

WHY  
EVANGELICAL  
ANGLICANS  
SHOULD NOT  
BAPTISE BABIES

*by Joe Story*

Published by the Unboring Book Company

Northampton, England

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Revised second edition 2019

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## NOTES:

- 1.To give some variety to what could otherwise be tedious repetition, the terms Anglican and Church of England are used interchangeably in this booklet.
2. I have chosen to use the term baby baptism rather than infant baptism, because the term infant can be used of young children, and I would not exclude the possibility of children coming to faith and being baptised when they are young. It is the issue of faith not age that I am dealing with.

## INTRODUCTION

*According to the Church of England's own statistics (2013), an average of 7000 baptisms are carried out each month on babies under the age of one year.*

The wording in the service of Holy Baptism in the Church of England's service book, Common Worship, declares all such babies to be added to the church. The priest says:

***“Faith is the gift of God to His people.  
In baptism the Lord is adding to our number  
Those whom He is calling.”***

and

***“The Church receives these children with joy.”***

The priest also speaks of rebirth, cleansing from sin and being buried with Christ.

At the rate that baptisms of those under one year are taking place (leaving aside the large number of those above that age who are baptised, or the parents of the baptised), the average congregation within the Church of England should at least double every twelve years. They do not appear to be doing so, and available statistics would seem to show that attendance is dropping. That would seem to indicate that either there is a death rate and/or rate of leaving equivalent to the baptism rate, or else that a very high percentage of those who are baptised never darken the door of a church again.

Whatever exceptions we may be able to find in this or that Parish around the country, any honest Anglican clergyman will have to admit that by far the majority of those babies who have been baptised do not grow into a place of active faith.

## Why do Evangelical Anglicans continue the practice?

I have read hundreds of books and booklets on baptism, many of them with the express aim of understanding why the Church of England carries out practices, that seem to many of us on the outside, to be misguided. There are numerous reasons which have been given, and it is not my intention to try and cover all of them. The ones that I will be concentrating on are those which seem to be most prevalent in evangelical churches. This is because they can be considered and refuted primarily on a biblical basis rather than being sidetracked by too much by tradition and church history.

This booklet is concentrating on Anglican baptismal practices not least because the Church of England is one of the most influential churches in this country, but also because the continued practice of baptising babies, sometimes causes those who practice believer's baptism to be labelled re-baptisers.

The practice of baby baptism can also cause problems of conscience for the many people who, having been baptised as a baby, subsequently come to faith and are challenged by the bible teaching on baptism. Many come to see that baptism as a believer is the biblical norm, but they are put off from asking for this because they went through a ceremony as a baby.

Part of the purpose of this booklet is to give those people the liberty to follow their conscience and understanding, and to receive Christian baptism as believers.

## AN HISTORICAL OVERVIEW: PRE-REFORMATION - 1907

Before the Church of England came into being, most people in England would have been baptised when very young babies. If they looked the least sickly or likely to die, the baptism would probably

have been carried out by the midwife who delivered them. Real Christianity was at a low ebb, bibles were in Latin and usually only in the possession of the priests. There was a fairly clear division between those in holy orders, such as monks, priests and nuns, and the common people, whose level of belief may have been little more than superstitions fed by a corrupt papacy.

During this period, the prevailing view of baptism would have been influenced by that set forth by Augustine. Because of the fall, all people (including babies) outside of the church were damned. Entry into the church was through baptism and so, in order to avoid damnation, virtually everyone was baptised as soon as possible.

In the period leading up to, and during the Sixteenth Century, God brought about a number of waves of change, revival and reformation. Such was the extent of this that we call it 'The Reformation'. During this period there was a recovery of a number of major foundational truths such as 'salvation by faith alone' and doctrine 'by scripture alone'. God raised up some outstanding champions of the faith and huge amounts of ground were gained. Tens of thousands were brought into a vital experience of new birth and life in Christ. But, as in most moves of God, opposition came and hard won ground was contested.

One area where the progress stopped was primarily related to the nature of the church in relation to the state and politics. Reformation leaders such as John Calvin and Martin Luther sought to reform the church whilst retaining links and interdependence with the state. A number of others such as Menno Simons and Jacob Hutter wanted to take reform further and they saw the church as a separate entity free from state involvement or interference. Baptism had been practiced so universally before the Reformation that it was viewed as being linked into citizenship. Both Calvin and Luther, with their emphasis on church/state interdependence, saw it as appropriate to maintain the status quo on the matter. Because bibles were becoming widely available and read, leaders such as Simons, Hutter and others, not

only sought to establish churches without state involvement but they rediscovered the biblical truth of baptism, as being a dividing line between those in the church and those outside of it.

Those in this second wave of the Reformation began to baptise people as believers. Calvin and Luther called them Anabaptists, (ana =again) or re-baptisers. However, as they sought independence from the state as well, they were branded as rebels and heretics, fiercely persecuted and executed in their thousands. Therefore, whilst the Reformation brought about many corrections and real changes for the better, it faltered on the issue of church/state interdependence and it ground to a near halt on the issue of baptismal reform.

Although the Anabaptists were reduced in number by extensive persecution, many survived, and just after the beginning of the seventeenth century there was a re-emergence of believer's baptism with the simpler designation 'Baptists' of those who practiced it. At the heart of their belief were two things, the independence and autonomy of the local congregation and the replacement of baby baptism by believer's baptism. The majority of 'Free Churches' that have arisen since then, including virtually all of the newer charismatic/pentecostal churches, have been influenced by their understanding. However, by the time the first Baptist church was formed, those who had rejected and persecuted them had had opportunity to consolidate their own positions.

Essentially there were three major groups. The Church of England, the Roman Catholics and those who adopted a Presbyterian (eldership) form of church government. All three continued to practice baptism of babies, but the Presbyterians, who were the most influenced by the Reformation's re-emphasis on the bible, began to develop a new, more biblically developed view of baby baptism. The Church of England and the Roman Catholics mainly continued in the Augustinian view with the emphasis on baptism as also being the point of regeneration. The 1662 Prayer book quite clearly stated this, and for the next two centuries that became the official position.

In 1847, George Gorham, a Church of England vicar was recommended to a new post at Bamford Speke in Devon. It had been speculated that his views on baby baptism were at odds with Anglican doctrine, particularly his contention that by baptism, babies do not become members of Christ and the children of God. Upon examining him for the new post, Bishop Phillpotts took exception to Gorham's view that baptismal regeneration was conditional and dependent upon a later personal adoption of promises made. The Bishop found Gorham unsuitable for the post. Gorham appealed to the ecclesiastical court to compel the bishop to institute him, but the court confirmed the bishop's decision and awarded costs against Gorham. He then appealed to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council, which caused great controversy about whether a secular court should decide on the doctrine of the Church of England, but eventually on 9th March, 1850, the Committee (in a split vote) reversed the Bishop's and the court's decision, granting Gorham his institution.

Bishop Phillpotts repudiated the judgment and threatened to excommunicate the Archbishop of Canterbury and anyone who dared to institute Gorham. Fourteen prominent Anglicans called upon the Church to repudiate the views that the Privy Council had expressed on baptism, and as there was no response, they left the Church of England and joined the Roman Catholic Church.

The important thing about this somewhat strange case is that:

***It shows conclusively that the official Church of England teaching on baby baptism at that time (1850), was that a child was considered to be regenerate through the act of baptism.***

Not only does it show this to be the case, but the fact that fourteen prominent Anglicans left the Church to join the Roman Catholics, when just one clergyman had managed to dissent, clearly demonstrates that the doctrine of baptismal regeneration was held with a good deal of conviction by the established church.

Over the next fifty years there was undoubtedly some softening of this view and by the end of the Nineteenth Century such a noteworthy clergyman as Bishop Ryle of Liverpool quite clearly opposed the concept of automatic baptismal regeneration. He even went so far as to say that what the 1662 Prayer book stated about the child being regenerate should not be considered as stating a fact but as expressing a charitable hope.

When he was asked the question:

***“Does not the Baptismal Service of the Church Prayer Book say of every baptised child, this child is regenerate, and does it not tell us to thank God that it hath pleased Him to regenerate the infant?”***

He answered:

***“The Baptismal Service uses these expressions in the charitable supposition that those who use the service, and bring their children to be baptised, are really what they profess to be.”***

And again when answering the question:

***“But is this explanation of the language of the Baptismal Service honest, natural, and just? Is it the real meaning which ought to be put on the words?”***

He replied:

***“It is the only meaning which is consistent with the whole spirit of the Prayer Book. From first to last the Prayer Book charitably assumes that all who use it are real, thorough Christians.”***

I am reminded of an incident, in which a traveler to an isolated area booked into a hotel there on the strength of a brochure showing a luxurious building with a swimming pool and beautifully laid out gardens. On arrival, seeing that it was little more than a building site, he sought out the manager in order to complain. “But my dear sir”, he was told, “the brochure shows it exactly as we hope it will be.”

It may well be that Bishop Ryle, and other good Anglicans since, have interpreted the statements of the Prayer Book on the basis that

what is said, is what they wish the case to be, rather than what they know the actual situation really is. Bishop Ryle was undoubtedly an intelligent, spiritual man of God, and he is held in high esteem in many Christian traditions. However, it is little less than astonishing, that he could make such statements as those above, when there is clear record that fifty years earlier the agreed belief of the Church of England, declared and fought over in a court of law, was to take the Prayer Book literally at face value in respect of the actual regeneration of babies in baptism.

Although, as we shall see, changes in the understanding of baptism came in over the following hundred years or so, it is clear from the 1971 Report by the Archbishops' Commission on Christian Doctrine, that the Prayer Book wording, based as it was on earlier prayer books, is considered to mean what it actually said. In Chapter 1 section 7, when referring to Confirmation, it states:

*“The new emphasis on the educational aspect of Confirmation is very clearly brought out in the inclusion of the Catechism within the pre-1662 Confirmation rite; indeed, in the early Prayer Books the form in which the candidates ratify their baptismal faith is by the replies which they make to the bishop’s questions. The prayers indicate that the grace received in Confirmation is a strengthening with the inward unction and sevenfold gifts of the Holy Spirit, by whom -*

*the candidates have been regenerated in baptism.”*

(Emphasis mine)

For those of us outside of the Anglican church, it is an embarrassing position to be faced with a requirement to accept the statement by our Anglican brothers and sisters that, though they are saying that a child is regenerate through baptism many, perhaps most, of them do not believe it themselves. It is very difficult not to conclude, that by any normal use of the English language that is what we would normally call a lie.

## THE CASE OF ROLAND ALLEN AND THE BAPTISM OF ALLCOMERS

The next noteworthy incident was with an Anglican clergyman who had been a missionary to China. Roland Allen, who, after he became ill and returned to England, took charge of a parish on the South coast until 1907, when he resigned in protest against the rule of the established church which said that he must baptise any child presented for the sacrament, whether or not the parents had any Christian commitment.

Although the seeds of baptismal reform may have begun to germinate in the latter part of the previous century, a different problem presented itself to Roland Allen. On encountering parents who were drunk, and family members unable to take part in baptismal services of their children, he decided that enough was enough and he left the ministry. Allen was a godly man and his situation has been looked upon by some as a tragic example of the system triumphing over an enlightened conscience.

No doubt any Christian, from any theological persuasion, would acknowledge the rightness of giving parents the benefit of the doubt if they make positive statements about where they stand in matters of faith, but unless the concept of discernment is entirely rejected, there must be some point at which Anglican clergy can make the judgement that some parents are not believing Christians. However, the problem which faced Roland Allen still exists today. In spite of many present day evangelical clergy struggling with the issue, the official practice of the Church of England is clearly that anyone coming with their child for baptism will be accepted and the ordinance given. The Church of England official website states:

***“Who is allowed to have a christening service?”***

***The Church of England welcomes all babies, children and families - whatever shape that family takes. You do not have to be married to ask for a christening for your child. You do not have to be an active churchgoer - as parents, you do not even have to have been christened yourselves. Everyone is welcome at their local church.***

***(Note: There is no difference between a christening service and a baptism service. Some churches will use the word 'baptism' and some the word 'christening'. Babies are 'baptised' during a 'christening' service.)”***

This particular problem still remains. There have been attempts within the Church of England to seek reform, but the impetus has only come from a few clergy rather than from General Synod. In spite of some spirited attempts by such men as Clifford Owen and Colin Buchanan, no actual changes have been made.

## AN HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

### TWENTIETH AND TWENTY FIRST CENTURIES

Following the Second World War, it became apparent that there had been some significant changes in thinking among evangelical clergy. The period from 1900 -1950 was a very intense time for theological study across the whole spectrum of denominations, especially on the part of some Continental theologians. Amongst the numerous academic works produced, were several on baptism. They covered most aspects of the subject and they undoubtedly influenced Post-War thinking. As far as Anglicanism goes there appear to be two particular strands of baptismal theology that came to the fore to replace the teaching of baptismal regeneration, (though it needs to be understood that, the wording of regeneration is still used in the baptismal liturgy in official service books).

The first of these strands, perhaps more favoured among non-evangelicals, but often referred to by evangelicals as a second string argument, stresses the prevenient grace of God in baptism. Prevenient means ‘going before’ and in baptism the emphasis is upon the fact that in all aspects of salvation, it is God who acts first. Baptism of an infant may therefore be seen as a declaration that God’s salvation has come and is available to all because of his grace. This view was emphasised by Scottish theologian, T.F.Torrance, who was part of a commission set up by the Church of Scotland on baptism in 1954.

One of the quotes in the report said:

***“Baptism has no efficacy apart from faith. In infant Baptism the faith is that of the Church, not of the child.”***

It was observed by R.L. Child (a Baptist), of the report:

***“there runs through it the persistent assumption that to bring an infant within the sphere of Christ's presence and activity (in other words into the Church) is the same thing as his becoming personally united with Christ.”***

The practical result of this was to give a theological basis, other than regeneration, for indiscriminate baptism, and this appears to have been welcomed by those in the higher and/or liberal wing of the Church of England.

The second strand appears to have gained ground because with the apparent almost universal rejection of baptismal regeneration by Anglican clergy today (in spite of the words in liturgical service books) it has become necessary to find an alternative theology. Unfortunately, rather than allowing genuine baptismal reform, and embracing baptism for believers as many clergy would wish, a different, but equally unbiblical, reason for baby baptism has been adopted. This theology is not the official Church of England teaching and it appears at odds with it, but it has become extraordinarily popular within the evangelical wing of the church in this country.

This new strand of baptismal theology has emerged fully formed, and has been welcomed and embraced by many evangelical Anglicans. Contrary to the official statement which defines *Who is allowed to have a christening service*, its emphasis is only to baptise children of believers. The doctrine was fully formed as it was not new, but had been formulated and used since the Reformation, especially within the Presbyterian and Reformed churches. In their midst, it had run parallel to the Anglican doctrine of baptismal regeneration for around three hundred years. At the heart of this teaching was the continuity of the biblical covenants and, especially, the teaching that baptism was the New Covenant sign equivalent to circumcision in the Old Covenant.

The ablest exponents of this doctrine have all been from the Reformed tradition of the Church and perhaps the most influential books in the post War period were: 'The Baptism of Infants' -1955 (later revised and re-published as Children of Promise) by G.W. Bromiley, and 'The Biblical Doctrine of Infant Baptism' written in 1951 by the Frenchman, Pierre Marcel. Of Marcel's book, Bridge and Phypers comment:

***“Only since the appearance of this book has the position been enthusiastically adopted by a growing number of evangelical Anglicans.....whatever the strength of the position may be it must be recognised that it was quite unknown before the Reformation, and cannot be found in any form in any of the writings of the early Fathers.”***

Marcel's book was translated into English by Philip Hughes, an Anglican who was involved in writing and editing a range of books under the title, The Christian Foundation Series, aimed at the Evangelical wing of the Church of England. One of these, by Geoffrey Hart, was on baptism and appears to show a close affinity with the arguments set forth by Marcel.

As well as Hughes and Hart, other Anglican writers, both English and Australian, began to bring out a range of 'popular' style books

and booklets on baptism during the four decades between 1950 and 1990. These included books or articles by Frank Colquhoun, John Stott, Michael Green, David Watson and, especially several in the Grove booklet series, by Colin Buchanan. Many evangelicals seeking a fresh approach to infant baptism in a changing world, welcomed this flood of books and booklets, each confirming each other, and their teaching was swiftly and widely accepted. It is understandable that this weight of literature, coming from popular, able and well respected authors, quickly established the Covenant view of infant baptism as the Evangelical Anglican norm.

However, it must be noted that:

***Its almost instant acceptance and familiarity, hid the fact that it was a new and novel import to Anglicanism from the Reformed churches, and would have been considered heresy in the Church of England a little over a hundred years previously.***

Such has been the immediate recent impact of this teaching, that many Church of England clergy that I have spoken with, seem unaware that not too long ago (prior to the 1940s) it was virtually unheard of as an argument for baptising babies in the Church of England, its previous impact having been limited to the Reformed churches. The practical outworking of this, is that having been presented with a ready-made and pre-packaged answer to the baby baptism issue, very few Anglican clergy appear to have felt it necessary to wrestle further with the matter for themselves.

The result of this appears to be that, because it has been taken on board as a package, which in many cases has remained unopened:

***There is a whole new generation of evangelical clergy in the Church of England, who appear to be practicing baby baptism from a Covenantal Reformed theological standpoint, which they seem neither to hold to, nor fully understand. Moreover, this position is not reflected in either Church of England liturgical services or official website statements and, prior to 1850, was generally considered by their predecessors to be heresy.***



Before we explore further the implications of this, we will seek to open up the teaching of Covenant baptism, and also explore why it is not biblical.

## WHAT IS COVENANT BAPTISM?

***“This covenant was the solid, biblical and objective foundation upon which all the Reformers unanimously and without exception rested the legitimacy of infant baptism.”***

Pierre Marcel approvingly quotes this from the reformed writer H. Bavinck, and it undoubtedly reflects the standpoint of virtually all Reformed writings on baptism.

Modern Reformed books on baptism would tend to have two strands of argument. The first is that which is emphasised above by Bavinck: it is right to baptise babies, and the grounds for such baptism is the nature of the one Covenant of grace which runs throughout scripture. The second strand, which is seen as confirmatory rather than primary, is that New Testament practice and teaching supports the practice of infant baptism. However, it is clear from virtually all Reformed writers that the foundational argument is the Covenant based one, and that this alone gives the certainty behind the practice.

Reformed Covenant theology is generally well argued and clearly thought through, and to do it justice it really is necessary to read and think about it for oneself. I am going to attempt a very short precis of it, which will inevitably be inadequate for a serious reformed thinker. However, I believe it will be adequate for our purposes here, as whilst I do disagree with it, the argument I want to develop here is essentially against the Anglican adoption of it, rather than the position and practice as it is held by those in Reformed churches.

## The Covenant of grace

Throughout the bible, God the Creator of all things, has taken the initiative to make promises to those people whom He has chosen for Himself. Such promises can be viewed as agreements or covenants which God has committed himself to fulfilling.

There have been a number of such covenants. To Noah, to Abraham, to the Israelites through Moses, to David and through Jesus Christ to the Church. Whilst it is recognised that there are differences in those covenants, even to the extent that one, the one given through Moses, is designated the Old Covenant, and another, that through Christ, is called the New Covenant, Reformed Churches believe that they are in fact all aspects of one Covenant, and that this Covenant, is based on grace on God's part and is received by faith on the part of those to whom it is given.

Whilst there are some churches, called 'Dispensational', who would disagree with that, most churches would have a measure of agreement, the measure varying according to the extent that differences between the covenants are seen and emphasised. Those from a Reformed position would strongly emphasise the unity between them and insist that such unity can only be adequately dealt with by treating all the covenants as part of one.

For our purposes here, the most important aspect of their unity is the way in which God deals with families and not just individuals. It is stressed that Noah was a preacher of righteousness, but it was Noah AND his family who were saved and sealed in the ark. It was Abraham who was called and it was Abraham who received the promises, but it was Abraham AND his family through whom those promises were outworked. When Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt and brought them to Mount Sinai to receive the law, it was the people AND their children who were included. When God promised David kingship over Israel, it was David AND his children who became the royal line.

When God made covenant with Abraham He sealed that covenant by commanding him to be circumcised AND his (male) children with him. Circumcision was confirmed to be the covenantal seal through Moses and that was for all male Israelites, including babies, who were to receive the rite when they were eight days old. It is argued that when God brought in the New Covenant through Jesus Christ, the new sign of the covenant must (to be consistent) be given to those who believe AND their children.

The Reformers taught that baptism was the sign and seal of the New Covenant and that it was a direct replacement of circumcision in the Old Covenant. Children of believers were included in the sign of circumcision of the Old Covenant, therefore children of believers must be included in the sign of baptism of the New. It is important to understand that this is based on the family unit, but only on a *believing Christian* family unit. It has no application whatever for the children of families where the parents are not believing and practising Christians. This is not a complicated argument, neither is it one that is as persuasive as it may first seem. However, before we explore objections to this position, it will be helpful to consider some of the secondary arguments that are used to back this up.

#### THE ARGUMENTS FOR BABY BAPTISM BASED ON THE ATTITUDE OF JESUS AND THE PRACTICE OF THE APOSTLES AND THE EARLY CHURCH

As far as I am aware, no one considers these arguments to be conclusive on their own, and no one accepts the counter arguments against them as being conclusive either. A case can be made and refuted for all positions. This does not mean that they are not important, but it does mean that we should be careful how much weight we put upon them. These arguments may be summed up briefly.

The first argument simply put, it that God loves children and has an inclusive attitude toward them.

I am certain no one arguing against baptising babies would deny the positive attitude of Jesus towards children. The issue does not, and should not revolve around the attitude of Jesus and Christian parents toward very young children, but on whether that attitude is of necessity, determined by the inclusion of babies in baptism.

One of the scriptures (*Mark Ch 10 v13ff*) most often quoted as a proof text for baptising babies, is one which actually shows the very opposite, but which does not appear to be discussed by those of a reformed position in any literature I have read. It is used, quite rightly, to show that Jesus both loves and accepts little children. I know of no one who would disagree with that.

What does not appear to be discussed or referred to on this point though, is whether Jesus (or his disciples) baptised such children. It would appear to have been common practice for the children of proselytes to have been baptised with their parents as a family unit when embracing Judaism. When John called for the Jews to be baptised, and when Jesus engaged with Nicodemus, using terminology that indicated his need to be reborn on the same basis as the proselytes, it was clear that a new era was being introduced. As part of this era, both John and Jesus (or rather his disciples) began to baptise those who repented and looked for the coming of the kingdom.

This seems to clearly create a dilemma which I have been unable to find addressed by those supporting baby baptism. If John and Jesus' disciples, in line with the Pharisees practice of proselyte baptism, baptised young children, then Mark's account becomes a mystery. John tells us that Jesus (that is His disciples) baptised more people than John did and we know that John baptised multitudes. If young children were included in these mass baptisms, then it would have been quite out of character for the disciples to refuse a simple request

for a blessing, as they would themselves have been baptising children and, as such, would have been fully aware of their need to be included as part of God's people. If, however, John and Jesus (His disciples) did not include children in the baptisms they conducted, whilst it would make more sense of the disciple's response in the situation that Mark records, it creates the problem that, if they did not baptise babies whilst Jesus was with them, why would they start doing it after Pentecost? No one supporting baby baptism appears to offer any answer to this question.

The second argument is based on verses in the Epistles that are addressed to children and Paul's reference to the children of believers being holy (*1 Corinthians Ch 7 v 14*). Dealing with the second point first, it is commonly asserted that Paul's terminology related to the children being made holy in v 14 is often taken as proof that they must have been baptised. However, a similar statement is made about an unbelieving husband or wife who is sanctified by the believing spouse. The likelihood of an unbelieving, pagan, husband receiving baptism at the same time as his believing wife or, more pertinently, allowing his children to be baptised if he was refusing it himself, stretches credulity. I have never heard it suggested that the unbelieving spouse would have been baptised nor that they should have been. This is where the hard words of Jesus about dividing families kicks in, and if it is conceded that an unbelieving spouse of a convert would not be baptised, it is hard to insist that their children must have been. In respect of those portions of scripture addressed to children, we have no problem, as the issue is not whether children can exercise faith but whether babies should be baptised.

The third argument is based on the preaching and practice of the apostles. It is argued that Peter's preaching on the day of Pentecost included the statement that "The promise is to you and your children", and this must have meant a continuation of the Old Covenant principle of a believer and his family. It also refers to the occasions in the book of Acts when the gospel was offered to "you

and your house" and the subsequent household baptisms, which it is said, must have included babies.

Volumes have been written on both sides of the argument in respect of the "and your house" baptisms. As far as I am aware, no one has ever claimed conclusive proof one way or the other. Because they can be read and explained, on the basis of background and practice, so that they may or may not have included babies, I do not propose to argue for or against this. The ultimate issue is not whether there were children in the household who received baptism but whether there were babies who were too young to believe who received it..

However, I believe that Peter's preaching has been misunderstood by those using what he said as a basis for including babies in baptism.

The fundamental difference between the Old Covenant and the New, is the difference of a promise awaited and a promise received. We will unpack this a little more when we look at Pauline re-baptism, but for the moment it is important to grasp this simple concept. Throughout the history of the Jewish nation there had been the gradual and increasing expectancy of a promised Messiah. The coming of the Messiah would be marked by the inauguration of the kingdom of God, where God Himself would exercise direct rule and influence over His people. He would do this through His Messiah by granting the gift of the Holy Spirit to His faithful people. The Old Testament prophecies of the New Covenant, (*Jeremiah Ch 31 v31 and Ezekiel Ch 36 v26*) explicitly designate the covenant to be new because it will include the presence of the Spirit, not only among God's people as a whole but in each individual. It would be through the Spirit within, that God's laws would be written on hearts and outworked in lives.

Key elements of the teaching of Jesus, especially in John's Gospel, focused on the coming of the Spirit, which had been promised beforehand. After the death and resurrection of Jesus, but before He

ascended to His Father, He told his disciples to await the promise which He had told them about. That promise was fulfilled on the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit was poured out by the now ascended and glorified Jesus.

When Peter preached to the Jews who were present, he explained that God had made Jesus both Lord and Messiah, and that was how and why the Spirit had now been given. When the hearers asked what they should do, they were told to repent and be baptised, and Peter then said that they would themselves receive the same gift of the Spirit, explaining that the *promise of the Holy Spirit* was to them, their children, and all who were afar off. The focal point of this sermon was that the promise had come. To those who could hear, understand, and respond with repentance and faith, baptism in water and Holy Spirit meant the entry into the longed for Messianic age.

There are only two ways that can be understood and acted upon in respect of babies and those not yet of an age to believe. Either, as is practiced in the Orthodox Church, to fully include them as those who also receive the Holy Spirit on the basis of the faith of Christ and His church, or not to include them until such time as they can respond by faith for themselves. Baptism in water, as a response to the realisation of the implementation of the New Covenant, is always with repentance for the past, *unto* the reception of the Spirit, not at some time still to come, for that was the nature of the Old Covenant, but now, into the promised New Covenant.

The Church can only be clearly defined as those followers of Jesus who have entered into the New Covenant, and the New Covenant can only be outworked through the indwelling gift of God's Holy Spirit, who comes on the basis of the finished work of Jesus the Messiah at Calvary. Whilst babies in believer's families may have the advantage and privilege of being brought up within the sound of the good news, and nurtured and prayed for to the end that they will respond in faith after the example of their parents; they are still in the expectation, not the realisation of the New Covenant. Baptism in

water is part of the faith process of moving towards the reception of the promised baptism in Holy Spirit that has now become available. It is not for those who merely have a vague hope in the indefinite future. Otherwise the two baptisms become disconnected, and the New Covenant becomes no more than a future hope similar to that held in the Old Covenant.

Paul's decision to give Christian re-baptism to the disciples at Ephesus who had previously been baptised by John, demonstrates this (*Acts Ch 19*). We know from Jesus' attitude and declarations about John, He considered him to be the greatest person born of a woman. It would therefore be unreasonable to suggest that John preached a different covenant or a radically different message to that of Jesus and his disciples. The only discernible difference between the message of John and that of Paul at Ephesus was that of timing. Both John and Paul preached the need for repentance, both acknowledged Jesus as Saviour and as the one who would baptise in Holy Spirit. The essential difference was that John proclaimed the message as future whereas Paul proclaimed it as having come. If Paul considered the fact of the present hope being relegated to the future as a sufficient cause for re-baptism of adult believers, it surely cannot be argued that he baptised infants into a future hope of salvation, and certainly not that we should do so.

Whilst these ancillary arguments need to be considered, as they may add weight for or against the primary position, almost all writers on the subject agree on one thing. It was the bottom line of Pierre Marcel's argument. Michael Green has stressed it and Frank Colquhoun appeared happy to put virtually the whole weight of his argument upon it. They are agreed, that the basis of their case is the replacement of circumcision by baptism. Colquhoun goes on to say categorically:

***“The Old Testament argument is the main argument, the conclusive argument, the only real justification for this doctrine (infant baptism)”.***

## WHY I DISAGREE WITH THE COVENANT BASED BAPTISM

### a) The confusion of the blood-line and the faith-line

It seems that the key issue on this matter centers on the confusion of the blood-line and faith-line of Abraham. Before you switch off, this is not so strange as it sounds and it is actually very important. What I mean by these terms is simply this:

A blood-line is a family line through the generations. This is seen at the beginning of the New Testament where the father to son relationships from Abraham to Jesus are listed (*Matthew Ch 1*). It is an important concept in Jewish thinking and even in our country, we recognise its importance when dealing with inheritance following the death of a parent. It is normal, and in law it is a default position, that any inheritance is passed from a father to his offspring. This is essentially what is meant by the blood-line.

A faith-line, is where faith is passed on to another person, whether they are in the natural family or not. It is an outworking of spiritual parenthood, not natural parenthood. Paul referred to Timothy as his son in the faith and also in the book of Philemon he refers to having given birth (spiritually) to Onesimus. Of course the two may coincide. A father or mother may bring about the spiritual birth of their own natural children, and would undoubtedly pray, believe and work to that end. But such a coming together of the natural and the spiritual is neither automatic nor inevitable.

Blood-line and faith-line are both concepts that we find in the bible, and they are important because through them the natural people of God (Israel) and the spiritual people of God (the Church) both trace their origin to Abraham, who was the father of the Israelites through the blood-line, and the father of all believers through the line of faith. Some of course, both before and after Christ, belong to both.

In the Old Testament, the blood-line is more prominent than the faith-line. So, for instance in the lists of the kings, good believing kings are interspersed with bad unbelieving kings such as Manasseh, but whilst, the dynastic (family) descendants were all circumcised, they could not all be described as believers or as having faith.

Even the genealogy of Jesus includes those who were not believers. The line of Kings through which he traced his ancestry back to David, includes some who were not only unbelievers but also plainly evil. Even a cursory look at the life of someone like Manasseh, should be enough to convince anyone that not only did he not believe in God, but that he totally rejected the faith of his fathers. He sacrificed his own son by burning him to death as an offering to a false god, and he dealt with demons and wizards. God's verdict on his life was "Manasseh seduced them (the people of Israel) to do more evil than all the nations who the Lord destroyed before them."

This situation, perhaps is seen most clearly with the second generation out of Egypt. Whilst those born in Egypt were circumcised, those born in the wilderness were not (*Joshua Ch 5*). The scriptures are explicit that the generation who died in the wilderness did so because of unbelief and disobedience. All of their children were commanded by God to be circumcised at Gilgal on entry into the land, but there is obviously no way that this could be described as happening on the basis of the faith of their fathers, who were designated by God Himself as unbelieving.

This clearly confirms that the Old Covenant acts of circumcision were based, *not on parental faith but Abrahamic blood-line*.

So, in the Old Testament, three generations of a family which were in turn, person A, believing, person B, unbelieving and person C, unbelieving, would have all undergone circumcision. However, whilst it could be argued that person B had their circumcision based on the faith of Person A, there is no way that the argument could be extended and stated as the reason person C was circumcised. It could

only have been on the basis of the blood-line. However, whilst it was undoubtedly correct Old Testament practice to circumcise all three persons A, B and C, there is no argument from a Reformed position that in the church today, the third generation of a family with a similar profile would be accepted for infant baptism.

*These incidents, of which there are many, many examples, incontrovertibly show that the Old Testament practice of circumcision was based on natural parenthood in the blood-line of Abraham and was not in any circumstances limited to children of those parents who believed.*

If baby baptism is carried out on the basis of the faith of the parents, this cannot be supported by pointing to a precedent at work throughout the Old Testament which is based on blood-line. Baptism for a family today which is done on the basis of the Reformed Covenant argument, cannot and will not continue to subsequent generations if the ones baptised do not themselves come into faith. This is clearly different from the practise of circumcision in the Old Testament, where subsequent generations were always circumcised, regardless of the presence or absence of faith in the parents, or the subsequent faith of those being circumcised.

Where it is insisted that a third generation is baptised, regardless of the faith of the second, that can only be done by rejecting any biblical basis at all, or by returning to a blood-line principle, which could only come into effect if every believer started a new blood-line for themselves. This would obviously be ridiculous and I am sure would not be argued by even the most ardent supporters of baby baptism.

#### **b) The problem of family coherence.**

There is no doubt, that in the Old Covenant, the family were always treated as a unit. This fact is not disputed. The issue is whether this concept and treatment continues unchanged into the New Covenant. For those who maintain it does, a problem begins to surface with the

preaching of John the Baptist. He was spoken of as turning the hearts of the fathers to the children and vice versa, but his preaching and activity seems remarkably free of any such emphasis if this should be taken as referring to the family unit, rather than a re-call to the faith of the (patriarchal) fathers, which was of course the emphasis of Elijah to whom he was likened. There is no biblical record at all of John preaching about the need for fathers to get on better with their children. However, there is a clear emphasis on the need to re-assess the nature of the blood-line relationship between the Jews to whom he was speaking and Abraham. There was no question raised about the fact that they were natural children of Abraham, linked by blood through the centuries. Where John's challenge was addressed was to the fact that his hearers had forsaken the belief and practice of their fathers. As Paul stresses in his letter to the Roman Church, Abraham is the father of all who believe, and in the New Covenant, that is the determining factor not natural parent-children relationships.

According to the content of John's preaching, Israel needed to return to the foundations of their faith. *This was because the blood-line relationship with Abraham, which was so important in the Old Covenant, could no longer be relied upon in the New.* A return to the *faith* of Abraham was therefore necessary, because inclusion in the New Covenant, about to be established through Jesus the Messiah, could not be entered into by any way except faith. *The inclusion by family line was finished.*

This is explicit in the teaching of Jesus. In what must have seemed shocking and revolutionary to the Jews, who held family coherence as a sanctified absolute, Jesus stated that he had come to divide families on the basis of loyalty to Himself. It is helpful to note that this is emphasised in Matthew's gospel (*Ch 10 v 35*), written first and foremost for the Jews. However, it also appears to be re-emphasised and made quite clear, when he states that even his own mother and brothers should not be considered as part of his new spiritual family apart from the exercise of faith (*Matt Ch 12 v 42-49*).

When preparing his disciples for ministry, Jesus told them that it may be necessary to forsake family ties. When discussing the nature of the marriage relationship, he made it plain that, whilst it is important, and whilst also it is a God ordained union that reflects the union of Christ and the Church, it is temporary. The family unit is God ordained and of great importance, but it is affected by both death and the division that may come when one member follows Jesus and another does not. In the Old Covenant there would not have been such a clear division in the family caused by loyalty to God, but Jesus taught that the family unit was no longer the determining factor as far as being His followers was concerned.

### c) **The problem of baptism replacing circumcision**

Some writers advocating the baptism of babies refer to the replacement of circumcision by baptism as being “obvious” or they say “of course” or some similar expression. This emphasis is made however, in spite of the fact that there is no place in scripture where this connection is stated or even inferred.

The word circumcision is mentioned approximately 30 times in the Old Testament and 54 times in the New Testament. Baptism is found 9 times in the Old Testament (in the Septuagint, that is the Greek version) and about 110 in the New Testament (in Greek text). Of these 200 odd occasions when either circumcision or baptism are referred to, there is only ONE scripture where the two things are mentioned close together, (*Colossians Ch 2 v 11 and 12*). The plain reading of that text would see them as two things in a list in the same manner that Paul often listed the benefits of Christ’s work for us (*for instance 1 Corinthians Ch 1v 30 and Ch 6 v 11 and Ephesians Ch 1 v 3-9*). There are NO instances, in any of the other 200 plus occasions in scripture where the two are likened or compared with each other.

There is only this one single occasion in scripture where circumcision and baptism are even mentioned in the same place, and

in that one place, it is not the Old Covenant physical act of circumcision that is referred to but the New Covenant fulfilment of it, which is circumcision of the heart. This is one of the accomplishments of God’s work in us, in the same way that baptismal union in Christ’s death and resurrection is an accomplishment, but the two things are not the same as each other, and neither should they be considered the same simply because they are mentioned one after the other. It would be as wrong to argue that baked beans have been replaced by tomatoes because they occur one after the other on a list, as it is to argue that circumcision has been replaced by baptism for the same reason.

The most natural reading of the passage is to take it as it is actually written, which is as a list. This especially so when we note that Paul often writes in a similar way, and it is completely in line with how he deals with things elsewhere, that is, to read it as two separate things mentioned one after the other.

***It seems an extraordinary thing to take such a reading and to say that it proves that physical circumcision is equal to physical baptism, when no words in any translation actually say that. It is even more extraordinary to press this conclusion when the other 99.5% of references to either circumcision or baptism do not give the slightest grounds for such an interpretation.***

In spite of the overwhelming hermeneutical grounds to read it as it is, that is as a list, some books I have read which use the Colossians text in support of baby baptism, appear to present it as if it were the pinnacle of a body of references proving that baptism has replaced circumcision. In fact there are no other verses in the bible where the two words even occur in the same sentence. There is no admission that it is a stand-alone text which should be more correctly read as a simple list not as a comparison.

When it is realised that the case for baptism replacing circumcision relies heavily on a single, and apparently inappropriate text which is

not supported by any of the other two hundred or more scriptures mentioning either circumcision or baptism, it becomes very difficult to take the argument seriously.

What then weakens the case further, is the fact that the usage of circumcision and baptism in the bible appear so dissimilar. The argument is made that circumcision is the sign and seal of the covenant given to Abraham and ratified through Moses. This is of course entirely correct and clearly stated in scripture.

***Baptism however, is not referred to in the same manner in respect of the New Covenant through Jesus Christ. Whilst commanded by Jesus, baptism is never referred to as a covenant sign.***

It would be far more appropriate to see the drinking of wine in the communion service in this light. Jesus said in respect of the cup of wine, “This is my blood of the New Covenant which is shed for many for the remission of sins.” This connection is especially appropriate as God’s first covenantal confirmation to Abraham was through shed blood and sacrifice (*Gen Ch 15 v 8ff*), and of course circumcision was also an act involving the shedding of blood.

Whilst, there are no unequivocal scriptures referring to baptism as a sign and seal of the New Covenant, the sharing of bread and wine is clearly set in this context. In spite of this, whilst arguing vigorously for the right of babies to be baptised, the majority of Anglican churches would not allow a baby to receive communion. This apparent inconsistency is both a mystery and a concern to those who oppose baby baptism. Surely it should be both or neither. (The Orthodox Church does of course offer both, and some Anglican writers such as Colin Buchanan have argued for the adoption of the practice in the Church of England.)

There are also other clear points of dissimilarity between circumcision and baptism. In both the Old Testament and the New Testament, the term **uncircumcision** is freely used. In fact, it occurs

more times than circumcision in the Old Testament. It also occurs nearly half the number of times as circumcision in the New Testament as well. However, the terms unbaptism or unbaptised are never used. Where there is a reference to those who are outside of the New Covenant, the term of choice appears to be unbelievers.

The meaning of circumcision is at least partially understood through a comparison to its negative uncircumcision, and this usage occurs widely, but baptism is never qualified by its negative counterpart because it is a completely different sort of concept.

Also, circumcision of the flesh never appears to be used in the context of anything happening beyond the simple action. There are NO occasions when Israel was reminded “Don’t you know, that when you were circumcised such and such happened.” Baptism however, is referred to by Paul as an act in which some transaction took place. “Don’t you know,” he writes to the Romans, “that as many of us as were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death?” A similar statement of course to that made in the earlier verse considered in the Colossian letter, where he reminds them that in baptism they were buried and risen with Christ.

We believe that if the above comments are acknowledged, they remove virtually all the ground for arguing from the New Testament scriptures, that baptism replaces circumcision.

However, what is both an interesting and even more persuasive fact, is that Paul never uses the “baptism has replaced circumcision” argument when dealing with those who are insisting on converts being circumcised. In spite of extensive reading and research, I have been unable to find any writings which deal with this omission. If it is so easily recognisable a fact, by those who advocate baby baptism today, that baptism has replaced circumcision, it would be astonishing if that fact was not readily recognised AND USED, by those who were confronting the Judaisers. The New Testament debate regarding the continuing requirement of circumcision, shows



that it was an ongoing issue in the early churches, but at no time is it addressed by what would appear to be the simplest and most conclusive of arguments (if correct), that circumcision is no longer needed because it has been replaced by baptism.

#### WHY AM I CHALLENGING EVANGELICAL ANGLICANS?

***If in fact baptism has replaced circumcision, the silence on this point by Paul in the biblical arguments against those continuing to promote circumcision, is not only astonishing but completely inexplicable.***

This brings us to the nub of the matter of the continuity of the Covenants. Apart from extreme dispensationalists, of which there only appear to be a few, there does seem to be a general agreement that there is essentially one Covenant given to Abraham. A Covenant of salvation and blessing on the basis of the gracious promises of God received by faith. However, before Calvary and the resurrection, ascension and glorification of Jesus, it was not possible to receive the ultimate benefits of the Covenant, as, whilst no less secure than they would be post-Calvary, until that time, they remained in the realm of future promise. Once Christ had ascended to the Father and received the promise of the Holy Spirit, the Covenant (now termed New) could be actualised by the indwelling Spirit who writes God's laws upon our hearts by faith.

The New Testament (*for instance in Galatians Ch 3 v 2*) teaches that the reception of the Spirit, which is an integral part of our salvation and redemption, is by faith alone. Paul sets out the nature of the New Covenant in comparison to the Old which is God's word written on our hearts by the Spirit, not on tablets of stone (*2 Corinthians Ch 3*). If the mark of entry into the New is the reception of the Holy Spirit, (and how else can God's laws be written on our hearts?), then either

baptism must accomplish this *ex opere operato* (automatically through the act itself) in the case of a baby, or that baby is not in receipt of the New Covenant, but merely the promise of it.

***In other words, it is in exactly the same position as the Ephesian disciples whom Paul considered it necessary to re-baptise.***

I recently had a meal with a young woman and we talked about baptism. She attends one of the new stream charismatic churches that practices baptism of those who have become followers of Jesus. It appears that one reason she has not been baptised as a follower is because her parents had her baptised as a baby in an Anglican church. She does not discount that baptism out of hand, but neither is she very certain why it was done and what might have happened when it was done. She is not clear what her present church teaches on baptism, nor what the bible says about it. In other words, she is confused. As such, she is not in a position to exercise faith as to the part that baptism has, or might have in her life.

I rarely find anyone who is not confused about baptism. The confusion originates in some churches from very dogmatic teaching, that is enforced by the leadership, but which doesn't find the echo of truth in the hearts of those being taught. But in many cases, unfortunately very many cases, the confusion originates because those who carry out baptisms do not themselves understand what they are doing. In my experience, a number of those who are likely to have a fuzzy understanding of the baptisms which they perform, are Evangelical Church of England clergy. I believe that it is time for this issue to be addressed.

Those from a High Church or liberal position often seem to be clearer (though not necessarily more correct), and often they seem to have more conviction in what they do. Evangelicals however, often lack both clarity and conviction, and this is why this booklet is addressed to them. I appreciate that this is a wide generalisation, and I know for certain there are Evangelical Anglicans who will defend

their position with conviction and understanding, but, and I am equally certain of this, there are a considerable number of evangelical ministers who are either confused or who avoid confusion by not thinking about the matter.

In summary, the following appear to be four possible arguments that Anglicans use to support the practice of the baptism of babies:

1. ***Baby baptism is done on the basis of the Covenant Baptism argument.*** We believe that we have clearly shown that there is no acceptable case for this. However, even if all of our arguments should be completely rejected, the fact remains that Covenant Baptism is only, and can only, be for children of believers, as otherwise it goes against its own tenets. As far as I am aware many Evangelical Anglican clergy would agree that baptism should only be administered to children of believers but in practice they do not restrict it to these.

This is where all sorts of ingenious excuses are rallied to show why, what is stated rigorously in theory, is not carried out in practice. I heard a bishop say that Covenant baptism theology was correct, but that it was to be carried out with pastoral lenience; a statement which, without careful qualification, could allow and condone indiscriminate baptism. I have also heard that it is simply not possible, nor is it right, to attempt to discern whether the parents have real faith. As parents are required to make a declaration of faith at the baptism, it would not be appropriate (or simply very difficult and embarrassing) to refute that statement.

I know some clergy claim they only baptise babies of believers. However, the Church of England website plainly says that anyone can have their baby baptised. I understand that discrimination may be accomplished by invoking the clause allowing a minister to give a period of instruction. If the parents are unwilling, they are likely to go off and find a compliant minister. If they do receive instruction, whatever the outcome they appear to be classified as believers.

2. ***Baby baptism attests to the primacy of the grace of God, and to deny the baptism is to deny God's grace.*** This is the argument of prevenient grace that we saw earlier. There are undoubtedly some clergy who believe this with a real measure of conviction, but they tend to be those who do not hold to an evangelical view of conversion and some would also argue for indiscriminate baptism.

3. ***Administering baby baptism is part of evangelistic outreach and gives positive contact with unbelieving parents.*** In contrast to the previous point, this appears to be the argument of some who hold strongly to an evangelical view of conversion. Their argument seems to be coloured by the absolute priority of “by all means save some”. ***Inexplicably, for those who have such a high view of the bible, they seem happy to ignore the fact that the bible gives no grounds for this argument at all.*** Even Colin Buchanan dismisses it with the scathing comment “This kind of argument ignores all questions about the meaning of baptism or its relationship with the Gospel of Christ, and nakedly justifies by results. This can run very close to being ready to do evil that good may come”. This is an indefensible position by any reckoning.

4. ***Baptism accomplishes regeneration in the person being baptised. This has been the Church's main teaching throughout the centuries and it should not be changed. Therefore, babies should be baptised to ensure their salvation.*** It is understood that very few Church of England clergy would hold to this view today, and certainly not evangelicals. However, the 1662 Prayer Book says it, as do the later forms of service as well. It appears therefore, that a considerable number, possibly the majority, of those who say the words either do not believe them, or else manage to persuade themselves that they don't actually mean what they say. For those of us outside the Church of England, we are faced with the pressure of being asked to accept baptisms performed for unbelieving families, using words that the minister did not actually agree with or mean to be taken at face value.

## BABY BAPTISM DOES NOT WORK

I am aware of the weakness of trying to prove things by statistics, and it really gives me no pleasure to produce this one at the end of my arguments, but quite frankly baptising babies in the Church of England appears to accomplish nothing worthwhile in terms of producing followers of Jesus.

Prior to the time of Jesus in Israel, those who were circumcised were likely to remain as identifiable Jews. In the Jewish communities throughout the world, since the time of Jesus it has also seemed that those who have been circumcised are likely to remain in the Jewish faith. There are no absolutely accurate and indisputable figures, but there would probably not be much argument about a figure of around 85-90%. That is probably about the same percentage of those *who do not remain in the faith* after having been baptised as babies in the Church of England.

***If God has substituted circumcision by baby baptism for His church, then statistically at least, it was a disastrously inefficient move on His part.***

The figure of 7000 babies under one year being received into the Church of England every month in this country, must set some alarm bells ringing. In the introduction we said that at this rate the average congregation in the Church of England should double every twelve years. That was of course a gross under-estimate, for we did not include the one or two parents and the two or three godparents also making vows of faith and nurture that would necessitate attending church at least some of the time. Even if they all attended church just once a month, the average congregation would double every six or seven years. If we added in those who are baptised at over a year old, then the growth rate would rise even more significantly. But the sad and indisputable fact, is that over this country as a whole, around 85-90% (and possibly a much higher percentage) of babies baptised within the Church of England do not remain in it.

It is easier to understand the maintenance of the practice by those clergy who hold to a theology, which considers the working of prevenient grace and regeneration to be effective even outside of the visible church, and, whilst I do not agree with them, they are not the ones at whom this booklet is directed.

However, a question needs to be addressed to those Evangelical clergy in the Church of England who do not believe in the doctrine of effective prevenient grace, nor in baptismal regeneration. Is the recently borrowed Reformed doctrine of Covenant theology (which some appear neither to fully understand nor endorse) a last theological straw held onto because there is nothing else left with which to defend the indiscriminate baptism of babies of all and sundry who ask for the rite?

In spite of the undoubted protestations that might be made to the contrary, the only apparent reason discernible by an outsider, is that whilst they remain in the Church of England, they have no choice but to baptise any baby presented to them. Neither Canon law nor the unrevised law of this country will allow otherwise.

## THE DETRIMENTAL EFFECT OF ANGLICAN POLICY ON OTHER CHURCHES.

The respected Anglican clergyman, C. F. D. Moule, remarking on the New Testament teaching on baptism, said:

***"It is disingenuous (or, at best, ignorant) to transfer to Infant Baptism a weight of doctrine and a wealth of promises which, in the New Testament, are associated only with a responsible adult experience."***

Most of the popular books on baptism written by Evangelical Anglicans, give an exposition of its meaning that makes sense when

it is applied to an adult. Having done that, they then introduce the subject of baptising infants and try and explain how what the bible says of the experience of believing adults can somehow be transferred to babies. They generally do not sound convincing, and such practice makes it increasingly difficult for those of us from other churches to receive such books as valid. This problem is highlighted when someone like C. F. D. Moule, one of the foremost Anglican scholars of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, described what is being written as either crafty (probably the least offensive of the meanings of disingenuous) or, at best, ignorant.

It is also apparent, that in spite of the significance given to baptism as far as the Church establishment is concerned, in matters such as not taking communion if not baptised, Evangelicals who are primarily concerned with evangelism, often omit the fact of baptism completely. Perhaps the most well-known example is John Stott's booklet 'Becoming a Christian' produced by IVP and in the past, often used as a standard mini textbook. In it the whole process of becoming a Christian is explained without a single reference to baptism. Stott is not of course an exception and a look at similar publications will show how common this is.

Whatever effect this may have on other Anglicans, some of us in other churches find ourselves puzzled and discouraged. Having worked ecumenically for over three decades including nearly ten years in a Local Ecumenical Partnership, I have many Anglican friends and a great respect for much of the work that the Church of England contributes to the wider Christian scene, but the more contact and involvement I have had, the less convinced I have become about the ground level commitment by Anglicans themselves to the practice of baby baptism.

I am aware of some in other churches, who have genuinely sought to be sensitive about promoting their own views on believer's baptism in order not to cut across or discredit Anglican practice. However, this does not seem to have been reciprocated. The continued practice

of indiscriminate baptism, whether admitted to be such or not, creates a pool of people who, if coming to faith later in life, immediately have an issue in respect of their baptism as a baby.

I believe that enough is enough and it is time to challenge Anglicans, especially Evangelical Anglican clergy, about the harm that they are perpetuating.

I would have fewer problems with Anglican clergy if they took time to seriously examine the biblical basis of what they are doing, and emerged convinced and full of faith that the baby baptisms carried out are true Christian baptisms which could be defended as such in open debate. But if such clergy exist, I suspect that they are no more than a very small minority.

I believe therefore that other churches should be released from any pressure, both imagined and real, that would stop them freely talking about the need for Christians to be baptised as believers, even though they may have been baptised as a baby in an Anglican Church. In my booklet "Taking The Lid Off Re-Baptism", I look at the need to define whether all baptisms are in fact Christian baptisms. Christian baptism can only happen once, but if it is not biblical, then it is not *Christian* baptism and it may safely be ignored as an obstacle to receiving the real thing. Those Christians who have desired Christian baptism and who believe that their first baby baptism was not the real thing, should be released from the fear of giving offence to their Anglican brothers and sisters.

What is needed is for the whole subject to come out of the closet and for all of our baptismal practices to be re-examined and only those that are clearly biblical should be retained.\*

\*My booklet, *Fresh Approaches to Baptism*, includes some basic background studies to help enable a re-examination of the whole subject of baptism.

## POSTSCRIPT: THE ECUMENICAL DILEMMA

Since the publication in 1982, of the World Council of Churches Faith and Order Paper No. 111 on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry it has become increasingly ‘bad form’ for someone in one denomination to challenge the validity of baptisms carried out within another. The paper specifically called for mutual recognition and acceptance of each other’s baptismal practices. Since that time, there have been some notable attempts, not least between Anglicans and Baptists, to try and discern what that might mean in practice. However, in undertaking the task to reconcile apparently irreconcilable differences, it surely has to be accepted, that one of the possible outcomes, might be to conclude that the differences do not merely appear to be irreconcilable, but that they are in fact irreconcilable.

As a committed ecumenist, and as someone who has taken a keen interest in the subject of baptism for many years, I have sought to seriously and conscientiously, wrestle with the dilemma which the World Council of Churches paper has presented to the churches. I have awaited the considered biblical conclusions of those allotted the task to bring about theological and practical reconciliation of varying baptismal positions, and they have not materialised. Nearly forty years after the challenge of mutual acceptance was presented to the churches, it would seem that the only way it might be done, is by an agreement based on a knowing wink and fingers kept crossed behind the back.

I therefore find myself in a similar position to the small boy, in the story of the Emperor who was persuaded to purchase an imaginary suit of clothes. Everyone knew that the Emperor was naked, so the

boy was neither more clever, nor more wise, to raise the shout affirming the fact, but he was more willing to be naively honest.

*I believe that it also needs to be shouted aloud, that the feasibility of honest mutual acceptance of differing baptismal theologies and practices is an illusion that is neither practical nor possible.*

Taking all variations into account, there are several dozen different ways that baptism is understood and practiced in our churches. Some of them are mutually exclusive. For instance, it is simply not possible to maintain that a view which sees water baptism as accomplishing regeneration and the baptism of the Holy Spirit in a child, based on the faith of Christ and the Church, is compatible with a view which sees no necessity of baptism for anyone. Yet both those positions are held by two mainstream churches. (Orthodox and Salvation Army.)

Many of the views held between those two extremes are equally incompatible. We cannot all be right; it is also highly unlikely that any one position has the monopoly of truth either. Having come to the long held off conclusion that mutual acceptance of baptismal practices is simply not possible, I believe that we are faced with the alternative that may appear as equally impossible, but nonetheless, as being inescapable, and that is to call for baptismal reform throughout all churches – including Baptists.

During my ecumenical journey over the past few decades, I have discovered hardly anyone in the protestant denominations or streams who has a baptism policy held on the basis of a clear biblical understanding. Many people have simply taken on board the particular persuasion of their own group, without really checking or challenging it. In some of the newer churches, baptisms may be carried out with a great deal of enthusiasm and dogmatism, but often with little biblical understanding and consequently with little faith. In some of the older mainstream denominations, baptisms appear to be undertaken with less enthusiasm and less dogmatism, but not with any more biblical understanding or faith either.

It is not reasonable to suggest, much less, to insist, that everyone has to accept all of the varied hotchpotch of baptismal theologies and practices carried out by everyone else, especially when many of those theologies and practices show little evidence of careful thought or genuine conviction.

Of all baptismal practices that I am aware of, apart from the Salvation Army and the Quakers, those undertaken by Evangelical Anglicans seem the least defensible of all, which is why they have been singled out in this booklet. It does seem to me to be a strange thing, to require me (or other non-Anglicans) to accept as valid, a baptism of a baby from family who make no claim to faith, when it has been carried out by a minister who does not really believe in what he or she is doing. But I am persuaded that there are Anglican ministers who will unofficially admit that sometimes that is the exact situation. If there was some evidence that the official Church of England policy as set out on their website and as detailed on page 13 of this booklet, was being carried out with enthusiasm and faith by the Evangelicals within the Church, those of us outside might be more prepared to be sympathetic to it. However, neither in the books I have read, nor in conversations I have had, have I ever discerned anything other than a reluctance to defend the Church's own policy.

I can no longer accept being placed in the position of having to defend as valid, something which the person who carried it out may not have believed in the first place.

I would be delighted if a number of Anglican clergy rose up to refute what I have said in this booklet, but over the many years that I have been discussing what I have now written, I am not aware of having come across any who seemed either energised or informed enough to consider doing so.