 cannot be used as a proof text (or a pretext) for the anabaptistic urge to supplant one New Testament baptism by another. In this context, it should be further noted that children and infants were included in the covenant at Mount Sinai, according to Hebrews 9:19 as Moses sprinkled the blood on *all* the people.

If Tertullian represents an historic witness to the "one baptism" concept, so does Augustine. Donatists questioned the validity of baptism administered by an unfaithful man or received by the unfaithful. Augustine offered the following:

... since it is possible that Christ's sacrament may be holy, even among those on the devil's side...and even if they are such in heart when they received the sacrament...the sacrament is not to be re-administered...; to my mind it is abundantly clear that in the matter of baptism we have to consider not who it is who gives it, but what it is that he gives; not who

he is that receives, but what it is that he receives....
18....wherefore, any one who is on the devil's side cannot defile the sacrament, which is of Christ....When baptism is administered in the words of the gospel, however great be the perverseness of either minister or recipient, the sacrament itself is holy on his account whose sacrament it is. In the case of one who receives baptism from a misguided man, if he receive not the perverseness of the minister but the holiness of the mystery, being united to the Church in good faith and hope and charity, he receives the remission of his sins....But if the recipient be himself misguided, then that which is administered does not avail for his salvation while he remains in his error; on the other hand, that which he receives remains holy in the recipient, and is not renewed to him if he be brought in to the right way (Bettensen, 1963, 110-111).

The one who opens the anabaptistic door opens Pandora's box. For there will always be another genie to point to someone else's baptism as being invalid, because there remains some measure of doubt as to the sincerity of the person's faith prior to baptism. This is not to mention the plethora of baptism modes which will then suggest to the believer that maybe his baptism is not yet fully in tact. (Does he now need to be thrice immersed to satisfy the triune symbolism of the baptism command—and which way, backward or forward?)

The Anabaptists have undoubtedly experienced a great deal of persecution throughout their history. It should be said in their defense that they have served to challenge those who, by ecclesiastical superstition or their own spiritual neglect, would themselves trivialize the practice of infant baptism. Early in the nineteenth century, New England pastor, Samuel Hopkins, noted,

There is reason to believe that most, if not all, who believe in the baptism of children, and practice it, are more guilty and offensive to Christ, in their treatment of this institution, than the Anabaptists are (1811,

2:340).

Hopkins urged "great candor, tenderness, and Christian charity" in dealing with Anabaptists.

The error and sin of the Antpedobaptists consists in their not believing infant baptism to be an institution of Christ, and therefore rejecting it, as a mere human invention. Theirs is a sin of ignorance. Their ignorance and unbelief are criminal; but who are the greatest criminals in their treatment of this institution, it is easy to determine (Hopkins 1811, 2:341).

Those who practice infant baptism as a matter of scriptural conviction must surely stand with the Baptists in insisting on a credible profession of faith prior to baptizing adults, and must require the same visible evidence of faith in those would present their children for baptism.

As for the rebaptism of heretics, the Anabaptists have the support of the Eastern church (Bettensen 1963, 111, note). The unsettling and divisive character of the anabaptistic insistence upon rebaptizing covenant children, however, needs to be checked by a more complete understanding of God's covenant of grace which extends to "children's children" (Ps. 103:17).

A more positive and biblical approach to those baptized as infants but who have not yet publicly professed faith in Christ would be to teach them concerning their spiritual birthright and the promise of the blessing (Gal. 3:14), to warn them not to miss out on God's grace (Heb. 12:15-17), to model the faith before them, and to be ready for the question you have been waiting to hear (Exod. 12:26-27; Deut. 6:20-21; Acts 16:30)!

Cullman reminded his readers that according to Romans 6 and 1 Corinthians 10 faith is demanded as much after baptism as it is before (1950, 55). The faith of covenant children, therefore, ought to be encouraged rather than their infant baptism put down. The need to call upon the God of their fathers as Jacob did, and to openly confess their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, must be impressed upon them (Gen. 31:42; 2 Tim. 1:5;

Matt. 10:32-33). The evangelizing of covenant children is remarkably illustrated by a letter written by Jonathan Edwards to his nine-year-old son, Jonathan, Jr., who had accompanied Gideon Hawley on a 200 mile trip from Stockbridge, Massachusetts to the Susquehanna River to spend a year learning the Mohawk language. Jonathan, Jr., as was the case with all the Edwards children, had been baptized as an infant.

Stockbridge, May 27, 1755

Dear Child:

Though you are a great way off from us, yet you are not out of our minds: I am full of concern for you, often think of you, and often pray for you. Though you are at so great distance from us, and from all your relations, yet this is a comfort to us, that the same God that is here is also at Onohoquaha and that though you are out of our sight, and out of reach, you are always in God's hands, who is infinitely gracious; and we can go to Him, and commit you to his care and mercy. Take heed that you don't forget or neglect Him. Always set God before your eyes, and live in his fear, and seek him every day with all diligence: for He, and He only can make you happy or miserable, as He pleases; and your Life and Health, and the eternal salvation of your soul and your all in this life and that which is to come depends on his will and pleasure. The week before last, on Thursday, David died: whom you knew and used to play with, and who used to live at our house. His soul is gone into the eternal world. Whether he was prepared for death, we don't know. This is a loud call of God to you to prepare you for death. You see that they that are young die, as well as those that are old; David was not very much older than you. Remember what Christ said, that you must be born again, or you can never see the Kingdom of God. Never give yourself any rest unless you have good evidence that you are converted and become a new creature. We hope that God will preserve your live and health, and return you to Stockbridge again in safety; but always

remember that life is uncertain; you know not how soon you must die, and therefore had need to be always ready. We have very lately heard from your brothers and sisters at Northampton and at Newark, that they are well. Your aged grandfather and grandmother, when I was at Windsor gave their love to you. We here all do the same.

I am,
your tender and affectionate father,
Jonathan Edwards (Murray 1987, 394-395).

Jonathan Edwards knew that in the final analysis, only one *seal* would matter:

God's solid foundation stands firm, sealed with this inscription: "The Lord knows those who are his," and, "Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness" (2 Tim. 2:19).

Nothing short of a genuine conversion of heart could answer to the covenant obligation assumed by Jonathan and Sarah Edwards on their son's behalf at the time of his baptism as an infant. Yet Edwards's approach better served the church of Christ, and proved more fruitful, than if he had denied the validity of his son's baptism as an infant--in effect repudiating an important element of the covenant of grace. Indeed Jonathan, Jr., went on to become a strong minister of the Gospel and a true servant of Christ and his church.

Evangelizing baptized children from a covenant perspective keeps intact the unity of the covenant without introducing the confusion which would otherwise occur by insistence upon a repetition of the covenant sign of baptism. It honors God as the "jealous God punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate" him, "but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love" him and keep his commandments (Exod. 20:5-6).

To insist upon a rebaptism because the original infant baptism did not follow the child's faith and repentance is to misapply the command to baptize. Not only does it disregard an

essential element of God's covenant of grace pertaining to the believer's household, but it destroys the symbolic aspect of baptism which is designed to set forth the once-for-all nature of Christ's death. This explains why the New England Congregationalists, valuing God's covenant of grace as they did, insisted upon the resignation of Henry Dunster, Harvard's second president, when it was discovered in 1654 that he had adopted "Baptist views" (Ahlstrom 1972, 149). For those whose hearts were set on a holy commonwealth, this was no trivial matter. Puritan political aspirations, however, in time would have to give way to the secular realities connected with the new republic. Baptist denial of the covenant of grace would have far-reaching implications for the church and family. Madison's and Jefferson's political favors for the Baptists, however well-intentioned and liberating from a political standpoint, would ultimately undermine the church and family.

If one chooses to apply the anabaptistic principle, let him at least be consistent about it. This is no small matter, however; because in order for the anabaptistic principle to be applied consistently, it must be validated retrospectively. Abraham received the sign of circumcision as a "seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised" (Rom. 4:11). This was *believers circumcision*--the sign followed Abraham's justification by faith. The operating theological principal of the Anabaptists would have refused the application of such a sign to infants. And yet, God commanded that circumcision be administered to the infant males of the believer's household.

The anabaptistic principle, applied retrospectively in terms of circumcision, turns against itself, being opposed to God's institution that the New Testament itself validates (Rom. 3:1-4). By the theological test of Scripture it is shown to be self-contradictory; and being divided against itself, it cannot stand.

The Ancient Landmark

418