

Chapter 17

Infant Baptism and the Congregation

I will tell of your name to my brothers;
in the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise.
-Psalm 22:22-

Collective Efficacy

The baptism of children has a *collective efficacy*, that is to say, all who participate in it are equally its beneficiaries (Marcel 1953, 228).

If Jesus' blessing the children dramatized a spiritual principle of the Kingdom (and who can deny the element of drama?), then the church had better, for its own good, join in the drama. It is, after all, the drama of redemption!

I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it (Luke 15:17).

It is not without reason that the congregation is publically called upon to engage in a covenant with the believing parents in the baptism of their infants and minority children. In the *ekklesia* God has chosen to make known his manifold wisdom and to manifest his glory in Christ Jesus (Eph. 3:10, 21). The Psalmist frequently referred to the church as the "great assembly" or the "great congregation."

From you comes the theme of my
praise in the great
assembly;
before those who fear you will I
fulfill my vows (Ps. 22:25).

The Ancient Landmark

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Praise God in the great
congregation;
praise the LORD in the assembly of
Israel (Ps. 68:26).

God presides in the great assembly;
he gives judgment among the
"gods" (Ps. 82:1).

The Lord Jesus promised that wherever two or three were *gathered* in his name he would be in their midst (Matt. 18:20)--and it is his Presence in the person of the Holy Spirit that makes the gathering "the great assembly." As Tertullian adroitly pointed out, the Holy Spirit is the true Vicar of Christ for the church (Roberts 1885, 3:256). John Owen, esteemed seventeenth-century English Congregationist, theologian, and Vice-Chancellor of Oxford, agreed:

And other vicar in the church Christ hath none, nor doth stand in need of any, nor can any mortal man supply that charge and office; nor was any such ever thought of in the world until men grew weary of the conduct and rule of the Holy Spirit, by various ways taking his work out of his hand, leaving him nothing to do in that which is called "the church" (Owen 1677, 4:500).

The Christian congregation is spiritually united with that "heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God" (Heb. 12:22) where our risen Lord sits at the right hand of God. It is no trivial matter when people "are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus . . . and the power of the Lord Jesus is present" (1 Cor. 5:4).

Not only is "the power of the Lord Jesus" present in the congregation of believers, but there is a sense in which the apostles and prophets are present as well! Paul in his days on earth claimed that he himself would be with the Corinthian church "in spirit," though physically absent, as they submitted to his apostolic directives and expelled the incestuous offender (1 Cor. 5:2-5). How much more, now that Paul is "absent from the

body" and is "present with the Lord" (2 Cor. 5:6-8; Phil. 1:23-24) can he be said to be present with the *church militant*. Having joined the ranks of the *church triumphant*, Paul is now part of that company to which the *church militant* is said to be spiritually joined--"the spirits of just men made perfect" (Heb. 12:23).

The expressed desire of the apostle John, speaking on behalf of the apostolic circle, that "you may have fellowship with us" (1 John 1:3a), is realized in every generation of the church that accepts the witness of the holy apostles and submits to their teaching legacy inscribed in the New Testament.

And what was done originally by their persons is now done by their word and doctrine; for the church is "built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone," Eph. ii.20 (Owen 1677, 4:492).

We have fellowship with them on that basis, inasmuch as faith in their established testimony brings us into fellowship "with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ" (1 John 1:3b); thus, we affirm that statement in the *Apostles Creed*--"I believe in the communion of saints."

To have fellowship with the apostles is not to pray to them, but to pray in unison with them under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. In the glorious reality of Jesus' transfiguration, the Old Testament prophets, Moses and Elijah, also were present; but on that "sacred mountain" the Father left no doubt that the designated central attraction was his beloved Son (2 Pet. 1:17-18). The same holds true for the church today (Col. 1:18). And the Scripture leaves no question as to *whom* the prayers of the church are to be addressed (Ps. 65:2; Matt. 6:9)--and *in whose name* the prayers should be offered (John 16:23-24).

In saying that he would be present "in spirit" with the Corinthian church for that critical occasion of ecclesiastical discipline, Paul was not affirming his own omnipresence, but rather the Lord's, and the *communion of the saints* who gather in Jesus' name. His prayers would co-mingle before God's throne

of grace with those of the saints at Corinth, and in support of their actions to enforce Christ's rule of ecclesiastical discipline. This reflected Jesus' words:

I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

Again, I tell you that if two or three of you agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them (Matt. 18:19-20).

Charismatic Dimension

When the church militant gathers for worship, she can be assured that the power of the Holy Spirit associated with the apostolic ministry is resident in the congregation to apply the work of redemption. John Owen, the eminent English Puritan scholar and Vice-Chancellor of Oxford, stated, "Every true gospel ministry hath now gifts of the same kind with the apostles, in a degree and measure sufficient to their work . . ." (1677, 4:486). "A ministry devoid of spiritual gifts is a sufficient evidence of a church under a degenerating apostasy" (1677, 4:482).

. . . if the Lord do at any time, or at any place, cease to give out spiritual gifts to men, enabling them in some good measure unto the discharge of their ministry, then and in that place, the ministry itself must cease and come to an end. To erect a ministry by virtue of outward order, rites, and ceremonies, without gifts for the edification of the church, is but to hew a block with axes, and smooth it with planes, and set it up for an image to be adored (1677, 4:494).

Clearly, Owen did not have in mind the "extraordinary gifts," such as healings, tongues, and miracles (1677, 4:86), but his

statements surely serve as a rebuke to many churches of our day along with his own. Owen added a charismatic dimension to Calvin's definition of the church.

Oscar Cullman wrote,

Where the believing congregation is, there the Holy Spirit, operating within it and knowing no limitations, has the power to draw an infant into his sphere, just as in the case of all baptised persons, who, according to Paul, are 'by one Spirit . . . baptised into one body' of Christ (1950, 43).

J. Rodman Williams, though rejecting infant baptism, properly insisted that the laying on of hands was "a divinely instituted means of *enabling* persons to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (1988-, 2:290). As parents bring these infants before the congregation to present them to the Lord in Christian baptism, and "the power of the Lord Jesus is present," those little ones are regenerated and sanctified by the Spirit of God according to the Father's good pleasure. The baptism of infants is not meant to be an empty, formalistic ritual. They come to belong to Christ in a special way, and they exhibit for the church the glorious mystery of the kingdom of God. By removing the ancient landmark of infant baptism from the church, the members soon lose sight of this truth and stand to reject God's purposes for the congregation.

This gathering of the Lord's people where the Lord has promised to manifest his presence is frequently described by the Scriptures as "the holy mountain" or "the mountain of the LORD" (Ps. 99:9; Micah 4:1-3). Here in a special way the drama of redemption is demonstrated. Through his Incarnation and Atonement Christ rendered Satan powerless and removed the fear of death thereby effecting the spiritual liberation of God's people (Heb.2:14-15). The love of God, perfectly revealed in Christ's atoning death, is "poured out" into the hearts of believers by the Holy Spirit (1 John 4:10; Rom. 5:5) and drives out all fear from the congregation (1 John 4:18). The bruising of the head of the Serpent through the Seed of the Woman has resulted in

Satan's undoing and has enabled the church to prevail over his efforts to frustrate or destroy it (Gen. 3:15; Matt. 16:18-19; John 12:31-32; Heb. 2:14).

God's purpose is realized when the church, as a manifestation of the Kingdom of God, becomes a place of spiritual safety and victory in Christ for the infant covenant sons and daughters. According to the prophetic symbolism of Isaiah, "the infant will play near the hole of the cobra, and the young child put his hand into the vipers nest," for "they will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain" (Isa. 11:8-9; Luke 10:19). The Christian church, as an expression of God's "holy mountain," is designed to be a place for the healing of hurts, not for inflicting them unnecessarily. Adult power plays stand opposed to this purpose.

Covenantal Purity

The antidote to ecclesiastical narrowness of spirit, and to worldly ambition, may well be found in the recovery of God's covenant pertaining to the believer's offspring that comes into congregational focus through infant baptism.

They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the road?" But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest.

Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all."

He took a little child and had him stand among them. Taking him in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me" (Mark 9:33-37).

The covenant baptism of infants and minority children, properly administered, does not compromise the church's purity. In fact, it is essential to it. It is rather the modern church's

refusal to engage in covenant on behalf of her offspring that compromises the church's purity, much as the nation's moral fiber is weakened by its reluctance to protect constitutionally its citizens at the gestational level.

The church's attitude toward her children is a barometer of her relationship with the Lord.

He called a little child and had him stand among them. And he said: "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

"And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me. But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea" (Matt. 18:3-6).

The public baptism of the church's infant sons and daughters before the congregation has a spiritual effect upon the congregation. Infant baptism brings into congregational focus, the Lord's gracious covenant pertaining to the Christian home, as well as the church's responsibility to defend, nurture, instruct, admonish, the little ones. When this vision is not sacramentally upheld, the church lapses into individualism and self-centeredness. Where infant baptism is properly administered, the congregation continuously comes to terms with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

. . . he who refuses the sign is in danger also of refusing the thing signified. By refusing the sign of the covenant for our children we are not far from believing that they are not in the covenant (Marcel 1953, 251).

Calvin cautioned,

Now I think no sober person will be in doubt how rashly they stir up Christ's church with their altercations and contentions over infant baptism. But it behooves us to note what Satan is attempting with this great subtlety of his. He is trying to take away from us the singular fruit of assurance and spiritual joy which is to be gathered from it, and also to diminish somewhat the glory of the divine goodness. For how sweet is it to godly minds to be assured, not only by word, but by sight, that they obtain so much favor with the Heavenly Father that their offspring are within his care? For here we can see how he takes on toward us the role of a most provident Father, who even after our death maintains his care for us, providing for and looking after our children. Should we not, following David's example, rejoice with all our heart in thanksgiving, that his name may be hallowed by such an example of his goodness [Ps. 48:10]? It is precisely this which Satan is attempting in assailing infant baptism with such an army: that, once this testimony of God's grace is taken away from us, the promise which, through it, is put before our eyes may eventually vanish little by little. From this would grow up not only an impious ungratefulness toward God's mercy but a certain negligence about instructing our children in piety (1960, 2:1358-59).

Similarly Martin Bucer thought it important that

the baptism of infants not be deferred; for thereby is a door opened unto the devil to bring in a contempt of baptism and so of our whole of redemption and communion of Christ, which through the Anabaptists hath too much prevailed with many (Wood 1910, 2:401, note).

Infants were a vital part of the *ekklesia* in the Old Testament (Joel 2:16) and were so regarded by Christ in the *ekklesia* of the New Testament as well (Luke 18:15-16). Not only so, but the Mediator of the new covenant was conceived by

the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary thereby passing through the stages of infancy and childhood himself in order to redeem even these little ones.

According to Christ's teaching, it would be better to drown with a millstone around one's neck than to cause "one of these little ones who believe in me to sin" (Matt. 18:6). To shut the church door on these little ones, by spiritual apathy, disdain for God's ordinance, or bringing worldly ambition and power into the life of the church is to play right into the hands of the Serpent who has always sought to devour the elect seed "the moment it was born" (Rev. 12:4; James 3:14-16; 1 Pet. 2:2; 5:8). The sound of Rachel weeping for her children can still be heard (Matt. 2:18) because the church does not take her task seriously in regard to her infant offspring, and God's judgment swiftly follows (Matt. 18:6-9).

The church's spirituality is of critical importance to the covenant sons and daughters. When Judah had spiritually declined to the level of apostasy, there was little hope for the covenant children.

As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, even if Noah, Daniel and Job were in it [the land], they could save neither son nor daughter. They would save only themselves by their righteousness (Ezek. 14:20).

Sin and idolatry in God's covenant nation had reached such serious proportions, that the covenant principle pertaining to the believer's offspring could no longer be effective. The church that trivializes its own spiritual consecration, trivializes the covenant sons and daughters in the unholy process. But the converse is true as well. The church that trivializes the covenant sons and daughters, trivializes its own spiritual consecration.

Those undershepherds who take infant baptism seriously will want to assure--by their faithful preaching and teaching of the Word of God, private and united prayer, attending to their own spiritual consecration, and applying the biblical principles of church oversight and discipline--that the church is indeed a

safe place. They will want to bear the image of the Lord Jesus of whom it is said, "A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out" (Isa. 42:3). Any breakdown in the spiritual qualifications of God's appointed overseers, or in the faithfulness of their instruction, undermines the operation of the covenant of grace in the lives of the believers' offspring. As God spoke to Israel's priests through the prophet Hosea,

My people are destroyed from lack of knowledge.
Because you have rejected knowledge,
I also reject you as my priests;
Because you have ignored the law of your God,

I also will ignore your children. . . .
And it will be: Like people, like priests
(Hos. 4:6, 9).

Oscar Cullman reminded his readers,

Attention must here be drawn to the Church that *prays* for the person being baptized [Acts 8.15]. It prays that God may complete the miracle of Baptism in the baptized person, whether adult or infant. *This* faith which has the person baptized as its object is in fact an indispensable element in the baptismal act (1950, 54).

Perrin, in his *History of the Waldensians*, noted that

the Waldensian Christians had their infant children baptized in the presence of the congregation, that "all might pray that the child might be esteemed to be a Christian" [p. 231] (Gallagher 1878, 159).

Prayers of intercession ought to arise from the congregation on behalf of the parents bringing their infants and small children for baptism. How important for the child to be surrounded by the prayers of the saints! How critical for the

congregation to be impressed and admonished concerning its spiritual obligation to these little ones!

The faith of believing parents and believing sponsors focuses attention on God's promise to receive children born into the covenant community. . . . When faith of this sort is exhibited by parents and sponsors, the Holy Spirit is pleased to work the first stirrings of baptismal grace within the infant's heart (Naglee 1987, 95).

The Family Paradigm

Beasley-Murray conceded that infant baptism would not pose such a problem if it were to be regarded as a formal introduction of the child to the influence of the love and grace resident within the church. He reminded his readers that Baptists themselves commonly bring their own little children for the "Blessing of Infants" for the same reason (1963, 369). What a great privilege and awesome responsibility to be the congregation of the Lord!

The spiritual impact upon the society-at-large by the congregation that is committed to her covenant children is not something to be taken lightly. The church's moral suasion respecting her infant seed--the covenant sons and daughters--has a direct bearing on her ability to stand strong in the midst of a society that aborts its unborn offspring.

Sons are a heritage from the LORD,
children a reward from him.
Like arrows in the hands of a warrior
are sons born in one's youth.
Blessed is the man
whose quiver is full of them.
They will not be put to shame
when they contend with their enemies
in the gate (Psa. 127:3-5).

The church must stop negotiating the biblical paradigm of the family with the elitest atomizers of modern society.

Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house;
your sons will be like olive shoots around your table.
Thus is the man blessed who fears the LORD (Psa. 128:3-4).

The above family paradigm is not a Hebrew idyllic expression, a lofty ideal for which the church should strive--it lies at the heart of God's *covenant*! And infant baptism is the sacramental means by which the congregation engages in the covenant.

God has not overthrown the intergenerational principle because he has not overthrown the family covenant. The Psalmist's vision of divinely-ordered families remains intact for the Christian church. The family unit and structure have not been rendered obsolete by the Gospel. Nor are Christians so spiritual that they can dispense with their family commitments (1 Cor. 7:3-5). Family commitments are very much a part of the fabric of the New Testament (1 Cor. 7:13-14; Eph. 5:22-6:4). If Christians are called to live out the Gospel within the context of strong family bonds, how can it follow that God is no longer covenantally bound to stand by his people in their family relationships?

Do elders of the church have no ground of assurance for maintaining their own scriptural qualifications for their divinely-ordained office (1 Tim. 3:4-5; Titus 1:6)? If God has abandoned his covenant with them and their households so as to invalidate infant baptism and all that it represents, these elders have no ground of assurance! The very survival of the church would be at stake in the matter. That is no trivial concern. Common sense ought to dictate to the Christian that God has not abandoned his people in this way.

Is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ no longer the God of Abraham and his seed? Does God refuse to be for Abraham's sons and daughters of today all that he promised to be in Genesis 17:7? These are critical issues for the church today whose institutions stand in need of recovery. This is not merely heady theology.

Paul King Jewett pointed to the Paedobaptists' vehemence as evidence of their consciousness of vulnerability in logic. He regarded a statement of the seventeenth-century English Puritan pastor, Richard Baxter, as typifying such a consciousness. On the basis of the biblical covenants, Baxter scolded the Antipaedobaptists claiming that they

play the devil's part in accusing their own children and disputing them out of the church and house of God, and out of his promises and covenant, and the privileges that accompany them, and not ungratefully deny, reject, and plead against the mercies that Christ hath purchased for their own children and made over to them (Jewett 1978, 61).

Baxter's vehemence hardly needs defending when considered alongside the Lord's indignation in the face of the same attitude (Mark 10:14). For Baxter, the doctrine that put infants out of the church put them in a worse condition than the children of the Israelites were to experience under the curse of Deuteronomy 28:4, 18, 32, & 41 (Baxter 1651, 70). While vehemence may in certain instances disguise a conscious logical vulnerability, its absence in the face of the antipaedobaptist assault on the church would be irresponsible if not unchristian (Mark 10:14; Pro. 31:8). Jewett's logic itself, therefore, was a bit vulnerable at this point (Cf. Matt. 23:13-36; Gal. 1:8-9; 3:1-3).

Thankfully, we know that God has not abandoned his people in the matter of the family covenant (1 Cor. 7:3-4; Luke 19:9-10; Acts 2:39; 16:31). Neither has he disinherited the infants and children in deference to the adults. He who overturned the tables of the money-changers and healed the blind and the lame, had an interesting question for those who themselves would question the propriety of children crying "Hosanna!" in the temple: "Have you never read, 'From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise'?" (Matt. 21:16).

Covenant Baptists

What does a Baptist do who discovers he can no longer apply his cherished "believers only" principle without violating the integrity of Scripture? Does he cease to be a Baptist? Must he now become a Congregationalist, a Presbyterian, a Lutheran, or an Episcopalian? Happily, he can still remain a Baptist--with this one difference--he now becomes a *Covenant* Baptist.

A *Covenant* Baptist affirms that baptism is a sign and seal of the covenant to be given to believers and their children (Legg 1982, 6). As a *Covenant* Baptist, the Baptist does not have to change his denominational identity--he simply becomes more biblical by baptizing on the basis of the covenant as originally set forth with Abraham "our father in the sight of God" (Rom. 4:17). When adults who have never borne the covenant sign, become believers, they are baptized just as Abraham "received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised" (Rom. 4:11). If the believer has infants or small children not physically capable of making a profession of their faith to the church's satisfaction, they are to be baptized along with their believing parent(s) (1 Cor. 7:14), on the basis of the promise (Gen. 17:7; Acts 2:39), just as Abraham's male infants were to receive the outward sign of circumcision according to God's command (Gen. 17:12). By becoming a *Covenant* Baptist, one can restore the "ancient landmark" (Prov. 23:10-11 RSV) from an evangelical perspective.