Why I’m Not a Baptist!

Personal reflections on the coherence of Scripture’s teaching on children in the covenant.

*Written by G. I. Williamson | Thursday, November 12, 2015*

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*When I was a student of theology at Pittsburgh-Xenia Seminary over half a century ago I wondered why God did not inspire one of his apostles to settle this issue once and for all with a simple statement — one way or the other — either that ‘children of believers are to be baptized,’ or ‘children of believers are not to be baptized.’ But I now realize that this was no mistake but quite the opposite.*

In writing this brief statement I want to begin by saying that one of my good friends in the wider Reformed orbit is a Baptist! And I’m very grateful for the testimony and influence of those who, like this brother, call themselves Reformed Baptists. The things we share are things of the highest importance, especially our firm belief in the absolute authority and complete sufficiency of Scripture.

I can also understand how personal experience can influence people in a Baptistic direction. When I was serving with the Reformed Churches of New Zealand I occasionally received a phone call from a stranger. The conversation went something like this.

Caller: ‘Hello, I’m calling to ask if we can have our baby ‘done.’

My response: ‘Do you mean that you want to have your infant baptized?’

Caller: ‘Yes, we want christening in other words.’

I would then suggest that we meet so that I could explain the meaning of baptism and the responsibility of the parents, etc.’ At that point the phone call would usually come to an abrupt end. After all, they only wanted to ‘have the baby done.’

If that was all there is to the meaning of infant baptism then I, too, would be tempted to join the Baptists. But that is not all there is to it. When I was a student of theology at Pittsburgh-Xenia Seminary over half a century ago I wondered why God did not inspire one of his apostles to settle this issue once and for all with a simple statement — one way or the other — either that ‘children of believers are to be baptized,’ or ‘children of believers are not to be baptized.’

But I now realize that this was no mistake but quite the opposite. It was exactly what God intended. Why? So that we would be forced to study the whole counsel of God as it is revealed in the whole Bible, and then come to a firm conclusion. For, as Westminster Confession of Faith 1.6 says, “The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man’s salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men.” I think of this as the necessity for coherence. Where God has not spoken ‘in so many words’ I must do some thinking. And if my line of thinking on a certain issue keeps bumping up against (coming into conflict with) other things clearly stated in the Bible, then I need to rethink the whole question.

So let me mention some of the things that I would find incoherent if I were to accept the Baptist way of thinking. Paul, having been driven out of Thessalonica, came to Berea and entered (as usual) the Jewish Synagogue. But wonder of wonders! These people were of a better character than those of the Jewish Synagogue in Thessalonia. They were willing to listen to Paul and to compare everything he said with their inspired scripture. And those inspired writings were what we call ‘the Old Testament.’ And guess what! They found that everything that Paul taught them was in line with that Old Testament teaching. So it cannot be true that Paul told them that their children would no longer be recognized as members of their parents congregation (or Synagogue) when they became a Christian church.

I see the same coherence problem on the very day of Pentecost when Peter said to that large crowd of Jews “the promise is to you and your children.” If Peter had gone on to explain that this promise no longer included membership of the children of believers in the covenant community with their parents, I’m not able to believe that all those Jewish people that day would have been willing to become Christians.

There was plenty of controversy about the whole idea that circumcision was no longer required in order to belong to God’s covenant people. That issue even had to be settled in a first General Assembly. Therefore to imagine that removal of believers children from membership in a church (like the synagogue that became a church in Berea) could have been accepted without a ripple is, in my opinion, simply not credible.

There was conflict enough when the external sign and seal of the covenant was changed from circumcision to baptism. It is simply impossible for me to believe that there could have been an even more momentous change in the internal meaning without an even greater conflict. That children, for the first time in history, could be demoted in this way without immediate controversy is simply unthinkable. And yet that is what I would have to believe if I were to become a Baptist.

I also see the same coherence problem in what Paul said to the Philippian jailer. When he was asked what he needed to do to be saved Paul said “believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved”—but then immediately added—”you and your household!” My own study of the use and meaning of those words “your household” in the Old Testament (and Hebrews 11:7) compels me again to remain Presbyterian! The day that a man (who is the spiritual leader and head of his family) becomes a true believer, everything changes not only for him but also for those under his authority and his teaching. Of course it doesn’t mean that there will ‘automatically’ be salvation for his children. Nothing is automatic in the Christian religion. But from day one the promise of eternal life to everyone who becomes a believer is front and center for all of his children. They hear it incessantly and urgently. Not so the children of unbelievers.

Unbelieving Jews accused Paul of being guilty of heresy, but he rejected their accusation insisting that they could not prove “what they now bring up against me.” In fact, the very opposite was the case for “according to the way, which they call a sect (Greek ai., resin) I worship the God of our fathers, believing everything laid down by the law and written in the Prophets” (Acts 24:14-15). I see this constantly in the writings of Paul (and in the other inspired New Testament writers). They constantly prove their New Testament doctrine from the Old Testament Scriptures. Indeed they even refer to New Testament things by using Old Testament language. We have our Passover in Christ (1 Cor. 5:7). We are circumcised in our baptism (Col. 2:11). This being true I can see no valid reason that there is any essential change in the place of the children of believers in the church of Jesus Christ. After all, as Paul once put the basic issue, in another slightly different context, that “which came 430 years afterward, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to make the promise void” (Gal. 3:17).

The more I read from even the best Reformed Baptist sources the more I’m impressed with the lack of an interpretation that removes incoherence. I also wonder why Baptists allow women to partake of the Lord’s Supper, since the conclusion that they should be admitted rests on the same valid principle that I have cited from the Westminster Confession of Faith 1.6.

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