

THE SECOND LONDON CONFESSION ON BAPTISM (Part II):

The Proper Subjects of Christian Baptism

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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 (2nd LCF 29.2).

We already have anticipated the doctrine of this paragraph in our treatment of paragraph one.¹ There we saw that the significance of Christian baptism presupposes that the spiritual realities signified by the ordinance exist prior to the administration of the ordinance. Since this is the case, baptism cannot be a sign to any who have not experienced the spiritual realities which the ordinance signifies. Baptism is legitimate only for those who already have fellowship with Christ in his death and resurrection, who have been engrafted into him, whose sins have been remitted, and who personally have committed themselves to live and walk in newness of life.

The present paragraph (2nd LCF 29:2), which takes up the question of the proper subjects of Christian baptism, is perfectly consistent with what baptism signifies. “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.”

Once again (as with the opening paragraph of this chapter of our Confession), we may understand our Confession’s doctrine best by comparing it with the doctrine found in the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF), for at this point our Confession’s statement consciously was crafted to deny what is claimed by the WCF. On the question of the proper subjects of baptism, the WCF says, “Not only those who do actually profess faith in and obedience unto Christ, but also the infants of one or both believing parents, are to be baptized” (28.4). In what follows, first we will examine the exegetical basis of the WCF statement, and then consider the exegetical basis of our Confession’s statement.

Genesis 17:7, 9-10, The Abrahamic Covenant, and Paedobaptism

On what basis do our paedobaptist brethren rest their case for infant baptism? The answer is that the Scripture proof for infant baptism offered by the WCF contains several kinds of texts (as we will see); but cited first is Gen. 17:7, 9-10, which contains the command to Abraham to circumcise his children. This text is cited first not because (among the texts cited) it appears first in the Bible, for the WCF does not cite its Scripture proofs according to biblical order (cf., e.g., WCF 28.6), but because it is the foundation text of the paedobaptist argument for infant baptism. And that this is the case may easily be seen from the way paedobaptists treat the subject. For example, John Murray says:

The argument for infant baptism rests upon the recognition that God’s redemptive action and revelation in this world are covenantal. In a word, redemptive action is covenant action and redemptive revelation is covenant revelation. Embedded in this covenantal action of God is the principle that the infant seed of believers are embraced with their parents in the covenant relation and provision. It is this method of God’s administration of grace in the world that must be

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¹Robert P. Martin, “The Second London Confession on Baptism (Part 1): The Significance of Christian Baptism.” *Reformed Baptist Theological Review* (January 2005): 36-55.

appreciated. It belongs to the New Testament as well as to the Old. It is its presence and significance that grounds infant baptism.²

Later Prof. Murray is even more specific, saying, “The basic premise of the argument for infant baptism is that the New Testament economy is the unfolding and fulfilment of the covenant made with Abraham.”³ In the same vein, citing the confessional standards of his own church (i.e., the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort), Louis Berkhof says, “It will be observed that all these statements are based on the commandment of God to circumcise the children of the covenant, for in the last analysis that commandment is the ground of infant baptism.”⁴

The manner of arguing from Genesis 17 (and from the Abrahamic Covenant) may be expressed in the following statements, taken from Murray:

1. “The argument in support of infant baptism is based upon the essential unity and continuity of the covenant grace administered to Abraham, unfolded in the Mosaic and Davidic covenants, and attaining its highest fruition in the new covenant. . . . So it is proper and necessary to say that the new covenant is the fulfilment and unfolding of the Abrahamic covenant (cf. Gal. 3:15-17).”
2. “The covenant made with Abraham included the infant seed, and was signified and sealed by circumcision administered by divine command (Gen. 17:9-14).”
3. “Since the infant seed of the faithful were embraced in the covenant relation, and there is no indication that this feature of covenant administration has been abrogated under the new covenant, the conclusion derived from the unity and continuity of covenant grace is that the same privilege belongs to the infant seed of believers under the new covenant.”
4. In addition, there is the evidence showing the continuance of this principle (Matt. 19:13, 14; Acts 2:38, 39; 16:15, 33, 34; 1 Cor. 1:16; 1 Cor. 7:14; Eph. 6:1, 4; Col. 3:20, 21).”
5. “These considerations are the ground for the propriety and validity of infant baptism.”⁵

How shall we respond to the arguments by which Prof. Murray supports infant baptism from the covenant with Abraham? We agree that “it is proper and necessary to say that the new covenant is the fulfilment and unfolding of the Abrahamic covenant (cf. Gal. 3:15-17).” This is evident from the text cited, along with its context (cf., Gal. 3:6-29; 4:28-29). That the New Covenant established by Jesus Christ is the present administration of the Abrahamic Covenant is beyond question. Not only does this fact alone explain the way that Paul argues in Galatians (for

²John Murray, *Christian Baptism* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co., 1977), 2.

³*Ibid.*, 48.

⁴Louis Berkof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1941), 638.

⁵John Murray, “Baptism,” in *Collected Writings* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), 2:374. Berkof (*Systematic Theology*, 632-634, italics his) argues in essentially the same way:

“The covenant made with Abraham was primarily a *spiritual* covenant, though it also had a national aspect, and of this spiritual covenant circumcision was a sign and seal.”

“This covenant is still in force and is essentially identical with the ‘new covenant’ of the present dispensation.”

“By the appointment of God infants shared in the benefits of the covenant, and therefore received circumcision as a sign and seal.”

In the new dispensation baptism is by divine authority substituted for circumcision as the initiatory sign and seal of the covenant of grace. . . . But if children received the sign and seal of the covenant in the old dispensation, the presumption is that they surely have a right to receive it in the new, to which the pious of the Old Testament were taught to look forward as a much fuller and richer dispensation.”

if believers are “Abraham’s seed,” then the covenant with Abraham in some sense must still be in effect) but also it underlies Paul’s arguments in Romans 4 and Romans 9-11, as well as justifies his referring to the church of Jesus Christ as “the Israel of God” (Gal. 6:16) and to believers in Christ (whether Jew or Gentile) as “the circumcision” (Phil. 3:3; cf., Rom. 2:28-29) who are no longer “alienated from the commonwealth of Israel” (Eph. 2:11-13; cf., 2:19; 3:6). But while we recognize continuity between the Abrahamic and New Covenants, we also must recognize diversity between them, for we cannot place an equals sign between them as though they are identical. The simple fact that we no longer are obliged to circumcise our sons indicates that there is more to the story than “the essential unity and continuity” of the Abrahamic and New Covenants.

The New Covenant brought with it certain changes in the Abrahamic Covenant (even as the Mosaic Covenant had done). In many things the Abrahamic and New Covenants are the same—the New Testament makes this plain—we readily admit this; however, in some things they are different, and we know this also from the testimony of the New Testament. But when Prof. Murray says, “The argument in support of infant baptism is based upon the essential unity and continuity of the covenant grace administered to Abraham, unfolded in the Mosaic and Davidic covenants, and attaining its highest fruition in the new covenant,” he ignores this. It is the differences between the Abrahamic and New Covenants which make his conclusion impossible, their “essential unity and continuity” notwithstanding. And what chief difference makes his conclusion impossible? It is the difference in the identity of the “seed of Abraham.”

The Abrahamic Covenant first was established with Abraham at Haran, and then progressively revealed in conjunction with the major incidents of his life. Under the terms of this covenant, God promised Abraham three things—seed, land, and blessing. When we come to the New Testament, these promises remain; but they are not described in precisely the same way as they are in the Old Testament. Let’s consider these promises one at a time—in the order (1) the land, (2) the blessing, and (3) the seed promised.

1. The Promised Land

The promised land is Canaan (cf., Gen. 12:5-7; 13:14-17; 15:7-8, 18; 17:8). This promise was fulfilled when, after God redeemed his people from captivity in Egypt, Israel entered Canaan and took possession of their inheritance (cf., Deut. 1:8, 9:4-6; Josh. 1:1-4; 21:43-45; 1 Chron. 18:3; Neh. 9:7-8, 23-24, 36).

The prophets, of course, prophesied another captivity (not in Egypt but in Babylon) as judgment on Israel and Judah’s sin. And in these prophecies, they also spoke of a future restoration from the captivity. They foretold a restoration to the land of Canaan, but also saw far beyond that to the entry of God’s people into a land greater than Canaan. In other words, the prophets saw the Jews’ return to the promised land, but they also saw in the same vision the heavenly rest of the people of God of which the earthly Canaan and earthly Jerusalem were type and foreshadowing.

When we come to the New Testament, which is the record of the New Covenant form of the Abrahamic Covenant, what has happened to the promise of the land? The answer is that nowhere in the New Testament is inheritance of the physical land of Canaan part of the Christian’s hope. The promise of the earthly Canaan disappears and the land greater than Canaan (the heavenly rest, the new heavens and earth, the New Jerusalem) alone is the focus of covenant expectation with regard to the inheritance of God’s people. As Iain Murray rightly says, “In the New Testament the church of Christ ceases to be connected in any theocratic manner with any land. Ours is ‘the Jerusalem above’, ‘the heavenly Jerusalem’ (Gal. 4:26; Heb. 12:22).”⁶

⁶Iain H. Murray, *Pentecost—Today?* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1998), 15.

We see this plainly in the Book of Hebrews. For example, consider Hebrews 3-4. There the writer likens his readers' situation to that of the generation of Israelites who perished in the wilderness. And this is the analogy that he presses: (1) the wilderness generation had been redeemed from Egypt, was in the wilderness with Canaan before them, but did not enter the promised land because of unbelief; (2) you have been redeemed from sin, are now in the wilderness of temptation with the promised heavenly rest still ahead. Don't be like the Israelites who fell away because of their unbelief. You are not in heaven yet. You have not received the consummation of your inheritance, so take heed. "Let us therefore give diligence to enter into that rest, that no man fall after the same example of disobedience" (4:11).

In the process of this argument, the writer of Hebrews says something very important about the land promised in the Abrahamic Covenant. He says that though Joshua had brought the next generation of Israelites into the promised land, he could not give them the "rest" which the land symbolized (4:8). Moreover, he says (by way of citing Ps. 95) that when the people were in the promised land of Canaan, David still warned them to beware not entering God's "rest" (3:7-11). In other words, one could be in the land of Canaan and not have the "rest" that the land symbolized. The land had always pointed forward to something greater, i.e., to God's own Sabbath rest, to the heavenly country which even Abraham himself most sought after as the thing which God had promised to him (cf., Heb. 11:8-10, 13-16). From the beginning, therefore, the promise of the land was understood as symbolizing something greater.

When Christ established the New Covenant, the symbol gave way to the reality symbolized. The priesthood, the sacrifices, the temple are all gone, replaced by the greater New Covenant realities which they foreshadowed and typified. If the promise of the physical land of Canaan is still in force, it is unique among the symbols of greater New Covenant realities. In a word, for the New Covenant believer the promised land is no longer earthly Canaan but a heavenly land. That which Abraham most looked for in the promise of the land is the only land with which we now have to do.

2. The Promised Blessing

As the promise of blessing unfolds in the Old Testament, like the promise of the land, it also has two aspects. *First*, there is a promise of great physical blessing (Gen. 12:2). God will make of Abraham a great nation and give them the land of Canaan as an inheritance. There Abraham's numerous posterity will enjoy the fruitfulness of the land, womb, etc. (cf., Lev. 26, esp. 26:42; Dt. 28). Bonar says, "The Lord made Israel '*Jeshurun*,' i.e., The Prosperous One, blessing him with all temporal things whenever Israel sought the spiritual. . . . Israel was offered the privilege of being, even in respect of temporal blessings, a type of Eden restored."⁷

Second, the Abrahamic Covenant also contains the promise of great spiritual blessing. This is seen especially in the promises "In thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed" (12:3) and "In thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed" (22:18). As this aspect of the promise unfolds, we do not see the Jews sharing their physical prosperity with the other nations of the earth; rather, spiritual blessing comes to the nations through Christ and the gospel. Indeed the promise of "blessing" in the Abrahamic Covenant is applied in the New Testament exclusively to redemptive blessing through Christ (with no idea of physical blessing involved). There is not any mention in the New Testament of the number of children that Christians will have, or of wealth and physical prosperity, as evidence of God's covenant blessing. Rather, the blessing that comes to the nations under the New Covenant is exclusively the gospel blessing of redemption in Christ and its attendant spiritual blessings.

⁷Andrew A. Bonar, *A Commentary on Leviticus* (reprint ed., Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1978), 473-474. This meaning of the name יֵשׁוּרֻן is disputed, but Bonar's point is nonetheless well made.

Consider, for example, Acts 3:25-26. Peter there speaks to a Jewish audience. And the blessing that he speaks of as fulfilling the promise of the Abrahamic covenant is God's "turning away every one of you from your iniquities." Peter makes no mention of physical blessing whatever. Also, at Gal. 3:7-9, Paul identifies the promise of blessing at Gen. 12:3 as "the gospel preached beforehand unto Abraham." And at Gal. 3:13-14, he says that the blessing promised to Abraham, which has come upon the Gentiles "in Christ Jesus," is "the promise of the Spirit through faith." As originally given, the Abrahamic Covenant contained the promise both of physical and spiritual blessing, but when we come to the New Covenant, the physical aspect of the blessing has disappeared and the greater, spiritual blessing to which it pointed alone remains.

3. The Promised Seed

The promise to Abraham of a "seed" is, of course, our main concern (cf., Gen. 12:2; 13:16; 15:1-5; 17:4-7, 10-21; 21:12-13; 22:16-18). From these texts we learn that the seed of promise is said to come through Sarah's womb, i.e., from the beginning the covenant seed is distinguished from the merely natural seed of Abraham. Moreover, the covenant seed of Abraham is the channel through which the earth will be blessed. The implication of 22:17-18 is that this will be fulfilled preeminently in the victory of one particular descendant of Abraham over his enemies (cf., Lk. 1:74; Jn. 8:56; Gal. 3:16).⁸

But who are the seed of Abraham? We may be tempted to assume that they are the natural descendants of Abraham. This is, after all, the normal meaning of the term "seed" or "descendants." As used in these texts, however, the term embraces more than the idea of physical posterity. As the promise unfolds, there are two discernible groups of Abraham's descendants—the natural (physical) seed and the covenant (spiritual) seed.

Consider first that the Lord distinguishes between Isaac and Ishmael (Gen. 17:18-21). Ishmael was as much the physical seed of Abraham as Isaac; Isaac, however, was the covenant seed. Both are called Abraham's "seed" (Ishmael, cf., Gen. 21:13); yet they are treated differently. Though Ishmael receives a blessing because he is Abraham's son (21:13), Isaac alone inherits the covenant blessing and promised land. In Rom. 9:6-9, Paul takes this fact into account and makes it clear that Isaac was a child "of promise" and a child "of God" (thus, not merely a physical but a spiritual descendant of Abraham), while Ishmael was a child "of the flesh" (i.e., merely a physical descendant of Abraham).

We can make the same observation regarding the sons of Keturah and the concubines (Gen. 25:1-6, 11). All these were the natural descendants of Abraham (as much as Isaac was); but only Isaac inherited the land and blessing.

In the sons of Isaac, we see the same distinction between the natural and the spiritual seed of Abraham. Both Jacob and Esau were physically descended from Isaac and Abraham; yet the covenant passes to Jacob (Gen. 28:1-4, 13-15). At Rom. 9:10-13, Paul makes the same point with reference to Jacob and Esau that he makes at 9:6-9 with reference to Isaac and Ishmael. Jacob is the elect seed of Isaac and Abraham to whom the inheritance comes and through whom the covenant is perpetuated.⁹

When we come to the NT, the idea of the spiritual seed so predominates that it is regarded as the only true seed of Abraham. Consider first that, though he says that he knows of their physical descent from Abraham, Jesus denies to the Jews the title "Abraham's seed" in its fullest

⁸At Gen. 22:17, we should read, with the Hebrew and the ASV, "the gate of his enemies" (cf., also Gen. 24:60 in the Hebrew text).

⁹Paul continues in Romans 9 also to make the point that the difference between a spiritual seed of Abraham and the merely natural seed can be seen in the remnant doctrine in Isaiah (cf., Rom. 9:27-29). The believing remnant (a body of people less in number than "the number of the children of Israel") is the true seed of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

signification, i.e., that they are the children of God, and traces their spiritual paternity to the devil (Jn. 8:31-44). Though the Jews to whom Jesus spoke were Abraham's physical descendants, yet because they did not do "the works of Abraham," he says that they are not Abraham's children in the only sense that now matters, i.e., they are not God's children but the children of the devil. The Abrahamic Covenant is still in force, but only those "who do the works of Abraham" are reckoned as his seed.

Consider also what Paul says on this subject at Rom. 2:28-29 and 4:9-12, 16-17. Paul makes it plain that Abraham's seed are "all those who believe," whether Jew or Gentile, and that it is not a circumcision of the flesh which matters but a circumcision of the heart. Those who have heart circumcision (who are regenerated), whether or not they are physically circumcised, are the true Israel. Coming again to Romans 9, who are the children of promise who are counted as Abraham's seed (9:8)? Who are the vessels of mercy (9:23)? Paul's answer is, "even us whom he called, not from the Jews only, but also from the Gentiles" (9:24). Abraham's seed are those (including Gentiles) who attain to righteousness by faith (9:30).

Consider also Paul's argument in Gal. 3:7-9, 13-14, 16, 19, 26, 29; 4:28-29; 6:16. These texts confirm in plain language what we've already seen, i.e., that under the terms of the New Covenant (i.e., under the terms of the Abrahamic Covenant as now expressed in the New Covenant), only believers in Christ are reckoned as Abraham's covenant seed.

See also Eph. 2:11-13, 19 and Phil. 3:2-3. In these texts Paul says that believing Gentiles (though not the physical seed of Abraham) under the terms of the New Covenant are now admitted into the commonwealth of Israel and made party to "the covenants of the promise." Indeed, warning believers to beware the merely natural seed of Abraham, whom he calls "the concision" or "the mutilation," taking from the Jews their most cherished title (i.e., "the circumcision," which pointed to their physical descent from Abraham), Paul says of believers in Christ (whether Jew or Gentile) that "we are the circumcision," which is to say, we are the true seed of Abraham.

It is impossible to read these texts and not see that the New Covenant has to do only with Abraham's spiritual seed. Merely natural descendants of believing Abraham are excluded. In fact, the New Testament makes such a radical distinction between the natural and spiritual seed that the privileges of the covenant are taken away from the merely natural seed and are exclusively the property of the spiritual seed.

By way of summary, before the establishment of the New Covenant, all three elements of the Abrahamic Covenant (land, blessing, seed) had a physical and a spiritual aspect. But when we come to the New Covenant, the physical aspect of the promises of the Abrahamic Covenant has disappeared and only the spiritual aspect remains, i.e., a heavenly land, gospel blessing, and a spiritual seed.

Now, returning to the case which paedobaptists wish to rest on "the essential unity and continuity" of the Abrahamic and New Covenants, we must recognize that what we see under the New Covenant, where the Abrahamic Covenant indeed attains "its highest fruition," invalidates their argument. Under the New Covenant the idea of physical descent (whatever role it played in previous epochs of redemptive history) now is excluded as grounds for regarding persons as party to the Abrahamic Covenant. Prof. Murray says, "The covenant made with Abraham included the infant seed, and was signified and sealed by circumcision administered by divine command (Gen. 17:9-14). . . . Since the infant seed of the faithful were embraced in the covenant relation, *and there is no indication that this feature of covenant administration has been abrogated under the new covenant*, the conclusion derived from the unity and continuity of covenant grace is that the same privilege belongs to the infant seed of believers under the new covenant" (italics mine). But, as we have seen, there is every indication that this feature of the Abrahamic Covenant has changed with the establishment of the New Covenant. And this change, i.e., that now the parties

of the covenant are in no way reckoned according to physical descent, invalidates the paedobaptist argument for infant baptism from Genesis 17, for its most basic premise is seen to be defective.

In the following pages, we will examine other texts which paedobaptists cite in defense of their doctrine of infant baptism. But already, we need to recognize that what they regard as their strongest argument is so defective as to invalidate their conclusion from it. We must not be surprised then if their other (supposedly weaker) arguments also are defective.

The New Testament and Paedobaptism

As we have seen, paedobaptists put the main weight of their case on the covenant made with Abraham, appealing to the “essential unity and continuity” of that covenant and the New Covenant, where the Abrahamic Covenant attains “its highest fruition.” In addition, they point us to a number of New Testament texts that, they say, evidence the continuance of the inclusion of the infant seed of believers in the covenant. Let’s look at these each in turn.

1. Mark 10:13-16

Consider first the incident recorded in Mk. 10:13-16 (cf., Matt. 19:13-15; Lk. 18:15-17). Paedobaptists cite this text as one of the key Scripture proofs for the doctrine of infant baptism, in spite of the fact that Jesus does not baptize the children brought to him. Their argument rests on their interpretation of the words “of such is the kingdom of God” (10:14). Prof. Murray, e.g., rightly says that the pronoun τοιοῦτος (here the genitive τοιοῦτων, “of such”) means “of this kind, sort, or class.” But then he concludes: “It is necessary to note the class of which Jesus had been speaking; it is distinctly and only of the infant class. This class alone provides us with the antecedent of the τοιοῦτων and not at all the class of those who are of childlike and humble spirit.”¹⁰ In like manner, also denying that Jesus is speaking of the childlike, he says, “What Jesus is asserting here is rather that the kingdom of God belongs to little children and that they are members of it, not at all that the kingdom of God belongs to such as resemble little children.”¹¹

Prof. Murray admits that this text does not “offer stringent proof of infant baptism” nor “provide us with an express command to baptise infants”; however, he believes that he finds in it three principles which, he says:

lie close to the argument for infant baptism and without which the ordinance of infant baptism would be meaningless. These principles are: (1) that little children, even infants, are among Christ’s people and are members of his body; (2) that they are members of his kingdom and therefore have been regenerated; (3) that they belong to the church, in that they are to be received as belonging to Christ, that is to say, received into the fellowship of the saints.¹²

But is this the correct interpretation of our Lord’s words? Is it true that “what Jesus is asserting here is rather that the kingdom of God belongs to little children and that they are members of it, *not at all* (italics mine) that the kingdom of God belongs to such as resemble little children”?

¹⁰Murray, *Christian Baptism*, 64.

¹¹Ibid., 63. Paedobaptists are far from unanimous in agreeing with Prof. Murray’s assessment of this text. See, e.g., Joseph Addison Alexander, *The Gospel According to Mark* (reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980), 276-277; Frederic Godet, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke* (reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, n.d.), 2:204-205; Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to S. Luke*, in *The International Critical Commentary* (reprint ed., Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956), 421; Norval Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, in *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1977), 454-456.

¹²Murray, *Christian Baptism*, 65.

At this point, Broadus's observation is helpful. Speaking of the interpretation of this text by Greek commentators in the early church, who presumably would have known the implication of the pronoun τοιοῦτος, Broadus says:

All the Greek commentators explain it as meaning the childlike, none of them mentioning children as included, and several expressly stating the contrary. Nor does any Greek commentator, so far as we can find, mention infant baptism in connection with the passage, though they all practiced that rite.¹³

Broadus's point, of course, is that the paedobaptist use of this text is not really supported by the grammar—otherwise the early Greek commentators, who themselves were paedobaptists, would have noted this and used the text in support of their doctrine of baptism. Instead, the meaning that they found in the text is precisely the one that Prof. Murray says is “not at all” our Lord's meaning.

Now, if Jesus had stopped with the words “of such is the kingdom of God,” perhaps our paedobaptist friends would have a case; but (Prof. Murray's “not at all” notwithstanding) Jesus in fact does indicate that he has in mind “such as resemble little children.” Jesus explains what he means by “of such is the kingdom of God” in the next words of the text, saying, “Verily I say unto you, Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as (or, like, ὡς) a little child, he shall in no wise enter into it” (Mk. 10:15; cf., Lk. 18:17). Here the conjunction ὡς indicates comparison (“as” or “like”) and may not legitimately be translated here in a temporal sense (i.e., “while”), in the way required by Prof. Murray's interpretation of Mk. 10:14 and its parallels.

Interestingly, Prof. Murray suggests, quite unconvincingly, that our Lord's statements in Mk. 10:14 and 10:15 (i.e., in consecutive verses, cf., Lk. 18:16-17) are not to be interpreted in light of one another.¹⁴ He further argues from the absence of the words of Mk. 10:15 (cf., Lk. 18:17) in Matthew's account of this incident: “Matthew, therefore, indicates that the statement, ‘Of such is the kingdom of heaven’ was valid and was to be understood quite independently of any mention of the additional observation reported by Mark and Luke, namely, that whosoever will not receive the kingdom of God as a little child shall not enter therein.”¹⁵ I cannot imagine a more tenuous line of reasoning concerning statements that obviously are exegetical of one other. On this premise every harmonizing interpretation of parallel passages in the Synoptics would be suspect. Happily, Prof. Murray was not consistent in using this approach everywhere in the Synoptics, for he applies the harmonizing method in defense of the so-called “exception clause” at Matt. 19:18, though it is missing from the parallel at Mk. 10:11 (cf., Lk. 16:18).¹⁶

It is true that in this text our Lord shows his willingness that children should come to him and that he forbids any from hindering them. This, however, isn't his main point, which is to illustrate the attitude that must mark those who receive the kingdom of God and enter into it. As B.B. Warfield says:

The message which the incident is made by our Lord to bring us, therefore,—and which, accordingly, the passage directly teaches us with no inferences of ours—does not concern either infant baptism or infant salvation, but distinctly the constitution of the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God, it asserts, is made up, not of children, but of the childlike. . . . This is as much as

¹³John A. Broadus, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, in *An American Commentary on the New Testament*, ed. Alvah Hovey (Philadelphia: The American Baptist Publication Society, 1886), 402. For the evidence in support of this assertion, see 402-404.

¹⁴Murray, *Christian Baptism*, 63.

¹⁵Ibid., 65.

¹⁶See John Murray, *Divorce* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co., 1961), 45-54.

to say, not only that childlikeness characterizes the recipients of the Kingdom, but that childlikeness is the indispensable prerequisite to entrance into it.¹⁷

The childlike quality that Jesus had in mind is that of complete dependence and trustfulness. The setting in which he uttered these words confirms this. Parents were carrying their babes in their arms and leading their children by the hand, bringing them to Jesus for his blessing. There is no image of helpless dependence and trust in all the world comparable to a babe lying in its mother's arms or a child led hand in hand by its father, being taken where it should go. Jesus' point, of course, is, in Warfield's words, "that the Kingdom of heaven is made up of those who are helplessly dependant on the King of the Heavens. . . . the children of the Kingdom come into it like children of the world into the world—naked and stripped of everything, infants who are to be done for, who can not do for themselves."¹⁸

Now, shall we say that our Lord's explanation of his own words is "not at all" his point? Certainly not! His meaning (even in the parallel passage at Matt. 19:14, where his explanation is lacking) is the same as on another occasion (recorded at Matt. 18:3). Having called a little child to him, Jesus said, "Verily I say to you, Unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven." To treat Mk. 10:13-16 and its parallels as Prof. Murray does is strained—and indeed (given what we saw in 2nd LCF 29.1 concerning the significance of Christian baptism) would require that we say with him that the infants in view "have been regenerated"¹⁹—and that with no other warrant than that our use of the text requires it.

2. Acts 2:38-39

Paedobaptists also cite Acts 2:38-39 as proof for their doctrine:

And Peter said unto them, Repent ye, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ unto the remission of your sins; and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For to you is the promise, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call unto him.

Prof. Murray says concerning this text that "the important consideration is that the promise, which is urged as an incentive to, or reason for, repentance and baptism, stands in the same relation to the children as to the adults being addressed."²⁰ I agree with this statement, but differ from Prof. Murray in his insisting that the infant children of those present were included in such a way as to warrant their being baptized with their believing parents.

This text gives no warrant for the practice of infant baptism. In fact, the context requires that we deny that infants were baptized on the day of Pentecost. At 2:41 we read, "They then that received his word were baptized." Unless we are prepared to argue that infants received the words of the apostle and obeyed the command to repent of their sins, we cannot argue logically that they were baptized.

Moreover, the promise extends to "all that are afar off." The most generally received interpretation of these words is that they extend the promise of the Holy Spirit to the Gentiles.²¹

¹⁷B.B. Warfield, "Childlikeness," in *Faith and Life* (reprint ed., Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 70.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 78.

¹⁹Murray, *Christian Baptism*, 65.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 70. In like manner, Alexander says that this is "an expression favouring the supposition that their children were to be baptized with them." J.A. Alexander, *A Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (reprint ed., Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1980), 1:86.

²¹See, e.g., John Calvin, *Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), 123; J. A. Alexander, *Acts*, 1:86-87; John Dick, *Lectures on the Acts of the Apostles* (Glasgow: Maurice Ogle & Son, 1848), 31; Melancthon W. Jacobus, *Notes, Critical and Explanatory on the Acts of the Apostles* (Philadelphia:

Shall we apply this expression in the same way that our paedobaptist brethren apply “and to your children”? Shall we administer baptism to others (in this case, to Gentiles), who like our infant children, have not yet repented of their sins and received the apostolic gospel? Surely these expressions must be treated the same way. Paedobaptists do not do this. Prof. Murray, e.g., while insisting that “the injunctions of Peter on the day of Pentecost, and the practice followed on that occasion, make it clear that repentance, the faith of the gospel, and the reception of the Word, are the conditions upon which baptism was administered (Acts 2:38, 41, 42, 44)” and that (in the case of adults) “the church accepts for baptism those who make an intelligent and uncontradicted confession of faith,” nevertheless also insists that the expression “and to your children” requires a different principle and procedure, i.e., that “the basis upon which baptism is dispensed to infants” is the “divine institution,” by which he means “the covenant made with Abraham” which “included the infant seed.”²² But is Acts 2:39 to be disjointed in such a fashion? Did Joel, when he uttered the prophecy that lies behind Peter’s exhortation, envision a differing principle and procedure for “your sons and daughters” than for “all flesh”? No. As Paul plainly shows (when also citing Joel’s prophecy), there is one gospel and its principle is that “all (whether Jew or Greek) who call upon the name of the Lord will be saved” (Rom. 10:13, cf., Joel 2:32). Peter says that the promise is to “as many as the Lord our God shall call unto him.” This is also Joel’s doctrine: “And it shall come to pass, that *whosoever shall call on the name of Jehovah shall be delivered*; for in mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those that escape, as Jehovah hath said, and among *the remnant* [יְרֵיִד, the survivors] *those whom Jehovah doth call*” (Joel 2:32). The “survivors” (the delivered ones) that Jehovah calls by the gospel and to which he gives his Spirit are those who call upon the name of the Lord. This is the only principle and procedure that Joel describes. This is the only principle and procedure described in Acts 2.

The true meaning of Acts 2:39 is that the scope of God’s promise is as wide as the net which he will draw in his sovereign grace. In the gospel net, spread by the preaching of the free offer of the gospel and drawn by the effectual call of God, will be gathered Jews throughout successive generations (“to you and to your children”) and Gentiles of every nation, tongue, and tribe (“all who are afar off”). Gathered in God’s net will be a catch comprised of “as many as the Lord our God shall call unto himself” (with no regard to ethnic or racial distinction). Burdened by the guilt of their sin (cf., 2:37), Peter’s Jewish hearers should not fear that God has exhausted his willingness to forgive or that there is no room for them at his throne of grace. Whether Peter recalls their words, “His blood be upon us and upon our children”(Matt. 27:25), we cannot know; however, Peter’s words “and to your children” certainly are well suited to set their hearts at rest. They and their children can be delivered, but the terms are the same for both—as Paul says “the promise of the Spirit” is “through faith” (Gal. 3:14).

3. Household baptism texts

Paedobaptists also point to the so-called “household” baptisms mentioned in the New Testament as proof for their doctrine. Citing Acts 16:15, 33-34 and 1 Cor. 1:16 (with which he bids us compare Acts 10:47, 48; 11:14), Prof. Murray says:

These are the instances of household baptism. We cannot prove conclusively that there were infants in these households. But the significance of such explicit reference to the baptism of households appears when we take into account two considerations. There is, first of all, the fact

Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1859), 80-81; Rudolf Stier, *The Words of the Apostles* (reprint ed., Minneapolis: Klock & Klock, 1981), 38; Paton J. Gloag, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (reprint ed., Minneapolis: Klock & Klock, 1979), 1:110-112; Joachim Jeremias, *The Origins of Infant Baptism*, trans. Dorothea M. Barton (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2004), 25-27.

²²Murray, “Baptism,” 2:373-374.

that there are relatively few instances of actual baptism recorded in the New Testament. . . . It is quite illuminating that at least three of these [twelve] instances refer to household baptism. Every consideration would point to the conclusion that household baptism was a frequent occurrence in the practice of the church in apostolic days. If so, it would be practically impossible to believe that in none of these households were there any infants. It would be unreasonable to believe so. The infants in the households belonged to the households and would be baptised. Presumption is, therefore, of the strongest kind, even though we do not have an overt and proven instance of infant baptism. There is, in the second place, the representative principle which is embedded in the Scripture and is woven into the warp and woof of the administration of grace in the world.²³

Murray's second "consideration," of course, is an appeal to Genesis 17 and to the Abrahamic Covenant. On this, see my comments above. His first "consideration" is largely an appeal to silence—which casts quite a shadow over his conclusion that "presumption is, therefore, of the strongest kind." Let's look at these texts in the order that they appear in the New Testament, beginning with Acts 10:47-48 and 11:14. I realize that many paedobaptist writers don't cite this text in support of their doctrine; yet Prof. Murray cites it as though it gives at least ancillary support.

What does the text tell us about those baptized in Cornelius's household? God clearly had received Gentiles into his kingdom without requiring them to pass through the outer court of Judaism. But what was to be done? Well, instead of calling for these new converts to be circumcised, which was the initiatory rite of the Old Covenant, Peter commanded that they receive the initiatory rite of the New Covenant, i.e., baptism. His point is that those who had received Holy Spirit baptism surely were eligible for water baptism. As Alexander asks, "Why should the sign be withheld from those who were possessed of the thing signified? If God was willing to accept them as converted Gentiles, why should man insist upon their coming forward as converted Jews?"²⁴ None could give a reason, so Peter "commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ" (10:48).

But the question is, were infants baptized in Cornelius's house? Cornelius was told that a man would come "who will tell you words by which you and all your household will be saved" (11:14). Were there infants in Cornelius's household included in that promise, and were they baptized? There's no way, of course, to know if there were infants in Cornelius's household. Perhaps there were. If there were, however, they were not baptized.

Luke says that Peter "commanded *them* (αὐτοὺς) to be baptized" (10:48). If we can identify the antecedent of the pronoun "them," we will know who was and was not baptized. Who were the "them"? The answer is that they were those who received the Holy Spirit (10:47), who heard the word with understanding (ἀκούω with the accusative case, 10:44), and who spoke with tongues and magnified God (10:46). Unless we are prepared to say that these things were true of infants, we must deny that infants were baptized on this occasion.

Consider next Acts 16:15. This text concerns the baptism of Lydia and her household. We do not know the constitution of her household, whether at this time it included infant children. All we know is that having believed the gospel, Lydia was baptized, along with all in her household. Unless there is some compelling reason to believe otherwise, which there is not, we must assume that they were baptized on the same terms as Lydia, i.e., having themselves believed in Christ. The presumption that this was the case is strengthened by the other example of household baptism cited in the same chapter, i.e., at 16:33-34.

There are two reasons for believing that Acts 16:33-34 gives no support for infant baptism. *First*, the assertion that infants are included in the phrase "all his" is merely assumed but

²³Murray, *Christian Baptism*, 68-69.

²⁴Alexander, *Acts*, 1:418.

unproven. *Second*, the account itself teaches that those baptized shared the same experience as the jailer himself. The most natural interpretation of v. 31 (“Believe on the Lord Jesus, and thou shalt be saved, *thou and thy house*”) is not that the members of the jailer’s household will be saved by virtue of his faith;²⁵ rather, they will be saved if they, like he, believe on the Lord Jesus.²⁶ This is why Paul and Silas “spoke the word of the Lord to him and *to all that were in his house*” (16:32). They also had to hear the gospel in order to believe and be saved. In v. 33 Luke is simply saying that all in the jailer’s house heard the gospel, believed, and were baptized with him.

Then Luke says that the jailer “rejoiced greatly, with all his house, having believed in God” (16:34). The adverb πανοικεῖ (trans. “with all his house”) in this case modifies either the verb ἠγαλλιάσατο or the participle πεπιστευκώς, so that Luke is saying either that the jailer “rejoiced with all his house” or that he “believed with all his house.” Indeed, the position of the adverb may imply that both is the case, i.e., he rejoiced with all of his house, having believed with all of his house. Unless we are prepared to argue that infants believed the gospel preached by Paul and Silas or rejoiced greatly with their father, we must deny that they were baptized on this occasion.

The last text cited mentioning household baptism is 1 Cor. 1:16, where Paul says, “I also baptized the household of Stephanas.” As with the other texts we have examined, we do not know if there were infants in Stephanas’s household, and therefore ought to argue nothing from silence. It is more proper to assume that all those of “the household of Stephanas” who were baptized were baptized on the same grounds as Stephanas himself. Moreover, Paul later says, “You know the house of Stephanas, that it is the firstfruits of Achaia, and that *they* have devoted *themselves* to the ministry of the saints” (1 Cor. 16:15). Unless we are prepared to say that the infant children of Stephanas have “devoted themselves to the ministry of the saints,” then we ought not to conclude that they are included at 1:16 among those who are of “the household of Stephanas” who were baptized.²⁷

4. Colossians 2:11-12

The WCF also cites Col. 2:11-12 in support of infant baptism. And it does so to establish the point that “baptism takes over in the stead of circumcision as the sign of the covenant.”²⁸ In like manner, Louis Berkhof says, “In the new dispensation baptism is by divine authority substituted for circumcision as the initiatory sign and seal of the covenant of grace.”²⁹ The inference that paedobaptists draw from this is, in Berkhof’s words, that “if children received the sign and seal of

²⁵Jacobus, *Notes, Critical and Explanatory on the Acts of the Apostles*, 282-283, comes perilously close to saying this: “How can any parent neglect this salvation when he sees his family so seriously involved in the consequences of his conduct. Even without the household plan of God, the parent must naturally, more or less, carry his children along with him in the course which he takes.”

²⁶Alexander says, “*Thou and thy house* . . . does not mean that they were to be saved by his faith, but by faith in the same Saviour.” *Acts*, 2:126. See also Gloag, 2:126.

²⁷In order to avoid this conclusion, Jeremias (14) argues that at 16:15a, the expression th.n oivki,an Stefana/ refers to “the family as a whole” (including the children), while at 16:15b, the clause kai. eivj diakoni,an toi/j a`gi,oi,j e;taxan e` autou,j refers to the adult members of that household who committed themselves to ministering to the saints. Clever, but unconvincing, since then the pronominal subject implied in the verb e;taxan and the pronoun e` autou,j have no expressed antecedent. But the antecedent is in fact “the house of Stephanas,” which Paul calls “the firstfruits of Achaia”—and this is nothing other than “the household of Stephanas” that Paul baptized (1:16). Jeremias also tries to distinguish oi=koj at 1:16 from oivki,a at 16:15. “The first passage is concerned with the household in its entirety, the second with the family as a group of representative persons” (14). But how does this accord with his assertion that at 16:15, the phrase th.n oivki,an Stefana/ refers to “the family as a whole”?

²⁸Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *Infant Baptism: A Duty of God’s People* (The Christian Education Committee, Westminster Presbytery, Presbyterian Church in America, 1980), 10.

²⁹Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 633.

the covenant in the old dispensation, the presumption is that they surely have a right to receive it in the new.”³⁰

In analyzing the use which paedobaptists make of this text, we need not deny one of the basic premises that they adopt, i.e., that “baptism takes over in the stead of circumcision as the sign of the covenant.” The Bible, of course, never explicitly says that this is the case, but a good case may be made for it from inference.³¹ That circumcision (as the distinctive ordinance and sign of the Abrahamic Covenant) no longer is relevant under the New Covenant is plain, e.g., from Rom. 2:28-29; 1 Cor. 7:17-19; Gal. 5:2-15; Phil. 3:3; Col. 3:11. And that baptism is a distinctive ordinance of the New Covenant is also plain, e.g., from Matt. 28:18-20 and from the practice of the apostolic church. We may be right to conclude from this that baptism replaces circumcision as the distinctive ordinance and sign of the New Covenant (as the present administration of the Abrahamic Covenant), but, as Beasley-Murray rightly observes, “the belief that circumcision has been replaced in the church by baptism by no means automatically involves the corollary that the two rites have identical significance or identical administration. Col. 2.11f certainly gives no justification for the latter presumption, nor does it point in the direction of the former.”³²

What then are we to make of Col. 2:11-12? Consider first the context in which this passage is found. The Colossians had been converted through the preaching of the gospel. Earlier in this letter, Paul reminds them that ever since they had “heard and known the grace of God in truth” and believed in Christ, “the word of the truth of the gospel” has been “bearing fruit and increasing” among them (1:3-6). In other words, they have been growing in their Christian lives because of their attachment to Christ and the gospel. The Colossians, however, are being subjected to an onslaught of heretical ideas on the subject of what constitutes the heart of Christian living.

The identity of the heretics who endangered the Colossians is uncertain, but the best suggestion is that they were former Essenes (members of a small, exclusive Jewish sect) who had embraced certain tenets of Christianity without abandoning key Essene doctrines.³³ According to Josephus (himself a former Essene), they were very ascetic in their lifestyle, stricter than even the Pharisees about food regulations and the observance of Sabbaths and feast days. They also emphasized circumcision and invoked angels in prayer. An ascetic is a person who is very austere, i.e., who is very severe with himself in practicing strict self-denial as a means of disciplining the flesh. The Essenes believed that rigid, minute observance of rules supposedly based on the Law of Moses was of great value in mortifying the flesh and would secure for them a righteousness superior to that possessed by others.

Apparently former Essenes (now professing faith in Christ) were trying to convince the Colossians that rigid observance of their system of rules was the secret to the Christian life. Paul, however, understands that this will take the Colossians away from Christ and the gospel and ruin their Christian lives; therefore, he warns them to beware of anyone who “makes spoil of you through his philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ” (2:8). He asks them:

³⁰Ibid., 634.

³¹See Paul K. Jewett, *Infant Baptism and the Covenant of Grace* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1978), 88-89.

³²G.R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (reprint ed., Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1977), 157.

³³On this point, see the cogent argument of John Eadie, *A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Epistle of Paul to the Colossians* (New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1856), xxx-xxxix. For a full treatment of this identification of the Colossian errorists, see J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (New York: Macmillan, 1879).

If you died with Christ from the rudiments of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to ordinances, “Handle not, nor taste, nor touch” (all which things are to perish with the using), after the precepts and doctrines of men? Which things have indeed a show of wisdom in will-worship, and humility, and severity to the body; but are not of any value against the indulgence of the flesh (2:20-23).

The Essene plan for the Christian life seemed so spiritual (it was full of self-denial and zeal for mortifying the flesh), yet, in the end it had only “the show of wisdom” and was of no value in living the Christian life. It was merely “will-worship,” or, as Calvin paraphrases, “self-invented worship . . . voluntary service, which men choose for themselves at their own option, without authority from God”³⁴—worship rendered in the hope of acquiring greater merit before God, but, in fact, “unsolicited and unaccepted” by him.³⁵

In this letter, Paul reminds the Colossians that all salvation, as well as all spiritual wisdom and understanding, is found in Christ. “For it was the good pleasure of the Father that in him should all the fulness dwell” (1:19). In Christ, “are all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge hidden” (2:3). “In him dwells all the fulness of the Godhead bodily, and in him you are made full” (2:9-10). Paul also reminds the Colossians that they need to persevere in their attachment to Christ and the gospel, a perseverance now endangered by their entertaining an heretical doctrine of the Christian life—saying to them that Christ will “present you holy and without blemish and unproveable before him: if so be that you continue in the faith, grounded and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel which you heard, which was preached in all creation under heaven” (1:23).

Paul’s central exhortation is found at 2:6-7. “As therefore ye received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and builded up in him, and established in your faith, even as ye were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.” The secret to the Christian life was not (as the Essene teachers insisted) an asceticism that majored on meticulous obedience to a set of legal traditions supposedly based on the law of Moses, with a focus on minutia that outdid even the Pharisees. The key to the Christian life was not found in rendering an obedience that God has not required in the hope of acquiring greater merit before him. *They had not so learned Christ!* Instead, the gospel had taught them to rest in Christ as their righteousness, to learn from him as their prophet and example, and to submit to him as their Lord and lawgiver. And as their Lord and lawgiver, he had set them free from “the precepts and doctrines of men” (2:22). Obedience to such rules not only did not increase their merit before God, but was “of no value against the indulgence of the flesh” (2:23).

When Epaphras came to Colossae with the gospel, he had not brought a code of ascetic rules and traditions with him and imposed them on believers. Though he brought Christ and his word, he did not also bring another way (beyond that provided in Christ) by which they could gain merit for themselves. He did not give them a code by which, if they followed it meticulously, they could mortify the flesh and secure a righteousness superior to that which others possessed. *That was not the secret to the Christian life.* And not having received such rules and traditions at the beginning, they were not to adopt them along the way.

Instead, Paul says to them, “As therefore you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him, and established in your faith, even as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.” The secret to Christian living is a deeper attachment to Jesus Christ, including a greater understanding of who he is as he is proclaimed in the gospel. This is why Paul reminded them that all salvation, as well as all spiritual wisdom and understanding, is found in Christ. They

³⁴John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians* (reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), 201-202.

³⁵Eadie, *Colossians*, 205.

did not need the Essene code to know how to be saved or how to “walk worthily of the Lord unto all pleasing.” What they needed was persevering attachment to Christ and the gospel. And instead of looking for a way to supplement what was already provided in Christ, they were to be thankful for what they had in Christ Jesus their Lord.

At two places in this chapter, we encounter the phrase “the principles (elements, rudiments) of the world” (cf., 2:8 and 2:20). In Gal. 4:3, 9 Paul uses this phrase (and the companion phrase “weak and beggarly principles”) to describe a religion which has no power to justify men from their sins and which was otherwise unprofitable, having nothing to offer but bondage. Here Paul uses the phrase in exactly the same way, although with a different point of application. The religion advocated by the Essenes in Colossae, like the religion advocated by the Judaizers in Galatia, though it had a place in it for God’s law, nevertheless had the law in the wrong place. God’s law was never given so that men could save themselves (Galatians); and God’s law was never given so that men could reshape it into a set of rigid, ascetic rules by which they might mortify the flesh and secure for themselves a righteousness superior to that possessed by other Christians (Colossians).

Now, this is the context in which our text (Col. 2:11-12) is found. The Essene heretics are urging circumcision on Gentile believers, on the premise that this will make them more righteous. But Paul has just said that “you are complete in him (i.e., in Christ)”—including having received in him the reality that circumcision was meant to signify—“in whom you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off of the body of the flesh, in the circumcision of Christ” (2:11). As Eadie says:

They had everything which it was alleged they wanted, and everything already in Christ. The heretical preceptors had enjoined upon them the rite of circumcision, but the apostle shows that it would be really a superfluous ceremony, since they had already experienced a nobler circumcision than that of the knife—for it was executed by no material hand. . . . Through their living union with Christ, they had enjoyed the privilege, and were enjoying the results of a spiritual circumcision.³⁶

The “circumcision made without hands . . . the circumcision of Christ” is, of course, the circumcision of the heart wrought by Christ in the new birth—in which there is a “putting off of the body of the flesh,” i.e., the putting off of the old man and the putting on of the new. As Meyer puts the matter, “He who is so circumcised is no more ἐν τῇ σαρκί [in the flesh], as heretofore, when concupiscence [sinful passions] ἐνηργεῖτο ἐν τοῖς μέλεσιν [worked in his members]; he is no longer σάρκινός, πεπραμένος ὑπὸ τὴν ἁμαρτίαν [carnal, sold under sin], and walks no longer κατὰ σάρκα [according to the flesh], but in newness of spirit.”³⁷

As physical circumcision was the token of being a Jew, so heart circumcision is the token of being a Christian and a sign of being in Christ. And this heart circumcision, which is nothing less than the death of the old man and being raised to newness of life, is symbolized in baptism—so that, Paul says, you were “buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead” (2:12).

There is nothing in this text (or in its context) which speaks of baptizing unconscious infants, and there is an important point against it. Paul says that “you were also raised with Him *through faith* in the working of God” (2:12). The subjects of the baptism mentioned here are those who “through faith” are united to Christ in his death (“buried with him”) and in his resurrection (“raised with him”). There is no warrant from this text to baptize any others. The words “through faith” exclude all those, including infants, who do not yet believe on Christ, who are not therefore

³⁶Ibid., 149.

³⁷Cited by Eadie, Ibid., 151.

joined to Christ in his death and resurrection, who for this reason cannot be the proper subjects of baptism. Everything in this text and its context applies exclusively to those who are “in him,” i.e., who are “in Christ,” joined to Christ through faith.

5. 1 Corinthians 7:14

Paedobaptists also cite 1 Cor. 7:14 in support of the baptism of infants. Prof. Murray comments on this verse as follows:

[The] sanctification of the children of parents, only one of whom was a believer, was a recognized principle in the apostolic tradition. It is this principle, clearly enunciated in 1 Corinthians 7:14, that underlies the ordinance of infant baptism. It does not, of course, offer stringent proof of infant baptism. But it does show that the children of a believer are not in the same category, in respect of “sanctification,” as the children who have no Christian parentage. There is a status or condition that can be characterized as “holiness,” which belongs to children in virtue of a parental relationship.

In view of the context we cannot maintain that this “holiness” is that of regeneration. But it can be nothing less than the “holiness” of connection and privilege. It is a “holiness” that evinces the operation of the covenant and representative principle and proves that the Christian faith of even one Christian parent involves the embrace of the offspring in a relationship that is by divine warrant described as “holy.”³⁸

Prof. Murray is correct that this text teaches that “there is a status or condition that can be characterized as ‘holiness,’ which belongs to children in virtue of a parental relationship.” Where we differ is in what constitutes the “sanctification” or “holiness” that Paul has in view. Prof. Murray is right that the holiness of which Paul speaks is not that of regeneration, for we do not believe that the infant children of Christians are regenerate because of their relation to their parents. But is he right in saying that the “holiness” in view is that “of connection and privilege”? This language is meant to express the idea that the children of a believing parent(s) are “covenant children” because of their connection to their parent(s), that they are embraced in the covenant relation along with their parent(s), and therefore that they have a right to Christian baptism.

Saying that the holiness in view is that “of connection and privilege” (i.e., using this expression as our paedobaptist brethren do), of course, proves too much. Consider that what Paul here says of a believer’s children (so-called “covenant children”) he also says of an unbelieving spouse. Both are “sanctified” or “holy”; but paedobaptists don’t speak of “covenant spouses” or offer Christian baptism to unconverted spouses or admit them to church membership.

Concerning the status of believers’ children, such expressions as these are common in paedobaptist writings: “covenant children,” “parties to collective holiness” who enjoy “the baptismal solidarity of the family.”³⁹ The Westminster Assembly’s *Directory for the Publick Worship of God*, speaking of the baptism of infants, uses the following language concerning them, that they “are solemnly received into the bosom of the visible church, distinguished from the world, and them that are without, and united with believers That they are Christians, and federally holy before baptism, and therefore are they baptized.” But as Jewett rightly observes, the “luxuriant theological formulations” used by paedobaptists to describe believers’ children “drop from the discussion when the unbelieving spouse is concerned.”⁴⁰ Jewett goes on to say:

³⁸Murray, *Christian Baptism*, 68.

³⁹Noted in Jewett, *Infant Baptism*, 126.

⁴⁰Ibid.

The very thing they most want this passage to yield for the “holy” children, namely, the right to baptism, they must deny to the “consecrated” parent who does not believe. . . . He or she is “consecrated,” but not so far as to be “in the fold”: he/she is an alien; he/she is “sanctified,” but not in the church classification of a “believer”: he/she is an unbeliever. The covenant does not “operate” for him/her as it does for the child; the “collective holiness” that gathers in the child leaves him/her uncollected. And though he/she was in the family before the child was, he/she has no part or lot with the child in the “baptismal solidarity” of that family! . . .

Why, then, should the meaning [of ἁγιασμός and ἅγιος, of “sanctified” and “holy”] be so different in the one case than in the other? If the sanctifying influence of the believer on the unbelieving spouse carries with it no benefit in the church above that of hearing the gospel, how may we conclude that the sanctifying influence of the believer on the child implies the right to baptism and church membership?⁴¹

If paedobaptists have misunderstood Paul here, how then are we to understand him? Consider that Paul is addressing the question of why a believer with an unbelieving spouse willing to dwell with him/her should not divorce the unbeliever. “But to the rest say I, not the Lord: If any brother hath an unbelieving wife, and she is content to dwell with him, let him not leave her. And the woman that hath an unbelieving husband, and he is content to dwell with her, let her not leave her husband” (7:12-13). In other words, the issue is whether a believer, now separated from a former pagan life, should also separate from a pagan spouse. Is it right to continue in such a marriage?

The concern is whether continuing in such a marriage defiles the believer and makes the marriage illegitimate and thus justifies divorce. Paul’s answer is that it does not. Continuing in such a marriage does not result in defilement and illegitimacy any more than the children of such a marriage are made unclean and illegitimate. Paul’s argument is that even as the children of such a union are not made unclean and illegitimate by virtue of having an unconverted parent, so a Christian man or woman is not made unclean nor their marriage illegitimate by having an unconverted spouse.

If the children were legitimate before, they are still legitimate. If the marriage was legitimate before, it is still legitimate. This is not the case of a Christian marrying an unbeliever—that would be illegitimate, for Christians may marry only in the Lord (7:39). This is a case in which a marriage once made up of two unbelievers now has a believer in it. This introduces no unholy, defiling factor or illegitimacy to the marriage relationship. There is therefore no ground for the believer to divorce the unbeliever simply by virtue of their being an unbeliever. This is the issue that Paul is addressing in the text, i.e., the sanctity of marriage, not the right of the children of Christians to baptism and church membership. This text lends no support to the case for infant baptism.

6. Ephesians 6:1 and Colossians 3:20-21

The final texts cited by paedobaptists are Eph. 6:1 (with 1:1) and Col. 3:20-21 (with 1:2). Consider the way Prof. Murray argues from these texts.

In these passages the apostle Paul includes the children among those who are addressed as saints. In the contexts of both passages exhortations are given to the various classes of saints—wives, husbands, fathers, servants, masters. The exhortation in each case is appropriate to the specific duty and particular station of each class. It should also be noted that in each case the apostle frames and directs his exhortation in terms of the Christian standing and character of the persons concerned. He is addressing wives, husbands, fathers, servants, masters as believers in Christ and as those therefore who recognize their allegiance to Christ as Lord. It is in such a context that

⁴¹Ibid., 126-127.

children, as constituting one particular class among others, are exhorted to cultivate the specific virtue appropriate to them. It is necessary, therefore, to understand that the children are reckoned as saints in terms of the salutations in both epistles and that they are not regarded as belonging to any different category in respect of the Saviourhood and Lordship of Christ. Everything points to the conclusion that children, equally with parents and servants and masters, belong to the body of Christ and are fully embraced in the fellowship of saints. If children were thus recognised and received in the apostolic churches, they were recognised as possessing the status of which baptism is the sign and seal. If this is so, there is no reason why such children should not have received the sign and seal of their status and privilege.⁴²

As Prof. Murray says, there are admonitions in these letters to a class of persons called “children.” Also, for the sake of argument, we may assume that they are addressed as “saints” (or, holy ones). However, if this is the case, then we must also assume that they are addressed as “faithful in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 1:1) and “faithful brethren in Christ” (Col. 1:2). In other words, the “saints” are not a different group of people from the “faithful in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 1:1) and the “faithful brethren in Christ” (Col. 1:2). These designations also refer to all those whom Paul addresses as “saints,” including the “children” addressed later in these letters.

But what is the significance of the expressions “faithful in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 1:1) and “faithful brethren in Christ” (Col. 1:2)? Speaking of the expression “faithful in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 1:1), Charles Hodge says that it refers to those who exercise faith in Christ, so that “it is equivalent to believing. The faithful, therefore, are believers.” Then, citing Calvin, Hodge says, “Those whom he calls *saints* he also calls *faithful*; Ergo, says Calvin, . . . *No one is a believer who is not holy; and no one is holy who is not a believer.*”⁴³ As to the parallel expression in Colossians, John Eadie translates Col. 1:2 this way, “to the saints in Colossae, to wit, the believing brethren in Christ.”⁴⁴

I heartily agree with these paedobaptist commentators in their interpretation of the expressions “faithful in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 1:1) and “faithful brethren in Christ” (Col. 1:2). Prof. Murray apparently also agrees, for he says, “He is addressing wives, husbands, fathers, servant, masters *as believers in Christ* and as those therefore *who recognise their allegiance to Christ as Lord*” (p. 67, italics mine). Now, it is these kinds of observations that take infants out of the picture. If we are going to press a rigid connection between the salutations of these letters and the classes of persons addressed later in the letters, then we must say that the children addressed also are believers (as is true of the husbands, wives, fathers, servants, and masters). Unless we are prepared to argue that infants are believers, “faithful in Christ Jesus” and “faithful brethren in Christ,” who “recognise their allegiance to Christ as Lord,” then we must conclude that this line of arguing for infant baptism fails.

We need not, however, press the connection between the salutations and admonitions given to various classes of individuals, as though Paul spoke only to Christians. Although appearing in letters addressed to Christians, Paul’s admonitions aren’t addressed only to Christian husbands and wives, servants and masters, parents and children, for the duties that he enjoins are the duty of all husbands and wives, servants and masters, parents and children, whether converted or not. Since this is so, his admonitions to children apply to the unconverted as well as to the converted children of believers, and to the unconverted and converted children of unbelievers. There is nothing to be presumed here about the status of children any more than there is about the status of

⁴²Murray, *Christian Baptism*, 66-67.

⁴³Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians* (reprint ed., Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, n.d.), 23-24. Italics his.

⁴⁴“Children of one Father by belief in Christ, the entire family are rightly named ‘believing brethren’ in Him.” Eadie, *Colossians*, 3.

husbands, wives, parents, servants or masters. We do not regard the unconverted in these other classes as having a right to baptism, just because these letters are addressed to Christians. Does the unconverted wife of a Christian husband have the right to baptism and church membership because her husband is a Christian? Does an unconverted slave qualify for baptism because he has a Christian master? The answer is No. What then makes the unconverted infant children of believers different? Paul certainly doesn't single them out for different treatment in either Ephesians or Colossians—nor does he even mention baptism at all, not even remotely. These texts lend no support to the doctrine of infant baptism.

The New Testament and the Subjects of Baptism

Thus far, we have examined the key arguments and texts cited by paedobaptists, and we have seen that they do not support infant baptism. Added to this is the telling admission of Berkhof, who, under the heading “The Scriptural basis for infant baptism,” acknowledges, “It may be said at the outset that there is no explicit command in the Bible to baptize children, and that there is not a single instance in which we are plainly told that children were baptized.”⁴⁵ This, however, is not the case with believer's baptism. Not only is the baptism of believers expressly commanded, but this is what we see in every example in the NT where it is possible to ascertain the identity of those who received baptism.

1. Matthew 3:1-6

Consider first the testimony of Matt. 3:1-6. The relation of John's baptism to the baptism which Christ and his disciples practiced is an interesting topic in itself. It isn't my purpose to take it up except to point out what surely is obvious on the surface of the NT, i.e., that the closest relation exists between John's baptism and New Covenant baptism.

As Christ's prophesied forerunner, John came preaching a message and administering an ordinance, both of which had meaning only because of their relation to the coming of Christ and the kingdom that he would establish. John's message was, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (3:1). Mark characterizes his message this way: “John came baptizing in the wilderness and preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins” (Mk. 1:4). What is clear is that the ordinance that John administered (i.e., baptism) was directly related to the message that he preached, which, of course, means that it was directly related to the fact of Christ's soon appearing and the need of repentance. The relation of his message and baptism is this—John preached that in order to prepare for Christ's imminent appearing, men should repent of their sins and be baptized as testimony to this fact.

After John's imprisonment, Jesus went into Galilee. Matthew says, “From that time Jesus began to preach and to say, Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (4:17). He also administered baptism to those who came to him, and the NT conveys this fact, noting no difference between John's baptism and his own (cf., Jn. 3:22-23). Now, since his message was the same as John's, his baptism likewise was the same in mode and meaning, i.e., it was a testimony of repentance in view, not of his imminent appearing, but in view of his actual appearing.

But whom did Jesus baptize? Must we not assume, given the intimate relation between John's baptism and his own, that he baptized men on the same basis as John did? Does this not follow? The Gospels tell us that those baptized by John came to him “confessing their sins” (Matt. 3:6; Mk. 1:5). In other words, he practiced “confessor's baptism.” Presumably Jesus did the same. This then would have excluded all who did not come confessing their sins—which would, of

⁴⁵Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 632.

course, exclude the infants of those baptized. There is no evidence that John or Jesus baptized infants—indeed, the biblical data argues strongly against it.

2. Matthew 28:19

Consider also our Lord's words at Matt. 28:19, in the Great Commission. Here our Lord, by virtue of the authority given to him by his Father, in setting out the agenda for his disciples after his departure into heaven, instructs them to "*make disciples* of all the nations, *baptizing them*." I cannot imagine that words could be plainer, i.e., our Lord authorized his disciples to baptize only those who (like them) were professed disciples of Jesus Christ, who confessed their readiness to be taught to observe all things which Christ had commanded his disciples to do. That our Lord here envisions the baptism of disciples only is explicit; and from this fact, infants, who cannot profess themselves disciples, are excluded from partaking of the ordinance.

3. Acts 2:38-42

Consider also Acts 2:38-42. Earlier in this study we examined the use that our paedobaptist brethren make of this text and saw that it gives no warrant for the practice of infant baptism—rather, the context requires that we deny that infants were baptized on the day of Pentecost. At 2:41 we read, "They then that received his word were baptized." The point again is that unless we are prepared to argue that infants received the words of the apostle and obeyed the command to repent of their sins, we cannot argue logically that they were baptized. The text says that it is "those who received his word" who were baptized—they and no others. And these are the same who then "continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers" (2:42).

4. Acts 8:12-13

Consider also Acts 8:12-13. Here, as before, it is those only who "believed . . . the things concerning the kingdom of God" who are baptized. Indeed, Luke is explicit that on this occasion baptism was administered to adult males and females (ἄνδρες τε καὶ γυναῖκες). Had children also been baptized, Luke easily could have added the words "and children" (καὶ τέκνα, as at Acts 21:5). Moreover, had he meant to convey the fact that infants also were baptized with their parents, why not use the word "babes" (βρέφη) which he had just used in another connection at Acts 7:19?

5. Acts 8:36-38

Consider also Acts 8:36-38. Whether we accept v. 37 as original or not (there is reason on textual grounds to doubt that it is), here is nevertheless a plain case of a believer being baptized. Only on the assumption that Philip baptized the Ethiopian eunuch without a profession of faith in Christ can this conclusion be overturned—an assumption which no one can cogently make. Also, the case of the baptism of Saul of Tarsus is plainly a case of the baptism of a believer (Acts 9:18).

6. Acts 18:8

We have already examined the cases of so-called "household baptism" (cf., Acts 10:47-48 with 11:13-14; 16:15, 33-34; 1 Cor. 1:16) and seen that there is no warrant in these texts for infant baptism, but that every sound exegetical consideration leads to the conclusion that only those who professed faith in Christ were baptized. There is one text, however, in this category which is rarely acknowledged by paedobaptist writers. Acts 18:8 reads, "And Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed in the Lord with all his house; and many of the Corinthians hearing believed, and were baptized." This is also an example of "household baptism"; however, Luke explicitly says that not only Crispus but his entire household "believed." And we presume that, like the

other Corinthians who believed, they were baptized. Describing the other Corinthians who were added to the church on this occasion, Luke says that (1) “hearing,” i.e., the gospel, (2) they “believed,” i.e., on Christ, and (3) were baptized. The only conclusion warranted from this statement is that those baptized at Corinth were those who heard the gospel with understanding and believed on Christ. This was patently believer’s baptism. Those who either had not or could not hear the gospel with understanding, or had not or could not believe on Christ, were not baptized.

7. Acts 19:1-6

The last text in Acts speaking of baptism is 19:1-6. We need not tarry long here. When Paul encounters disciples of John at Ephesus, he assumes two things: (1) that when men believe on Christ, they receive the Holy Spirit, and (2) that when men believe on Christ, they are baptized into the name of Christ. When Paul reminds these folk of John’s testimony that “they should believe on him who would come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus,” evidently they believe on Christ, are baptized, and receive the Holy Spirit. The important point for us is that baptism is administered to those who believe on Christ.

Conclusion

In sum, when we compare the scriptural evidence cited for the doctrine of infant baptism (as set out in the WCF) with the scriptural evidence for the doctrine of believer’s baptism (as set out in our Confession), Scripture proof stands squarely on the side of believer’s baptism. The case for infant baptism simply cannot be sustained scripturally on any solid ground whatever. The Bible’s doctrine, as well as that of our Confession, is that “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.” As Spurgeon so well said:

If we could find infant baptism in the word of God, we would adopt it. It would help us out of a great difficulty, for it would take away from us that reproach which is attached to us—that we are odd and do not as other people do. But we have looked well through the Bible and cannot find it, and do not believe it is there; nor do we believe that others can find infant baptism in the Scriptures, unless they themselves first put it there.⁴⁶

⁴⁶Charles H. Spurgeon, *C.H. Spurgeon Autobiography* (reprint ed., Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1962), 1:152.