

Infant Baptism: Is It Essential To The Reformed Faith?

(A paper prepared for discussion by various members and courts of the Presbyterian Church in America)

Prolegomena:

Relevant Cultural Issue: Modern evangelicals, including many in the PCA, tend to diminish the importance of "secondary" doctrines

What may be the most important question facing PCA churches is "what relation between 'experience' and 'doctrine' forms the basis of true Christian religion?" Gene Edward Veith states it this way:

*The postmodernist rejection of objectivity pervades the evangelical church. "We have a generation that is less interested in cerebral arguments, linear thinking, theological systems,... and more interested in encountering the supernatural." (Quoting Leith Anderson, **A Church for the 21st Century**) Consequently, churchgoers operate with a different paradigm of spirituality. "The old paradigm taught that if you have the right teaching, you will experience God. The new paradigm says that if you experience God, you will have the right teaching." (Again quoting Anderson)... not only is objective doctrine minimized in favor of subjective experience; experience actually becomes the criterion for evaluating doctrine.¹*

Though, by and large, the PCA is resisting this paradigm shift, (and certainly there is no intention of accusing any of the principles in this case of falling into this trap) yet the prevailing cultural skepticism regarding propositional truth has had some effect. The tendency among many, in the face of cultural pressure, is to retreat from a full orb'd confessional stance and find the basis of congregational unity in a reduced set of "fundamental" beliefs which are validated by an experientially defined associated spirituality.² This overarching desire for "unity in the midst of theological diversity", as alluded to in the complaint,³ can then lead to a depreciation of the importance of those "secondary" doctrines which are added to the fundamental beliefs.

The often unrecognized presupposition in this approach is that the truths of the Christian faith are a series of individual and somewhat independent or disconnected propositions. The "fundamentals" are confessed individually as " I believe this and I believe that and I believe this other." The "secondary" beliefs are understood in the same way, as being disconnected from or added to the other set of beliefs. This is the great danger of "reductionism". Countering this, the Reformed Faith boldly proclaims that Christianity is not a religion of disconnected propositional truths. Christianity is a comprehensive world view that is centered upon the Covenant God has made with mankind and which was fulfilled in Christ. It is the task of the church to communicate and uphold this comprehensive world view as that which God commands all people to believe and obey.⁴ It is the

¹Veith, Gene Edward, Jr. , **PostModern Times: A Christian Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture**, (Wheaton, ILL: Crossway, 1994), p. 211

²Wells, David, **No Place For Truth: Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?**, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), cf. p 9ff - Wells demonstrates how the retreat ("each to their own tents") to an ever diminishing set of common beliefs has actually resulted in an increase in false spirituality. A culture which no longer believes anything believes everything and therefore loses any power to combat error.

³P. 3, ref. 01, *The congregation should not remain untended as we choose what we perceive to be the cause of unity over sound doctrinal practices.*

⁴Acts 20:27 - *πάσαν τὴν βουλὴν τοῦ θεοῦ* - **the entire counsel of God** - Thayer = "all the contents of the divine plan"

task of individual believers to study and grow in their understanding of this comprehensive world view so that they indeed attain "the mind of Christ".⁵ True unity among believers is not based upon agreement to a reduced set of commonly held general principles, but rather in the convergence Christians achieve as they seek to grow together in their understanding of the fullness of God's revelation of His Covenant in Christ.

Thus, there exists in Scripture, an organic relation between all the truths contained in it. To remove one scriptural doctrine and replace it with another less Biblical one, is to do damage to the whole. One cannot have a proper view of God without a proper view of Christ and the Holy Spirit. One cannot properly understand salvation without properly understanding the Church. It is this fundamental unity of the Scriptures, expressed as Covenant Theology, which lies at the heart of the Reformed Faith. Abraham Kuyper is correct in his teaching that all deviations from the comprehensive world viewed expressed in the Reformed Faith are in fact deviations from the Gospel.⁶

It is this fundamental principle which informs and guides any discussion about the relation between infant baptism and the system of doctrine contained and expressed in the articles and catechisms of Westminster. Though our Book of Church Order makes provision for the possibility of ordination for an elder who is not in accord with "every statement and/or proposition of doctrine in our *Confession of Faith...*",⁷ yet, we do not, by that statement, affirm that such deviations are inconsequential, even when they are not "fundamental" to the system of doctrine. Every deviation has an effect on the organic whole and in the last analysis, has an effect on the nature of the visible church that accepts or embraces those deviations.⁸ A church which embraces and upholds infant baptism as an integral component of the Gospel of Jesus Christ will necessarily and inevitably manifest a different spirituality, family orientation, and Kingdom world-view than one which does not. Therefore, even if it were to be determined that infant baptism was not "fundamental" to the doctrinal standards, the impact of treating it as "not-fundamental" would have far ranging effects. The Church of Jesus Christ must be diligent to manifest and proclaim the fullness of God's Covenant in all its particulars and not allow the subordination of one doctrine to another to hinder or obstruct it in its call to be obedient in everything the Lord has commanded.⁹

In summary, the cultural pressure to treat "secondary" doctrines as inconsequential and even as threats to the unity of the church, must be vigorously resisted by the Church. Even though it is acknowledged that such doctrines are not essential to a "saving knowledge" of Jesus Christ and thus as not posing a barrier to receiving a person as a brother or sister in Christ, yet the absence or replacement of such doctrines has inevitable effect on the Kingdom understanding of that person. They must be understood as having a "defective" grasp of the Gospel and every effort should be made to assist and exhort such a person to advance from theological milk to solid food.¹⁰

⁵1 Cor. 2:13-3:4

⁶Kuyper, Abraham, **Lectures on Calvinism**, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1931, repr. 1987), p. 9ff. "*..(Calvinism is a) powerful life-system..not to be invented nor formulated by ourselves, but is to be taken and applied.. (Because it is) ..the manifestation of the Christian principle...* p. 11-12 (emphasis supplied)

⁷BCO 21-4

⁸Kuyper, *ibid* p. 17ff - particularly his illustration of how the Romanist, Lutheranist, and Baptist world views inevitably result in "*not merely... a different Church-form, but an entirely different form for human life, ...a different method of existence... and populate the world ... with different ideals and conceptions.*"

⁹Matthew 28:20 - disciples are to obey "all that I have commanded you." Even though we confess that all Scriptures are not alike or *alike clear unto all* (WCF 1:7), yet that does not mean that all must not be obeyed. It is incumbent upon all Christians to grow in their obedience in all that Christ has commanded.

¹⁰1 Cor. 3:2

The Issue: Is the doctrine of Infant Baptism so essential to the unity of the Reformed Faith that its absence irreparably undermines the foundations of Covenant Theology?

It is not necessary to do anything more than survey the Biblical basis on which Covenant Theology (the Reformed Faith) constructs its defense of Infant Baptism. It is well understood by all parties to this complaint that the Standards of the PCA uphold the doctrine and in fact, command such baptism.¹¹

A Survey of the Biblical Basis for Infant Baptism:¹²

The manner by which God was pleased to reveal Himself to man so that man may have "fruition of Him as their blessedness and reward" was "by way of covenant". (WCF 7:1)

- The "Covenant" concept is the unifying thread of Scripture which ties all of God's dealings with man, both unto salvation and to judgment, into one gracious expression. (Romans 2:1-16; Romans 3:21-26)
- At the center of Covenant concept is the promise of God to those whom He has elected to bless
 - that promise is, expressed in various forms is to the point that God will create a people unto Himself in whom He will manifest His Glory and the mystery of His purposes in creation before the powers and principalities of this world. (Eph. 3:10; Col. 2:11-15, esp. v. 15)
 - the essential nature of this promise is that God "I will be your God and you shall be My people" (Exod. 6:7; Jer. 7:23; Jer. 30:22; Ezek. 36:28)
 - the binding of this people to Himself is an act of grace which conveys great blessing for it is the means by which God intends to dwell with man and have fellowship with Him. (Lev. 26:11,12; Ezek. 37:27; Ezek. 43:7; John 1:14; John 14:23; 2 Co. 6:16; Rev. 21:3,4)
- The Covenant promise to create a people unto Himself among whom He will dwell is ultimately to be fulfilled in glory but it is typologically signified and temporally manifested in the present age through the covenant "dispensations" God has variously instituted throughout Biblical history.
 - The Adamic covenant promised a savior who would destroy the work of salvation though a great expense to Himself. (Gen. 3:15)
 - The Abrahamic covenant promised a seed through whom the nations would be blessed. (Gen. 12:3)
 - The Mosaic covenant promised a prophet greater than Moses whom the people would hear (Deut. 18:15)
 - The Davidic covenant promised a king who would reign on the throne of David forever (2 Sam. 7:12-16)
 - The New Covenant foreseen by Jeremiah promised that the people of God would have the law of God written on their hearts and be taught by God Himself (Jer. 31:31-34)
 - All of which covenants were fulfilled in Jesus Christ who revealed the nature of the True Israel which constitutes His Church (John 4:23-24; Acts 2:14-36)

¹¹WCF 28:4 - *those that do actually profess faith... (and) ... infants of ... believing parents **are** to be baptized.* (Emphasis added)

¹² See Morton H. Smith, **The Church And Covenant Theology**, *JETS* 21:1 (March 1978) p. 47-65 for an excellent overview of the doctrine of the Covenant, particularly for his development of the church as the spiritual commonwealth of Christ. With relation to infant baptism, Smith states (p. 57) *The inclusion of the children as citizens in the commonwealth of Christ is much like that of the citizen of a nation. By virtue of birth a child born in America, for example, is a citizen of the United States, and yet he may not exercise all the rights of that citizenship until he has reached maturity. So also with God's people. The children of believers have the right to the covenant sign, even though they have not yet come to their own faith. ... The covenant theologian sees this sign of the covenant continued in the NT in baptism, which carries the same basic meaning as circumcision*

- The identification of the temporal people of God, the visible Church, through whom God would manifest His power was by distinction from the rest of the world (Exod. 8:23)
 - From Adam until Abraham the separateness of God's people was through specific descendants of Adam (Seth, Noah, Shem, Terah, etc.)
 - From Abraham until Jesus, the separateness was through the circumcision. (Gen. 17:10-11)
 - From Jesus' incarnation until His return in glory, the separateness is through baptism. (Col. 2:11-15)
- Since the temporal covenants made with the visible Church are expressive of the eternal covenant revealed by God's decree, the covenants are unified and express the same truth.
 - The signs of the covenants are unified in their signification
 - The members of the covenants are unified in their eternal inheritance
- Thus (Col. 2:11-15) circumcision and baptism, during the time of their individual dispensations, signify one and the same eternal truth and their application is to one and the same people, the Israel of God. (Eph. 2:11-18)
- Children, born of covenant parents, are themselves members of the covenant, heirs of the covenant promises of God, and are to be distinguished by the sign of the covenant, rightfully applied. (Gen. 17:10-11; 1 Cor. 7:14; cf. Acts 2:39)

Infant Baptism is Essential to the Unity of the Reformed Faith (fundamental to the system of doctrine contained in the Standards of the PCA)

Granted this survey of the Scriptural basis for the Reformed view of Infant Baptism, the question now is whether or not it is essential to the overall system.

By way of precedent, the Presbyterian Church in America has ruled (Bowen vs. Eastern Carolina Presbytery, case 90-8, attached for reference) that such is indeed the case.

Since the theme of the Covenant is so essential to the entire system of doctrine, it follows that the doctrines pertaining to Baptism as the sign and seal of admission to the covenant is (sic) also an essential doctrine. To seek to separate the issue of the baptism of infants from the remainder of the doctrines of baptism and of the covenant would have the affect of removing the place of children from being in the church and from being heirs of the promises of God. This would, of course, be inappropriate and unBiblical. It is for these reasons that Infant Baptism must be considered as a 'fundamental of the system of doctrine.'

The line of reasoning set forth in this ruling builds upon the centrality and unity of the temporal covenants established between God and man and the necessity for the signs of those covenants to be unified in their expression of the eternal covenant of Grace. We will not repeat here the arguments advanced by the SJC but any interested party will find them quite helpful, especially in the three categories of doctrines which ~~is~~ are presented there.

However, building upon the premises expressed above (Prolegomena) further arguments can be advanced beyond that rendered in the Bowen Case. It can be argued that the doctrine and practice of infant baptism must be embraced in order for the visible church to manifest the fullness of God's sovereign purpose and decree.

God's decree has ever entailed the intent to build a people unto Himself by ordinary generation (Gen. 1:28; Gen. 12; Gen. 17, etc. etc.). Jesus considered covenant children to have an extraordinary advantage with regard to access to the Father (Matthew 18:1-11). The promises extended to those converted to the faith were also extended to the children who would come after them (Acts 2:39). Thus, it should be readily acknowledged, that God intends for the ordinary progress of His Kingdom

to be advanced through the birth and rearing of godly children (1 Cor. 7:14) who will, in due time, embrace Him as their Lord and King and establish godly households in which further godly children will be reared. This is not to diminish the necessity for conversion of those outside the covenant. It is only to emphasize that to which they are to be converted! Obedience to the Gospel of Christ means exercising headship and authority over the family which God has provided to the husband and wife such that their rearing of children reflects the promise of God's grace. The Gospel is not just concerned with individual relationships between Jesus and a convert. It is concerned with the corporate relationships that define and establish that person's witness to the world about him or her. Thus, the call of the Gospel is to individuals and those under their covenant authority and its promises are embodied in that entire range of relationships.

Now, as can be readily understood, a church which embraces and proclaims this gospel will differ in a fundamental manner from a church whose proclamation is the weakened and beggarly call to just an individual relation to Christ. If an attempt is made to explain away this deficiency by pointing to the new relationships within the visible church and proclaiming that these relations now form the "household and family of God" for Christians, even to the point of using Jesus' words about his mother and brothers to establish it (Matthew 12:48-49), yet, upon inspection, we find this to be contrary to the wider analogy of Scripture. God did not institute families among His people so that they may somehow be subordinated to the covenant relations a person has with other Christians. Gen. 2:24 clearly establishes the priority of a new family relation among His people even above that of relation to parents.

A church whose priority for baptism is for that of conversion of adult unbelievers will necessarily be defective in its witness to God's promises to families and will institute an unbiblical distinction between professing adults and their children. This degrades the gospel, undermines faith in God's sovereign control over the lives of offspring, and obscures the witness of God's power in blessing His people through prospering their families in their succeeding generations.

This analysis is readily established by inspection of the creeds of Reformed Baptist Church.¹³ Though this creed professes to be fully Reformed (and it is with regard to soteriology) yet its limited view of Baptism strips its confession of power with regard to covenant children and reduces the church membership to individuals rather than families.

From the 1689 London Baptist Confession:

(Chap. 26: 6 of the Church) The members of these churches are saints by calling, visibly manifesting and evidencing (in and by their profession and walking) their obedience unto that call of Christ; and do willingly consent to walk together, according to the appointment of Christ; giving up themselves to the Lord, and one to another, by the will of God, in professed subjection to the ordinances of the Gospel.

This view of the church is integrally related to the view of baptism:

(Chap. 29:2 of Baptism) Those who do actually profess repentance towards God, faith in, and obedience to, our Lord Jesus Christ, are the only proper subjects of this ordinance.

The inherently contradictory nature of the underlying theology in this confession is immediately recognized in its statement about elect infants.

(Chap. 10:3 of Effectual Calling) Elect infants dying in infancy are regenerated and saved by Christ through the Spirit; who worketh when, and where, and how he pleases; so also are all

¹³For a detailed refutation see http://www.the-highway.com/InfantBaptism_Warfield.html, **The Polemics of Infant Baptism** by B. B. Warfield

elect persons, who are incapable of being outwardly called by the ministry of the Word.

Here we see the possibility of elect infants or other children being saved, who are incapable of being called to faith by the Word of God, yet those same infants and children are denied the sign and seal of the promise of God which alone gives them any hope of this very salvation. The contradiction is manifest. The sovereignty of God in election is indelibly tied to His covenant and the seals of that covenant should be applied to all who may benefit from it. Therefore we must conclude, that even the so called Reformed Baptist view held by Charles Spurgeon and others, though commendable above other deviations from the Gospel of Jesus Christ, yet still is such a deviation and fails to conform to a full orb'd confession of the Reformed Faith.

Conclusion

The Scriptural emphasis on "Covenant" as the means by which God has revealed His salvic intentions for His people requires a comprehensive view of Covenantal signs be taken by those who benefit from it. The practice of infant baptism must be properly understood and adopted if one is to fully appreciate the full scope and implications of God's Covenantal dealings with man.