



This devotion is an excerpt from Bishop J.C. Ryle's work entitled, **Knots Untied**. It is the third in a series of commentary on Baptism.

ARTICLE XVII, Of Baptism, (the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion)

Baptism is not only a sign of profession, and mark of difference, whereby Christian men are discerned from others that be not christened, but it is also a sign of Regeneration or New-Birth, whereby, as by an instrument, they that receive Baptism rightly are grafted into the Church; the promises of the forgiveness of sin, and of our adoption to be the sons of God by the Holy Ghost, are visibly signed and sealed; Faith is confirmed, and Grace increased by virtue of prayer unto God. The Baptism of young Children is in any wise to be retained in the Church, as most agreeable with the institution of Christ.

Part III. Let us next consider *the subjects of baptism. To whom ought baptism to be administered?*

It is impossible to handle this branch of the question without coming into direct collision with the opinions of others. But I hope it is possible to handle it in a kindly and temperate spirit. At any rate it is no use to avoid discussion for fear of offending Baptists. Disputed points in theology are never likely to be settled unless men on both sides will say out plainly what they think, and give their reasons for their opinions. To avoid the subject, because it is a controversial one, is neither honest nor wise. A clergyman has no right to complain that his parishioners become Baptists, if he never instructs them about infant baptism.

I begin by laying it down as a point almost undisputed, that all grown-up converts at missionary stations among the heathen ought to be baptized. As soon as they embrace the Gospel and make a credible profession of repentance and faith in Christ, they ought

at once to receive baptism. This is the doctrine and practice of Episcopal, Presbyterian, Wesleyan, and Independent missionaries, just as much as it is the doctrine of Baptists. Let there be no mistake on this point. To talk, as some Baptists do, of “believer’s baptism,” as if it was a kind of baptism peculiar to their own body, is simply nonsense! Believer’s baptism is known and practised in every successful Protestant mission throughout the world.

But I now go a step further. I lay it down as a Christian truth that the children of all professing Christians have a right to baptism, if their parents require it, as well as their parents. Of course the children of professed unbelievers and heathen have no title to baptism, so long as they are under the charge of their parents. But the children of professing Christians are in an entirely different position. If their fathers and mothers offer them to be baptized, the Church ought to receive them in baptism, and has no right to refuse them.

It is precisely at this point that the grave division of opinion exists between the body of Christians called Baptists and the greater part of Christians throughout the world. The Baptist asserts that no one ought to be baptized who does not make a personal profession of repentance and faith, and that as children cannot do this they ought not to be baptized. I think that this assertion is not borne out by Scripture, and I shall proceed to give the reasons why I think so. I believe it can be shown that the children of professing Christians have a right to baptism, and that it is a complete mistake not to baptize them.

Let me remind the reader at the outset, that the question under consideration is not the Baptismal Service of the Church of England. Whether that service is right or wrong,—whether it is useful to have godfathers and godmothers,—are not the points in dispute. It is mere waste of time to say anything about them.⁴ The question before us is simply whether infant baptism is right in *principle*. That it is right is held by Presbyterians, Independents, and Methodists, who use no Prayer-book, just as stoutly as it is by Churchmen. To the consideration of this one question I shall strictly confine myself. There is not the slightest necessary connection between the Liturgy and infant baptism. I heartily wish that some people would remember this. To insist on dragging in the Liturgy, and mixing it up with the abstract question of infant baptism, is not a sign of good logic, fairness, or common sense.

Let me clear the way, furthermore, by observing that I will not be drawn away from the real point at issue by the ludicrous descriptions which Baptists often give of the *abuse of infant baptism*. No doubt it is easy for popular writers and preachers among the Baptists, to draw a vivid picture of an ignorant, prayerless couple of peasants, bringing an unconscious infant to be sprinkled at the font by a careless sporting parson! It is easy to finish off the picture by saying, “What good can infant baptism do?” Such pictures are very amusing, perhaps, but they are no argument against the *principle* of infant baptism. The abuse of a thing is no proof that it ought to be disused and is wrong. Moreover, those who live in glass-houses had better not throw stones. Strange pictures might be drawn of what happens sometimes in chapels at adult baptisms! But I forbear. I want the reader to look not at pictures but at Scriptural principles.

Let me now supply a few simple reasons why I hold, in common with all Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Methodists, and Independents throughout the world, that infant baptism is a right thing, and that in denying baptism to children the Baptists are mistaken. The reasons are as follows.

(a) Children were *admitted into the Old Testament Church by a formal ordinance*, from the time of Abraham downwards. That ordinance was circumcision. It was an ordinance which God Himself appointed, and the neglect of which was denounced as a great sin. It was an ordinance about which the highest language is used in the New Testament. St. Paul calls it “a seal of the righteousness of faith.” (Rom. ii. 4.) Now, if children were considered to be capable of admission into the Church by an ordinance in the Old Testament, it is difficult to see why they cannot be admitted in the New. The general tendency of the Gospel is to increase men’s spiritual privileges and not to diminish them. Nothing, I believe, would astonish a Jewish convert so much as to tell him his children could *not* be baptized! “If they are fit to receive circumcision,” he would reply, “why are they not fit to receive baptism?” And my own firm conviction has long been that no Baptist could give him an answer. In fact I never heard of a converted Jew becoming a Baptist, and I never saw an argument against infant baptism that might not have been equally directed against infant circumcision. No man, I suppose, in his sober senses, would presume to say that infant circumcision was wrong.

(b) The baptism of children is *nowhere forbidden in the New Testament*. There is not a single text, from Matthew to Revelation, which either directly or indirectly hints that infants should *not* be baptized. Some, perhaps, may see little in this silence. To my mind it is a silence full of meaning and instruction.

The first Christians, be it remembered, were many of them by birth Jews. They had been accustomed in the Jewish Church, before their conversion, to have their children admitted into church-membership by a solemn ordinance, as a matter of course. Without a distinct prohibition from our Lord Jesus Christ, they would naturally go on with the same system of proceeding, and bring their children to be baptized. But *we find no such prohibition!* That absence of a prohibition, to my mind, speaks volumes. It satisfies me that no change was intended by Christ about children. If He had intended a change He would have said something to teach it. But He says not a word! That very silence is, to my mind, a most powerful and convincing argument. As God commanded Old Testament children to be circumcised, so God intends New Testament children to be baptized.

(c) The *baptism of households* is specially mentioned in the New Testament. We read in the Acts that Lydia was baptized “and her household,” and that the jailer of Philippi “was baptized: he and all his.” (Acts xvi. 15, 33.) We read in the Epistle to the Corinthians that St. Paul baptized “the household of Stephanas.” (1 Cor. i. 16.) Now what meaning would any one attach to these expressions, if he had no theory to maintain, and could view them dispassionately? Would he not explain the “household” to include young as well as old, children as well as grown-up people? Who doubts when he reads the words of Joseph in Genesis,—*take food for the famine of your households* (Gen. xlii. 33);—or, *take your father and your households and come unto me* (Gen. xlv. 18), that children are included? Who can possibly deny that when God said to Noah, *Come thou and all thy house into the ark*, He meant Noah’s sons? (Gen. vii. 1) For my own part I cannot see how these questions can be answered without establishing the principle of infant baptism. Admitting most fully that it is not directly said that St. Paul baptized little children, it seems to my mind the highest probability that the “households” he baptized comprised children as well as grown-up people.

(d) The *behaviour of our Lord Jesus Christ to little children*, as recorded in the Gospels, is very peculiar and full of meaning. The well-known passage in St. Mark is an instance of what I mean. *They brought young children⁵ to Him, that He should touch them: and His disciples rebuked those that brought them. But when Jesus saw it, He was much displeased, and said unto*

them, Suffer the little children to come unto Me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God. Verily I say unto you, Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, he shall not enter therein. And He took them up in His arms, put His hands upon them, and blessed them. (Mark x. 13-16)

Now I do not pretend for a moment to say that this passage is a *direct* proof of infant baptism. It is nothing of the kind. But I do say that it supplies a curious answer to some of the arguments in common use among those who object to infant baptism. That infants are *capable* of receiving some benefit from our Lord, that the conduct of those who would have kept them from Him was *wrong* in our Lord's eyes, that He was ready and willing to bless them, even when they were *too young to understand* what He said or did,—all these things stand out as clearly as if written with a sunbeam! A direct argument in favour of infant baptism the passage certainly is not. But a stronger indirect testimony it seems to me impossible to conceive.

I might easily add to these arguments. I might strengthen the position I have taken up by several considerations which seem to me to deserve very serious attention.

I might show, from the writings of old Dr. Lightfoot, that the baptism of little children was a practice with which the Jews were perfectly familiar. When proselytes were received into the Jewish Church by baptism, before our Lord Jesus Christ came, their infants were received, and baptized with them, as a matter of course.

I might show that infant baptism was uniformly practised by all the early Christians. Every Christian writer of any repute during the first 1500 years after Christ, with the single exception of perhaps Tertullian, speaks of infant baptism as a custom which the Church has always maintained.

I might show that the vast majority of eminent Christians from the period of the Protestant Reformation down to the present day, have maintained the rights of infants to be baptized. Luther, Calvin, Melancthon, and all the Continental Reformers,—Cranmer, Ridley, Latimer, and all the English Reformers,—the great body of all the English Puritans,—the whole of the Episcopal, Presbyterian, Independent, and Methodist Churches of the present day,—are all of one mind on this point. They all hold infant baptism!

But I will not weary the reader by going over this ground. I will proceed to notice two arguments which are commonly used against infant baptism, and are thought by some to be unanswerable. Whether they really are so I will leave the reader to judge.

(1) The first favourite argument against infant baptism is the entire absence of any direct text or precept in its favour in the New Testament. "Show me a plain text," says many a Baptist, "commanding me to baptize little children. Without a plain text the thing ought not to be done."

I reply, for one thing, that the absence of any text about infant baptism is, to my mind, one of the strongest evidences in its favour. That infants were formally admitted into the Church by an outward ordinance, for 1800 years before Christ came, is a fact that cannot be denied. Now, if he had meant to change the practice, and exclude infants from baptism, I should expect to find some plain text about it. But I find none, and therefore I conclude that there was to be no alteration and no change. The very *absence* of any direct command, on which the Baptists lay such stress, is, in reality, one of the strongest arguments against them! No change and therefore no text!

But I reply, for another thing, that the absence of some plain text or command is not a sufficient argument against infant baptism. There are not a few things which can be proved and inferred from Scripture, though they are not plainly and directly taught. Let the Baptist show us a single plain text which directly warrants the admission of women to the Lord's Supper.—Let him show us one which directly teaches the keeping of the Sabbath on the first day of the week instead of the seventh.—Let him show us one which directly forbids gambling. Any well-instructed Baptist knows that it cannot be done. But surely, if this is the case, there is an end of this famous argument against infant baptism! It falls to the ground.

(2) The second favourite argument against infant baptism is the inability of infants to repent and believe. "What can be more monstrous," says many a Baptist, "than to administer an ordinance to an unconscious babe? It cannot possibly know anything of repentance and faith, and therefore it ought not to be baptized. The Scripture says, *He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved*' and, *Repent, and be baptized* (Mark xvi. 16; Acts ii. 38.)

In reply to this argument, I ask to be shown a single text which says that *nobody* ought to be baptized until he repents and believes. I shall ask in vain. The texts just quoted prove conclusively that grown-up people who repent and believe when missionaries preach the Gospel to them, ought at once to be baptized. But they do not prove that their children ought not to be baptized together with them, even though they are too young to believe. I find St. Paul baptized *the household of Stephanas* (1 Cor. i. 16); but I do not find a word about their believing at the time of their baptism. The truth is that the often-quoted texts, *He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved*,—and *Repent ye, and be baptized*, will never carry the weight that Baptists lay upon them. To assert that they forbid any one to be baptized *unless* he repents and believes, is to put a meaning on the words which they were never meant to bear. They leave the whole question of infants entirely out of sight. The text "nobody shall be baptized except he repents and believes," would no doubt have been a very conclusive one. But such a text cannot be found!

After all, will any one tell us that an intelligent profession of repentance and faith is absolutely necessary to salvation? Would even the most rigid Baptist say that because infants cannot believe, all infants must be damned? Yet our Lord said plainly, *He that believeth not shall be damned*. (Mark xvi. 16)—Will any man pretend to say that infants cannot receive grace and the Holy Ghost? John the Baptist, we know, was filled with the Holy Ghost from his mother's womb. (Luke i. 15)—Will anyone dare to tell us that infants cannot be elect,—cannot be in the covenant,—cannot be members of Christ,—cannot be children of God,—cannot have new hearts,—cannot be born again,—cannot go to heaven when they die?—These are solemn and serious questions. I cannot believe that any well-informed Baptist would give them any but one answer. Yet surely those who may be members of the glorious Church above, may be admitted to the Church below! Those who are washed with the blood of Christ, may surely be washed with the water of baptism! Those who can be capable of being baptized with the Holy Ghost, may surely be baptized with water! Let these things be calmly weighed. I have seen many arguments against infant baptism, which, traced to their logical conclusion, are arguments against infant salvation, and condemn all infants to eternal ruin!

I leave this part of my subject here. I am almost ashamed of having said so much about it. But the times in which we live are my plea and justification. I do not write so much to convince Baptists, as to establish and confirm Churchmen. I have often been surprised to see how ignorant some Churchmen are of the grounds on which infant baptism may be defended. If I have done anything to show Churchmen the strength of their own position, I feel that I shall not have written in vain.