

CHAPTER 7

THE ATONEMENT AND INFANTILE FAITH

From birth I was cast upon you;
from my mother's womb you have
been my God. -Psalm 71:6-

He shall see the fruit of the
travail of his soul and shall be satisfied.
-Isaiah 53:11-

Limited Atonement?

In his atoning death Christ's three-fold office came to its grand focus and fulfillment. Here, as Prophet, he preached peace (Eph. 2:17); as Priest, he offered the supreme Sacrifice of himself (Heb. 9:12-15); and, as King, he cast out the usurper to the throne (John 12:31). While Alexander Carson denied that infants are saved by the Gospel and that they are capable of faith and repentance, he conceded that infants who die in their minority years are saved by the atonement of Christ.

Infants are saved by the death of Christ,
but not by the Gospel--not by faith. . . . We know
nothing of the means by which God receives
infants; nor have we any business with it ([1853]
1981, 173).

Carson argued that Abraham's children dying in infancy "were saved, as all saved infants were saved from the beginning of the world, and will be to the end of the world, through *the bruising of the heel* of the seed of the woman" ([1853] 1981, 217). One's view of the atonement of Christ has a great bearing on his view of infant baptism, and particularly whether he allows, or repudiates, the notion of infantile faith. Carson, however, failed to see the relationship of Christ's atonement to infantile faith.

During the week of his Passion, Jesus spoke of his death in the following terms: "But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself" (John 12:32). The apostle John, writing under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, wished to make certain that the church did not mistake the meaning of Jesus' words and explained, "He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die" (John 12:33). In the cross Jesus drew "all men" to himself. His death did not merely make salvation a *possibility* for "all men" (an Arminian notion), but actually made it an *reality* for "all men." It actually saved "all men." His once-for-all death actually brought people to God (1 Pet. 3:18).

The expression "all men" of John 12:33, however, does admit of a limitation—otherwise we should all become unbiblical Universalists! The "all men" must certainly correspond to the "all men" and the "many" who, through the obedience of the Second Adam receive "life" and are "made righteous" according to Romans 5:18 & 19. This group is not co-extensive with the "all men" and the "many" who receive "condemnation" and are made "sinners" through the disobedience of the first Adam as described in the first part of these verses. Obviously, the "all men" are the elect--that "great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language" described in Revelation 7:9. To acknowledge this is to acknowledge one of the most challenging points of doctrine—Dort's third point commonly known as "Limited Atonement," or as some prefer, "Particular Redemption."

The eminent nineteenth-century English Baptist pastor, Charles Spurgeon, had this to say about the doctrine of *Limited Atonement*.

We are often told that we limit the atonement of Christ, because we say that Christ has not made a satisfaction for all men, or all men would be saved. Now, our reply to this is, that, on the other hand, our opponents limit it: we do not. The Arminians say, Christ died for all men. Ask them what they mean by it. Did Christ die so as to secure the salvation of all men? They say, "No, certainly not," We ask them

the next question--Did Christ die so as to secure the salvation of any man in particular? They answer "No." They are obliged to admit this, if they are consistent. They say, "No. Christ has died that any man may be saved if"--and then follow certain conditions of salvation. Now, who is it that limits the death of Christ? Why, you. You say that Christ did not die so as infallibly to secure the salvation of anybody. We beg your pardon, when you say we limit Christ's death; we say, "No, my dear sir, it is you that do it." We say Christ so died that he infallibly secured the salvation of a multitude that no man can number, who though Christ's death not only may be saved, but are saved and cannot by any possibility run the hazard of being anything but saved. You are welcome to your atonement; you may keep it. We will never renounce ours for the sake of it (Steele & Thomas 1963, 40 Note).

The doctrine of *limited atonement* affirmed at the historic Synod of Dort is understandably offensive to sensitive theological ears. On the surface it seems flagrantly to contradict a verse such as 1 John 2:2: "He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world." For that reason many have preferred the term *particular redemption*, among them the beloved John Bunyan, while others have dismissed the doctrine altogether as contrary to Scripture (Williams 1988-, 1:369). In its design, or with respect to its *efficacy*, Christ's atoning death was *limited*. As for its *sufficiency*, the Atonement was unlimited. "God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ" (2 Cor. 5:19). It is *sufficient* for all but *efficient* for some! Jonathan Edwards wrote,

However Christ in some sense may be said to *die for all*, and to redeem all visible Christians, yea, the whole world, by his death; yet there must be something *particular* in the design of his death, with respect to such as he intended should actually be saved thereby. As appears by what has been shown,

God has the actual salvation or redemption of a certain number only; and therefore such a design only can be prosecuted in any thing God does, in order to the salvation of men (Edwards 1879, 1:88).

Those who reject the doctrine of limited atonement, or particular redemption, fail to appreciate the connection between God's eternal purposes of election and his saving act in the cross of Christ.

According to this doctrine, Christ's death is pictured as a narrow bridge that goes all the way across the chasm to those it rescues, rather than a wide bridge that only goes half-way across (Steele & Thomas 1963, 39-40). It also means that Christ's death reached all the way to infants in the womb, for infants are part of the *ekklesia* for whom Christ died (Ps. 22:9-10; Luke 1:15; Joel 2:15-16; Eph. 5:25). And it did so in a retroactive manner in space and time--that is, even Old Testament infants were the subjects of its efficacy. This should not surprise us, for just as the Son of God transcends space and time, so does his work. He is designated "the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world" (Rev. 13:8). And the Old Testament prophecies which concerned that work were written as though that work were already accomplished (Isaiah 53:3-12). And the Levitical sacrifices which imaged that work were prescribed by the God who knew before the world was created what that work should be. Edwards had that eternal covenant of redemption in mind when he wrote the following statement:

There was a transaction between the Father and the Son, that was antecedent to Christ's becoming man, and being made under the law, wherein he undertook to put himself under the law, and both to obey and suffer; in which transaction these things were virtually done in the sight of God; as is evident by this, that God acted on the ground of that transaction, justifying and saving sinners, as if the things undertaken had been actually performed long before they were performed indeed (Edwards, 1879, 1:637).

A thousand years before the Atonement occurred in history,
David declared

Yet you brought me out of the womb;
you made me trust in you
even at my mother's breast.
From birth I was cast upon you;
from my mother's womb you have been my God
(Ps. 22:9-10).

The apostle Paul, though converted to Christ in his adult years after the Crucifixion, was keenly aware that the cross's foreshadow had fallen upon his life even as an infant; for he described his conversion as the time

when God, who set me apart from birth [lit. *from my mother's womb*] and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me . . . (Gal. 1:15).

When Christ said, "I lay down my life for the sheep" (John 10:15), he was excluding the "goats" (Matt. 25:33, 41). The reason some did not believe, Jesus said, was because they were not his sheep (John 10:26). The Atonement was not efficacious so as to generate faith in those who had not been chosen by the Father (John 6:44). While the "goats" were excluded, however, the lambs were embraced by the efficacious influence of Christ's atoning death. The Good Shepherd who lays down his life does not overlook the lambs.

He tends his flock like a shepherd:
He gathers the lambs in his arms
and carries them close to his heart;
he gently leads those that have young (Isa. 40:11).

Indeed, the "lambs" were among those he *drew to himself* when he was "lifted up."

By conceding that infants who die in their minority are

saved through the atonement of Christ, Alexander Carson proved too much. If Christ's atonement can reach infants who die in their minority so that they are saved from the terrors of hell for all eternity, why can it not preserve them through earthly adversities beyond the minority years? This was certainly the case with David and with John the Baptist. The faith born of Christ's Atonement is a persevering faith:

God, in the act of justification, which is passed on a sinner's first believing, has respect to perseverance, as being virtually contained in the first act of faith; and is looked upon, and taken by him that justifies, as being as it were a property in that faith. God has respect to the believer's continuance in faith, and he is justified by that, as though it already were, because by divine establishment it shall follow; and it being by divine constitution connected with that first faith, as much as if it were a property in it, it is then considered as such, and so justification is not suspended; but were it not for this, it would be needful that it should be suspended, till the sinner had actually persevered in faith (Edwards 1879, 1:641).

The New Testament describes Christ our High Priest as one who "is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them" (Heb. 7:25). This is true even if the means of their *coming* is in the arms of their parents (Isa. 49:22; Luke 18:15-16).

When Carson said that infants could be saved by the atonement of Christ but not by the Gospel, he was separating what Scripture unites. For on the cross Christ preached the Gospel (Eph.2:17), and in the proclamation of the Gospel, Jesus Christ is "clearly portrayed as crucified" (Gal 3:1). Carson further failed to see the connection between the efficacy of Christ's atonement and *faith*.

John Wesley held to a view of *general Atonement* whereby all infants were justified from Adam's sin; yet in his *Treatise on Baptism* he posited a baptismal justification that washed away the guilt of original sin.

In baptism, he, who is by birth a pardoned "child of wrath," becomes actually the pardoned and regenerate "child of God" (Naglee 1987, 129).

Naglee tried to resolve this by saying that baptismal justification, unlike the justification at birth, did not end with the commission of the first actual sin. Whereas Wesley's general Atonement concept appeared to share the advantage of the Calvinistic limited atonement, or particular redemption, in that it reached all the way across the chasm to the infant conceived in sin (Ps. 58:3), its efficacy was short-lived and apparently had to rely on the sacrament of baptism for its survival. This represented an extremely weak view of the Atonement, an unrealistically exalted view of the sacrament, and a duplicity with respect to justification.

Antipaedobaptistic Unbelief

J. Rodman Williams acknowledged that Jesus was circumcised as a "Jewish boy", but argued that Jesus' baptism as a 30-year-old indicated that baptism belonged to "an age of responsible decision" (1988-, 3:233 note 58).

Those who deny infant baptism frequently acknowledge the baptism of entire households in the New Testament, but insist that such households consisted entirely of believers, or that only believing members were baptized. Such was the argument of Alexander Carson. Commenting on Jesus' words to Zacchaeus, "Today has salvation come to this house," Carson wrote,

I am quite willing to admit, I am joyful in believing, that when the Gospel comes to a house, it generally spreads. But this is no foundation for baptizing an unbelieving family. . . ([1853] 1981, 197).

Carson maintained,

It is into the faith and subjection of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, that men are baptized. Surely none can be baptized into the faith and subjection of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, but adults. Infants cannot believe, nor express subjection (Carson [1853] 1981, 173).

Using Mark 16:16 as his foundational premise, Carson argued that Gospel salvation was solely by adult faith, and Gospel ordinances were only to be administered on the basis of adult faith.

The Gospel saves not but by faith. But the Gospel has nothing to do with infants, nor have the Gospel ordinances any respect to them. The Gospel has to do with those who hear it. It is good news; but to infants, it is not news at all. They know nothing of it. The salvation of the Gospel is as much confined to believers, as the baptism of the Gospel is. None can ever be saved by the Gospel who does not believe it. Consequently, by the Gospel no infant can be saved ([1853] 1981, 173).

Carson assumed *a priori* that an infant, unlike an adult, is incapable of faith or of hearing the Word and therefore cannot be considered a candidate for baptism. J. R. Graves followed a similar line of argument. Graves went so far as to approve Robinson's lexicon description of John's "*baptism of repentance*, i. e., by which THOSE WHO RECEIVED IT ACKNOWLEDGED THE DUTY OF REPENTANCE"; but he commented, "An infant, of course, could not do this" (Graves & Ditzler 1876, 701). Beasley-Murray conceded that Matthew, in using the expression "baptism of repentance," saw in baptism a divine work which issued in conversion. He denied baptism to infants, however, on the grounds that both conversion and baptism involved human action as well (1963, 35).

Regarding Graves' *a priori* denial of faith in infants, Jacob Ditzler observed, "To assume the very thing in dispute does not amount to good logic" (1876, 662).

Danish theologian, Soren Kirkegaard, regarded infant baptism as the "naturalization" of the Christian faith rendering nonsensical the doctrine of regeneration--as though anyone could speak seriously of an infant being reborn! Kirkegaard could not conceive of an infant experiencing the existential "moment" of decision (Law 1988, 91:114).

Human "decision" reached monumental importance in modern existentialism and crisis theology. The heralded "valley of decision" of Joel 3:14, properly understood, however, is centered in the judgment of God rather than the decision of men. The eschatological truth there portrayed has been historically realized in the sinner's justification. This is God's doing, not man's (Psalm 118:23; Isaiah 53:11b). It was the will of Christ rather than the will of sinful men that was the all important matter in the salvation of sinners (Heb. 10:10). If man's will is not totally passive in salvation, it is certainly "dead" until God acts upon it in regeneration (Ephes. 2:5). "Today," therefore, is not so much an "hour of decision," humanly speaking, as it is a "time of God's favor" and a "day of salvation" (2 Cor. 6:2), if we are properly to regard the New Testament. The problem with the chorus "Whosoever will may come" is that the "whosoever" will never come "unless the Father draws him" (John 6:44). Believing in Christ is the work of God (John 6:29). So why make age such a monumental factor? In fairness, Kirkegaard's view of infant baptism must be considered in historical context, for the state church of Denmark literally forced infant baptism upon the children of Baptists during the 1840s. Kirkegaard's brother, a clergyman, was arrested for refusing to officiate at such baptisms (Law 1988, 91:114). Certainly this author is not advocating that a parent should be legally required by the state to have his (her) children baptized if the parent is not persuaded that God approves of it. But that is a separate issue. Hanko raised a legitimate question, "What proof is there from Scripture that God saves only older children and not younger?"

Surely in the Old Testament he saved infants if circumcision was, as Kingdon grants, a symbol of the same things of which baptism is symbolic" (Hanko 1981, 47). Richard Baxter wrote,

It can no more be argued that infants are incapable of what baptism signifies [than] that infants were incapable of what circumcision signified (1651, 111-12).

Baxter's argument is certainly the answer to William's appeal to Jesus' baptism at age 30 as a pretext for adult baptism. Jesus' earthly life exhibited the sacramental transition of the church from circumcision to baptism. Jesus was born under the Old Testament order; consequently, as an infant, he received the Abrahamic token of entry to the church (Luke 2:21). As an adult, his mission was to inaugurate the Kingdom of God. Accordingly, he submitted to baptism as the divinely appointed token of entry in order to be "numbered with the transgressors" and thereby "fulfill all righteousness" (Isa. 53:12; Matt. 3:15).

The righteousness fulfilled at Jesus' baptism (Matt. 3:15), however, not only must be one and the same with the righteousness that is *by faith* which the apostle Paul expounded (Rom. 1:17; 3:22), it must be that righteousness extending to "children's children which David insisted upon (Psalm 103:17). And one can hardly insist that the righteousness which extends to "children's children" in Psalm 103:17 is different from the righteousness which God reckons apart from works as per Romans 4:5-7 since, in both passages, David is the proclaimer. Rather David is simply proclaiming two aspects of the same righteousness. Considered as an isolated event, Jesus' baptism as a 30-year-old, may not appear to support infant baptism. Considered in theological context, however, it does precisely that! The English Reformed Baptist, David Kingdon, practically acknowledged as much when he stated:

We must . . . insist, in the light of New Testament theology, that psychological incapacity is no barrier to the operation of God's Spirit in saving power in

infants (1973, 96).

Paul King Jewett, however, was unwilling to concede that there could be saving faith in infants. He insisted that whether there were infants in the baptized households of the New Testament was a "theological impertinence. . . . We all know infants cannot 'believe in the Lord'" (1978, 51). Jewett compared the idea of infant regeneration at birth to the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation: "Indeed, it would seem that if there can be faith without self-awareness, there can be blood and body without attributes" (1978, 169). Regarding the matter of "self-awareness" here raised by Jewett, John Murray had the following rhetorical response:

Are we to say. . . that it is of no avail to the infant to be born and nurtured in a Christian family simply because the infant has no conscious understanding of the great blessing that belongs to him in the care, protection, devotion, and nurture of the Christian parents? (1980, 71)

Yet who but the Holy Spirit can speak definitively of an infant's self-awareness?

Jewett's position was not without its difficulty; for he maintained that the infant John the Baptist had regeneration but not faith (1978, 169-170). In granting the infant John regeneration but not faith, the professor himself tore asunder what Scripture joins together (John 1:12-13). By acknowledging the infant John's regeneration, which could hardly be denied (Luke 1:15), Jewett exposed the weakness of the Baptist argument. For regeneration surely contains the seed of faith as John Calvin noted:

. . . infants are baptized into future repentance and faith, and even though these have not yet been formed in them, the seed of both lies hidden within them by the secret working of the Spirit (1960, 2:1343).

Naglee wrote,

Calvin was an optimist at this point, believing that at an age of discretion the children would produce faith, "addicting themselves to be his disciples. . . with the understanding of faith" (1987, 70).

Calvin, however, was not ascribing to a kind of blanket baptismal regeneration here, but only so far as God's election applied to infants. Calvin acknowledged that "in older persons the receiving of the sign ought to follow the understanding of the mystery," but insisted, that "infants must be regarded as following another order" (1960, 2:1344).

Calvin maintained that "infants may have infused into them a kind of faith and knowledge, though not ours." Or, again, the standing faith of the parents might be taken for the faith of the children (Wood 1910, 403).

Reformers Bucer and Luther believed that baptism presupposed faith even in the case of infants, but they acknowledged that faith may not be observable to the human eye. Bucer called baptism the "laver of regeneration" in keeping with Titus 3:5-6 (Goode 1857, 174-176, 178). Harnack stated that "Luther retained infant baptism rather as a sacrament of regeneration."

He fell back on the Roman doctrine. He strove to retain the connexion between faith and baptism by continuing the *interrogatio de Fide* and the presence of sponsors in the rite, and by supposing that there is a kind of faith bestowed on infants. . . . Luther . . . distinguished between faith and regeneration. Regeneration was an inward effect, wrought in baptism. Justification, the inner experience of repentance and forgiveness, was a distinct and later stage in religious development (Wood 1910, 403).

While the high sacramentarian view of baptism represented by Luther has to be questioned on the basis of such passages as Romans 4:1 and 1 Corinthians 12:13, the fact that faith can and frequently does follow from the *covenant act* involved in infant baptism is a very scriptural idea (Isa. 59:20-21; 1 Pet. 3:21). That it may occur immediately in infants in keeping with the promise of Genesis 17:7 is the clear implication of Ps. 22:9-10.

The beloved seventeenth-century New England pastor, John Cotton, distinguished between faith as *habit* and faith as *act*. The former was tantamount to grace and was the "formal cause of justification." The Spirit of God was the "efficient cause" and faith as *act* was the *instrument* of justification (Higgins 1984, 163-164). In the following century another New England pastor, Jonathan Edwards, stated,

The Scriptures give us ground to think, that some infants have the habit of saving grace, and that they have a new nature given them. But no reason at all to think, that ever God works any mere moral change in them, or infuses any habits of moral virtue without saving grace.--And we know, they cannot come by moral habits in infancy, any other way than by immediate infusion. They cannot obtain them by human instruction, nor contract them by use and custom (1879, 1:525).

The *a priori* Baptist assumption that infants cannot believe or repent--and therefore, that they cannot be saved, must be put to the test of Scripture. Because it can be demonstrated biblically that infants can believe and be saved, the argument that household baptisms involved only believers has little or no relevance.

To suggest that infants are less capable of faith than adults is to oppose the divinely inspired words of King David who attested to having believed even as a nursing infant.

Yet you brought me out of the womb;
You made me trust in you even at my mother's breast.
From birth I was cast upon you;
from my mother's womb you have been my God
(Ps. 22:9-10).

From my birth I have relied on you:
you brought me forth from my mother's womb
(Ps. 71:6).

David's words "from my mother's womb you have been my God" attest a direct fulfillment of God's covenant promise in Genesis 17:7: ". . . to be your God and the God of your descendants after you." Similarly, Isaiah affirmed God's covenant care of the faithful remnant of Israel *even from their conception and birth*:

Listen to me, O house of Jacob,
all you who remain of the house of Israel,
you whom I have upheld since you were conceived,
and have carried since your birth (Isa. 46:3).

If a baby cannot trust or experience God's grace, then David the Psalmist and Isaiah the prophet have lied to us; and if the Scripture cannot be trusted at this point, how at any other?

If an infant cannot respond spiritually to the grace of God, then either Luke or God's angel was misinformed, for Luke recorded as the angel's promise that John the Baptist was to be filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb (Luke 1:15). Luke went on to describe the pre-natal response of John the Baptist to the arrival of Mary, the virgin who had been chosen by God to bear the Christ:

When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:41).

As if to remove any doubt that it was the unborn baby John (as a distinct person) making the response, his mother

Elizabeth immediately testified:

But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy (Luke 1:43-44).

Jesus knew that small children could indeed be believers. Having taken such a child in his arms, he began to warn the unbelieving adults who were present, "And if anyone causes one of these little ones *who believe in me* to sin. . ." (Mark 9:42, italics mine).

Exposing a Rationalistic Mind-Set

Many readily acknowledge that infants can indeed be the objects of divine grace; yet they insist that an intelligent confession of faith is quite another matter, and they would limit the scope of baptism on that basis. Such was the position of an early Mennonite confession prepared for Anabaptist John Smyth and his congregation in Amsterdam in 1609.

29. The Holy Baptism is given unto these in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, which hear, believe, and with penitent heart receive the doctrines of the Holy Gospel. For such hath the Lord Jesus commanded to be baptized, and no unspeaking children...(Walker [1893] 1960, 5).

To insist upon an intelligent confession of faith as a prerequisite for baptism in the case of infants, not only is to deny the covenant (Gen. 17:7, 10-14), but it reflects an unbiblical, rationalistic mind-set. The Scriptures affirm God's power to work his purpose and plan through infants chosen by his grace.

From the lips of children and infants
you have ordained praise
because of your enemies,
to silence the foe and the avenger (Ps. 8:2).

Carson scoffed at the "most doleful lamentation" of English Independent, Dr. William, "about cutting off infants from the church *militant*, by refusing to include them in the commission of the apostles."

Militant infants! What an idea! . . . If any general should talk of raising an army of infants to oppose an invading enemy, he would at once be judged insane ([1853] 1981, 217).

Carson apparently did not highly regard the LORD's plan "to silence the foe and the avenger" (Ps. 8:2). But neither did the Pharisees who objected to the little children's outburst of praise in the temple; consequently, Jesus brought it to their attention (Matt. 21:15-16).

Nowhere in the Scriptures are adult standards of faith imposed on infants or little children; quite the reverse is true--Jesus imposed a child's standards upon adults!

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"

He called a little child and had him stand among them. And he said: "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me. But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea (Matt. 18:1-6).

Ditzler argued that infants are not forbidden food on the grounds of not being able to work (2 Thess. 3:10)--yet the Baptist would deny them a place in God's household because they cannot believe by his standards (Graves & Ditzler 1876, 764-65).

Jesus, in the following statement, commended his own perspective on infants and children:

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).

Carson argued that infants could not be saved by the new covenant because infants "know nothing," and knowledge is a necessary condition according to Jeremiah 31:31-34 ([1853] 1981, 216). Carson somehow missed the point that the new covenant "knowledge" would extend "from the *least* of them to the greatest."

"No longer will a man teach his neighbor,
or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,'
because they will all know me,
from the least of them to the greatest,"
declares the LORD.

"For I will forgive their wickedness
and will remember their sins no more" (Jer. 31:34).

Carson also overlooked Jesus prayer and affirmation concerning his own elective and revelatory role:

I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children ["babes" RSV]. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure.

All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him (Matt. 11:25-27).

Jesus' words do not deny that "faith comes from hearing the message," and that "the message is heard through the word of Christ" (Rom. 10:17), even in the case of infants, but they certainly remove it from the confinement of the cranial cavity.

The apostle Paul's observation of God's working in Timothy's life and family illustrates the principle behind infant baptism. Paul spoke of Timothy's "sincere faith" which "first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also" (2 Tim. 1:5). Then he spoke of

how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus (2 Tim. 3:15).

The New International Version has accurately rendered the primary meaning of the Greek *brephos* as "infancy" while other versions have rendered this word as "child" (hence "from childhood" in RSV). *Brephos* is used of the baby Jesus in Luke 2:12 & 16. It is used in Acts 7:19 to designate those Hebrew babies whose death as newborns Pharaoh instituted by executive order (Exodus 1:15-22). It is used figuratively of new Christian believers whom Peter instructed as "newborn babies" to "crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation" (1 Pet. 2:2).

Perhaps most strikingly, *brephos* is used to designate the pre-natal John the Baptist who had not yet completed his second trimester of development within Elizabeth's womb (Luke 1:36,41,44). Luke used *brephos* to designate the "babies" whom parents were bringing to Jesus (Luke 18:15).

When Paul selected the word *brephos* to describe the beginning point of Timothy's knowledge of the Holy Scriptures, he was affirming that the Christian classroom began in the cradle. Although Lois and Eunice had appropriated and applied the means (the Scriptures) for Timothy's salvation, God was not limited by Timothy's infantile stage of intellectual development as many adult minds might suppose. "From infancy you have known the holy Scriptures," Paul affirmed (2 Tim. 3:15).

The Scriptures consistently attest that salvation comes to people by God's power rather than by man's intellect or will (Rom. 9:16; 1 Cor. 1:18-24; 2:4-5; 1 Thess. 1:5).

To rule out infant baptism by insisting upon an intelligent confession of faith is wrong for two reasons. First, it misses God's perspective concerning children. Would anyone question the Holy Spirit's regenerative activity in the unborn John the Baptist on the ground that he only "leaped in the womb" to demonstrate his faith--and fell short of an intelligent verbal statement?

This is not to suggest that all children of believers are undoubtedly regenerated at birth, or that infant baptism is based on their regeneration. It is simply to recognize that God's covenant of grace, as it pertains to the offspring of professing believers, is not an empty covenant. The promise is efficacious in the case of the elect, and may be so at birth. Baptism, in the case of infants, is administered on the basis of the promise, as well as the command to apply the covenant sign associated with that promise (Gen. 17:7, 9-14).

In the second place, to impose an intelligent confession upon infants betrays a misunderstanding of baptism. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, in his book *Children of Promise*, stated,

If baptism is primarily for remission and regeneration it does not focus on our necessary but secondary and derivative action, faith and the confession. It focuses on the indispensable, primary, and originative action of God, the divine work of reconciliation and renewal. Baptism declares, signifies, and seals not what I do but what God has done, does and will do for me (1979, 35).

This is not to deny the inescapable connection between faith and baptism. Goode expressed it well.

In *all* cases, baptism is connected with regeneration only as the formal signing and sealing of

the deed is connected with the completion of a promise. This follows necessarily from the fact, that faith and repentance are required (either in person or by promise) from *all* who *come* to baptism, and that in Holy Scripture these are described as essential characteristics of regeneration (1857, 42).

Whether considering John's filling by the Holy Spirit within Elizabeth's womb, or David's trusting in the Lord from the womb, we must not construct another plan of salvation different from the one set forth by the apostles and prophets. Salvation is, and always has been, by grace through faith--and David and John the Baptist were no exceptions to this rule.

But if it is by grace through faith, it does not depend solely or even primarily upon a human decision or human intelligence. The people who were saved by grace through faith were described by the apostle Paul as having been "dead in your transgressions and sins" (Eph. 2:1) prior to their conversion. Certainly, David and John the Baptist had been in the same category, even in infancy, at some point prior to their conversion--for through Adam "death came to all men" (Rom. 5:12).

Jonathan Edwards, commenting on Romans 5:14, insisted that even infants had not been exempted from the deadening effects of Adam's transgression.

... it appears in fact, all mankind, during that whole time which preceded the law of Moses, were subjected to that temporal death, which is the visible introduction and image of that utter destruction which sin deserves; not excepting even infants, who could be sinners no other way than by virtue of Adam's transgression, having never in their own persons actually sinned as Adam did; nor could [they] at that time be made polluted by the law of Moses, as being uncircumcised, or born of uncircumcised parents (Gerstner 1991-, 2:95-96).

Salvation is not inherited through natural generation but through the regeneration of the Holy Spirit. The call in infancy

is not a natural call, but God's supernatural call (Jer. 1:5; Gal. 1:15).

If God saves only "dead" adults (Eph. 2:1), however, why should it be considered such a strange idea that he would save infants? Impossibility? Certainly! But it is no greater impossibility than the salvation of a spiritually dead adult--for the spiritual death that engulfs grown men and women in their natural state engulfs their *will*, as well as their *intellect*. Apart from the grace of God, no one can will himself, or reason his way into the kingdom of God (John 1:13; 6:44; 1 Cor. 1:21). That is the spiritual point attested by Christian baptism--the regeneration of the volition and the mind.

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws (Ezek. 36:25-27).

The distorted mental conception of God represented by "idols," and the degenerate will, represented by the "heart of stone," are removed by the operation of God's Spirit. A new heart is given and the will becomes obedient to God. Water baptism attests to the cleansing, regenerating work of the Holy Spirit.

A word of caution is in order lest Christian parents assume that the spoken Word is not efficacious even in the lives of infants. The following statements from Calvin were designed to refute the Anabaptists, not as practical parenting guidelines for parents of infants and small children:

The doctrine of the gospel is an incorruptible seed [I Peter 1:23] to regenerate us, if we are indeed fit to receive it; but when we are not old enough to be taught, God keeps his own timetable of regeneration (1960, 1:1357).

We consider it incontrovertible that no one of the elect is called from the present life before being sanctified and regenerated by the Spirit of God. They [Anabaptists] counter with the objection that the Spirit in Scripture recognizes no regeneration except from incorruptible seed, that is, from God's Word. [1 Peter 1:23]. In this they wrongly interpret Peter's statement, which has reference only to believers who had been taught by the preaching of the gospel. We indeed admit that to such persons the Word of the Lord is the only seed of spiritual regeneration; but we deny the inference from this that infants cannot be regenerated by God's power, which is as easy and ready to him as it is incomprehensible and wonderful to us (1960, 2:1341).

It is true that the Word can only be *propositionally* communicated to the extent of a child's cognition, and that God's plan is to work through the understanding in the communication of spiritual truths (1 Cor. 14:9-11). It can hardly be denied, however, that the child's cognitive faculties are developed by hearing the sounds of words, and that such cognitive development would better be served by meaningful language than by gibberish.

Horace Bushnell's insights into early childhood cannot be disregarded however deficient were his views on the Atonement (Williams 1988-, 1:370 note 50). In the following statement he spoke with an air of sarcasm to Christian parents and church leaders, laden with heavy theological conceptions, but who were apt to overlook the critical stage of spiritual development posed by a child's infancy:

Now the very common assumption is that, in what we have called the age of impressions, there is really nothing done, or to be done, for the religious character. The lack of all genuine apprehensions, in respect to this matter, among people otherwise intelligent and awake, is really wonderful; it amounts even to a kind of courseness. Full of all fondness,

and all highest expectations respecting their children, and having also many Christian desires for their welfare, they seem never to have brought their minds down close enough to the soul of infancy, to imagine that any thing of consequence is going on with it. What can they do, till they can speak to it? What can it do, till it speaks? as if there were no process going on to bring it forward into language; or as if that process had itself nothing to do with bringing on intelligence, and no deep, seminal working toward a character unfolding and to be unfolding in it. The child, in other words, is to come into perfect intelligence through perfect unintelligence! to get the power of words out of words themselves, and without any experience whereby their meaning is developed! to be taught responsibility under moral and religious ideas, when the experience has unfolded no such ideas! ([1888] 1903, 235).

Bushnell went on to say, "I think it can also be shown by sufficient evidence, that more is done to affect, or fix, the moral and religious character of children, before the age of language than after" ([1888] 1903, 236).

A study done at Johns Hopkins University has conclusively demonstrated that babies as young as eight months can hear and remember words. Peter W. Jusczyk who did the study concludes that reading to a child at that early age can start the learning process even though they might not seem to understand. Infants in the experiment listened to the repetitious playing of three recorded stories once a day for ten days. Two weeks later the infants were exposed to 36 words from those same stories, as well as to similar words not contained in the stories. The infants' recognition of the words from the stories previously read to them, in contrast to the words not previously read, was obvious by their comparative attentiveness to the respective sources of the sounds. According to Jusczyk, this storing up of labels in the infant mind accounts for the growth spurt in language development most children experience between 18 and 21 months of age (Associated Press 1997).

For the Christian, the purest and most profitable communication that exists is none other than the Word of God. Christian parents, therefore, concerned about character formation and ultimate values, would hardly want to settle for the words of Plato's *Republic* or Marx's *Communist Manifesto*, or even something as innocuous as the local telephone directory, to effect the development of their infant's cognitive abilities. Those who value Christian education are convinced that a child's rationality, as well as his spirituality, is best served with the Bible as the core curriculum (Ps. 119:97-100; Dan. 1:17). Indeed, apart from the Word (Logos) of God, man's rational faculty ultimately degenerates and is dwarfed, for God's judgment must certainly fall upon the mind that stands in rebellion against its Maker, as Nebuchadnezzar was forced to acknowledge (Dan. 4:34). This is no less true in the infantile stages of man's development than it is of his adulthood (2 Tim. 3:15).

Certainly Calvin himself recognized that the Spirit of God always worked in conjunction with the Word (Heb. 4:12). While an infant will not immediately grasp the propositional aspects of the Word, the seeds of spiritual rationality are sown in the infants's psyche through the sound of the Word. If we are to have a biblical perspective on the Word, we must recognize that there is a revelational aspect to it, as well as a propositional aspect. To fail to regard the propositional aspect is to lapse into superstition; to disregard the revelational aspect is to drift into rationalism.

The Word is not only a body of propositional truth--the Word is a person, the eternal Son of God (John 1:1, 14). As the Word is proclaimed in the home and in the church, and propositionally understood and received by those who do have their full cognitive faculties, Jesus manifests himself and in a way that surpasses the understanding (John 14:21). While the infant may not grasp the propositional aspect so as to be able to respond as an adult would, the propositional aspect is certainly being developed. Further, the infant's spirit is being impacted by the revelational aspect of the Word. While the written Word

certainly embraces Jesus Christ, its propositional aspect must never be regarded as "embalming" him! This is just another way of saying that Jesus' blessing of the infants (Luke 18:15-16) was not a mere beating of the air, but an efficacious action on his part upon the lives of the infants.

We must not mistake Calvin's words, however intended, to mean that the church and Christian parents should withhold God's Word from infants. Should they not rather verbalize it's truths to them--confident that their exposure to the Word is the means by which God ultimately brings about his efficacious call in their lives? And the child's rationality is being developed in the holy process! Surely there was practical significance in God's command for "nursing infants" physically to be present among his assembled people when the Word was proclaimed, God's praises sung, and God's covenant publicly affirmed (Deut. 29:10-15; 2 Chron. 20:13; Joel 2:15-16).

Who is to say that God does not use the same means for the salvation of infants that he has appointed for the salvation of adults? Who would foolishly suggest that a mother was wasting her breath whispering intelligible words of compassion to her infant child? Are we to deny infants God's appointed means for salvation simply because its effectual operation is beyond us? Thank God that Lois and Eunice were not so cerebral and enlightened in their nurture of Timothy (2 Tim. 3:15)!

How God regenerates infants and children must ever remain a mystery to baffle the "wise and learned" (Matt. 11:25), but so must God's regeneration of adults (John 3:5-8). The song writer expressed it well.

I know not how the Spirit moves,
Convincing men of sin,
Revealing Jesus through the Word,
Creating faith in Him.
But I know whom I have believed,
and am persuaded that He is able
To keep that which I've committed
Unto Him against that Day
(Beckwith 1952, 59).

The spiritual impact of a godly mother and grandmother upon an infant must never be underestimated. Elisabeth Dodds reminded her readers that it was Yale President Timothy Dwight who first spoke that famous remark: "All that I am and all that I shall be, I owe to my mother" ([1971] 1976, 209). Dwight, whose lectures to the students at Yale sparked the Second Great Awakening in America, was the grandson of Jonathan and Sarah Edwards. His mother, Mary Edwards Dwight, apparently shared the spiritual greatness of her mother, Sarah Pierrepont Edwards, whose character Jonathan had extolled on the front page of his Greek grammar while preparing for his M.A. degree:

They say there is a young lady in [New Haven] who is beloved of that Great Being, who made and rules the world, and that there are certain seasons in which this Great Being, in some way or another invisible, comes to her and fills her mind with exceeding sweet delight, and that she hardly cares for anything except to meditate on him--that she expects after a while to be received up where he is, to be raised up out of the world and caught up into heaven; being assured that he loves her too well to let her remain at a distance from him always. There she is to dwell with him, and to be ravished with his love and delight forever.

Therefore if you present all the world before her, with the richest of its treasures, she disregards it and cares not for it, and is unmindful of any pain or affliction. She has a strange sweetness in her mind, and singular purity in her affections; is most just and conscientious in all her conduct; and you could not persuade her to do anything wrong or sinful if you would give her all the world, lest she would offend this Great Being. She is of a wonderful sweetness, calmness and universal benevolence of mind especially after this Great Being has manifested himself to her mind. She will sometimes go about from place to place, singing sweetly and seems to be always full of joy and pleasure; and no one knows for

what. She loves to be alone, walking in the fields and groves, and seems to have someone invisible conversing with her (Edwards 1879, Vol. 1, p. lxxxii-lxxxii).

Another Yale President, Theodore Woolsey, also a descendant of both Sarah and her daughter Mary, addressed a family reunion in 1874 and noted that the Edwards clan "has been rich in women 'whose works have praised them in the gates.' . . . This mother of us all, friends and kindred, deserves to be held in grateful remembrance." The last surviving granddaughter of Sarah, Mrs. Mary Edwards Whiting, at the age of 92 was unable to attend that reunion, but sent the message that "she wishes to bear testimony at that meeting to God's covenant faithfulness and to his covenant mercies to her and hers" (Dodds [1971] 1976, 203-204).

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