

# To the Heart of the Matter

Confronting the Role of Reason in the Evangelical Rejection of Infant Baptism

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The scene is a room in the maternity ward. Visiting hours are over. Grandma and grandpa have left. The new parents gaze upon their newborn with love and adoration. Then the mother begins to speak. “People talk about perfection. They say, ‘this is perfect’ or ‘that is perfect’—when nothing on earth is really perfect. But look at him. A baby is perfect. Their minds are clear of all unkind thoughts. They nothing about good or evil...in a baby’s eyes, one sees no greed or guilt or malice. Their tiny bodies are untouched and beautiful.” The father chimes in. “You’re right. A brand new baby is the one thing that’s absolutely perfect.”

So goes the dialogue from the majority of the panels in the cartoon strip *For Better or for Worse* run in comic sections on November 7, 2004. Without speaking with the strip’s creator, it would be impossible to know for certain whether his view is the same as his characters or if he was poking fun at it (the strip concludes with the startled baby crying at the top of his lungs and the father amending his statement of babies as absolutely perfect to “almost”). Yet many, perhaps the majority of Sunday paper readers would heartily agree with the mother’s conclusions about the perfection of newborns. In fact, the words of those cartoon characters essentially constitute one of the objections sometimes presented by Evangelicals who reject infant baptism.<sup>1</sup>

What is the basis for this conviction that babies are free of evil, malice and sin in general? The answer is human observation and deduction, reliance upon the ability to reason. After all, no infant has ever robbed a convenience store, committed murder or embezzled millions of corporate dollars. It simply follows that the adorable smiles, the physical vulnerability, the gentle and harmless demeanor must reflect the inward

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<sup>1</sup> Gaylin R. Schmeling, *Baptism: My Adoption into God’s Family*, Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1999, p. 74.

condition of the soul as well. It does not logically follow to the natural mind that “every inclination of his (man’s) heart is evil from childhood” (Genesis 8:21). If it can’t be observed, if it can’t be empirically proven, it can’t be so.

This elevation of reason over Scripture is really at the heart of all evangelical arguments against infant baptism. This isn’t really terribly surprising if one looks back to the roots of evangelical and Reformed theology. Both Zwingli and Calvin, whose theology has heavily influenced modern Evangelicals, followed the humanist practice of elevating reason and logic, even giving it sway over Scripture. A phrase attributed to Zwingli illustrates this point well: “God does not ask us to believe anything we cannot comprehend.”<sup>2</sup> David Valleskey observes that this elevation of reason is also seen in the evangelical’s pursuit of apologetics, where they have “a tendency to overemphasize the reasonableness of Christian truth.”<sup>3</sup>

Besides the denial of the possibility that babies are morally evil and sinful, reason provides the catalyst for other evangelical objections for bringing babies to the font. One example would be the argument: “You need to believe to be baptized, and little children can’t believe.”<sup>4</sup> The logic used to come to this conclusion can be observed in the following selections from an evangelical statement on the matter.

Salvation is offered to and baptism is commanded of only people who can meet the conditions of repenting, believing, and obeying Jesus Christ. We see this in the ministry of John the Baptist... The ones who were baptized were the ones who confessed their sins. Infants, of course, cannot do this. Hence there is no reason to suppose that infants were among those whom John baptized.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> David J. Valleskey, “Evangelical Lutheranism and Today’s Evangelicals and Fundamentalists,” essay to the Arizona California District, 1982, p. 13.

<sup>3</sup> Valleskey, “Evangelical Lutheranism and Today’s Evangelicals and Fundamentalists,” p. 17.

<sup>4</sup> Forest L. Bivens and David J. Valleskey, *New Life in Christ*, Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1996, p. 90.

<sup>5</sup> Gregory A. Boyd and Paul R. Eddy, *Across the Spectrum: Understanding Issues in Evangelical Theology*, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002, p. 203.

What is the reasoning used? Since one cannot observe babies repenting, confessing their sins (or their faith for that matter), or obeying Jesus in the same way an adult does, then they must not be capable of doing so. This line of reasoning based on human observation and conclusion is reinforced all the more by the tone: “infants, of course, cannot do this.” These words seem to ring with the hidden message that anyone who would say otherwise is clearly ignorant and unobservant!

Yet another evangelical protest against infant baptism illustrates the dominant role of reason in their theology: “How can mere water do all that? Sounds like a superstitious practice to me.”<sup>6</sup> In a rather scathing and polemical anti-infant baptism sermon, John MacArthur puts it this way: “They (infant baptizers of the Reformation) got into a confounded viewpoint that somehow faith, and grace, and salvation, and regeneration, and entrance into the church is all dumped into that little baby at the point of which water’s dumped on the head.”<sup>7</sup> The reasoning is that one cannot see God the Holy Spirit working through the water and baptismal right, nor can one observe a change in the baby, therefore it simply cannot be so.

MacArthur sets forth a similar point in his observation of how many people who were baptized as infants walk away from the church later in life. “You’ve got all kinds of people who were infant baptized, who, at the time of their infant baptism, were supposedly ushered into the church. They have nothing to do with the church now...”<sup>8</sup> This observation yields a “logical” conclusion that infant baptism is not effective and

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<sup>6</sup> Bivens and Valleskey, *New Life in Christ*, p. 91.

<sup>7</sup> John MacArthur, “A Scriptural Critique of Infant Baptism,” Sermon available on Internet.

<sup>8</sup> MacArthur, “A Scriptural Critique of Infant Baptism.”

therefore can't be valid. (Though one must also note MacArthur's presuppositions of irresistible grace and his confusion of the visible and invisible affects his logic.)

The place of emphasis given to reason will have a strong bearing in the way evangelicals approach Scripture passages they use to defend their view of baptism/refute the beliefs of others. They have already determined for themselves what is reasonable and possible concerning baptism. These rationally determined presuppositions will then accompany them to the table as they examine Scripture and enter any discussion on the subject of infant baptism. (It is in order to note that letting presuppositions manhandle Bible passages is a pitfall that is capable of ensnaring Orthodox Lutheran theologians as well.)

Due to these predetermined rational decisions of views of baptism that evangelicals bring to the discussion, it is far from sufficient to simply "throw passages" at them without challenging their presuppositions. A failure to do so will quite possibly lead to a vigorous round of head-butting scripturally speaking. (It is not the author's intention to in anyway say that Scripture is not powerful or that the Holy Spirit is unable to work a change through a testimony for infant baptism by Bible passages. Rather the goal is to stress how detrimental to a scriptural discussion of infant baptism evangelical rational presuppositions can be and therefore they must also be addressed.) Scriptural head-butting might go like this: a passage is first set out in defense of infant baptism. Then the evangelical rejects the point made because he or she has already determined that the passage cannot mean what it says or cannot determine a point for infant baptism, since infant baptism, babies believing, or the Holy Spirit "chained" to a ritual is simply irrational.

A concrete example might go like this. A Lutheran might point to Matthew 28:19 and then rightfully draw from that verse the point Edward Koehler makes: “Infants are to be baptized, because they certainly are included in ‘all nations.’ As little as they can be excluded from the term ‘nation,’ so little dare we exclude them from Baptism.”<sup>9</sup> What Christ has not expressly excluded from his command, we neither should exclude. Since with his logical presuppositions he will look at the same passage with the same broad command and declare: “Infant baptism is not in Scripture... If Scripture doesn’t command it, it cannot be introduced into the church as normative...if you go to Scripture, you cannot find one single solitary word about infant baptism—it’s not in the Bible.”<sup>10</sup> Judging by the tone MacArthur sets in his harsh sermon, if he were to hear Gaylin Schmeling say, “The Bible does not teach one doctrine of infant baptism and another doctrine of adult baptism. Rather, it teaches a single doctrine of baptism...,”<sup>11</sup> MacArthur would only listen to the first ten words and then declare that he has made his point.

Or consider how Francis Pieper will point to Luke 18:17 when speaking of an infant’s faith. “Scripture... not only ascribes faith to children, but in addition tells adults that they must first be reduced to the state of children before they can enter the Kingdom...who shall not receive the Kingdom as a little child shall in no wise enter.”<sup>12</sup> Again we hear from MacArthur, convinced by reason and observation that children cannot believe retort: “Well that’s not talking about babies; that’s talking about

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<sup>9</sup> Edward W. A. Koehler, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1939, p. 206.

<sup>10</sup> MacArthur, “A Scriptural Critique of Infant Baptism.”

<sup>11</sup> Schmeling, *Baptism*, p. 71.

<sup>12</sup> Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1953, vol. 2, p. 448.

believers.”<sup>13</sup> He goes on to clarify that what is being discussed in this passage is not child-like trust and faith, but a lack of reliance on good works. “If you’re going to come into God’s kingdom you don’t come with a record of all your great achievements... That’s what the Lord is saying: you come into the kingdom with out any achievements.”<sup>14</sup>

If a dialogue with an evangelical on infant baptism disintegrates into the aforementioned game of “here is a passage,” “now I’ll tell you why it can’t possibly apply,” little will be accomplished besides an ample supply of frustration on all parties involved. Therefore it becomes necessary to address the rational presuppositions that are really at the heart of the matter all along. As long as human reason is given the driver’s seat and allowed a veto over what God’s Word clearly and simply says, it will be difficult to present the biblical case for infant baptism to a person who refuses let go of the credo it must make sense to be so.

Such rational presuppositions cannot be argued away, just as one cannot argue someone into accepting infant baptism or creation in six 24-hour days. Only the Holy Spirit is able to bring about such a change of heart and mind. Therefore, we will seek to use his powerful Word when it comes to such matters. He has supplied us with a wealth of passages that speak to the issue and show how foolish it is to pit human reason against God’s thoughts. Indeed that is the very point the Lord makes through the pen of Isaiah: “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the LORD. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:8-9).

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<sup>13</sup> MacArthur, “A Scriptural Critique of Infant Baptism.”

<sup>14</sup> MacArthur, “A Scriptural Critique of Infant Baptism.”

What truly humbles human reason is not just the fact that God's ways are so far above and beyond us, but that he demonstrates this fact by not always doing things in the majestic and marvelous ways humans would expect of an all powerful God. Paul reminds us of this when he speaks of "the message of the cross" as "foolishness," and when he tells us that God has done this to make "foolish the wisdom of the world." Indeed, he even tells us that "God chose the foolish things of world to shame the wise" and that he "chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong" (1 Corinthians 1:18,20,27). 2 Kings provides us with a case and point of Paul's words. Naaman expected a supernatural show of power from the prophet, but God chose to cleanse him from his leprosy by bathing in the lowly and muddy Jordan River (2 Kings 5). Should we then be surprised to see God doing the same when he tells us forgiveness of sins, faith, and salvation can from something so externally "silly" as pouring common water and speaking some words?

After addressing the role of reason over the Word by Scripture, one would pray the Lord might bring individuals to see the faulty presuppositions they are using. Some benefit is at least to be had in calling to their attention that they do come with presuppositions and then encourage a careful examination of Scripture free of pre-determined judgments that these passages do not apply to the issue at hand. Then we would ask that our Lord open their eyes through the treasure store of pertinent passages to see what a truly priceless gift baptism is, freely given without a qualification of age. Prayer certainly is called for, for the ability to achieve such a change of heart and mind

belongs to God alone. For “not to believe God’s Word and work is natural to all men.”<sup>15</sup>

We leave the mounting of such an obstacle to the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>15</sup> Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 3, p. 271.

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