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ST 3021

November 10, 2003

Responding to the Evangelicals' Rejection of Infant Baptism

Evangelicals¹ believe that the baptizing of infants is wrong, and they are able to make persuasive arguments for why the practice is unscriptural. It should also be noted that Evangelicals are very sincere in their efforts to do away with infant baptism. They see the practice as an abomination before God, and they want nothing more than to glorify him and have fellow Christians do the same. But the truth of the matter is that infant baptism is scriptural, and it glorifies God because it is a means by which he brings infants and very young children to faith in Christ.² Since the baptism of infants is so important, a purpose for this paper is to set forth responses³ to the Evangelicals' claims against paedobaptism⁴. More importantly, the main goal of this work is to point out to the Evangelicals that the underlying reason why they deny infant baptism is due to their synergistic viewpoint.⁵

The biggest claim Evangelicals have made against infant baptism is that "the act of baptism conveys no direct spiritual benefit or blessing. In particular, we are not regenerated

¹ The term "Evangelicals" will be used to refer to all who deny infant baptism. Such people in the past have been referred to as "Anabaptists" or "Antipaedobaptists." The term "Evangelicals" is fitting to use in this pursuit because the majority of people who deny infant baptism today identify themselves as "Evangelicals."

² Baptism is not the only way for a child to come to faith. Faith in an infant also can come by means of God's word (e.g. Perhaps John the Baptist; Luke 1:44). Nor does the baptism of an infant ensure that the child will not reject the blessings of baptism because of his or her sinful nature. However, baptism is "a means" because God himself attaches a promise to the sacrament that by it the "washing of rebirth" (faith in Christ for the forgiveness of sins) comes from the Spirit to the baptized individual (cf. Titus 3:5).

³ This work will not address the claims which Evangelicals have made against those who support infant baptism but have a wrong understanding of it (e.g. Beliefs that declare baptism to be work-righteousness, salvation apart from faith, salvation for infants through the faith of the parents/church members, or a retained salvation for one who afterwards parts from Christ and never returns.)

⁴ Infant baptism

⁵ Synergism is the false teaching that "man can and must contribute something positive, be it ever so little, towards his conversion, and unless he does so, he cannot be converted. Synergism is a false teaching, resulting from attempts to explain why some are converted, while others remain unconverted" (Koehler 123).

through baptism” (Erickson 1105). In other words, Evangelicals believe baptism, especially infant baptism, has no power to convert.⁶

As the previous footnote shows, there are, however, passages that talk about the power of baptism. One of the most convincing is found in 1 Peter 3:21; “And this water symbolizes baptism which saves you also – not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”⁷ Such passages refute this first claim of Evangelicals by showing that God has attached power to baptism.

Another claim Evangelicals put forth against infant baptism is that “infant baptism is not in Scripture” (MacArthur). By this statement they mean that there are no examples of infant baptism in the Bible.⁸ The logic in their objection is faulty because false claims of an equal nature can be made. For instance, a specific example of a woman taking the Lord’s Supper is not found in Scripture. Does that mean God forbids woman communion? Just because there is not an instance of an infant’s baptism *mentioned* in Scripture does not mean that God forbids the practice. A different way to reply to this claim would be to simply say, “Scripture nowhere explicitly forbids the baptism of infants.”

One of the better ways to answer this objection and any objection against the practice of infant baptism is found in Christ’s command for the baptism of all people in Matthew 28:19; “Go and make disciples of *all nations*, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of

⁶ Evangelicals deny the following: Baptism brings recipient into union with God: Mt 28:19; Ro 6:3; 1 Cor 1:13; Ga 3:27. It brings salvation: Mk 16:16; Ac 16:30–33. Repentance: Mk 1:4; Lk 3:3; Ac 13:24; 19:4. Regeneration: Jn 3:5; Tt 3:5. The forgiveness of sins: Ac 2:38; 22:16; Eph 5:26. A good conscience: 1 Pe 3:21. Mt 28:19; Jn 3:5; Tt 3:5; 1 Pe 3:21; Ro 6:3–14; It puts on Christ: Ga 3:26,27. It connects us to all the saints: 1 Cor 12:13 (WLS 64, 71). This objection stems from synergism which is discussed in more detail later.

⁷ All Scripture references are from the New International Version unless otherwise stated.

⁸ Concerning infant baptism in the Scriptures: There are no specific instances, but Christ’s command to baptize is broad enough for the baptism of infants: Mt 28:19; Mk 16:15,16. He did not qualify His words to exclude anyone as in other places: 1 Cor 11:28. His instructions were complete: Ac 1:4–9. Christ welcomed little children: Mt 10:13–16; Lk 18:15–17; Mt 18:1–6,10; 21:15,16; Ps 8:2. And infant baptism probably occurred in the following instances: Ac 2:38,39;10:48; 11:14;16:15,33; 1 Cor 1:16 (WLS 67-68).

the Holy Spirit.” The words “all nations” is proof enough for the baptism of young children because the phrase “all nations” is all-inclusive.⁹

Another argument against infant baptism to which Evangelicals often appeal is the history of paedobaptism: “Catholicism built its power this way: back in the 4th century, Constantine takes over (325 AD); he makes Christianity the state religion and starts to persecute the people who aren’t Christians—this is kind of a switch. It feels good for the Christians for a while, but pretty soon it’s serious” (MacArthur). Later on “in the year 416 infant baptism was made compulsory throughout the Roman Empire by law. This, of course, filled the churches with unconverted members who had only been ‘baptized into favor,’ and whatever power the church had retained was now gone” (Pettingill).¹⁰

How does one answer their objection from history? Just bring up more history. Schmeling, a proponent of infant baptism, writes concerning the early history of the practice; “The early church fathers, such as Irenaeus (about AD 115-202), Hippolytus (170-236), and Origen (185-254), were familiar with infant baptism and regarded it as an apostolic practice. No one in the first four centuries ever argued that infant baptism was not the established historic practice from the apostles” (Schmeling 80).¹¹

A fourth claim against the practice of infant baptism is a response to paedobaptists who believe that baptism is a replacement for circumcision which was a visible gospel able to bring about faith. John McArthur says, “It (infant baptism) is not a replacement sign for the

⁹ Evangelicals may claim that Jesus is commanding a baptism of people who are already his disciples, but with the participle “baptizing” (βαπτίζοντες) Jesus is pointing out the means by which people become disciples. It parallels “teaching” (διδάσκοντες) which is another participle denoting another means by which people become disciples.

¹⁰ Surprisingly Lutzer, an Evangelical, shows that infant baptism is dated previous to 325. “With the rise of sacramentalism (which according to Lutzer arose in the late second century, page 85) ... it seemed logical to administer them (the sacraments) to infants as well as adults” (Lutzer 119). The fact that MacArthur and Pettingill ignore some important historical facts shows that people who are passionate about proving their case can become blind to the facts for their purpose.

¹¹ Both claims are evidence that history is seen differently by people standing at opposite viewpoints.

Abrahamic sign of circumcision.” His reason is that “infant baptism perpetuates the same thing it did in Israel. You had a whole bunch of circumcised kids who didn’t know God. Now, we have a whole bunch of baptized babies who don’t know God either.¹² If we’re going to carry that over, we get the same result” (MacArthur). There are a number of other reasons¹³ Evangelicals will bring up about why parallels should not be drawn between circumcision and baptism.

All their objections concerning the connection between circumcision and baptism can be refuted by stressing to the Evangelicals the fact that paedobaptists were not the first ones to come up with a connection between circumcision and baptism. God did. Pieper says, “Colossians 2:11-12¹⁴ states that Baptism has supplanted the Old Testament Sacrament of Circumcision. It is therefore the means of grace for children” (Pieper 277). Not only does Pieper point out that there is a connection between the two, he rightly emphasizes the truth about baptism found in Colossians 2:11-12. Baptism is a means of grace and not just an outward act.

A fifth claim made against paedobaptism states that the baptism found in the pages of the New Testament is not infant baptism. “What is in the Bible is Christian baptism... Christian baptism is this: somebody believes as an adult, they repent of their sin, they confess Jesus as Lord, they acknowledge Him as Savior, they are saved, then they are baptized. That is New Testament Christian baptism. It’s definitive. It’s meaning is clear...” (MacArthur). John Piper sums up the Evangelical view this way; “In every New Testament command and instance of

¹² Scriptural paedobaptists share MacArthur’s concern, but they do not claim that once an infant is baptized he will go to heaven even if the person becomes an unbeliever.

¹³ (e.g. “Why institute a new sign? ... Why baptize those who have been circumcised? ... Why draw a parallel to what Paul condemned in Galatians?” – George Welty.)

¹⁴ Colossians 2:11-12 “In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.”

baptism repentance and faith precede baptism.”¹⁵

For some reason Evangelicals believe that Christians who hold to infant baptism cannot hold to the Biblical teaching that adults are to be disciples before baptism and that faith and repentance must be present to receive the benefits which baptism offers. Orthodox paedobaptists believe this. “From Acts 2:41; 8:26-40; 10:47-48 we learn that adults were first instructed; hence we do likewise. These people are not converted or made disciples by Baptism; they are such by faith in Christ, which they confess before their Baptism (Acts 8:37)” (Koehler 206). The question then is asked, “Why do paedobaptists not hold infants to the same requirement of adults?”

Doctor Martin Luther has answered this objection as well as every objection to infant baptism when he wrote in his Large Catechism, “We carry the child to the font with the purpose and the hope that he may believe, and we pray that God would give him faith,¹⁶ but it is not on the strength of that purpose, that hope, or that expected creation of faith in the child that we baptize the child, but simply because God has commanded it” (Janzow 106).

In this answer Doctor Martin Luther professes the Scriptural truth that baptism is powerful and effective to create faith - even in infants - as Titus 3:5b declares, “He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.” Since Titus 3:5b can refer only to the one washing our Lord has commanded us which is baptism and since the “righteous shall live by faith” as Paul says in Romans 1:17, we understand that the Spirit is able to work faith through the baptism of infants. However, Luther says that though we pray that the Lord would

¹⁵ It is true that the benefits of baptism cannot be received unless the faith and repentance are present. But does the lack of ability to express faith, repentance, and confession of Jesus in an adult fashion mean that faith, repentance and confession are not present in an infant before baptism or by it?

¹⁶ With an adult one can very easily find out if he or she rejects Christ or is ignorant of him. In either case which is proven by their confession baptism is forbidden. With an infant it is impossible to find out how he or she views Christ, thus we baptize for the scriptural reason Luther puts forth.

do what he promises in baptism, we do not baptize infants for that reason. We baptize simply because the Lord has commanded us to baptize in Matthew 28:19, “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” As previously mentioned, all nations include infants.

Though the answer from Luther should put the matter of infant baptism to rest, the Evangelicals explain away the scriptural support. As a result, Evangelicals continue to reject infant baptism. What is the real reason why they seek to disprove infant baptism which the Bible teaches? Pieper answered this question when he wrote, “At the bottom of the opposition to infant Baptism is usually the singular notion that adults indeed can believe, but not children” (Pieper 277). In other words, Evangelicals are synergists.¹⁷ They believe that they had some involvement with their conversion. Consider the following remarks from Evangelicals as they discuss why they reject infant baptism. Notice how all these rejections stem from and show evidence of a synergistic mindset.

In refuting infant baptism John MacArthur pretends as if he is in a discussion with Martin Luther. His dialogue follows:

(MacArthur asks Luther,) “How is that (an infant’s faith) possible?” (Luther says,) “The Holy Spirit helps them to believe... The Holy Spirit comes to the child in the holy baptism. By this bath of regeneration, He is richly poured out upon us...”
 (MacArthur answers,) “In any case, it is not what the gospel is about, which is personal¹⁸ faith, right? The great mark of the Reformation was salvation by faith alone accompanied by personal repentance! A baby can’t do that. A baby doesn’t

¹⁷ Once again, synergism is the false teaching that “man can and must contribute something positive, be it ever so little, towards his conversion, and unless he does so, he cannot be converted. Synergism is a false teaching, resulting from attempts to explain why some are converted, while others remain unconverted” (Koehler 123).

¹⁸ The word “personal” is a key word to express the active role a person takes in conversion. It is found throughout the writings of many Evangelicals, and it is one expression among many which reveals their synergism.

have any faith.¹⁹ A baby doesn't have any part in baptism. It's no different than circumcision; a baby didn't have any part in circumcision. In fact, if you'd asked him, he'd probably vote against it. Baptizing a baby has no spiritual meaning to that baby..." They (paedobaptists) got into a confounded viewpoint that somehow faith, and grace, and salvation, and regeneration, and entrance into the church is all dumped into that little baby at the point of which water's dumped on his head. It has nothing to do with the gospel of faith (John MacArthur).

The preceding quotations simply emphasize the fact that Evangelicals are thoroughly infected with this false teaching of synergism. J. Rodman Williams says, "There is no suggestion that this faith and baptism (of believing households in the New Testament) encompassed children too young to believe... 'All' in his household (Jailer at Philippi; Acts 16:32) heard and believed and were baptized in connection with their own personal faith. Infants obviously were not included" (Williams 230). The striking phrases "too young to believe," "personal faith," and "not included" once again reveal the Evangelicals' belief that conversion involves an intellectual act of the will by the individual's own power.²⁰

Even the theologians of Evangelicals who claim to be Calvinistic in theology have fallen into synergism: "In the Great Commission, the command to baptize follows the command to disciple (Matt. 28:19).²¹ John the Baptist required repentance of confession of sin (Matt. 3:2, 6). In the conclusion of his Pentecost sermon, Peter called for repentance, then baptism (Acts 2:37-

¹⁹ Infants are in need of salvation (Psalm 51:5). If infants cannot have faith, how is an infant saved since the Bible simply declares that salvation comes through faith alone (Romans 3:20-21) in Christ alone (Acts 4:12)? Baier comments on the seriousness of baptism in light of the Holy Scriptures: "Those [concerning] whom it is the will of Christ that they should come to salvation, but who cannot come to life in the ordinary way except by means of baptism, ought to have baptism, as the ordinary way conferred on them. It surely should not be denied to them. But Christ wants infants to be saved. But they cannot come to eternal life in any other ordinary way than by means of baptism (by virtue of the universal dictum [found] in John 3:5)" (WLS 68).

²⁰ Throughout Williams' section on infant baptism one finds references to synergism with phrases like "personal faith," "active faith," "responsible decision of faith," "personal response," "response of repentance and faith," "actively believe," "saving faith is more than a seed," "personal, conscious, even heartfelt faith," and "conscious decision" (Williams 230-235).

²¹ Once again, βαπτίζοντες the participle for baptize in Matthew 28:19 is a participle of means. It is not a command, but it is Jesus' way of telling his disciples how they will make disciples – by baptizing them and teaching them. This construction actually gives support for infant baptism.

41). Belief followed by baptism is the pattern in Acts 9:21; 18:8; and 19:1-7. All these considerations lead to the conclusion that responsible believers are the only people who are to be baptized” (Erickson 1106).²²

Grudem comes to the same conclusion as Erickson. He says, “Infants have not yet come to saving faith or given any evidence of regeneration” (Grudem 970). However, in his footnote attached to this very sentence Grudem says, “This is not to argue that no infants can be regenerated...” (Grudem 970). There is a contradiction here. In one breath Grudem says that infants have no faith and have not been regenerated. In the following breath he says that it is possible that an infant can be born again. Infants can either be born again or they cannot. Both cannot be true, and the consequences for the two possibilities follow: If infants cannot be reborn, then they are all damned which no Evangelical will ever say. Therefore, the Evangelicals must conclude that infants can be reborn as Grudem permits. If infants can be born again why not through baptism as the Lord has decreed through Paul; “for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ” (Galatians 3:27)? By chance, if Evangelicals should claim that infants are already born again, then they must believe that infants are disciples and are to be baptized.

Finally, when it comes to infant baptism the question is not really whether or not infants should be baptized. The question behind it all is really – How does conversion happen? Does man have a part in it, or does God do it all? (In the author’s opinion, these are the best questions to ask in response to any objection an Evangelical puts forth concerning infant baptism.) If one

²² He later on summarizes his point by saying “all of the individuals involved (in the baptisms in the Bible) had reached an age of understanding and responsibility” (Erickson 1112). J. Rodman Williams also appeals to an age of accountability; “It is far better to say that even as Jesus blessed the infant children by taking them into his arms, if they die before an age of accountability, He will apply His saving work...” (Williams 235). It is interesting that on the one hand Evangelicals claim infant baptism has no Scriptural support and on the other hand hold to the false doctrine of the age of accountability which is brought up in Scripture as often as they say an example of an infant’s baptism can be found.

answers that a person must play a part in his own conversion then infant baptism must be false. If one answers that God works conversion by grace alone just as salvation is worked by grace alone, then infant baptism presents no problem. Since the Bible is our only authority, it alone must tell us the agent(s) involved in conversion, and the Bible is not silent on this matter. “The Bible teaches that human beings can do nothing but resist and oppose God by nature. The Bible says that we cannot contribute to our own conversion.⁽²³⁾ Human beings are purely passive” (Brenner 62).²⁴

At the beginning of the paper there is a mention about how Evangelicals are sincere in their belief that infant baptism is wrong. As one approaches an Evangelical on the topic of infant baptism, this should be kept in mind. A response in love which focuses on the discussion of their unscriptural synergistic viewpoint should dominate the conversation, not the topic of infant baptism. In seeing their error, they will understand the truth about infant baptism and ultimately receive divine comfort from the baptizing of their own children. Just as important, they will see the truth about their own conversion. God-willing, absolute certainty of their salvation will follow.

²³ Romans 8:7 “The sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so.” 1 Corinthians 12:3 “Therefore I tell you that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, “Jesus be cursed,” and no one can say, “Jesus is Lord,” except by the Holy Spirit” (NIV).

²⁴ “Does that mean then that God coerces the unbeliever? ... God doesn’t force sinners; he draws them to himself. He makes the unwilling willing... ‘I will give them a heart to know me, that I am the LORD. They will be my people, and I will be their God, for they will return to me with all their heart’ (Jeremiah 24:7)” (Brenner 62-63).

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