

The Link between ‘A Gospel Church’ and Infant Baptism

In this chapter, I want to show that the concepts of ‘a gospel church’ and infant baptism are hand in glove.

A major plank in the platform – the theology – upon which ‘a gospel church’ and its link with infant baptism stands is the covenant theologian’s claim that the old and new covenants are in essence one and the same, and that these two covenants are nothing more than different administrations of one covenant of grace. As a direct consequence, covenant theologians go on to claim that Israel in the old covenant, and the church – the *ekklēsia* – in the new covenant, form one continuous body. To distinguish the *ekklēsia* from Israel, they invent a title for it: ‘the gospel church’.

All this, as I have argued, is pure invention. But it is far from innocent; the consequences are dire.

But let me make the case that such teachers link ‘a gospel church’ and infant baptism.

John P.Sartelle, for instance, actually opened his booklet *What Christian Parents Should Know About Infant Baptism* by saying: ‘We begin our study with the Old Testament character Abraham’.¹ What a remarkable opening statement in a booklet to deal with baptism – a New Testament (a new-covenant) ordinance! Would infant baptisers *begin* a study on the Lord’s supper with the Passover? Would they *set about* an examination of church discipline by looking at Moses and the man gathering sticks? Do we *embark* on a discussion of the duties of church elders by considering the hierarchical appointment of the seventy judges to help

¹ John P.Sartelle: *Infant Baptism, What Christian Parents Should Know*, Presbyterian and Reformed, Phillipsburg, 1985, p3.

The Link between 'A Gospel Church' and Infant Baptism

Moses?² Is it not a golden rule of biblical interpretation to start with passages which deal most fully – explicitly – with the subject in hand? Surely the practice of a New Testament ordinance began in the New Testament, did it not? This would seem self-evident. Shouldn't, therefore, the New – not the Old – Testament, set the parameters for its practice?³ And shouldn't the study and explanation of such an ordinance begin – to say the least – in the New Testament? What did Abraham know about baptism? Of course, Sartelle started with Abraham because he thought that Abraham was in the church, and baptism is the equivalent of circumcision. But that was begging the question!

Benjamin B. Warfield wrote of 'the continuity of the church of God... in the Scriptures', and of the inclusion of children in the church 'in its pre-Christian form'. Thus, he argued, the Old Testament practice of circumcision is the basis of the New Testament ordinance of baptism. He even went as far as to assert: 'If the continuity of the church through all ages can be made good, the warrant for infant baptism is not to be sought in the New Testament but in the Old Testament'. This is another remarkable statement, being nothing less than an admission of the non-New-Testament basis for the practice of infant baptism. And since its premise – the continuity of the church in all ages – is false, then it follows that there is no warrant whatsoever for the practice of infant baptism, according to Warfield's own words. Yet he was even prepared to say that this sense of continuity was so strong and so obvious in the apostolic age, he did 'not doubt that

² The sad answer is, alas, not a few evangelicals are prepared to say 'Yes'. In addition to the men cited in this chapter, witness Ray Evans on evangelism with his: *Ready, Steady, Grow: Equipping Today's Gospel Churches*, Inter-Varsity Press, Nottingham, 2014. In addition, do not miss Evans' subtitle. For my reply to this work, see my *Relationship*.

³ In the history of infant baptism, things actually got worse; it wasn't even the Old Testament which set the parameters for infant baptisers; it was the stubborn problems raised by the process itself which came to dominate its theology. See Appendix 1.

The Link between 'A Gospel Church' and Infant Baptism

children born into the church during this age were both circumcised and baptised'! Indeed the change from circumcision to baptism, he alleged, 'was slow, and never came until it was forced by the actual pressure of circumstances. The instrument for making this change was... Paul. We see the change formally constituted... in Acts 15'.⁴ Reader, this is an amazing rewriting of the Acts, is it not? Baptism is not even mentioned in Acts 15! Warfield must have had extraordinary powers of sight if in that chapter he could see infant baptism replacing circumcision as its equivalent.

R.L.Dabney wrote that the 'church is substantially the same under both dispensations (the Old and the New Testaments, the old and new covenants), retaining under the New, the same membership and nature, though with a suitable change of circumstances, which it had under the Old'.⁵ Did Dabney really think that the Israelites of the Old Testament, and the saints of the New, were members of the same church, and in the same way, allowing for 'suitable' differences of circumstances? A.A.Hodge went even further than Dabney.

⁴ Benjamin B.Warfield: *Studies in Theology*, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1988, pp390,399,404. When Richard L.Pratt stated that 'the book of Acts reveals that baptism replaced circumcision only through a complex process', he was wrong. Baptism didn't replace circumcision by a complex process; it didn't replace it at all; the non-existent process Pratt spoke of was 'invisible'! And when Pratt said that in Acts 15, 'the... apostles [and the church] determined that circumcision would no longer be required of New Testament believers ['no longer'? – it never was], and that baptism alone would suffice as the initiatory rite for the... church', I should like to know where we can find such a far-reaching statement in Acts 15. As I say, I can discover no mention of baptism in the chapter. And what is this 'alone... suffice'? (John H.Armstrong (ed.): *Understanding Four Views on Baptism*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 2007, pp66-67; see Thomas J.Nettles' reply in John H.Armstrong pp75-76). Such shoddy exegesis serves only to prove the weakness of the case.

⁵ R.L.Dabney: *Systematic Theology*, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1985, p727.

The Link between 'A Gospel Church' and Infant Baptism

He baldly stated that 'the church under the Old dispensation is precisely the same church with the Christian church under the New'.⁶ *Precisely* the same?

This entire scheme is based upon a faulty foundation. Actually, it has no foundation at all. The church in the Old Testament is not the same as the church in the New Testament, for the simple reason the church did not even exist in the Old Testament! It is entirely a New Testament body. Hence the deductions of infant baptisers are based on a false premise. In particular, it is useless to argue from this false premise to say that baptism has replaced circumcision. It has done nothing of the kind.

Pierre Marcel's words may be regarded as typical of the infant baptiser's view. He claimed that 'the church has been and remains one; the nation of Israel was the church; the Christian church, since it also comes under the covenant of grace, is the same church'.⁷ Reader, take careful note of Marcel's words. He said that 'the nation of Israel was the church'. This is a staggering statement. It will take some justification. It cannot be done; it is utterly false. The nation of Israel was not the church. Though, as we have seen, infant baptisers frequently refer to 'the Jewish church', there was no such thing. When they qualify the church and call it 'the Christian church', or 'a gospel church', and so on, they merely add to this confusion. R.A.Cole, for example, wrote that after Christ's 'breach with the church of Jewry, the Lord began to constitute his own church'!⁸ His *own* church as opposed to somebody else's church?⁹ The *Christian* church?

⁶ A.A.Hodge: *Evangelical Theology*, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1976, p332.

⁷ David Pawson and Colin Buchanan: *Infant Baptism under Cross-Examination*, Grove Books, Bramcote, 1974, p11.

⁸ R.A.Cole: *The Gospel According to... Mark*, The Tyndale Press, London, 1961, p79.

⁹ Of course, the church *is* Christ's church (Matt. 16:18; Rom. 16:16). See also 'the church of God' (Acts 20:28; 1 Cor. 1:2;

The Link between 'A Gospel Church' and Infant Baptism

Is there any other? We ought to do as the New Testament does and speak only of the church, the church of Christ, the *ekklēsia*.

Louis Berkhof, writing on the Sinaitic covenant, said: 'In a large measure church and State became one. To be in the church was to be in the nation, and *vice-versa*, and to leave the church was to leave the nation'.¹⁰ What a manifestly false assertion! The nation of Israel the church? Matthew Henry, commenting on Mark 2:23 where it is recorded that the disciples ate the corn on the sabbath, said: 'What a poor breakfast Christ's disciples had on a sabbath day morning, when they were going to church'! Going to church?¹¹ They must have had a remarkably long journey that sabbath. The church was not even founded at the time. And what a mongrel mix up – the sabbath and the church! Nevertheless, there is the claim – the church is the same in both Testaments, infant baptisers say. Sadly, some Baptists agree with them; Erroll Hulse, for instance, who said: 'The gospel church is not a different church from that which existed in the Old Testament period'.¹²

If so, an interesting question arises. According to infant baptisers, the disciples were members of the church before they met Christ. After all, they were in the covenant, they were circumcised, they belonged to the nation of Israel,

10:32; 11:22; 15:9; 2 Cor. 1:1; Gal. 1:13; 1 Tim. 3:5,15).
Incidentally, do not miss the clear implication: Christ is God.

¹⁰ Louis Berkhof: *Systematic Theology*, The Banner of Truth Trust, London, 1959, p298. How much suffering, what appalling torture, how much martyrdom, has come from that principle applied to the church!

¹¹ 'Going to church' is Christendom-speak, a Christendom invention. Nobody in the New Testament 'went to church'. A church was not a place or a building; it was the *ekklēsia*, the body of the called-out ones, the body of believers. A believer did not 'go to church'; he was part of the church. This seemingly innocuous phrase – 'going to church' – has caused immense damage.

¹² Erroll Hulse: *The Restoration of Israel*, Henry E. Walter, Ltd., Worthing, 1968, p26.

The Link between 'A Gospel Church' and Infant Baptism

hence they were members of the church, according to infant baptisers; indeed, according to all covenant theologians.¹³ Presumably, on regeneration they became members again. But the point is this: if they were members of the church before they met Christ, why did Christ say that he had chosen them 'out of the world' (John 15:19)? According to infant baptisers, covenant theologians, he had chosen them out of the church! Furthermore, if Jews had been properly admitted to the church by circumcision, why did they have to be admitted to the church all over again by baptism? Why were Jewish converts baptised? Indeed, why, if circumcised, are they today?

At first glance, the Authorised Version (KJV) of Acts 7:38 appears to justify the idea that the nation of Israel was the church, and therefore supports the claim that the church existed in the Old Testament. The verse speaks of 'the church in the wilderness'. This, however, is a misleading translation of Stephen's words. Instead of 'church', *ekklesia* should here be translated 'congregation' or 'assembly'.¹⁴ The Greek word means a gathering of citizens called out to a public place, a gathering or throng.¹⁵ In the Greek version of the Old Testament – the Septuagint – the word is used for the assembly, throng or gathering of the Israelites, and that is how Stephen used it. Unfortunately, the Authorised Version, for reasons of its own,¹⁶ translated it badly by the word

¹³ Although Reformed Baptists dissent from this, having conceded so much to covenant theologians, they face an uphill – impossible – task to fend off the consequences of their theology.

¹⁴ See NKJV, NASB, NIV, NEB. In his version, William Tyndale had 'congregation'.

¹⁵ See Joseph Henry Thayer: *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, Ninth Printing 1991; William F. Arndt and, F. Wilbur Gingrich *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago... and The Syndics of the Cambridge University Press, London, 1957.

¹⁶ In the *Preface for the Reader*, the AV (KJV) translators were quite open about keeping 'the old ecclesiastical words'. This is

The Link between 'A Gospel Church' and Infant Baptism

'church', which in the New Testament takes on an altogether different meaning, being used in a technical, specialised sense, peculiar to itself. In these New Testament terms it now means a church, a covenanted body of baptised saints gathered in the name of Christ for the worship of God, and so on. But Stephen did not intend to convey that meaning. He used the word in its Greek Septuagint or Old Testament sense, meaning the throng or assembly of Israel. The Greeks themselves also used exactly the same word to speak of an assembly of citizens convened in a public place to deliberate some particular issue. That is the way the very word translated 'church' in Acts 7:38 is used in Acts 19:39. Nobody would dream of translating Acts 19:39 – 'the lawful assembly', a legally gathered assembly of citizens, or court – as 'the lawful *church*'. Stephen's words, badly mistranslated in the Authorised Version,¹⁷ do not in any way support the claim that the church existed in the Old Testament. It has nothing to do with it.

The church – the word used in the spiritual New Testament or Christian sense – the new-covenant sense – is, as I say, entirely a New Testament body. How could it exist in the Old Testament? The very first time it appears in the Bible is in Matthew 16:18 where Jesus said: 'I will build my church'. Exactly so. That was the founding of the church and it took practical effect on the Day of Pentecost. We know that the church is 'built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone' (Eph. 2:20).¹⁸ In this verse we have the foundation of the

what King James wanted (F.F.Bruce: *The English Bible...*, University Paperbacks, Methuen, London, 1963, p98). He got his way, but a big price had to be paid for it – one which is still being paid today. The giving of a wrong view of 'the church' to millions is a hefty instalment! See my *Battle*. Although the KJV translators used a huge amount of Tyndale's version, they studiously did not use his 'congregation'. See earlier note.

¹⁷ It would be fair to call it 'loaded'. See the previous note.

¹⁸ 'No one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ' (1 Cor. 3:11).

The Link between 'A Gospel Church' and Infant Baptism

church. What, or who, is the foundation? The apostles and prophets. There is no question or debate over who the apostles were, but who were the prophets? Did Paul mean the Old Testament prophets, or did he mean the New Testament prophets? Clearly, he meant the prophets of the New Testament. Why? For three reasons.

First, if he had intended the Old Testament prophets, he would not have said 'the apostles and prophets', but he would have said 'the prophets and apostles', putting them in their proper chronological order.

Secondly, the immediate context in which Paul wrote makes it abundantly plain that he meant New Testament prophets. A few verses later, he spoke of the mystery of Christ 'which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to his holy apostles and prophets' (Eph. 3:5). Clearly, the prophets in this verse were the New Testament prophets. The mystery had been fully revealed to them now. This makes it very likely – to put it no stronger – that those spoken of in the earlier passage were those same New Testament prophets. Again, shortly after, when speaking of the church and the gifts Christ gave to the church after his ascension, Paul said that 'he himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets' (Eph. 4:11). This refers without doubt to the New Testament prophets. Thus the context gives a second reason which makes it extremely likely, to say the least, that Ephesians 2:20 relates to the New Testament prophets. (See also 1 Corinthians 12:28).

Thirdly, Paul did not write of 'the apostles and the prophets', but 'the apostles and prophets'. The one definite article qualifies both apostles and prophets; they were, together, the one foundation of the church. They were the joint instrument through which God revealed his truth to found the church, with Christ the chief cornerstone. The apostles were New Testament men, a new-covenant phenomenon; likewise, these prophets.

The Link between 'A Gospel Church' and Infant Baptism

For these three reasons, we may say – without question – that Ephesians 2:20 teaches that the church was founded in the New Testament. And since it was founded in the New Testament, how could it exist in the Old? It did not – it could not – exist before it was founded! Hence, for infant baptisers to maintain that the church is the same in both Testaments, must be completely wrong. It did not even exist in the Old Testament.¹⁹ And consequently, any and every practice which is deduced on that false basis, must itself be false. In particular, infant baptism cannot be justified by this argument of the so-called continuity of the church.

Of course, as I have said, there were true believers in the Old Testament, and they were saved in the same way as believers in the New Testament, they were in the same covenant as New Testament saints, and they will inherit the same eternal glory. This arises from the spiritual aspect of the Abrahamic covenant. The believers of both Testaments are in the same covenant with God – the new covenant – which was the spiritual aspect of the Abrahamic covenant.²⁰ But while all that was true of the saints of the Old Testament, it is entirely wrong to speak of the church in the Old Testament. There was no church, at that time, in the terms of the New Testament. Therefore, any attempt to apply Old Testament conditions to the church is greatly misguided. Sadly, the fallacious notion that the church existed in the Old Testament is one of the basic arguments of infant baptisers. As a result, they wrongly apply Old Testament practices and conditions, especially about circumcision, to the church. It leads to all sorts of trouble. And it is baseless. When they talk about the *Abrahamic* church, or the *Mosaic* church, or the *Jewish* church, they make utterly ridiculous statements. And when they talk of a *gospel* church they simply add to the muddle. In particular, as a consequence of their mistaken view of the continuity of the church in both Testaments,

¹⁹ It was prophesied in the Old Testament, but came into existence in the New. See my *Christ Is All*.

²⁰ See my *Redemption*.

The Link between 'A Gospel Church' and Infant Baptism

infant baptisers hold that New Testament baptism has replaced Old Testament circumcision. But since the church did not exist in the Old Testament, their appeal for the baptism of infants on that basis falls to the ground.

Warfield summarised the total range of arguments employed by infant baptisers: 'The argument in a nutshell is simply this: God established his church in the days of Abraham and put children into it. They must remain there until he puts them out. He has nowhere put them out. They are still then members of his church and as such entitled to its ordinances. Among these ordinances is baptism'.²¹ Reader, this *is* the argument in a nutshell, but the shell is empty! God established his church, not in the days of Abraham, but through Christ in the New Testament (Eph. 2:20). Israel was not the church. Furthermore, God never did put children into his church. God only ever put believers into his church, in the local sense of the word. The church is composed of the elect, not the elect and their children. Warfield's argument falls to the ground because it is based on a false premise. And since, as he said, his argument summarised the entire case of infant baptisers – it is the argument in a nutshell – their whole hypothesis collapses.

I now move on to the second issue.

²¹ Warfield p408.