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## Reassessing Believer's Baptism in Pentecostal Theology and Practice

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REASSESSING BELIEVER'S BAPTISM  
IN PENTECOSTAL THEOLOGY AND PRACTICE

Simon G. H. Tan

I. Introducing the Agenda

The ordinance of Water Baptism and the Lord's Supper are the two external rites that are virtually observed by all churches. These ordinances originate from the instructions of Christ himself, but not from man nor from the church. Augustus H. Strong writes:

By the ordinances, we mean those outward rites which Christ has appointed to be administered in his church as visible signs of the saving truth of the gospel. They are signs, in that they vividly express this truth.<sup>1</sup>

There are two distinct interpretations concerning the relationship between the ordinance of water baptism and the individual. The first interpretation emphasizes the importance of a faith response. This means that the individual must be able to give a believable profession of faith in Christ before he/she can be baptized.

The other interpretation views the baptism simply as an expression of the reality of the grace of God in the life of the individual. Daniel Migliore of Princeton Theological Seminary writes:

These two tendencies struggle with each other in the church and theology up to the present. The danger (of the objective reality view) is that it minimizes the importance of the response of faith and seems to disregard the freedom of the Spirit. Viewed purely objectively, the grace of God mediated by sacramental action is depersonalized and reified. The danger of the subjective view (that requires a faith response

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<sup>1</sup> A. H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1979), p. 930.

by the individual) is that it obscures the unconditional and objective reality of God's grace.<sup>2</sup>

I have often been asked during the baptismal services of our church as to why we do not allow infants to be water baptized. I had replied that it is the view of our church that infants are not able to respond in repentance and faith which are the necessary requirements for baptism. I believe that virtually all Pentecostal churches like ours, will baptize only believers who are able to make a credible profession to the faith. However, I have often wondered whether these requirements are indeed necessary.

It is ironic that the world has no problem with infant baptism; neither do nominal Christians, nor infants themselves. Apparently only a minority of Christians, indeed often the most pious, fear that infant baptism may be harmful to the future spiritual health and well-being of the infant!

There is no clear indication in the New Testament that water baptism was ever administered to the infants of the believers. While paedobaptism (baptizing infant children of believers) is mentioned in the writings of the church fathers including Tertullian, Irenaeus, Origen and Justin Martyr, there is no evidence before AD200 of any baptism other than that of believers. Paul K. Jewett of Fuller Theological Seminary writes:

I have evaluated each relevant passage from ancient Christian sources and have reached the conclusion that the practice of infant baptism appears in the Western Church about the time of Irenaeus (AD180) and in the Eastern Church somewhat later, but prior to Origen (AD233).<sup>3</sup>

G. R. Beasley-Murray identifies the origin of the contemporary discussion on infant baptism to the work of W. Heitmuller, *Im Namen Jesu*, published in 1903.<sup>4</sup> The strongest statements rejecting the practice of infant baptism had come mainly from Reformed scholars of his day. However in the years that followed, there had been a marked acceptance

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<sup>2</sup> D. L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), pp. 212-13.

<sup>3</sup> P. K. Jewett, *Infant Baptism and the Covenant of Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976), p. 307.

of infant baptism by many of the Reformed tradition, and this has been due mainly to the influence of distinguished theologians such as Joachim Jeremias, Louis Berkhof, Oscar Cullmann, John Murray and G. W. Bromiley.<sup>5</sup>

This paper defines “an infant” to mean “an infant of believing parents” who have a sufficient enough relationship with the church to request baptism for their infants. It calls for a reassessment of our Pentecostal view and practice of rejecting infant baptism. It argues that believer’s baptism is a reflection and a resulting influence of the individualistic orientation of the West and does not reflect the true nature of Asian societies. The paper begins by reviewing and evaluating the historical arguments for infant baptism. It then seeks to show that infant baptism is not contrary to the biblical teachings but is an important step of faith and Christian commitment for Asian parents. The paper also rejects the view that infant or child dedication is a suitable alternative to infant baptism.

## II. Reviewing the Historical Arguments for the Baptism of Infants

There are two primary theological arguments that are often cited in support of infant baptism. The first primary argument is that infants were among those who were baptized in the biblical narratives on the baptism of households and families (Acts 10:44-48; 11:14; 16:15; 16:33; 18:8). For example, it is argued that the conversion and baptism of Lydia “and members of her household” (Acts 16:15), the Philippian jailer “and all his family” (Acts 16:33) and “the household of Stephanas” (1 Cor 1:16) would in all probability included infants and children. The Reformed systematic theologian Louis Berkhof writes:

The New Testament repeatedly speaks of the baptism of households, and gives no indication that this is regarded as something out of the ordinary, but rather refers to it as a matter of course (Acts 16:15, 33; 1

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<sup>5</sup> Among their many books that have been often cited in support of the infant baptism are Joachim Jeremias, *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries* (London: SCM, 1960); Oscar Cullmann, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1950); John Murray, *Christian Baptism* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Pub., 1980); and G. W. Bromiley, *Children of Promise* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979) and *The Baptism of Infants* (London: Vine Books, 1955).

Cor 1:16). It is entirely possible, of course, but not very probable, that none of these households contained children. And if there were infants, it is morally certain that they were baptized along with the parents. The New Testament certainly contains no evidence that persons born and reared in Christian families may not be baptized until they have come to years of discretion and have professed their faith in Christ. There is not the slightest allusion to any such practice.<sup>6</sup>

Joachim Jeremias also agrees with him and writes:

In all five cases, the linguistic evidence forbids us to restrict the concept of the 'house' to adult members of the family. On the contrary, it shows plainly that it is the complete family including all its members which receives baptism.<sup>7</sup>

However, the Baptist theologian Wayne Grudem rejects the probable inclusion of infants in the narratives and writes:

When we look at the actual examples more closely, we see that in a number of them, there are indications of saving faith on the part of all of those baptized. For example, it is true that the family of the Philippian jailer was baptized (Acts 16:33), but it is also true that Paul and Silas "spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all that were in his house" (Acts 16:32). If the Word of the Lord was spoken to all in the house, there is an assumption that all were old enough to understand the word and believe it. Moreover, after the family had been baptized, we read that the Philippian jailer "rejoiced with all his household that he had believed in God" (Acts 16:34). So we have not only a household baptism, but also a household reception of the Word of God and a household rejoicing in faith in God. These facts suggest quite strongly that the entire household had individually come to faith in Christ.... Of all the examples of "household baptism" in the New Testament, the only one that does not have some indication of household faith as well is Acts 16:14-15, speaking of Lydia: "the Lord opened her heart to give heed to what was said by Paul. And when she was baptized, with her household." The text simply does not contain any information about whether there were infants in her household or not. It is ambiguous and

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<sup>6</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1979), p. 634.

<sup>7</sup> Joachim Jeremias, *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries* (London: SCM, 1960), p. 55.

certainly not weighty evidence for infant baptism. It must be considered inconclusive in itself.<sup>8</sup>

I am inclined to agree with Grudem that these narratives on the baptism of households do not conclusively support the contention that infants and children were also baptized along with their parents. His observation that there is no indication concerning the faith of Lydia and her household in contrast to the other narratives is certainly significant in rejecting the contention that these narratives provide evidences for infant baptism. Therefore these narratives provide little support for the practice since Luke certainly did not have infants in mind. Consequently his narratives cannot be pressed to include them.

The other primary argument for infant baptism is based on the divine covenant with Abraham and “with his seed” (Gen 17:7). In the Old Testament, this covenant is always referred to in the singular (Exod 2:24; Lev 26:42), and the New Testament speaks of believers as participants in or heirs to this covenant (Acts 2:39; Rom 4:13-18; Gal 3:13-18; Heb 6:13-18). Hence, the covenant has continued and applies to us as believers today. John Calvin writes: “The covenant which the Lord once made with Abraham is no less in force today for Christians than it was of old for the Jewish people.”<sup>9</sup>

It is also pointed out that the Old Testament recognizes infants and children as among the covenant people of God. They were present when the covenant was renewed (Deut 29:10-13; Josh 8:35, 2 Chro 20:13), they had a standing in the congregation of Israel, and they were also present in their religious assemblies (2 Chro 20:13; Joel 2:16). Therefore, we would hardly expect a reduction in their position and privileges in the new dispensation, and would certainly not expect the promotion of their exclusion from any standing in the church today. John Leith of Union Theological Seminary in Virginia writes:

The covenant is for believers and for their seed. The children of Christian parents, even one Christian parent, are considered holy. The community of birth, of nature, and of history has significance for the community of faith. The church cannot ignore birth, nature, and history and spiritualize away their significance.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), p. 978.

<sup>9</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), vol. 21, 4:16:6.

<sup>10</sup> John Leith, *Basic Christian Doctrine* (Louisville: Westminster, 1993), p. 255.

The words of Peter in Acts 2:38-39 is also cited to support the practice of infant baptism:

Repent and be baptized, everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.

It is pointed out that since infants and children are included in the promise given against a background that specifies water baptism, they may therefore be rightly baptized. Joachim Jeremias writes:

The children are not the coming generations, but the sons and daughters of the hearers. Since the gift of the Spirit (2:38) is linked to baptism, 2:39 contains the challenge to have the children baptized also. Thus in Acts 2:38f, we have before us a witness for the practice of infant baptism in apostolic times.<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, the Reformed systematic theologian John Murray agrees with him and adds:

Nothing could advertise more conspicuously and conclusively that this principle of God's gracious government, by which children along with their parents are the possessors of God's covenant promise, is fully operative in the New Testament as well as in the Old than this simple fact that on the occasion of Pentecost, Peter took up the refrain of the old covenant and said, "The promise is to you and to your children."<sup>12</sup>

J. Rodman Williams, the professor of theology at Regent University, rejects the interpretation of the passage by Jeremias and Murray, and writes:

A careful reading of Acts 2:38-39 and the background of these verses will show that in the first place, Peter is referring to the gift of the Holy Spirit, not salvation (contained in the words "repent," "be baptized," and "forgiveness of sins"), which is promised to all whom God "calls to him" (thus who have received salvation). Hence it is misguided to view the baptism of anyone as included in the promise. Second, Peter's

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<sup>11</sup> Jeremias, *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries*, p. 41.

<sup>12</sup> John Murray, *Christian Baptism* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. 1980), p. 68.

words about children cannot imply infant baptism, since the whole background of repentance and faith calls for conscious decision, and only in that context can baptism occur with the resulting promise of the gift of the Holy Spirit. Third, “your children” is properly understood as “your sons and your daughters” (v. 17)—not your infants—those of responsible age. In every way to view Peter’s words as under-girding the practice of infant baptism is without warrant.<sup>13</sup>

The New Testament references concerning the Genesis flood and the exodus from Egypt which are “types” of Christian baptism have also been cited in support of infant baptism. For example, Peter speaks of Noah with his sons and their wives who were “baptized” by the waters of the flood (1 Pet 3:20-21). Similarly, Paul himself declares that all Israel was “baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea” (1 Cor 10:1-2). It was noted that in both of these Old Testament “types,” an elected people was delivered from death, and in both instances, the covenant was made not only with individuals (Noah and Moses) but also with their family and their people that included their infants and children. Geoffrey W. Bromiley of Fuller Theological Seminary writes:

The point is...that the covenantal action of God is not with individuals in isolation, but with families, or with individuals in families so that those belonging to the individuals are also separated as the people of God and in a very special sense come within the sphere of the divine covenant.<sup>14</sup>

It has also been pointed out that the sign of the covenant in the Old Testament was circumcision which was administered to infants and that the sign of the covenant in the New Testament is water baptism. The words of Paul in Col 2:11-12 is cited to support the parallelism between circumcision and baptism:

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

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<sup>13</sup> J. Rodman Williams, *Renewal Theology*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), pp. 235-36.

<sup>14</sup> Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *Children of Promise* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), p. 16.

Therefore it is argued that baptism should be administered to all infants and children of believing parents since to deny them the baptism is to deprive them of the privileges and benefits that are rightfully theirs as covenant members of the community of God. Louis Berkhof writes:

In the new dispensation, baptism is by divine authority substituted for circumcision as the initiatory sign and seal of the covenant of grace.... If baptism did not take its place, then the New Testament has no initiatory rite.... 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.... Their exclusion from it would require a clear unequivocal statement to that effect, but quite the contrary is found (Matt 19:14; Acts 2:39; 1 Cor 7:14).<sup>15</sup>

Wayne Grudem questions the strength of Berkhof's argument and writes:

It is certainly true that baptism and circumcision are in many ways similar but we must not forget that what they symbolize is also different in some important ways. The old covenant had a physical external means of entrance into the "covenant community." One became a Jew by being born of Jewish parents. Therefore all Jewish males were circumcised. Circumcision was not restricted to people who had true inward spiritual life, but rather was given to all who lived among the people of Israel (Gen 17:10-13). It was not only the physical descendants of the people of Israel who were circumcised but also those servants who were purchased by them and lived among them. The presence or absence of inward spiritual life made no difference whatsoever in the question of whether one was circumcised (Gen 17:23; cf. Josh 5:4).... The New Testament does not talk about a "covenant community" made up of believers and their unbelieving children and relatives and servants who happen to live among them.... In the New Testament church, the only question that matters is whether one has saving faith and has been spiritually incorporated into the body of Christ, the true church. The only "covenant community" discussed is the church, the fellowship of the redeemed.<sup>16</sup>

I agree with Grudem that Berkhof's argument is fraught with difficulties. I do not find a single verse of the scripture suggesting that circumcision and water baptism are "initiatory sign and seal of the

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<sup>15</sup> Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 633-34.

<sup>16</sup> Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 976-77.

covenant,” nor any verse of the scripture suggesting that they correspond with one another as the sign of reception into the covenant community.

### III. Some Theological Considerations in Advocating the Baptism of Infants

The primary objection to infant baptism is that, according to the scriptures, an active faith that reveals itself in a credible confession is necessary (Mark 16:16; Acts 10:44-48; 16:14, 15, 31, 34). If this means that the individual must be manifesting an active faith before receiving baptism, then infants are naturally excluded. However, although the Bible reveals that only those adults who believed were baptized, it does not stipulate that an active faith is absolutely essential in order to be baptized. Louis Berkhof writes:

Baptists refer us to the Great Commission as it is found in Mark 16:15-16. In view of the fact that this is a missionary command, we may proceed on the assumption that the Lord had in mind an active faith in those words. And though it is not explicitly stated, it is altogether likely that he regarded this faith as a prerequisite for the baptism of the persons intended. But who are they?... The words of our Savior imply that faith is a prerequisite for the baptism of those who through the missionary efforts of the Church would be brought to Christ, and do not imply that it is also a pre-requisite for the baptism of children.<sup>17</sup>

It has also been pointed that many who were baptized during infancy do make a request for a re-baptism in their later years because they have grown in the faith and want to testify about it. It is said that they do so in order to have a rich and meaningful subjective experience. It is as a result of this observation that Stanley Grenz who teaches at Regent College, Vancouver rejects infant baptism and writes:

Baptism is the God-given means whereby we initially declare publicly our inward faith. If this is the case, believer's baptism is obviously superior. Infant baptism simply cannot fulfill this function. Because it cannot be an outward expression of inward faith, infant baptism also loses its value as a day to be remembered. Believer's baptism, in

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<sup>17</sup> Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 637.

contrast, does offer the means to confess personal faith. For this reason, it deserves to be the standard practice in the church.<sup>18</sup>

While the practice of a re-baptism may seem appealing to many, it is certainly without biblical support and certainly unnecessary. If an enriching personal experience is the only thing that matters, it would clearly be expedient to delay baptism as long as possible until the believer becomes more spiritually mature. In so doing, the believer's understanding and the baptismal experience as a whole would be even more meaningful. However, it must be pointed out that an appreciation of one's baptism is simply not the result of having had a maximally rich subjective experience on that occasion. The appreciation grows as one continually remembers that he or she is bound by divine obligations to the body of believers and to Christ himself.<sup>19</sup> Gerhard O. Forde concludes:

None of the abuses attributed to a "too liberal" practice of infant baptism will be corrected by withdrawing it. That is like withholding food from the starving until they have a proper concept of nourishment. We do not need to protect the Lord from the Lord's own generosity! In the current "post-Constantinian" age, withholding baptism does not end but only fosters a more legalistic preoccupation with the self.... The only real weapon left to the church is the proper teaching and preaching of baptism as the gracious and saving action of the triune God. And that, certainly, is about as it should be.<sup>20</sup>

I agree and believe that infant baptism emphasizes primarily the initiative of God in the salvation of the Christian family. It is a declaration of the gift of salvation made available to us by the grace of God. In short, infant baptism is a proper response to the divine gift of salvation and is designed to evoke faith, hope and love. To use the analogy of love, one might say that baptism has about the same necessity as that of a lover's kiss. The kiss is certainly not a necessity. If it is, love

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<sup>18</sup> Stanley Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), p. 529.

<sup>19</sup> I myself was baptized as an infant by my parents who are Christians and who in the course of my Christian upbringing have often reminded me of my Christian obligations and responsibilities in view of the fact that I had been baptized as an infant.

<sup>20</sup> Gerhard O. Forde, "Something to Believe," *Interpretation* 47:3 (July 1993), pp. 229-41 (240).

has already flown! But if the pair of lovers were asked, "Is this really necessary?" the most likely response would be that the question is ridiculous!

Therefore, in relation to infant baptism, we must set the question so as not to undermine the nature of the gift itself. The question, then, is not whether it can be proven that we should baptize such infants, but whether it is a faithful and hopeful practice to do so. The question is not whether we can prove theologically that infants should be included, but whether there are unimpeachable theological grounds for excluding them. In short, is excluding infants from baptism simply because they are infants a faithful practice? Does the exclusion serve as a proper declaration and witness to the grace of God? Michael Green, the Anglican Archbishops' Adviser in Evangelism writes:

Infant baptism stresses the objectivity of the gospel. It points to the solid achievement of Christ crucified and risen, whether or not we respond to it.... It is the standing demonstration that our salvation does not depend on our own very fallible faith; it depends on what God has done for us. Infant baptism reminds us that we are not saved because of our faith but through the gracious action of God on our behalf.... Baptism is the mark of God's prior love to us which antedates our response and calls it forth. For the Baptist, baptism primarily bears witness to what we do in responding to the grace of God. For the paedobaptist, it primarily bears witness to what God has done to make it all possible.<sup>21</sup>

Similarly, Daniel Migliore agrees with Green and writes:

Common to both infant and adult baptism is the affirmation that we are recipients of the gift of God's love and are claimed for God's service.... Whether baptized as children or adults, our baptism signifies primarily what God has graciously done for us, and it is upon this that faith rests.... Infant baptism demonstrates that even when they are helpless, human beings are loved and affirmed by God. It expresses loving reception into a confessing community that takes responsibility for helping this child to mature in faith as a member of the Christian community. It makes clear that baptism is a beginning of the process of growing into Christ and that this process of growth cannot take place without a supportive community of faith.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Michael Green, *Baptism: Its Purpose, Practice, and Power* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1987), pp. 76-77.

<sup>22</sup> Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, p. 217.

I believe that an independent individualism as expressed in believer's baptism is a uniquely American and modern western phenomenon. In many Asian cultures, the expression of individuality is considered socially undesirable, since to focus and single out the individual is likely to result in embarrassment rather than edification. Therefore, it is questionable whether the insistence on believer's baptism only should be generalized to include all other cultures, since it reflects western assumptions and values. Vern Sheridan Poythress writes:

International students coming to the United States from Third World countries often remark about the extreme individualism of America. They notice it because it does not exist in their native culture. Neither did it exist in the pre-modern cultures of the first-century or the Old Testament. People thought of themselves not as isolated individuals but as members and participants in a family, a lineage, a society, and a people. Making a life-changing "decision" apart from relationship to social communities would have seemed weird. Membership in the Christian church meant participation in the new "holy nation" (1 Pet 2:9) formed through Christ's resurrection. According to Paul's image in 1 Corinthians 12, we are members of one body, not lopped off, isolated eyes or hands or feet. Thus, we must be suspicious and critical of this modern individualism.<sup>23</sup>

Similarly, the difference in the nature of the Asian context from the West is clearly articulated by the Pentecostal missiologist and theologian, Wonsuk Ma who writes:

God's Word do not change. It is rather the human perceptions of God's revelation that are transitory. Asians should remember that the revealed words were given to Orientals (Hebrews for the Old Testament, and primarily Jews for the New Testament). Since God uses human thought mechanisms, His revelation assumes a close affinity to Oriental world-views. In a way, God's revelation has been "contextualized" into the western world-views. Therefore in Asia, Christianity is viewed as a "western" religion, in spite of its distinct Oriental origin. So, Asian theologians ought to "recover" the scripture in the Oriental context to best accommodate their psychology.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Vern Sheridan Polythress, "Indifferentism and Rigorism in the Church: With Implications for Baptizing Small Children," *Westminster Theological Journal* 59:1 (1993), pp. 21-22.

<sup>24</sup> Wonsuk Ma, "Towards an Asian Pentecostal Theology," *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 1:1 (1998), pp. 15-41 (20).

John Leith summarizes and concludes:

Most of those who are in the church are there first of all because they were born into the church. It is a clear fact of life that human existence is shaped by the nature and history into which a person is born.... The ambiguity created by the fact that the church can be neither identified with the natural community nor separated from it, is the source of our ambiguity concerning baptism. Churches that do not baptize infants have the problem of determining the relation of unbaptized young people to the church. This is reflected in Baptist churches, which are committed to adult baptism, in the practice of pushing back to the ages of five, six, and seven in many instances.<sup>25</sup>

I strongly believe that infant/child dedication is not an acceptable substitute for infant baptism. The biblical precedent that are often cited for its practice includes the presentation of the infant Jesus by his parents in the temple (Luke 2:22-38), the presentation of Samuel by his mother Hannah (1 Sam 1:24-28) and the act of Jesus in blessing the children who were brought to him (Matt 19:13-14). However, it must be pointed out that the practice of infant dedication preceded any theological justification. The practice seems to have originated among Anglo-American revivalist Congregationalists and among the Baptists in the eighteenth century.<sup>26</sup>

The practice is believed to be similar to infant baptism in that it is a ceremony marking the child's entrance into the Christian community and the beginning of his/her journey along the path of Christian nurture and training. However I believe that this practice, which is not an "ordinance" that has its origin in the instructions of Christ, is woefully inconsistent in its objectives and proclamation. Richard C. Leonard writes:

There is a certain tension within the effort to provide a theological justification for child dedication or presentation. At one end of this tension is the understanding that a person becomes part of Christ and his church through repentance and a faith commitment; at the other pole is the recognition that the spiritual environment in which children mature is a major factor in their appropriation of the life of Christian discipleship. The issue for a theology of child dedication is the question

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<sup>25</sup> Leith, *Basic Christian Doctrine*, pp. 255-56.

<sup>26</sup> Richard C. Leonard, "Child Dedication," in *The Sacred Actions of Christian Worship*, ed. Robert E. Webber (Nashville, TN: Star Song Pub., 1994), pp. 267-71 (267-68).

of who these children are before God, and what their status is within the body of Christ.<sup>27</sup>

The language of our infant dedication services reflects the expectation that the child will mature within the nurturing context of the family and the church, and look towards the hope that the child will confess personal faith in Christ in the future. In terms of these expectations, infant dedication is certainly no different from infant baptism. In both cases, we have no guarantee that the infant will have a personal faith in Christ sometime in the future. Therefore I am of the view that infant dedication is nothing more than simply a kind of baptism without water! In fact, does it really matter whether we practice infant dedication or infant baptism, and whether we use water or not? John Christopher Thomas writes:

Modernity has long embraced the idea that one theological size fits all. On this view, the challenge is to articulate an a-cultural or “pure” theology that may be applied to any and every context... The diversity of Scripture undermines this view when it reveals that uniformity is not to be confused with spiritual unity. In addition, the rich theological and experiential variety manifest in global Pentecostalism suggests that we as a movement are not faced with the task of re-paving a highway; rather, we stand at the edge of a jungle with machete in hand seeking to clear a path.<sup>28</sup>

#### IV. Concluding the Assessment

It is noted from the outset of our discussion that the primary difficulty in determining the validity of infant baptism is that the New Testament does not give us any clear evidences for or against the practice. There is no direct command to baptize or not to baptize infants, nor is there any specific mention of infants being baptized in the New Testament writings. We realize also that the question of infant baptism entails not just the doctrine of the church and baptism but brings with it implications on the other doctrines of theology. It is the question whether baptism emphasizes primarily the divine election in our salvation, or the

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<sup>27</sup> Leonard, “Child Dedication,” p. 269.

<sup>28</sup> John C. Thomas, “Pentecostal Theology in the Twenty-First Century,” *Pneuma: Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 20:1 (Spring 1998), pp. 3-19 (11).

self-disposition of the human will. If baptism is viewed to be a required response of the self before God, certainly infants cannot be baptized. Infants are not capable of such heroics! However, the question is even deeper than this. Gerhard O. Forde explains:

Wherever it is held that salvation depends in any way or to any degree on the free choice of the will, infant baptism will always seem a highly questionable practice, even in those churches where it is regularly practiced, for then the self always moves into the center as the real subject of the baptismal act. The faith of the self becomes the primary focus, or perhaps even the faith and sincerity of the parents. The claim that God is actually doing something fades from view, and infant baptism becomes a pious communal custom whose theological rationale has long since been forgotten or surrendered.<sup>29</sup>

I believe that the ultimate question in infant baptism is not whether or not we may baptize infants of believing parents, but whether we have any legitimate reason to withhold baptism from them. The integration of the heart and the head is clearly needed in our theological task. In the words of John C. Thomas:

Pentecostals, perhaps more than most, should understand that doing theology is more than an exercise in rationalism. Unfortunately often within our tradition, theology has been pursued in just this fashion.... The integration of the heart and head means that the theologian within the tradition do not have the luxury of simply focusing on "pure" theology while leaving for the so-called "practioners" the task of working out its implications.... Doing theology in a way that is intentional about the integration of heart and head should not only lead to a transformation of the theologian, but also make clear that the work of Pentecostal theology is not simply concerned with orthodoxy (right doctrine), but orthopraxy (right practice) and orthopathy (right passions/affections) as well. It hardly needs to be noted that the community context for the pursuit of such integration is essential.<sup>30</sup>

The necessity for baptizing infants is grounded not in human will or doing but solely in the will and word of God. The sobering fact is that we are not in a position to follow the practice of infant baptism with the nurture that is needed! The fault is neither in the theology of baptism nor with the infant, but rather lies with us. In some way, we have to ask

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<sup>29</sup> Forde, "Something to Believe," p. 237.

<sup>30</sup> Thomas, "Pentecostal Theology in the Twenty-First Century," p. 8.

ourselves whether our rejection of infant baptism clearly reveals our loss of confidence in the truth of the gospel or in the mission of the church. Therefore the church must look first to itself in these matters. No good is accomplished by complaining about lack of sincerity or poor discipling on the part of parents. The word of God clearly declares that God graciously acts in the present to reclaim the lost, and the latter certainly includes infants. I personally believe that infant baptism is biblically warranted, and to baptize them is to respond faithfully to God's word of grace.