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Children, Covenant and the Church

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This lecture starts with a story, the history in outline of the use of the Gospel account of Jesus' blessing of the children in Mark 10:13–16 par.¹ A widespread feature of recent orders of service for infant baptism has been the omission of this pericope altogether, as in the Church of England's *Common Worship* (2000; and earlier in the *Alternative Service Book*, 1980) and the *Methodist Worship Book* (1999), or its drastic demotion in prominence, as in the Church of Scotland's *Common Order* of 1994. This contrasts markedly with an earlier generation of such service books, represented by the 1928 *Book of Common Order* of the (Scottish) United Free Church, where infant baptism begins with 'The sanction of the ordinance is to be found in the words of our Lord, who spake, saying, "Suffer ..."' (Mark 10:14–16). The Gospel passage now commonly appears in services of Thanksgiving for, or Blessing of a Child.

This recent consensus, which declines to see in Jesus' blessing of the children any connection with the baptism of children, in fact reflects the mind of the early church fathers almost to a man. It was the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformers who brought the account into the baptism of infants, probably not fully understanding what they were doing but finding it a useful shield against Anabaptist protests. Its apologetic value in favour of paedobaptism reached a peak in the mid-twentieth century when, in writers like Joachim Jeremias, Oscar Cullmann and T.F. Torrance, by way of the so-called *koluein*-formula it furnished even liturgical evidence of apostolic practice. As the Church of Scotland's Special Commission on Baptism put it: 'the Evangelists intend us to interpret that blessing [by Jesus] in terms of [the children's] baptism'.

This late-twentieth-century departure from the Reformation tradition belongs to the recovery of infant baptism as an ordinance or sacrament of the gospel, rather than a rite of babyhood. It is also one instance of the continuing reassessment of the biblical and historical evidence for infant baptism. The latter's connection with the subject of this lecture scarcely needs explication. Among evangelicals, especially of a Reformed hue, the most standard argument for paedobaptism has been covenantal. The continuity between Israel and the church within the one Abrahamic covenant renewed in Jesus

¹ For documentation see David F. Wright, 'Out, In, Out: Jesus' Blessing of the Children and Infant Baptism', in S.E. Porter, A.R. Cross (eds), *Dimensions of Baptism: Biblical and Theological Studies* (JSNTS 234; Sheffield Academic Press, London, New York, 2002), 188–206.

Christ finds particular expression in the parallel between circumcision and infant baptism. As the Westminster Confession of Faith states it:

Sacraments are holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace ... The sacraments of the Old Testament, in regard of the spiritual things thereby signified and exhibited, were, for substance, the same with those of the New (par. 27).

The practice of baptising the newborn is the most obvious and common way in which visible testimony is given to the conviction that children of believing parents 'have by their birth an interest in the covenant of grace', in the words of an earlier *Book of Common Order*.

The binding of infants to the covenant in baptism undoubtedly gathers strong *prima facie* support from the essential evangelical insistence on grounding theology on both Testaments together. Yet the tradition has rarely escaped damaging ambivalence. In the first place, do the infant-baptised become (or are they recognised as already being) members of the church, of the covenant people of God? Communion which both baptise babies and several years later admit to communicant membership are often in the toils at this point. The impression is sometimes given in my own church that baptism designates membership of the body of Christ for infants but not of the Church of Scotland. For that they must wait until their teens or later, and very few do so. Secondly, does baptism, or more accurately the Holy Spirit through baptism, effect anything for babies or merely mark them out as future recipients? Does baptism, for example, confer specific covenantal blessings on babies, such as new birth or remission of sin, specifically original sin, as Augustine influentially argued?

Behind such questions lies a much more important one: can the NT's presentation of Christian baptism, which I take in decidedly realist terms, be applied to baby-baptism? The issue is less pressing if baptism, whatever its subjects, is understood only in symbolic terms, but I must insist that this approach does scant justice to the NT texts. As a general method of construing baptism it most certainly owes something, and perhaps a very great deal, to the demands of encompassing infants as its commonest recipients.

The phrase 'Christian initiation complete in baptism', associated in the Church of England with Colin Buchanan and others, is intended to deny that baptism administered to infants needs 'completion' by some later rite incorporating personal profession of faith. The assertion evokes decades of debate over the relation between baptism and (episcopal) confirmation. The diminishing importance assigned to confirmation is in part the result, as well as a major cause, of the admission of baptised children to the Lord's supper – an action which at one time attested powerfully to the conviction 'Christian initiation complete in baptism'. A somewhat different, yet not irreconcilable, path to infant communion has followed the rediscovery of the early Christian pattern of initiation set out in the Hippolytan *Apostolic Tradition*, in which admission to the supper follows immediately upon baptism, even for the infant newly-baptised, so it seems. In this setting initiation for none of the baptised is complete without their sharing in the other dominical ordinance of the covenant community.

It may be the case that most evangelical ministers or churches have not endorsed the admission of young children to the communion table. It surely merits more serious consideration than it commonly receives. In its favour is the weighty argument that it takes the baptism of infants genuinely as baptism, as making them truly members of Christ's people. Thus it has the virtue of putting both ordinances of the new covenant

on an equal basis, dissolving the anomaly that the infant-baptised have been welcomed into the Christian community but are debarred for years from its communal meal celebration. It should be noted also that the change in practice relates also, again partly as cause and partly as effect, to a re-evaluation of the Lord's supper itself, more as food for the journey of growing up in Christ, rather than as the privilege of those who have 'arrived'. We are seeing, I suggest, a continuation of the desacralisation of much that the Reformers carried over without radical questioning from the old church. Finally we must take account of the fact that in the early church infant communion is recorded almost as early as infant baptism is indisputably attested, in the mid-third century in Cyprian of Carthage. It is apparently assumed a generation or so earlier in the *Apostolic Tradition* ascribed to Hippolytus.

When we seek the wisdom of Scripture on my subject, the OT proves more obviously helpful than the NT. Therein, however, lies a good part of the problem. At this stage it will be useful to unpack the problem at some length.

We are in a circle, whether vicious or virtuous, compounded as much of tradition as of Scripture, with the 'tradition' element deriving in large measure from the Reformation – which makes it unpalatable or uncomfortable to question. Let me spell this out more fully. We are mostly products of a western Christianity or Christendom in which infant baptism has been virtually universal for some millennium and half, since around 500. The grounds for infant baptism espoused in the evangelical community are in the main those espoused by the Reformers, and especially the parallel with circumcision within the context of a covenantal framework for salvation-history. Few of us accept the Augustinian theology of original guilt as eternally fatal in infants dying unbaptised, a theology which lay behind the universality of infant baptism from the early medieval era onwards. Augustine did not need to defend the practice of baptising babies, and made limited reference to the precedent of circumcision.

The sixteenth-century Reformers, on the other hand, were confronted with the urgency of justifying the rite in the face of Anabaptist protests which took *sola Scriptura* more strictly than did the likes of Luther, Calvin and company did. Covenantal parallelism proved the most sophisticated and durable of their apologiae which in turn made the assumption of universal paedobaptism (made legally binding in some Reformation strongholds, such as Geneva) a factor in the rise of covenantal theology to prominence in the later sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries.² Although covenantal continuity is not, I suppose, the only respectable biblical-theological matrix for infant baptism, I judge that it remains the most satisfying approach for most evangelical apologists. The Church of Scotland's Panel on Doctrine in 2003 based its justification heavily on the household paradigm without enlisting a covenantal framework for this – and was criticised in the General Assembly for doing inadequate justice to the covenantal argument.³

² Cf. the judgement of John W. Riggs, *Baptism in the Reformed Tradition. A Historical and Practical Theology* (Columbia Studies in Reformed Theology; Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, London, 2002), 122: 'From a historical perspective, the Reformed use of covenant to interpret Christian baptism first arose, almost always, when arguing for infant baptism. In other words, its origin was not in theological or exegetical reflection on baptism as such but as a specific response to the challenge to a long-held practice of infant baptism.'

³ Church of Scotland, *Reports to the General Assembly 2003* (Board of Practice and Procedure, Church of Scotland, Edinburgh, 2003), 13/1–17, especially 13/12–15.

Against this summary sketch of the circle, vicious or virtuous, in which, so I would argue, much of the paedobaptist evangelical constituency is now placed, we must focus in on a couple of segments of the circle, and first on the analogy with circumcision. Here is one writer's estimate:

The very centre of Calvin's theology of infant baptism rests upon the view that there exists an anagogic relationship between circumcision in the Old Testament and infant baptism in the New Testament.⁴

And the context of that relationship is, for Calvin, the one covenant of grace. Yet how securely is this relationship grounded in the NT? More securely, I suggest, in general than in specific terms. Overall there is not much evidence that the parallel commended itself to Christian writers before about 200 – although thorough research on early Christian attitudes to circumcision remains to be done. For most of the first two or three centuries the common Christian stance towards circumcision was polemical. It was frequently linked with the Sabbath as elements of the Jewish order superseded by the coming of the Messiah Jesus. This was a most unpropitious climate in which to advance circumcision as a typical anticipation of infant baptism, or of baptism as a whole. Remember that all the explicit NT patterns of baptism present faith-baptism or conversion-baptism.

By the time of Cyprian in the mid-third century, the analogy with circumcision is clearly established, to the extent that his *Letter* 64 responds to a bishop uncertain whether it was permissible to baptise a baby before the eighth day indicated by the precedent of circumcision. But we have already noted Augustine's relatively low use of the link, and Augustine is by a massive distance the most expansive patristic writer on infant baptism. A dossier of patristic sources without Augustine would be thin indeed.

There is, of course, Colossians 2:11–12. My reading of this discerns no direct connection between circumcision and baptism but rather each related separately to Christ's death. It is arguable that circumcision is spiritualised as Christ's death in Colossians and in Galatians, just as elsewhere it is spiritualised as rebirth. I was struck by the NRSV translation of these verses:

In him also you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision, by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ; when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.

The fact that it is so singular a text does not aid exegesis. The juxtaposition of baptism and circumcision and the density of the verses would make the development of an interpretation paralleling the two understandable, but this seems not to have happened until around 400. A review of the patristic evidence concludes that it:

does not suggest that the analogy between circumcision and baptism gave rise to the practice of infant baptism, nor that Colossians 2:11–12 were initially understood to imply infant baptism. It suggests rather that this analogy was not used as an argument for infant baptism until after the practice has arisen on

⁴ Egil Grislis, 'Calvin's Doctrine of Baptism', *Church History* 3 (1962), 46–65, at 51.

other grounds.⁵

The invocation of circumcision with its covenantal context was generally not an original feature in Reformers' baptismal teaching. It emerges in general terms when, having nailed their colours to the mast of *sola Scriptura*, they had to row back from an initial emphasis on the necessity of faith for beneficial reception of baptism. This repositioning occurred when the opposition against whom this emphasis was directed, the old Roman Church, was supplanted by the new foe of Anabaptism. We should not underestimate the seriousness of the challenge posed by Anabaptist radicals. More than one of the magisterial Reformers had to overcome early doubts about infant baptism, independently of Anabaptist protests. It can be seriously argued that the baptism of babies was the single most significant constitutive element of church order that the Reformers preserved without explicit biblical warrant.

It is instructive to track the movement of baptismal thought in Luther and in Calvin as they confronted first one and then a different set of opponents. In 1521 Luther produced a *Defence and Explanation of All the Articles Which were Unjustly Condemned by the Roman Bull* – the bull of excommunication, 'Exsurge Domine', of June 15, 1520. The first Article Luther defends is his denial that 'the sacraments give grace to all who do not put an obstacle in the way' and his assertion that the worthy reception of the sacraments also requires 'genuine repentance for sin' and 'a firm faith within the heart'. When he comes to baptism, Luther first quotes Mark 16:16, 'He who believes and is baptised will be saved'. There follows a series of apparently unqualified statements:

[Christ] puts faith before baptism for where there is no faith, baptism does no good.

[W]ithout faith, no sacrament is of any use, indeed it is altogether deadly and pernicious.

[T]here must be an unwavering, unshaken faith in the heart which receives the promise and sign and does not doubt that what God promises and signifies is indeed so.

[I]t is better, if faith is not present, to stay far away from these words and signs which are the sacraments of God.

For this reason, he who is baptised must hold these words [of Mark 16:16] to be true and must believe that he will certainly be saved if he is baptised as these

⁵ See J.P.T. Hunt, 'Colossians 2:11–12, the Circumcision/Baptism Analogy, and Infant Baptism', in *Tyndale Bulletin* 41 (1990), 227–44, at 244. This valuable article, which includes a survey of selected patristic sources, is based on the author's unpublished Durham University MA thesis, 'The History of the Interpretation of Colossians 2:11–12 up to the Council of Chalcedon, with particular reference to the Uses of these Verses as an Argument for Infant Baptism' (1988). His conclusion that 'It was not until the mid-fourth century that Colossians 2:11–12 were used explicitly in connection with infant baptism' (art. cit., 241) requires revision since the source he has in view, Asterius, has more recently been dated later, c. 400.

words say and the sign signifies.⁶

Luther does not forget infants altogether:

[E]very day ... wherever in the whole world baptism is administered, the question is put to the child, or the sponsors in his stead, whether he believes, and on the basis of this faith and confession, the sacrament of baptism is administered.⁷

But apart from this one reference, the whole article reads as if it concerned believers' baptism.

Then came the Zwickau prophets to Wittenberg in December 1521. Luther sent a revealing letter to Melancthon on 13 January 1522. The prophets were citing Mark 16:16 and arguing that, since children could not believe in their own person, they were not to be baptised. Luther advances two responses, *fides infantum* and *fides aliena*. Without the latter, he reflects, 'there is nothing else to be debated, and baptism of small children simply has to be rejected'.⁸

Luther has no difficulty citing Scripture in support of 'extrinsic faith', that is, faith exercised by someone else on my behalf. Such faith

belongs to me personally but is really also someone else's faith ... Christ never rejected a single person who was brought to him through someone else's faith ... The testimonies and examples of the whole Scripture are on the side of extrinsic faith, that is ... personal faith, which attains faith, and whatever is desired for someone else.⁹

As for children's lack of faith, how will the prophets prove it? 'Perhaps by the fact that children do not speak and express their faith.' But we are silent during sleep and do not stop being believers. 'Can't God in the same way keep faith in small children during the whole time of their infancy, as if it were a continuous sleep?' But does the church believe that 'faith is infused into infants'? There is no Scripture passage which would force the church to believe this. The church has the authority not to baptise infants at all. 'Baptism is free and not compulsory like circumcision.' Perhaps Augustine and the subsequent church have erred on this point – for it is 'a special miracle of God that the article that infants are to be baptised is the only one which has never been denied, not even by heretics'. The letter reads like Luther's conversation with himself. He comes back to Mark 16:16; opponents who cite it cannot prove from it that children do not believe.¹⁰

By the time of his most extensive treatment of the subject, *Concerning Rebaptism* in 1528, Luther insists that the onus is on the Anabaptists to prove the negative, that children cannot have faith. He is content to show from Scripture that they may have faith.¹¹

⁶ Transl. and ed. George W. Forell, *Luther's Works*, vol. 32: *Career of the Reformer II* (Muhlenberg Press, Philadelphia, 1958), 12–16.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁸ Transl. and ed. Gottfried G. Krodel, *Luther's Works*, vol. 48: *Letters I* (Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1963), 368.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 369.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 367–71.

¹¹ Transl. and ed. Conrad Bergendoff, *Luther's Works*, vol. 40: *Church and Ministry II* (Muhlenberg Press, Philadelphia, 1958), 241–42.

There are Scripture passages that tell us that children may and can believe, though they do not speak or understand. So, Psalm 72 [106:37f.], describes how the Jews offered their sons and daughters to idols, shedding innocent blood. If, as the text says, it was innocent blood, then the children have to be considered pure and holy – this they could not be without spirit and faith. Likewise the innocent children whom Herod had murdered were not over two years of age [Matt. 2:16]. Admittedly they could not speak or understand. Yet they were holy and blessed. Christ himself says in Matthew 18 [19:14], 'The kingdom of heaven belongs to children.' And St John was a child in his mother's womb [Luke 1:41] but, as I believe, could have faith.

Yes, you say, but John was an exception. This is not proof that all baptised children have faith. I answer, wait a minute, I am not yet at the point of proving that children believe. I am giving proof that your foundation for rebaptism is uncertain and false inasmuch as you cannot prove that there may not be faith in children.¹²

Furthermore, he commands us to bring the children to him. In Matthew 19 [14] he embraces them, kisses them, and says that theirs is the kingdom of heaven. The misled spirits like to fend this off by saying, Christ is not speaking of children, but of the humble. This, however, is a false note, for the text clearly says that they brought to him children, not the humble. And Christ does not say to let the humble come to him, but the children, and he reprimanded the disciples not because they kept the humble, but the children away. He embraced and blessed the children, not the humble, when he said, 'Of such is the kingdom of heaven.' So also Matthew 18 [10], 'Their angels behold the face of my Father', is to be understood as referring to such children, for he teaches us that we should also be like these children. Were not these children holy, he would indeed have given us a poor ideal with which to compare ourselves.¹³

By 1528 and *Concerning Rebaptism*, Luther's earlier vacillation of mind has passed and he trots out a series of vigorous claims and arguments. He repeats what he had written elsewhere, that 'the most certain form of baptism is child baptism', for an adult might deceive on coming forward and a child cannot. If God has not commanded the baptism of children, nor 'has he specifically commanded the baptism of adults, nor of men or of women, so we had better not baptise anybody'.¹⁴ In this work Luther also develops his distinctive argument that faith is so uncertain a quality ('Always something is lacking in faith') that none should base their baptism on it but only on the command of God. So an adult wanting to be baptised should say:

I want to be baptised because it is God's command that I should be, and on the strength of this command I dare to be baptised. In time my faith may become what it may. If I am baptised on his bidding I know for certain that I am baptised. Were I to be baptised on my own faith, I might tomorrow find myself unbaptised, if faith failed me, or I became worried that I might not yesterday have had the faith rightly.¹⁵

¹² Ibid., 242.

¹³ Ibid., 243.

¹⁴ Ibid., 244, 245.

¹⁵ Ibid., 253.

And one who had been baptised as a child might say:

I thank God and am happy that I was baptised as a child, for thus I have done what God commanded. Whether I have believed or not, I have followed the command of God and been baptised and my baptism was correct and certain. God grant that whether my faith today be certain or uncertain, or I think that I believe and am certain, nothing is lacking in baptism.¹⁶

Luther has come a long way since he argued that there had to be 'an unwavering, unshaken faith in the heart' to receive the promise and sign of baptism. In the course of *Concerning Rebaptism* we scarcely notice the following statement among such a varied case:

If they now believe that through the covenant of circumcision God accepts both boys and girls and is their God, why should he not also accept our children through the covenant of baptism?¹⁷

Calvin's movement of faith is comparable to Luther's, with this difference, that while the shift in Luther's thinking is observed in separate writings over a spread of years, in Calvin's case it is discernible in the different editions of one work, the *Institutes*. What in the final 1559 edition is Book 4:15 is derived mostly from the first 1536 version directed chiefly against the Catholic Church, whereas Book 4:16 comes from the 1539 edition and was originally aimed at the Anabaptists. As a number of scholars have recognised, Book 4:15 defines baptism in such terms that it might almost have been written of believers' baptism only. There is only one explicit reference to the baptism of infants (4:15:22), and at a couple of other places where the argument seems to invite mention of it, it is absent (4:15:9, 4:15:10). At the outset the chapter declares that baptism was given for two ends, 'first, to serve our faith before him; secondly, to serve our confession before men'.¹⁸ The rest of the chapter unpacks this initial statement.

[The Lord] wills that all who believe be baptised for the remission of sins [Matt. 28:19; Acts 2:38].

[T]he chief point of baptism ... is to receive baptism with this promise, 'He who believes and is baptised will be saved' [Mark 16:16] (4:15:1).

Peter ... adds that this baptism is not a removal of filth from the flesh but a good conscience before God [1 Pet. 3:21], which is from faith (4:15:2).

[T]hose who receive baptism with right faith truly feel the effective working of Christ's death in the mortification of their flesh, together with the working of his resurrection in the vivification of the Spirit [Rom. 6:8] (4:15:5).

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 244.

¹⁸ *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, tr. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols (Library of Christian Classics 20-21; SCM Press, London, 1961), vol. II, 1304. All quotations are from this translation.

[O]ur faith receives from baptism the advantage of its sure testimony to us ... John first baptised, so later did the apostles, 'with a baptism of repentance unto forgiveness of sins' [Matt. 3:6; 11; Luke 3:16; John 3:23; 4:1; Acts 2:38, 41] (4:15:6).

[T]hose whom the Lord has once received into grace, engrafts into the communion of his Christ, and adopts into the society of the church through baptism – so long as they persevere in faith in Christ ... are absolved of guilt and condemnation (4:15:12).

[Baptism] is the mark by which we publicly profess that we wish to be reckoned God's people; by which we testify that we agree in worshipping the same God ... by which finally we openly affirm our faith (4:15:13).

[Baptism] is given for the arousing, nourishing, and confirming of our faith (4:15:14).

[F]rom this sacrament, as from all others, we obtain only as much as we receive in faith (4:15:15).¹⁹

Near the beginning of Book 4:16, which from the very first embarks on an assault against Anabaptist rejection of paedobaptism, Calvin gives a fresh account of the 'force and nature' of baptism.

Scripture declares that baptism first points to the cleansing of our sins, which we obtain from Christ's blood; then to the mortification of our flesh, which rests upon participation in his death and through which believers are reborn into newness of life and into the fellowship of Christ. All that is taught in the Scriptures concerning baptism can be referred to this summary, except that baptism is also a symbol for bearing witness to our religion before men (4:16:2).²⁰

The *Institutes* continues immediately with a section on baptism and circumcision. There is no difference, argues Calvin, between the two 'in the inner mystery, by which the whole force and character of the sacraments has been weighed' – he means God's fatherly favour, the forgiveness of sins, eternal life, regeneration – but only in the 'very slight factor' of the outward ceremony (4:16:4).²¹ Hence:

If the covenant still remains firm and steadfast, it applies no less today to the children of Christians than under the Old Testament it pertained to the infants of the Jews (4:16:5).²²

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, vol. II, 1304, 1305, 1307, 1308, 1313, 1313–14, 1314, 1315.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, vol. II, 1325.

²¹ *Ibid.*, vol. II, 1327.

²² *Ibid.*, vol. II, 1328. A little further on in this section Battles' translation reads 'since the word "baptism" is applied to infants', but inaccurately. The Latin *baptismi verbum* denotes what Calvin has just called 'the inner mystery' of baptism declared in the word of the sacrament. This is evident when Calvin proceeds immediately to talk of the sign, i.e. outward baptism, as 'the appendage of the word'. Henry Beveridge's translation has 'the word of baptism is destined for infants'. The French of the 1560 *Institution* reads 'la parole du Baptisme s'adresse aux petits enfans' (ed. Jean-Daniel Benoit, vol. IV, 343).

After devoting a brief section to Jesus' blessing of the children, Calvin turns to a lengthy rebuttal of Anabaptist objections against the baptism-circumcision parallel (4:16:10–16). He next asserts that infants are quite capable of being regenerated, as Christ's own infancy demonstrates. Without regeneration, dying infants must surely perish.

To the further objection that infants were incapable of hearing preaching and hence of faith, the Reformer advances various counter-arguments. God can use other means than preaching to grant illumination. What danger is there:

if infants be said to receive now some part of that grace which in a little while they shall enjoy to the full? (4:16:19).²³

In a passage whose complex construction over three editions reflects Calvin's continuing struggle with this question, he expostulates:

[W]hy may the Lord not shine with a tiny spark at the present time on those whom he will illumine in the future with the full splendour of his light – especially if he has not removed their ignorance before taking them from the prison of the flesh? I would not rashly affirm that they are endowed with the same faith as we experience in ourselves, or have entirely the same knowledge of faith – this I prefer to leave undetermined (4:16:19).²⁴

In another variation on the same theme:

Infants are baptised into future repentance and faith, and even though these have not yet been formed in them, the seed of both lies hidden within them by the secret working of the Spirit (4:16:20).²⁵

More than one issue of coherence is raised by Book 4:16 of the *Institutes*. One which will not be pursued here is the coherence of 4:16 within itself. On the one hand Calvin insists on the regeneration of elect baptised infants, but on the other hand asserts that:

In infant baptism nothing more of present effectiveness must be required than to confirm and ratify the covenant made with them by the Lord. The remaining significance of this sacrament will afterward follow at such time as God himself foresees (4:16:21).²⁶

More serious is the charge of incoherence between 4:15 and 4:16, in the light of the marked emphasis in the former on baptism's purpose as serving faith and public confession. The disjunction between the two chapters is sharply evident in the use of Scripture: 4:15 mostly cites the NT, 4:16 the Old. Part of Calvin's argument in the latter denies that NT statements which require faith and repentance before baptism apply to infants. Running through 4:16 is the principle that considerations advanced against the baptism of baby children would count equally against circumcision – and are thereby

²³ *Ibid.*, vol. II, 1342.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, vol. II, 1343.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, vol. II, 1345.

automatically disqualified.

The heirs of Calvin have largely focussed on Book 4:16 because it is there that he provides his apologia for infant baptism, and for churches in the Reformation tradition baptism has continued to be overwhelmingly infant baptism. But it says a great deal for Calvin's fidelity to Scripture that 4:15 retains its place into the final edition of the *Institutes*, even though the impression is given that there is one theology of baptism and another of infant baptism. Too much of the later tradition has either lost sight of the former or simply collapsed it into the latter and hence worked with a doctrine of baptism that to all intents and purposes has been a doctrine of infant baptism alone. This has happened despite Calvin and despite the influential Westminster Confession of Faith, whose chapter on baptism preserves a commendable balance.

Not only those that do actually profess faith in and obedience unto Christ, but also the infants of one or both believing parents are to be baptised (28:4).

If such a statement had been borne in mind, it would have been impossible to equate baptism with infant baptism *simpliciter* or to approach baptism through infant baptism. Yet in the Church of Scotland the Special Commission on Baptism under Professor T.F. Torrance, surely the most extended and paper-productive investigation of baptism in the whole history of the Christian church, issued in a revised Act on baptism in 1963 which envisaged solely infant baptism. When in 2000 the Kirk sought to consolidate its various legislative enactments on the sacraments into a single Act, it was discovered that never since the Reformation had it made any provision in the law of the Church for baptism on profession of faith.

There is no need to spell out the difficulties which such an approach lands one in. There is the NT, for example! Among evangelicals, it has been directly and indirectly responsible for a massive baptismal reductionism. Infant baptism has been practised, of course, but with little confidence in talking of it in the baptismal tones of the NT. Countless hordes of babies have been baptised without ever coming into living membership of the covenant community of Christ. In Scotland, and I feel sure in England also, the population includes far more unchurched baptised people than the membership of the national church.

Significant changes in theological reflection on baptism have been afoot for some years, not least in paedobaptist communions, with the still emerging consensus that if there is a baptismal norm it is faith-baptism. This holds true for Roman Catholicism, Anglicanism, some Reformed churches, including the Church of Scotland as of May 2003, and more broadly in ecumenical circles in the wake of *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (1982). This consensus does not entail the abandonment of infant baptism but rather that, in terms of the reception of baptism, baptismal theology starts with baptism on profession of faith and provides for the baptism of non-respondent babies within this framework.

This major sea-change in the churches' attitudes to baptism points forward to a position not generally held since the age of the Fathers – as far as the Latin West is concerned, the era before Augustine of Hippo. When we look closely at the Reformation, we can still recognise a foreshadowing of this nascent consensus in the movement of baptismal teaching in Luther and Calvin sketched above. The post-Reformation succession built one-sidedly on the anti-Anabaptist slant that finally determined the Reformers' writings, but particularly in Calvin, the sequence of Book 4:15 followed by 4:16 in outline embodies the kind of way into understanding baptism,

inspired by the NT, which informs much contemporary baptismal thought and revision of baptismal orders of service.

This also links up with early Christian liturgical practice. If we grant that some infants were baptised from at least the late second century, the dominant pattern in teaching and rite remained baptism on profession of faith. The first known liturgical adjustment to cope with the baptism of infants is attested around 400. The questions were addressed not to the child but to parent or sponsor in the form 'Does he/she believe?', with the response 'He/She believes'. There is hardly any theology of specifically infant baptism before Augustine. Vast reaches of preaching and catechesis on baptism, in John Chrysostom, for example, hardly ever mention infant recipients.

Biblical Christians should welcome this movement for change within baptismal thinking, even though it is bound to have the effect of relativising the claims of infant baptism. Such a correction was long overdue. The case for infant baptism has for centuries suffered from overkill, from exaggerated biblical deductions and maximalized historical enquiries. I never tire of citing C.F.D. Moule's oral comment on Joachim Jeremias's *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries*, 'It contains at least all the evidence.'

This paper's return to our theme of covenant is also overdue. The covenant people of God is a community of faith. It is as such that the Abrahamic covenant finds its fulfilment in the new covenant of Christ, as Paul argues in Galatians 3:6–39, especially verses 7, 9, 14, 26, 29. That is why circumcision cannot serve simply as a model for Christian baptism. Second-century Christian writers saw in circumcision a mark of Jewish ethnicity. So if children belong to the new covenant people of Christians, they do not do so on special non-faith terms, of birth or nationality – and certainly not of innocence. (The late Alan Stibbs used to say that what had killed the gospel at the font was baby-worship.) There is no double-entry scheme on offer. The millennium-old experience of Christendom was recruitment largely from birth, on the basis of physical kinship.

The question, then, is whether children belong to the covenant community. To that I would answer in the affirmative, on a presumption of inclusiveness, whether or not it is thought appropriate to baptise them.²⁷ Whether by baptism, by dedication or by thanksgiving and blessing, we welcome the children of the faithful as the gift of God and we are right to treat them as new members of God's people, not as no better than little pagans or unbelievers.

This presumption of covenantal inclusiveness comports well with several features in the NT:

- i. Children are addressed in some of the epistles as though part of the community of Christians in Colossae, Ephesus and elsewhere. What assumptions does their presence imply?
- ii. The household baptisms of Acts indicate an inclusiveness extending beyond the modern nuclear family, presumably encompassing slaves also.
- iii. The descendants to whom the promise extends in Acts 2:39, 'to you and your descendants' (as in the promises to Noah, Gen. 9:9, to Abraham, Gen. 13:15, 17:7–8, Gal. 3:16, and to David, Pss 18:50, 89:34–37, 132:11–12), began life as children of their parents.

²⁷ My own position, for what it is worth, views infant baptism as an *adiaphoron*, a matter on which Christians may differ without breaking fellowship. In my judgement, it is untenable to demand infant baptism on the basis of Scripture, but at the same time its advocates have sufficient biblical arrows in their quiver not to face dogmatic rejection. Baptism itself, of course, is emphatically not an *adiaphoron*. No baptism, no Christian.

- iv. Jesus welcomed children, took them in his arms, laid his hands on their heads and blessed them. Mark twice in successive chapters has Jesus taking children in his arms, with a cuddle or a hug, I imagine (9:36–37; 10:14–16). Who were 'these little ones who believe in me, Jesus' (Mark 9:42, Matt. 18:6), whose angels in heaven, according to Matthew 18:10, always behold the face of Jesus' Father in heaven?

If this presumption of the inclusion of children within the covenant people is sound, we may make it a basis for the reconsideration of certain features of church life.

- i. The decision to allow children to join in the Lord's supper was driven, at least in the Church of Scotland, by the realisation that children, most of them baptised, were welcomed into the church at the outset but were then largely out of the church, in Sunday School or Bible Class, for years after which their full inclusion was expected but often did not happen. At least where baptism is thought appropriate to mark their inclusion, their exclusion from the other covenant ordinance is difficult to defend.
- ii. If infant baptism is practised, it should be made an important reference-point for instruction and formation. Children should grow up knowing that they belong to Christ and his church as enacted in baptism. They should be brought up believing this, and on the basis of my argument in this paper this need not be restricted to baptised infants alone.
- iii. The question arises of the inclusion of children within the normal diet of worship. This was one of the principles of the influential long ministry of the late William Still in Gilcomston South Church, Aberdeen, without for a moment involving the reduction of the level of worship to that of a children's service.
- iv. Even more controversially, and at first sight paradoxically, we should seriously consider the refocusing of energies away from special children's ministries towards adult ministries. If only in more of our churches the immense time, imagination and enterprise expended on children's ministries were paralleled in ministries to adults, especially men. Our strategy has often appeared to seek to reach parents through children, but a recent statistic revealed the huge disparity between the effect of the conversion of a child and of a mother, and even more so of a father, on other members of a family.²⁸
- v. More tentatively, I raise the question of our listening to and learning from children, of children ministering to the rest of us. The Church of Scotland has recently experimented with children's forums, and invited representatives to attend the General Assembly of 2002 and to speak.²⁹ (Annual youth assemblies send delegates to be present and participate throughout each General Assembly.) That children might be involved in decision-making may seem far-fetched, but if we listen to children at home, perhaps we should do so in church. We are increasingly accustomed to forms of feedback on adults', and teenagers', experience of the church, and it would be a short step to extend this to children.

²⁸ According to research in America, if a child is the first person to become a Christian, there is a 3.5% probability that the rest of the family will follow; if the mother is the first, 17%; if the father, 93%. Reported in *Evangelicals Now* 18:5 (May 2003), 28. It must be said that 3.5% is not negligible.

²⁹ *Reports to the General Assembly 2003* (see n. 3 above), 29/4–5.

Concluding Reflections

The wide-ranging exercise which this article has attempted can be viewed in part as a process of disentanglement from aspects of the complex legacy of the Reformation which has reached us, again in part, as Christendom, entailing a heavy element of continuity from the pre-Reformation western church. Within this context, infant baptism has been a mixed blessing. It has unambiguously marked children as heirs of the promises of the covenant, but often with major disagreement among us on when they enter into their inheritance. In fact, very many of the infant-baptised, probably a good majority, never enter into that inheritance, if we judge by standard criteria. If we believe that baptism is a dominical ordinance, to whomsoever it is given, hard questions about tolerable levels of ineffectiveness seem inescapable.

What is proposed here concentrates on a less specific inclusiveness focussed on children growing up within the heart of our churches, or within the fold of the covenant community, if that language is preferable, as 'little ones who believe in Jesus', mini-believers or believers-in-the-making. The boundaries of such inclusiveness will almost by definition be open, porous, permeable. Whether all will be members of the church, of the covenant people, need not be pressed.

In many churches the concept of membership has been becoming more problematic. We are undoubtedly moving into an era that is characterised by looser patterns of belonging, before and after believing, and children are surely very much to the point. This may prove bothersome to some evangelicals. We tend to be precisionists, to want to have things tied down and buttoned up, insistent on people conforming, meeting conditions. Calvin got a bloody nose when he attempted in his first years in Geneva to get all the citizens individually to state where they stood on the Reformation. This issue is not irrelevant to the question of the presence of children at the supper. If you bring the Sunday School in as a group, what about any unbaptised children among them?

If we baulk at the possibility of unbaptised children at the communion table – as I do – let us be sure that we know why we do. Attitudes towards the sacrament of the supper in some quarters still reek of the hypersacralism of the late medieval church. There is surely gross incongruity between the scrupulous care with which we fence the table and the freedom with which we dispense the other sacrament instituted by Christ, on the grounds, for example, that it presents an evangelistic opportunity. Yet in the Scottish tradition it is communion, not baptism, that has been known as a converting ordinance. Discrepant views of the two sacraments of the gospel continue to distort pastoral policy.

The vision granted to the prophet Zechariah of the Jerusalem to which the Lord has returned to dwell in, the Jerusalem now called the faithful city, the holy mountain, includes the following picture.

Once again men and women of ripe old age will sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each with cane in hand because of his age. The city streets will be filled with boys and girls playing there (Zech. 8:4–5).

Is this a sight of the new heavenly Jerusalem to come? Do the streets of our city of God on its earthly pilgrimage ring with the playing of boys and girls? The presence of children may demand of us less of a prim-and-proper solicitude lest they disturb the peace of our Sunday morning expositions.