

April - June 2024

# The Link

**NORTH ROAD CHAPEL**

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**BIDEFORD**

# THE BOOK OF JONAH

## Part 4

*“So they took up Jonah, and cast him forth into the sea: and the sea ceased from her raging. Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly, and offered a sacrifice unto the Lord, and made vows. Now the Lord had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. Then Jonah prayed unto the Lord his God out of the fish’s belly.”* (Jonah 1:15 – 2:1)

The casting of the ship’s cargo into the sea produced no effect whatsoever – but immediately that Jonah was thrown overboard, the storm ceased. This dramatic end to such a tempest proved conclusively that the son of Amittai was indeed the cause of all the trouble. If the sea had not abated for 24 hours, or if the storm had gradually died out, then it might have been construed as a natural occurrence. But this was not the case – as soon as Jonah was out of the ship and into the water, the trouble was over. This was not a natural phenomenon; it was miraculous. It could only be interpreted that Jonah was condemned by the judgment of God. True, he had been cast into the sea by the hands of men, but God was over and above it; He was so presiding that nothing could be ascribed to men; they were but instruments in His hands to accomplish His purposes – although of course, they did not realise it.

So Jonah was consigned to the deep, and immediately the gales blew out and the sea calmed. What an amazing happening! These mariners had never seen anything like this before in all their seafaring experience – one minute raging billows, tempestuous winds – the next a gentle swell and balmy breeze. The Spirit of God reports the reaction of the sailors to such remarkable circumstances: *“Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly, and offered a sacrifice unto the Lord, and made vows”* (v.16). In a previous article each of these men was seen praying to his own god. They all had some kind of superstitious belief in a god of sorts, or

mysterious power, but it was all false and foolish notion. Now there was a degree of fear for the True God within them – in fact the Scripture says ‘they feared exceedingly’. They were possessed of a high degree of fear. The scenes they had witnessed were so spectacular that they were frightened by them. “This God of Israel is truly a God of power – unlike the gods to whom we ineffectually prayed”, they conclude.

‘The Fear of God’ needs to be enlarged upon a little, for there are different aspects to this. There is a **nominal** fear of God, expressed in outward shows of religion, in which there is an acknowledgement of God, and a form of worship, but devoid of positive obedience or true faith; it is a form of godliness but the power thereof is denied (cf 2 Timothy 3:5); it is empty, void of reality, hypocritical. There is also a **servile** fear – a desire to satisfy God; in everyday language, an endeavour to ‘keep God pleased’ so that He will be favourably disposed to the individual. Such persons wish to avoid arousing His anger, for they secretly know they cannot exempt themselves from His authority and power – but at the same time they do not want to become bound to God in total commitment. Then there is a true and **reverential** fear of God; a willing submission to Him and all that He requires. Such fear as this is ‘wisdom’ (Job 28:28, Psalm 111:10).

In what sense then, should Jonah 1:16 be understood? The fear of the mariners was of a servile or craven kind. Simply because it is said that they ‘feared the Lord’, it should not be imagined that they repented of their sins and became wholly devoted to the God of Israel. No indeed! That dreadful storm had filled them with terror; its abrupt cessation was equally frightening for its unnatural suddenness; they could glimpse a God who was the sovereign controller of all created things, and see the fearful happenings of past days as the evidences of His displeasure and wrath; consequently they were filled with fear. Such a fear of God as this is of little spiritual value – only that by it, these men were rendered ‘without excuse’ (cf Romans 1:18-20). They had now been enlightened

as to God's judgment; demonstration had been given them that a failure to submit to His authority incurs His wrath and vengeance.

Perhaps some might think this to be a misinterpretation of the verse, for it has overlooked a detail in verse 16, where it is reported that the sailors offered sacrifices unto the Lord. Sacrifices were a symbol of worship and thanksgiving, and have long been practised among the heathen. They have innumerable forms of sacrifice and ritual by which they manifest their piety towards their gods. Had the gales blown themselves out after the terrified mariners had cried unto their gods, they would no doubt have held some similar kind of sacrifice and ceremony. But seeing it was such a dramatic intervention on the part of Israel's God, then they would sacrifice unto Him instead, for after all, it was obvious that He was a God to be feared.

"*And made vows*" (v. 16). This was a further expression of gratitude. They owed their very lives to this God of Israel, so they made their vows unto Him. To what degree any of this was spiritually genuine is impossible to discern. Many are the unfilled vows made by men unto God in time of crisis (cf Ecclesiastes 5:2, 4-5). But here the Spirit of God leaves the account of the mariners, telling no more of what became of them or their vessel. Rather is attention to be focussed now upon Jonah.

He has been thrown overboard in the midst of a storm, and therefore has drowned and is dead by this time. Only he is not. From the ship, the record of Scripture passes now into the deep, for much more is to be said concerning the son of Amittai. If that which has been seen thus far is amazing, that which follows is even more so! The Book of Jonah is a book of miracle. Though to the natural man the details may seem unbelievable, they are perfectly acceptable to a man of faith: "*Now the Lord had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights*" (v. 17). This verse, and the record of Jonah's survival inside a sea-creature for three days and three

nights has been the butt of ridicule by sceptics and unbelievers throughout the centuries. Even Martin Luther said: “The history of the prophet Jonah is almost incredible, sounding more strange than any poet’s fable; if it were not in the Bible, I should take it for a lie” (*Table Talk*, translated W. Hazlitt). This is the fact that makes all the difference: it **is** recorded in Scripture, which is **all** “*given by inspiration of God*” (cf 2 Timothy 3:16); “*the scripture cannot be broken*” (John 10:35); God’s Word is truth (cf John 17:17).

For this reason, much care should be taken to ascertain exactly what the Word of God says. It does not say that God ‘created’ a great fish – a special creature brought into existence for this specific purpose – no, the word here is ‘prepared’. In the Book of Jonah alone it appears four times: “*Now the Lord had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah*” (1:17); “*And the Lord God prepared a gourd*” (4:6); “*God prepared a worm*” (4:7); “*God prepared a vehement east wind*” (4:8). On each occasion, the Hebrew word means ‘to assign’, ‘to enrol’, ‘to commission’, or ‘to appoint’. God is the supreme ruler in earth and sky and sea. The inhabitants of each and every realm obey His direction and do His will. If God desires to call a ravenous bird from the east to execute His counsel (cf Isaiah 46:11), then He can. He does not have to create that bird, for it is already at His disposal; He has but to commission it. When the time came for the ten northern tribes to be scattered in accordance with God’s threatened judgments, He did not need to bring the Assyrians into existence at that moment – they were already prepared, and God assigned them to the task. So with regard to Jonah: God has His purpose in having His prophet cast overboard, and He had already enrolled one of His great fish (which He had brought into being long before) to be alongside the vessel; and it was appointed by God to swallow Jonah alive immediately he was plunged into the deep. This the fish did, and within seconds of Jonah being thrown over, he was in the fish’s belly.

Divine precision was behind all this. The mighty sovereign God had ordered the whole thing – the great storm, the mariners, the lots, the

great fish – all were prepared and disposed on stage to carry out the whole drama; each appointed to its own particular role. Men have argued and speculated over the generations as to what kind of fish this was – whether a whale, or a shark, or some other species. Ultimately, it makes no difference. It was a type of creature which God had created at the first. At the creation He brought into being ‘all creatures great and small’. *“And God created great whales, and every living creature that moveth, which the waters brought forth abundantly, after their kind ... and God saw that it was good”* (Genesis 1:21). In the earth there is the worm and the elephant; in the air the wren and the buzzard; in the water both minnows and great fish – and when God wanted one of these latter, He selected the right type; one with a big enough mouth, and a sufficiently large belly; and commissioned it to swim beside a boat bound for Tarshish; that at the precise moment, before Jonah had a chance to inhale the briny water, he was inside the fish. Fantastical tale? Incredible story? No – this is simply a record of one of the doings of Almighty God. Such a thing as this is as nothing to Him.

Well – what about Jonah? He might have been saved from drowning, but surely he will immediately suffocate in the fish’s belly? He did not. The same God who had put him in was also going to bring him out – alive. But first Jonah must stay there for three days and three nights. That period would not be prolonged, neither would it be shortened. Why such rigid timing as this? Because it had important prophetic significance. A great fact was being set forth by these events, indeed the greatest happening the world would ever know was being typified here: *“For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale's belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth”* (Matthew 12:40). (‘Whale’ in the English translation is derived from the Greek word meaning ‘huge fish’). Just as Almighty God brought Jonah into the whale’s belly for three days and three nights, so would the Lord Jesus be three days and nights entombed in death. These words were spoken by Christ Himself. He knew the precision with which everything had been ordered in the case of Jonah, for it was all intended to set Him forth.

Jonah did not suffocate in the belly of the fish; neither was our blessed Lord overcome in the belly of Hell. God did not leave His soul in Hell, neither did He suffer His Holy One to see corruption (cf Psalm 16:10; Acts 2:25-32). After the three days and three nights, Christ came forth the victorious conqueror over sin and death and hell. This truly ‘prophetic’ aspect of Jonah’s narrative is essential to register.

“*Then Jonah prayed unto the Lord his God out of the fish’s belly*” (Jonah 2:1). Writing to Timothy, the apostle Paul states: “*I will therefore that men pray every where*” (1 Timothy 2:8); the meaning being that there is no spot on earth, no situation that can arise, no circumstance of life however extreme, but that prayer should be made to God. A more abnormal situation than this cannot be imagined; what could be more objectionable than the belly of a great sea monster? Could a man possibly be more cut off or isolated? Yet Jonah was still linked with Heaven, and the belly of that great fish became a literal prayer-chamber, from which ascended supplications that God both heard and answered. The detail of the prayer will be reserved until the next article God willing; but in conclusion some lessons remain to be drawn out.

The first chapter of Jonah’s prophecy portrays a man who was well aware of that which was required of him, but he refused to do it. ‘Not Thy will, but mine be done’ was his maxim. In this he thought he had ‘liberty’ – but he was sadly mistaken. The Christian is not his own (cf 1 Corinthians 6:19) – he belongs to the Lord. He has been brought into the glorious liberty of the children of God (cf Romans 8:21), but this liberty does not give licence to the flesh, or to the world; indeed, it puts a restriction on these things. The Christian who, like Jonah, wilfully disregards this, will ultimately come into serious trouble. The sad experiences of other patriarch as David, and Abraham, bear this out. Oh let none lightly esteem their God by playing ‘fast-and-loose’ with His word and will for them – for He is able to bring swift retribution. Should this ever happen (and God forbid that it should) but if through folly and disobedience a Christian is brought into chastening and adversity, let the

vital link with Heaven never be forgotten. Confession and prayer must swiftly be made. Jonah had been wilful; he had knowingly and blatantly disobeyed God's will and word; and God dealt in a most severe manner with him – but how did he then react? Was Jonah heard to say 'well, yes, I was self-willed and disobedient, but I don't deserve this'? 'Here I am in this state, and will just have to live with it'? No – Jonah at this point came to his senses, and did the only thing which a wayward Christian can do, namely: to **pray** – and get back into vital communion with God without delay. May the Lord bless His word.

W. H. Molland (1920 – 2012)

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## THE DEATH OF JONAH

And thus died Jonah. To [the crew] at least, thus died Jonah – the death of a criminal pursued by justice; yet the death of a repentant and righteous man; in death triumphing over death; committing himself to God in singular meekness and faith; acknowledging the justice of his doom, and relying on Divine pardon and protection; committing his body to the sea and his soul to the God whom he feared – the God of heaven, and of the sea, and of the dry land. Thus died Jonah.

So their story reads. And – save for the inspiring Spirit of God continuing His revelations – so the story would end. To all this the mariners could bear witness; and here their witness-bearing, their story would end. And in this there is a precious lesson. In God's people and His prophets, their offence and their chastisement may be capable of being reported; the knowledge of these being common property. For their offence and their chastisement may be upon the surface; and upon the surface there may be nothing more. But the story may not end thus. There may be deliverance, forgiveness, marvels of grace, and prayer, and love, and joy, and communion with God, beneath the surface or



behind the scenes. Beneath the surface and behind the scenes, there may be such salvation as the world shall never know.

‘Thus died Jonah’ – so these mariners, on reaching land, and rehearsing the story would say, as they brought the marvellous narrative to a close. Literally beneath the surface, God carried on the marvellous story more marvellously still; bringing in His own unique, peculiar work of ‘life in the midst of death’; His ever-glorious work of justice satisfied by being executed, and grace reigning through righteousness unto life from the dead. “*Now the Lord had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah.*”

Oh, fear the Lord at **all** times. There is no want to them that fear Him (cf Psalm 34:9). Accept no deliverance at the expense of righteousness or truth or duty. There is a better deliverance for you. On, therefore. On, rather: fronting the righteousness; facing your duty; trusting your God. Is anything too hard for Him? And is not His faithfulness in the very heavens? Not His dark dispensations, but His clear and ever-bright word of covenant grace and truth, is the ground and warrant of your faith. And, therefore, though He slay you, you may trust in Him still.

On His face, a frown of deep displeasure for your offence! In His hand, a raging storm, relentless, waiting for you! Could your case well be worse? This much upon the surface. Thus, to sense and reason.

But to faith – what? Beneath the surface, while He holds the storm in His left hand, with His right hand ‘the Lord has prepared’ a deliverance. And behind the frown, in the depths of the Lord’s heart – what? Protecting, redeeming, life-giving love! “*Righteousness and peace have kissed each other*” (Psalm 85:10). Oh, all ye that fear the Lord, keep ye judgment at any cost: the Lord hath ‘prepared’ His salvation. “*Thus saith the Lord, Keep ye judgment, and do justice: for My salvation is near to come*”; “*I bring near My righteousness; and My salvation shall not tarry*” (Isaiah 56:1, 46:13).

Hugh Martin (1822 – 1885)

# LONG SHADOWS

## 3. Infant Sprinkling

### Introduction

Of all the activities within the ‘reformed’ church that could be described as a return to the weak and beggarly elements of Judaism (cf Galatians 4:9), there is perhaps none so blatant as that of Infant Sprinkling. For, finding not the least basis or example in the New Testament, the proponents of this practice have been obliged to fabricate support from elsewhere; and by means of resuscitating an Old Covenant, have subverted the Abrahamic rite of circumcision to this purpose. It seems an ironic and strangely self-defeating argument to use, when so great a portion of the New Testament Epistles is devoted to repudiating the notion of ‘covenant succession’ within the Christian church, and denouncing the imposition of physical rites upon ‘the flesh, made by hands’; and when any suggestion of baptism on the grounds of family descent is expressly forbidden in the Word of God, at the inception of the ordinance. This article will examine these themes in more detail.

### Terminology

The practice under examination is commonly referred to as ‘paedobaptism’ or ‘infant baptism’ – but we cannot, in all good conscience, dignify the act of splashing water on a child’s brow with such a name. And this for two principal reasons:

(1.) The English word ‘baptism’ is transliterated almost directly from the Greek verb *baptizo*. Whilst many self-interested persons have sought to cast a veil of obscurity or impose other meanings on this word, its original definition is beyond any shadow of doubt, in both Biblical and secular Greek literature of the same era. It means to dip, plunge, immerse, or inundate. The fact that the same word is occasionally used in connection with washing, or in a metaphorical sense, in no way contradicts or alters its fundamental meaning – but rather confirms it. When the Saviour said, concerning His imminent sufferings: “*I have a*

*baptism to be baptized with; and how am I straitened till it be accomplished!”* (Luke 12:50), would anyone dare to suggest He endured a mere sprinkling of affliction? No indeed – for as He cries from the prophetic Psalm: “*Save Me, O God; for the waters are come in unto My soul . . . I am come into deep waters, where the floods overflow Me*” (Psalm 69:1-2). Furthermore, baptism only provides its important typology of burial with Christ (Romans 6:4) by virtue of the fact that it always means immersion.

(2.) The ritualistic anointing of babies with water as practiced by the Papist, Anglican or Presbyterian, is so utterly removed from the Christian ordinance described in God’s Word, that to use the same name for both procedures is inexplicable and misleading; for they are two entirely different things. Some of the most ardent advocates of infant sprinkling have had to admit that no trace of it can be found anywhere in the New Testament; while other of its less-principled supporters have resorted to supposition, inference and a general wresting of the Scriptures; but all to no avail. No firm evidence for the existence of infant sprinkling in the church can be found until about the third century B.C., (by which time a corrupt and Romanising influence was already infiltrating Christendom). And it is only upon this dubious foundation – of religious tradition, ecclesiastical authorities, the writings of a few so-called ‘church fathers’, and **not** the Bible – that the practice is based. The very same foundation, it should be noted, upon which stand all the aberrations and false doctrines of Popery.

### **Believer’s Baptism**

A forged document, or fake banknote, may be more readily identified if there is a true or genuine copy at hand to make comparison. Likewise, the unreality of ‘paedobaptism’, and its unworthiness of the name become all the more apparent when the Biblical ordinance is first considered. Whilst a full exposition is beyond the scope of this article, let these points be registered:

Firstly, its **Primacy**. It is the habit of ‘mainstream’, ecumenical Christians, desperate to avoid controversy and maintain peace at any cost, to relegate many distinguishing points of doctrine to the status of ‘secondary’ or ‘non-essential’ issues. Baptism is a frequent victim of this treatment. Those who so disparage this ordinance of God, ‘do err, not knowing the Scriptures’. The Gospel age began with baptism (cf Mark 1:1, 4-5). Four hundred years of judicial silence from the heavens were broken when, “*the word of God came unto John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness. And he came into all the country about Jordan, **preaching the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins***” (Luke 3:2-3). All the Gospel writers afford it this precedence. The preaching of this message, and then immersing in the waters of Jordan those who repented in response to it, was a process so striking that vast crowds of curious persons went out to witness, and perhaps partake, of this phenomenon. But John (soon named ‘the Baptist’ in consequence of this remarkable procedure) was resolute, and would admit none save those who manifested the fruits of repentance. Within a short while, the Lord Jesus also, both submitted Himself to this ordinance, and began (through His disciples) to administer it. The first great sermon of the New Testament age would end with this charge: “**Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ**” (Acts 2:38). The convert of Ethiopia, by the end of Philip’s discourse, knew immediately what he must do (Acts 8:36-38). Believer’s Baptism is no secondary issue – it is at the forefront; the defining feature of the Christian church.

Secondly, its **Originality**. Believer’s Baptism is not derivative. When it first began to be preached and practised, it was entirely novel and unprecedented. The Jewish religious hierarchy were so astounded by its introduction, that they concluded only the Messiah, or a great Prophet, could possibly have the authority or genius for its inception (cf John 1:25). The modern-day detractors of Baptism like to claim that it was merely an adaption of the Levitical priests’ ablutions; that it plagiarised the ceremonial washing of Jewish proselytes; or that it was a successor to the rite of circumcision. Evidently the Jews themselves – Pharisees,

scribes and doctors of the Law alike – thought no such thing. They had no explanation for it, and made no connection whatsoever with any of the former rituals of Judaism.

They were unable to do so by reason of (thirdly) the **Divinity** of Baptism. The Jews were in a constant state of denial concerning the Deity of the Lord Jesus and His heavenly origin, and constantly questioned and scorned it. Thus, “*when He was come into the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came unto Him as He was teaching, and said, By what authority dost Thou these things? and who gave Thee this authority? And Jesus answered and said unto them, I also will ask you one thing, which if ye tell Me, I in like wise will tell you by what authority I do these things. The baptism of John, whence was it? from heaven, or of men?*” (Matthew 21:23-25). The Lord’s question was in fact the answer. If His interrogators could solve one query, they would know both. The ordinance which John practised came down from God, to no less a degree than Christ Himself descended to earth from heaven. They are equally of divine origin. Believer’s Baptism is not from the Jews, or Abraham, or any man; it is not the product of human invention, nor from this world: it is of the Father. Says John: “**He** ... *sent me to baptize with water*” (John 1:33).

Fourth, its **Singularity** – in the sense of both uniqueness, and unity. In one of the earliest ‘affirmations of faith’, the Apostle describes the true church in these terms: “*There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, **one baptism**, one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all*” (Ephesians 4:4-6). There is no diversity or disparity in Baptism. Whether administered by John, or the Lord, or His disciples, Peter, Philip, or Paul; it was always and only performed in one way, to one category of persons, on one set of criteria, for one reason. Namely: by immersion, of competent individuals, upon evidence of faith and repentance – because that is what God ordained. For a Christian to argue for the validity of other forms of baptism, for other classes of people, on

the basis of different qualifications, is as preposterous as suggesting the espousal of other faiths, other lords, or other gods. Infant sprinkling claims to be ‘another baptism’, “*which is not another; but there be some that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ*” (Galatians 1:7).

### **Covenantal Misappropriation**

The use of Old Testament analogies as a defence of infant sprinkling seems to have come into vogue in the mid- to late-third century, some 50 or 100 years after the practice had crept into the Christian church. The argument is broadly as follows:

- The blessings promised to Abraham were based upon a covenant.
- The work of salvation is founded upon a covenant.
- The rite of circumcision was a sign of the Abrahamic covenant, applied to all those who featured in it.
- The ordinance of baptism is a sign of the new covenant, to be received by all those who feature in it.

(Thus far, all these statements are individually true. The breakdown in logic and credibility comes with the concluding inference...)

- Since the rite of circumcision was applied to all of Abraham’s children, then the ordinance of baptism is to be applied to all of a Christian’s children.

This tenuous line of reasoning fails to register certain fundamental and inescapable facts. (1.) The Abrahamic Covenant is **not** the New Covenant. This is why they are referred to by different names. The promises made by God to Abraham may have been illustrative, typical, instructive and portentous of that Eternal Covenant of grace upon which salvation is grounded – but they are not the same thing. There are (mercifully) great differences between them. It is erroneous to conflate the two together, or presume that the ‘rules’ of one system are transferrable to another. The New Covenant is immeasurably superior to the Abrahamic (as the Hebrew and Galatian epistles repeatedly declare).

(2.) The Abrahamic Covenant is over. The Lord once made promises to Abraham of earthly good (cf Genesis 13:14-17) for his natural descendants (cf Genesis 17:7-9) on the basis of practical obedience (cf Genesis 17:1, 18:19). Neither the patriarch or his progeny were able to meet the terms, and so the blessings were forfeited. There is no innumerable multitude of descendants, the 'promised land' is now a war-torn strip of desert, and the biological line of Abraham is dissipated among the nations of the world. For that covenant belonged to those methods of operation with which God 'found fault', and 'took them away' (cf Hebrews 8:7-8; 10:9). Any attempt to re-open a door that God has closed (cf Genesis 3:24) or rebuild what God has removed (cf Joshua 6:26) is both dangerous and doomed. Who would be so foolish as to suggest its re-institution?

(3.) The 'children' are fundamentally different. The promises made by God to Abraham were for him and his successors – his biological children – and it was therefore appropriate for them to receive the ritual mark of the covenant at birth. The greater the rate of reproduction amongst Abraham's descendants, the more beneficiaries of that covenant there were. But what is the equivalent process in the spiritual economy of the New Covenant? Are the biological children of Christians themselves true Christians by default? Certainly not, unless every one of the 'doctrines of grace' is to be denied. Manifestly not, or else the church on earth should be constantly growing, at a rate proportional to the world's human population. Every Christian parent needs to recognise that their own *"flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God"*; they *"must be born again"* (1 Corinthians 15:50, John 3:7). How, then, are believing 'children' generated? The answer is clear: *"as many as received Him, to them gave He power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on His name: which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God"* (John 1:12-13); *"as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God"* (Romans 8:14). New covenant children come into existence only by virtue of new birth (evidenced by being led by the Spirit unto faith in God), and only then may receive the

sign of the covenant, at that point. This is precisely the order of events and criteria which apply to Believer's Baptism!

(4.) Associating baptism with the Abrahamic covenant is expressly forbidden in Scripture. There must have been a strangely perverse mindset amongst the early promoters of infant sprinkling, that led them to use an argument in its defence that was specifically prohibited in the Gospel record. When John first began to teach and conduct Believer's Baptism, great numbers of people desired a part in it; not least the Jewish ruling classes, who believed themselves to have a monopoly on truth, and a born right to any religious exercises or benefits. *"But when he [John] saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees come to his baptism, he said unto them, O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance: and think not to say within yourselves, 'we have Abraham to our father': for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham"* (Matthew 3:7-9). From the very outset of baptism, there were those who wrongly imagined that they had a right by birth, or through human lineage, to receive it. They were roundly condemned for their presumption. 'O generation of vipers!' retorts John. This was not a cheap insult, but a statement of spiritual truth – levelled (remember) at Jews, the biological descendants of Abraham.

Irrespective of race or parentage, all humanity has, since the Fall, been born into the same family; one which owes its loyalty and hence its condition to Satan, and his gross deception. As such, it can dreadfully though truthfully be stated that its progenitor is the Devil (cf John 8:44); the poison of asps is on every tongue (cf Romans 3:13); all are 'the seed of the Serpent' (cf Genesis 3:15); and a 'generation of vipers' indeed. The situation is an inescapable inheritance from birth (Psalm 51:5), for *"that which is born of the flesh is flesh"* (John 3:6). And thus it would remain for every one, but for the intervention of Divine grace, and the convicting, convincing call of the Holy Spirit – by which impossibly dead and lifeless 'stones' are hewn out, and transformed to life and sonship.



Baptism cannot, and must not, be administered to any who still belong to the Viper's generation; who have not received the Spirit's call to flee to Christ; who have not brought forth any fruits of repentance; who have not yet been converted by God's grace and power into 'living stones' (cf 1 Peter 2:5). This, the Word of God declares.

### **Uncomfortable Associations**

Those who wish to make the practice of circumcision to be the justification and pattern for infant sprinkling should be more honest about its implications. It is easy to claim "all Abraham's children received the rite of circumcision" – but also untrue. At least fifty percent never did. The Old Testament ordinance was by definition for male children only, and no equivalent was ever prescribed for women. Similarly, the rules of inheritance for the Abrahamic Covenant can be described as 'male preference primogeniture'. Had any daughters of the patriarchs married (or their wives remarried) outside of Abraham's family, they could not take or convey covenantal privileges with them.

The claim made for "all Abraham's children" is also false in two other details. It is too limiting. The ritual was not only imposed upon his biological male children, but also on all 'born in his house', or 'bought with his money' (cf Genesis 17:10-14), and could even be extended to strangers sojourning temporarily amongst the Jews (cf Exodus 12:48). Neither then, was it only for children. It could be conducted for males of any age, depending upon their circumstances. If the rite had been omitted or overlooked through ignorance, neglect or sin, it could be performed at any time of life, with ages from 13 to 99 on record (cf Genesis 17:24-25, see also Joshua 5:1-9).

If circumcision is the authority for ritual sprinkling in the church, and the only pattern for it in Scripture, then the implications are these: it cannot be permitted for women in any circumstances; it can only be applied to males whose father (not mother) qualifies them. Equally, if a qualifying man were to have live-in employees, domestic staff, servants (in an earlier time – slaves), long-term house guests, or other

dependants, then all the males among these could also be sprinkled. Neither ought it to be limited to babes and infants – a man of any age, irrespective of his conduct or disposition, has a right to sprinkling on the basis of his father’s (or employer’s, or host’s, or master’s) faith. Refusing to acknowledge the chaotic consequences of their chosen Old Testament model, churches that pursue this false doctrine have been obliged to invent countless additional rules, the diversity of which belies their man-made origins. They must set arbitrary age limits; determine whether one, both or either parent’s faith legitimises their child; choose what forms of Christianity the parent must have followed to qualify; decide how to deal with adopted or fostered children; establish schemes for managing divorce, remarriage, fornication, adultery, and modern ‘blended families’. What is the ‘age of innocence’? What is the ‘age of responsibility’? What if a child refuses sprinkling for themselves? What if a parent afterward denies their own faith? Why permit infants to receive ‘baptism’, but not the other ordinances and privileges of church membership? To these questions there are no right answers – because infant sprinkling is a fundamentally wrong practice.

### **Recreating the Past**

When the Gospel began to be preached by Christ and His apostles, they encountered a particular form of opposition from the Jews. There were, amongst people of that ethnicity and religion, many who objected to all suggestions of sin and unworthiness, and equally resented the call to repentance and faith; taking instead pride and confidence in their pedigree, and the accompanying rite of circumcision (cf Matthew 3:9, Luke 18:10-14, John 8:33-40). This effectively rendered them impervious to the truth. The imposition of infant sprinkling and covenant succession theology in the churches has re-created precisely the same scenario. Countless multitudes to the present day have sat in church pews, scornful of ‘unchurched’ persons without, boasting in the name of Christian, insensible to the preached word, all because of water dabbed on their heads in infancy, and the entry of their name in a ledger. In this state they live, in this state they die, and in this state they languish

in Hell, cursing those who bred in them such misplaced confidence and false hope. If infant sprinkling is the successor to circumcision, then its recipients are no better off than those unbelieving Jews who had a form of godliness, devoid of power; whose circumcision no more saved them than it saved Ishmael or Esau; and whose moral and ecclesiastical advantages served only to exacerbate their crime of unbelief. Let us make the paedobaptist's own substitution: "*Behold . . . if ye be [sprinkled], Christ shall profit you nothing . . . Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by [this] law*" (Galatians 5:2, 4). 'In Christ Jesus, [sprinkling] availeth nothing, but a new creature' (cf Galatians 6:15). Similarly, the advocates of this 'alternative circumcision' in the New Testament should recognise themselves as the heirs of 'the concision' that so troubled the early church (cf Philippians 3:2), and as the objects of all the censure of the Apostles: "*Forasmuch as we have heard, that certain . . . have troubled you with words, subverting your souls, saying, Ye must be [sprinkled] . . . to whom we gave no such commandment*" (Acts 15:24).

There is great sin in adding unto, or taking away from, the Word of God (cf Revelation 22:18-19). Tragically, the majority of Christian denominations which have adopted the error of infant sprinkling, have not only added this to their creed, but have simultaneously eradicated Believer's Baptism. This practice they exclude entirely, and denounce it as 'double baptism', or 'anabaptism'. They deny their adherents that precious ordinance given by God to John, exemplified by Christ, received and administered by His disciples, observed with much joy and blessing by all the members of the early New Testament church. In the main, infant sprinklers shut up the waters of baptism against men; 'for they neither go in themselves; neither suffer them that are entering to go in' (cf Matthew 23:13). The clear instruction and example of Christ and Scripture is denied; whilst a practice with no more support than mangled verses and dubious traditions is installed: "*teaching for doctrines the commandments of men . . . full well ye reject the commandment of God, that ye may keep your own tradition . . . making the word of God of none effect through your tradition, which ye have delivered*" (Mark 7:7, 9, 13).

## Old Errors, New Dangers

Throughout most of church history, the faithful upholders of Believer's Baptism have understood the vital necessity of that ordinance, and the folly of unbiblical alternatives – the contrast being starkly emphasised by persecution (even unto death) of Baptists in many eras, almost to modern times. But the clear distinction between truth and error is being dangerously eroded today – in some cases by neglect, and in others, by design. The modern trend towards ecumenism has afflicted many once-sound baptistic congregations. Desperate for a broader fraternity in this 'day of small things', the criteria for fellowship have been reduced to a minimum: anything described as 'reformed', or 'conservative', or adhering to the Authorised Version of Scripture is embraced; and if this liaison must come at the cost of Believer's Baptism, it is a price that many so-called Baptists seem willing to pay. But the loss is incalculable.

Another worrying trend is the introduction of covenant succession theology by stealth. The author has been horrified to learn recently of chapels that once rejoiced in the name of 'Baptist', inventing new rituals for infants born into their fellowships, which shamelessly adopt the liturgy of Anglicanism or Presbyterianism for their purpose – even down to calls and responses, or vows being made. Whether these ceremonies are described as 'dedications', or 'blessings' makes no difference: they are 'dry christenings', infant sprinkling in all but name, wanting only a font to complete the scene.

This focus upon natural-born children and earthly progeny is entirely misplaced. The church is not Jewry, seeking to increase its population; it is not an organ of the state acting as a registrar of births; it is not a religious social club offering family memberships; it is not an inheritance to be bequeathed upon descendants. It is the New Testament church of God, founded upon the New Covenant, its members brought in by a new and living way, through new birth alone. To this they joyfully give testimony, by the New Testament ordinance of Believer's Baptism.

R. J. Steward

## EDITORIAL

What is the spiritual condition of a Christian's child at birth? The answer given to this question will vary, according to the creed or confession to which a person subscribes. But what are the options? The Word of God divides all humanity into two categories only, described in various contrasting terms: light and darkness; believers and unbelievers; Christ's or Belial's; the Temple of God or the Temple of idols (cf 2 Corinthians 6:14-16); day and night (cf 1 Thessalonians 5:5); wheat and tares (cf Matthew 13:30); sheep and goats (cf Matthew 25:32-33), amongst others. These are all extreme opposites, mutually exclusive, and all-encompassing.

The *Westminster Directory for Public Worship* makes some audacious claims, stating that a child's 'baptism' is symbolic of "ingrafting into Christ, and of our union with Him, of remission of sins, regeneration, adoption, and life eternal", justifying the administration of sprinkling on the basis that: "**they are Christians**, and federally holy before baptism, and therefore are they baptized", "distinguished from the world", and "united with believers". This is of course, a travesty of the 'doctrines of grace'. Depravity is no longer total, but mitigated or absent in their case; Election is no longer unconditional, but inherited; Redemption is not particular to an individual, but general to a family; the Spirit's calling – quite apart from being 'irresistible' – is not even required; while the godless masses of the world who have Christian forebears in their genealogies, deny 'perseverance', and would appear to have lost the salvation that once was theirs by right.

Some denominations, conscious of the contradictions described above, and the doctrinal inconsistency of the position, have attempted to moderate it by creating a new, third category for believers' children. This is variously described as an 'outer covenant', or 'the visible church', or 'chapel people'. They are reckoned to be neither as lost as the world, nor as saved as their parents; neither children of the day nor of the night,

but in an ambiguous twilight region. This is completely alien to Scripture, and rather than solving the problem, creates many more, and a state of utter confusion – for the church, for the world, and for the poor children and young people, supposedly somewhere in the middle.

What is the truth of the matter? The answer is clear. They are “*by nature the children of wrath, even as others*” (Ephesians 2:3). Everyone ever born is primarily a descendant of Adam the first – and therefore an outright sinner – born in sin, shapen in iniquity. And this principle is essential to understand, if we are to do justice to God, and magnify His grace. ‘God hath concluded all in unbelief, that He might have mercy upon all’ (cf Romans 11:32); “*But the scripture hath concluded all under sin, that the promise by faith of Jesus Christ might be given to them that believe*” (Galatians 3:22). No-one was ever saved on the basis of their own personal merits; much less on the basis of their parents’ merits; but solely on Christ’s merits. Anything that presumes to work alongside the grace of God, or in addition to the grace of God, is an offence to the grace of God. Let the principle of ‘*sola gratia*’ mean what it actually says: **Grace Alone** – not birthright, not covenant succession, not ecclesiastical tradition, not the ordinances of men. Let the true Christian’s faith be fixed only upon Christ – not in their parents’ professions, not in church confessions, not in sprinkling received in infancy – but in **Christ alone**. Then it will be a faith worth the name; then they may ‘assure their hearts before Him’

## **ANNUAL BIBLE CONVENTION**

**Saturday 1<sup>st</sup> June 2024 D.V.**

Services 3.00 pm & 5.30 pm Tea served 4.30 pm

*Preacher:* Dr Ian Sadler  
(Free Grace Evangelistic Association)

*a cordial invitation is extended to all*