

# Infant Baptism

*William Cunningham (1805-1861)*

The Reformers, and the great body of Protestant divines, in putting forth the definition of the sacraments in general, or of a sacrament as such, intended to embody the substance of what they believe Scripture to teach, or to indicate, as equally applicable to both sacraments; and in laying down what they believe concerning the general objects and the ordinary effects of the sacraments, they commonly *assume*, that the persons partaking in them are rightly qualified for receiving and improving them,—and further, and more specially, that the persons baptized are adults.<sup>1</sup> It is necessary to keep these considerations in view in interpreting the general description given of sacraments and of baptism, in our Confession of Faith and the other Reformed confessions; and with these assumptions, and to this extent, there is no difficulty in the way of our maintaining the general principle, which can be established by most satisfactory evidence,—namely, that the fundamental spiritual blessings, on the possession of which the salvation of men universally depends,—justification and regeneration by faith,—are not conveyed through the instrumentality of the sacraments, but that, on the contrary, they must *already* exist before even baptism can be lawfully or safely received. The general tenor of Scripture language upon the subject of baptism by adults,—the profession, that is, that they had already been led to believe in Christ, and to receive Him as their Saviour and their Master,—was sincere, or corresponded with the real state of their minds and hearts. It is necessary, therefore, to form our primary and fundamental conceptions of the objects and effects of baptism in itself, as a distinct subject, and in its bearing upon the general doctrine of the sacraments, from the baptism of adults and not of infants. The baptisms which are ordinarily described or referred to in the New Testament, were the baptisms of men who had lived as Jews and heathens, and who, having been led to believe in Christ,—or, at least, to profess faith in him,—expressed and sealed this faith, or the profession of it, by complying with Christ's requirement, that they should be baptized. This is the proper, primary, full idea of baptism; and to this the

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<sup>1</sup>This article is reprinted from William Cunningham's *Historical Theology* (Banner, 1960), vol. 2, pp. 144-

general tenor of Scripture language upon the subject, and the general description of the objects and ends of baptism, *as given in our Confession of Faith*, and in the other confessions of the Reformed churches, are manifestly adapted.

As, in the condition in which we are placed in providence, we but seldom witness the baptism of adults, and commonly see only the baptism of infants,—and as there are undoubtedly some difficulties in the way of applying fully to the baptism of infants the definition usually given of a sacrament, and the general account commonly set forth of the objects and ends of baptism,—we are very apt to be led to form insensibly very erroneous and defective views of the nature and effects of baptism, as an ordinance instituted by Christ in His church, or rather, to rest contented with scarcely any distinct or definite conception upon the subject. Men usually have much more clear and distinct apprehensions of the import, design, and effects of the Lord's Supper than of Baptism; and yet the general definition commonly given of a sacrament applies equally to both, being just intended to embody the substance of what Scripture indicates as equally applicable to the one ordinance as to the other. If we were in the habit of witnessing adult baptism, and if we formed our primary and full conceptions of the import and effects of the ordinance from the baptism of adults, the one sacrament would be as easily understood, and as definitely apprehended, as the other; and we would have no difficulty in seeing how the general definition given of the sacraments in our Confession of Faith and Catechisms applied equally to both. But as this general definition of sacraments, and the corresponding general description given of the objects and effects of baptism, *do not apply fully and without some modification* to the form in which we usually see baptism administered, men commonly, instead of considering distinctly what are the necessary modifications of it, and what are the grounds on which these modifications rest, leave the whole subject in a very obscure and confused condition in their minds.

These statements may, at first view, appear to be large concessions to the anti-paedo-baptists, or those who oppose the lawfulness of the baptism of infants, and to affect the solidity of the grounds on which the practice of paedobaptism, which has ever prevailed almost universally in the church of Christ, is based. But I am persuaded that a more careful consideration of the subject will show that these views, besides being clearly sanctioned by Scripture, and absolutely necessary for the consistent and intelligible interpretation of our own stand-

ards, are, in their legitimate application, fitted to deprive the arguments of the anti-paedo-baptists of whatever plausibility they possess. It cannot be reasonably denied that they have much that is plausible to allege in opposition to infant baptism; but I am persuaded that the plausibility of their arguments will always appear greatest to men who have not been accustomed to distinguish between the primary and complete idea of this ordinance, as exhibited in the baptism of adults, and the distinct and peculiar place which is held by the special subject of infant baptism, and the precise grounds on which it rests. Paedo-baptists, from the causes to which I have referred, are apt to rest contented with very obscure and defective notions of the import and objects of baptism, and to confound adult and infant baptism as if the same principles must fully and universally apply to both. And in this state of things, when those views of the sacraments in general, and of baptism in particular, which I have briefly explained, are pressed upon their attention, and seen and acknowledged to be well founded, they are not unlikely to imagine that these principles equally rule the case of infant baptism; and they are thus prepared to see, in the arguments of the anti-paedobaptists, a much larger amount of force and solidity than they really possess. Hence the importance of being familiar with what should be admitted or conceded, as clearly sanctioned by Scripture, with respect to baptism in general, in its primary, complete idea,—estimating exactly what this implies, and how far it goes; and then, moreover, being well acquainted with the special subject of infant baptism as a distinct topic,—with the peculiar considerations applicable to it, and the precise grounds on which its lawfulness and obligation can be established.

It is not my purpose to enter upon a full discussion of infant baptism, or an exposition of the grounds on which the views of paedo-baptists can, as I believe, be successfully established and vindicated. I shall merely make a few observations on what it is that paedo-baptists really maintain,—on the distinct and peculiar place which the doctrine of infant baptism truly occupies,—and on the relation in which it stands to the general subject of baptism and the sacraments; believing that correct apprehensions upon these points are well fitted to illustrate the grounds on which infant baptism rests in all their strength, and the insufficiency of the reasons by which the opposite view has been supported.

Let me then, in the first place, remark that intelligent paedobaptists hold all those views of the sacraments and of baptism which I have endeavoured to

explain, and are persuaded that they can hold them in perfect consistency with maintaining that the infants of believing parents ought to be baptized. There is nothing in these views peculiar to the anti-paedo-baptists; and there is, we are persuaded, no real advantage which they can derive from them in support of their opinions. These views are clearly sanctioned by our Confession of Faith; while, at the same time, it contains also the following proposition as a part of what the word of God teaches upon the subject of baptism: "Not only those that do actually profess faith in and obedience unto Christ, but also the infants of one or both believing parents are to be baptized." Now, let it be observed that this position is all that is essential to the doctrine of the paedo-baptists, as such. We are called upon to maintain nothing more upon the subject than this plain and simple proposition, which merely asserts the lawfulness and propriety of baptizing the infants of believing parents. Let it be noticed also, that the statement is introduced merely as an adjunct or appendage to the general doctrine of baptism; not as directly and immediately comprehended under it, any more than under the general definition given of a sacrament, but as a special addition to it, resting upon its own distinct and peculiar grounds. This is the true place which infant baptism occupies; this is the view that ought to be taken of it; and I am persuaded that it is when contemplated and investigated in this aspect, that there comes out most distinctly and palpably the sufficiency of the arguments in favour of it, and the sufficiency of the objections against it. On this, as on many other subjects, the friends of truth have often injured their cause, by entering too fully and minutely into explanations of their doctrines, for the purpose of commending them to men's acceptance, and solving the difficulties by which they seemed to be beset. They have thus involved themselves in great difficulties, by trying to defend their own minute and unwarranted explanations, as if they were an essential part of the Scripture doctrine. It is easy enough to prove from Scripture that the Father is God, that the Son is God, and that the Holy Ghost is God, and that they are not three Gods, but one God; but many of the more detailed explanations of the doctrine of the Trinity which have been given by its friends, have been untenable and indefensible, and have only laid it open unnecessarily to the attacks of its enemies. In like manner, we think it no difficult matter to produce from Scripture sufficient and satisfactory evidence of the position, that the infants of believing parents are to be baptized; but minute and detailed

expositions of the reasons and the effects of infant baptism are unwarranted by Scripture; they impose an unnecessary burden upon the friends of truth, and tend only to give an advantage to its opponents. The condition and fate of infants, and the principles by which they are determined, have always been subjects on which men, not unnaturally, have been prone to speculate, but on which Scripture has given us little explicit information beyond this, that salvation through Christ is just as accessible to them as to adults. One form in which this tendency to speculate unwarrantably about infants has been exhibited, is that of inventing theories about the objects and effects of infant baptism. These theories are often made to rest as a burden upon the scriptural proof of the lawfulness and propriety of the mere practice itself; and thus have the appearance of communicating to that proof, which is amply sufficient for its own proper object, their own essential weakness and in validity.

It is manifest that, from the nature of the case, the principles that determine and indicate the objects and effects of baptism in adults and infants, cannot be altogether the same; and the great difficulty of the whole subject lies in settling as far as we can, what modifications our conceptions of baptism should undergo in the case of infants, as distinguished from that of adults; and, at the same time, to show that, even with these modifications, the essential and fundamental ideas involved in the general doctrine ordinarily professed concerning baptism are still preserved. The investigation even of this point is, perhaps, going beyond the line of what is strictly necessary for the establishment of the position, that the infants of believing parents are to be baptized. But some notice of it can scarcely be avoided in the discussion of the question.

*(To be concluded, DV)*