

The Link between ‘A Gospel Church’ and Mixed Churches

By ‘mixed churches’, I mean those churches which comprise a mixture of the regenerate and unregenerate.

The heading to this chapter, I have to confess, is simplistic. Mixed churches can easily arise when there is no such ‘link’ as I have specified, when theology – indeed, Scripture – has virtually gone out of the window; that is to say, if churches are not concerned with theology (or are not over-particular about it), then mixed churches can – like Topsy – simply grow.¹ I have very little to say about such churches – except to dismiss them as utterly at variance with the *ekklēsia*, as recorded in Scripture.

What follows is based on the assumption that we are talking about churches which do take theology seriously – more precisely, take Scripture seriously – whether they practice believer’s baptism or infant baptism. The fact is, however, it is infant baptisers who have their theology in this area worked out to a very high degree, and their mixed churches follow their theology as inevitably as night follows day. So, as I say, although it is a somewhat simplistic approach, most of what I now say is in respect of infant-baptiser churches, but with a definite application to Baptist churches where there is a mixed membership.

Infant baptisers make much of the notion of ‘visible churches’. They are not alone; sadly, many Baptists use the phrase. In this way a class of Christians is invented – ‘visible’ Christians; that is, professed Christians, or those who claim to be Christians; nominal Christians, or those who

¹ In Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, a small Afro-American girl is asked if she knew who made her. ‘I ’spect I grow’d. Don’t think nobody never made me’, was her reply.

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are not openly non-Christian. Churches composed of this sort of people are visible churches.²

It goes without saying that all believers must be open (or visible) in their testimony: 'Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven' (Matt. 5:16) is Christ's standing charge to his people. There is no quarrel over that. But the concept of visible churches is not dealing with this command of Christ. Oh no! It is an attempt or invention to cope with the utter disaster of Constantinian and Augustinian practice in general, and of infant baptism in particular.³ Alas, in these days many churches are acting on those very principles – even among those churches which ought to understand the folly and mistake of the concept of visible churches. Instead of insisting on clear evidences of regeneration before baptism and church membership, a mere nominal profession is considered enough. It is a dreadful mistake. It is worse; it is a contradiction of Scripture. And it will bring havoc in its wake. Indeed it is already doing so.⁴

² But even this does not work. See Appendix 2.

³ Some, at least, of the Reformed, are not apologetic about this; they see it as biblical: 'Baptism is the symbolic linguistic crucible of regeneration and new birth which gives form to the substance of faith in Christ. Therein, regeneration is signified by our being gathered to a people where the Holy Spirit works through our existence in the church to conform us to Christ. Through baptism, we enter this mode of existence, either willingly as adults, or unwillingly as infants... This is the essence of a Reformed understanding of the church' (Thomas Harvey: 'Baptism as a Means of Grace: A Response to John Stott's "The Evangelical Doctrine of Baptism"', in *Churchman* Vol.113 number 2 ,1999, p111). Note the word – 'the *essence* of a Reformed understanding of the church'.

⁴ I recall a conversation with a Presbyterian minister. He told me there were 400 members in 'his' church. 'How many at the prayer meeting?', I asked. 'Forty', he replied. 'The trouble is', he explained, 'we have an unregenerate elder, and we are waiting for him to die!' The overwhelming majority of Baptist churches, too, seem willing to accept such a disproportionate attendance. It is, of

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The notion of visible churches is an idea which is very handy for infant baptisers, but it is entirely foreign to the New Testament. It is more than handy – it is essential for them to think of something to cope with what they find in their churches, what they produce by their sprinkling of babies, and all that follows in its wake. As there was an 'Israel after the flesh' (1 Cor. 10:18), so the practice of infant baptism must inevitably produce some 'Christians after the flesh';⁵ that is, those who have one or more parents who are Christians, then who have been baptised and admitted into the church, who are called holy, members of Christ and Christians, when all the time they are unregenerate. What can infant baptisers do with them?

Listen to the way A.A.Hodge described the practical outworkings of infant baptism in terms of church membership. He quoted *The Directory for Worship* with approval when he wrote:

It is evident that this [baptism of infants] should be supplemented by the rite of confirmation... I refer simply to the historical, universally-practised [universally?] Christian ordinance observed in bringing the Christianly instructed and trained children before the church 'when they come to years of discretion: if they be free from scandal, appear sober and steady, and to have sufficient knowledge to discern the Lord's body, they ought to be informed it is their duty and their privilege to come to the Lord's supper'. Then they who have been members of the church from their birth are admitted to full communion, and are confirmed in their church standing, upon their voluntarily taking upon themselves the vows originally imposed upon them by their parents in baptism. This is the CONFIRMATION, separated from the abortive mask of the so-called

course, not the attendance which counts here; it is the attitude which is reflected in such figures. Can it be that 90% of the church are otherwise properly engaged, and to their great disappointment are unable to attend the prayer meeting?

⁵ And the disaster occurs not only in infant-baptiser churches. I recall a man saying: 'There are too many Ishmaels in the church'. He was talking about evangelical and Baptist churches.

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sacrament, that John Calvin declared was an ancient and beneficial custom, which he earnestly wished might be continued in the church.⁶

Well, A.A.Hodge and Calvin might have wished this sort of procedure to continue long in the church, but in the light of the New Testament, words fail to describe just how abominable it is. The New Testament churches were composed of saints – nothing at all to do with age.⁷ How infant baptisers are infatuated with age! But here it is in black and white; all that infant baptisers demand is for an infant to be baptised, then to be ‘Christianly’ brought up, ‘free from scandal, appear sober and steady, and to have sufficient knowledge’, before they become full members of a church. Full members? What is this? The New Testament knows nothing of this *full* membership. Nothing at all! It is a piece of pure invention by infant baptisers, remarkably, often the very people who call loudest for the Regulative Principle!⁸ Further, where in the New Testament does

⁶ A.A.Hodge: *Evangelical Theology*, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1976, p337, emphasis his. Note how infant baptism – itself an invention – demands a further invention – confirmation – to supplement it.

⁷ Baptism is nothing to do with age. But this does not mean those who baptise believers pay no regard to it whatsoever. The real question, however, is not the age itself, but does the one being baptised give a credible profession of faith?

⁸ The Regulative Principle? Just this: that nothing must be done in the church unless it is prescribed in Scripture. But, of course, however highly exalted their intentions, or however well-meaning men might be, this is a fence too high for them to climb. The fact is, Scripture does not prescribe every last detail in every last matter. So how does this work out? Take preaching a discourse in the usually accepted meaning of the word. I am sure the New Testament warrants and governs the principles and practice of preaching, but it leaves us free to decide whether we preach at, say, 10 in the morning or 10:30. It does not tell us how many minutes a discourse should last. And so on. All this is left unspecified. What the New Testament does not authorise us to do, however, is to

baptism have to be 'supplemented' as Hodge put it? Church members, according to the New Testament, are saints; they are true believers who give clear evidences and marks of regeneration in their lives. This stands in sharp contrast to the infant-baptism system which, apparently, can produce adults who are communicant or full church members but who, nevertheless, are not required to be regenerate, only reasonably decent. Indeed, this is what the Presbyterian Church looks for, according to its *Directory* for worship. They will be steady and sober – or appear to be. But is that *all*? Is that sufficient for church membership? What if some of these steady, sober unregenerate men become preachers, elders and teachers? And they do. Of course they do. It is inevitable. The consequences are horrendous. As Maurice Roberts, the then-editor of the *Banner of Truth*, himself a Presbyterian minister, wrote in his editorial in the April 1994 issue:

Let a man become a church member without the new birth and the probability is he will be secure in his church membership till he wakes up in a lost world. Let a man become a preacher, a divinity professor, a missionary, a church historian, a moderator, an assembly clerk, a printer of Bibles – all without the new birth – and such persons are only twofold more the heirs of hell than they would otherwise have been (Matt. 23:15). However hard it is for us to take in this doctrine, there cannot be the least doubt that it is the plain and obvious teaching of Christ in many places of the Gospels.⁹

All who would be thought a Christian should weigh these words. All elders should, especially. But, in particular, infant baptisers need to pay close attention to them, for the reasons I have given – reasons which arise directly out of their own principles and which have been made abundantly clear by their own writings. To be regenerate is not the same as being 'Christianly' brought up – whatever that may be reckoned to

decide whether or not we should preach, and whether or not we should preach Scripture or something other than Scripture.

⁹ *Banner of Truth* April 1994 p2.

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mean – or to ‘be free from scandal, appear to be sober and steady’.

How do infant baptisers try to justify this abomination of knowingly accepting unregenerate church members?¹⁰ They grossly abuse the parable of the tares (Matt. 13:24-30), conveniently saying that the field is the church when it is nothing of the sort; the field is *the world*. They expect – and their system produces – churches which are composed of members, some of whom are regenerate and baptised, some of whom are adults who have been baptised but are unregenerate, and some of whom are baptised infants but who give no evidence one way or the other concerning regeneration. What a mixed multitude! This inevitably leads on to the idea of visible churches. The Westminster Confession, Chapter XXV, puts it this way: ‘The visible church... consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; and of their children’.¹¹ The main text chosen to serve as a proof text to substantiate this defective and misguided definition is 1 Corinthians 1:2 which reads:

To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all who

¹⁰ It is more than knowingly. Dabney, without batting an eyelid, was prepared to issue this challenge: ‘Cannot that which is worldly, in the true sense, be in the visible church?’ (Dabney p785). Of course, as I admit, those of us who want the New Testament basis of church life, and demand regenerate church membership, can be deceived; we do not always get it right! Even in apostolic days, unbelievers slipped in, crept in, sneaked into membership. See, for instance, Gal. 2:4; 1 Pet. 2:1; Jude 4. But this is a far cry from virtually *boasting* of carnal members. And, as 1 Cor. 5 shows, when they were discovered, the church would have removed them. See also 1 John 2:19. See Shawn D. Wright: ‘Baptism and the Logic of Reformed Paedobaptists’, in Thomas R. Schreiner & Shawn D. Wright (eds.): *Believer’s Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, B&H Academic, Nashville, 2006, pp218-228.

¹¹ *The Confession of Faith* and other documents of the Westminster Assembly, The Publication Committee of the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland, 1967, p107.

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in every place call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord,
both theirs and ours.

It will be readily observed that the text quoted does not support the Confession in the slightest. The Confession speaks of church members as those who profess true religion, whereas the New Testament speaks of church members as those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, who are called to be saints, and who call upon Christ. Professors, says the one; saints, says the other! Not the same thing at all. The other verses quoted are 1 Corinthians 12:12-13, Psalm 2:8, Revelation 7:9 and Romans 15:9-12, none of which say that church members are mere professors.

The Confession also says that church members are professors *and their children*. The 'proof' text, 1 Corinthians 1:2, says nothing of the sort. 1 Corinthians 7:14 is also quoted. In my *Infant Baptism Tested*, I dealt with the infant baptisers' misunderstanding of that verse – which, in any case, says nothing about church membership. Acts 2:39 is also referred to. Reader, may I suggest that you read the entire passage, Acts 2:37-42? Baptism comes in the verse preceding the proof text, and church life comes in the verses which follow it. It reads: 'For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call'. Let us look at it.

The passage teaches that the gospel invitation, command or promise (which Peter issued in his preaching on the Day of Pentecost) is made to every man, woman and child in the world;¹² invitations, commands or promises such as: 'Look to me, and be saved, all you ends of the earth!' (Isa. 45:22). God's promise – along with his command – is sent to both Jews and non-Jews, both young and old, as long as time shall last. God's mercy is offered in the gospel to all sinners, not only to those who happened to hear it on the Day of Pentecost. The promise is sent to all men, women and children throughout the age. 'God... commands all men

¹² See my *Offer*; D.Martyn Lloyd-Jones: *The Church and the Last Things*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1998. p40.

everywhere to repent' (Acts 17:30). But surely it does not need to be said, a sinner is saved only when the call is effectual and inward; it being 'as many as the Lord our God will call'. This caveat qualifies everything which follows. All are called outwardly, but it is only those who are effectually called – and it is all of *them* – who will repent and believe. 'As many as had been appointed to eternal life believed' (Acts 13:48). It is no different today. The elect believe. They are then to be baptised and thus join the church. 'Then those who gladly received his word were baptised' (Acts 2:41).¹³ That is what Acts 2:37-42 teaches.

Infant baptisers, however, deny that the qualification – 'as many as the Lord our God will call' – applies to all the classes mentioned, and which must be met before any are baptised. In particular, their view is that the children of those who are near do not need to be called before they are baptised and join the church, seeing they are born in the covenant. This is wrong. There are two issues here. *First*, to whom does the proviso – the calling – apply? And, *secondly*, were infants baptised that day?

On the *first*, it is clear that on the Day of Pentecost, the calling applied to all the categories of people, and to all the issues involved. Whether the people were near or far off, adults or children, they all needed to be called. And the believing, the repenting, the being baptised and joining the church, all came under that one stipulation. It was only those who were effectively called – and only those – who repented, believed, were baptised, and so on. The context proves it. That is exactly what happened. It was only those who repented (Acts 2:38) and 'who gladly received his word' – that is those who truly believed (Acts 2:44) – who were baptised and were added to the church to partake in all its life (Acts 2:41-42). In other words, all who were

¹³ Implying that there were some who did not receive his word, and were not baptised – even though they had been outwardly called in the general call of the gospel. See my *Offer; Septimus; No Safety; Revisited*.

effectively called, were baptised, and only they. It did not matter a scrap whether they were Jews or Gentiles;¹⁴ they had to be called. In this way they joined the church and partook of all the ordinances of Christ including the Lord's supper.

Now for the *second* point. There is not the slightest suggestion that infants were involved in any of it.¹⁵ Did they prophesy (Acts 2:17)? No! Did they repent and believe? No! And if infant baptisers persist in saying that infants were involved, and that infants were baptised, then we are forced to conclude that Peter must have exhorted those infants to repent and be baptised. This must be so since we know that he urged all those, whom he later baptised, to 'repent, and let every one of you be baptised' (Acts 2:38). According to infant baptisers, that number included infants. But why ever would Peter exhort infants to repent, when he knew it was an impossibility for them by reason of their age? And why would he exhort the infants to be baptised, in any case? On infant-baptism logic, he was wasting his time! As long as one of the parents repented and was baptised, the infants followed automatically. So why would Peter exhort the infants to repent and be baptised? The answer is, of course, he did nothing of the kind. He only exhorted those of sufficient maturity in years, those who could hear, believe and repent; they were the ones whom he exhorted and who

¹⁴ True it is, on that day, the vast majority (if not all) who heard and were called were Jews or proselytes. But the principle stands.

¹⁵ But it says 'the promise is to you and to your children' (Acts 2:39). So it does. But this does not have to mean infants. Indeed, it is unlikely to have meant infants. When Paul stated: 'That promise which was made to the fathers... God has fulfilled this for us their children' (Acts 13:32-33), was he talking about *infants*? Of course not! The prophetic promise, given to men long before, had now been fulfilled to their descendants – this present generation. Likewise, Peter might well have been saying that God's promise was not only for those hearing him that day, but for them and for those who would hear in future generations – as many as the Lord our God will call. Compare Deut. 29:29; Josh. 22:24-25; Ps. 78:4-6; 132:12; Matt. 27:25 *etc.*

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were subsequently baptised upon their profession of faith – not infants. Infants were not baptised on the Day of Pentecost.

On the same verse, Calvin wrote: 'The promise was first made to the Jews, and then to their children, and last of all, that it is also to be imparted to the Gentiles'.¹⁶ This comment raises an important, practical question. Why, on this argument, did Peter not tell the Gentiles that their children were included in the promise? You see, reader, accepting for a moment the infant baptiser's argument, the Gentiles would not have realised that their children were included along with the parents – it was a Jewish concept, in their genes under the old covenant, leaving the Gentiles in ignorance of it, 'afar off'. According to Calvin, Peter told the Jews that *their* children were included – Jews, those who were supposed to know all about it – but he omitted to tell the unfortunate Gentiles – Gentiles, the very people who needed to be told, since they didn't have a clue about it! Furthermore, if Calvin was right, the Gentiles could easily have thought their

¹⁶ Calvin thought 'this place... abundantly refute[s] the manifest error of the Anabaptists, which will not have infants, which are the children of the faithful, to be baptised, as if they were not members of the church'. If Calvin was right, and the Anabaptists wrong, and all the children of believers (or nominally so) are 'members of the church', we must know what he meant by 'members of the church'. Did Calvin mean 'members of the [visible] church' or 'members of the [biblical] church'? If the latter, then it takes us back to the point made earlier; namely, all such children are saved, since 'Christ... loved the church and gave himself for her', and will bring all its members to absolute perfection (Eph. 5:25-27). Note also, once again, the infant baptiser's confusion. Are infants baptised to make them church members or because they are? Personal note: I was standing with fellow-speakers at a Reformed conference for a group photograph. The birth of my grandson had been announced at the meeting that morning. I felt a nudge in my side. A Reformed minister hissed in my ear: 'Get him under the covenant, brother; get him under the covenant'. As I recall it now, I wish I had asked: 'On your principles, isn't he already under the covenant?' Or is there a difference between being '*in* the covenant' and *under* it?

children were not included, since the promise, according to Calvin, was made to the Jews and their offspring, leaving the children of Gentiles high and dry! What makes this even more surprising is, on the basis of the doctrine of infant baptism, all the children of all believers are supposed to be in the covenant. Or is it only the children of Jews who are included? Is the promise made to the Jews because they are Jews? And if the children of believing Gentiles are not included, why do infant baptisers baptise those children today? The truth of the matter is, age and birth are of no consequence; all men, all women and all children – of whatever nationality and age – are included, if they are among the number whom the Lord our God shall call.

What is more, are we to believe that those present, who heard Peter preach, and who repented and believed, but did not have their children (or wife, husband or servant)¹⁷ with them, went home (or wherever), routed them out, took them back to the apostles, and had them all baptised? Is there the slightest suggestion of this in Acts 2? And what about the resistance put up by some of those so fetched? After all, in such a huge number, it is unthinkable that none of those gathered by the believers would not put up a struggle. Do we get any hint of the scuffles which must have ensued?

And when it is all boiled down, church membership is not even in view in Acts 2:38, so how can it be a proof text for church membership? It only arises in Acts 2:41 and on, after the demonstration of faith and repentance, followed by baptism on the part of those who have been called by God's grace. If infant baptisers would do as the New Testament, and restrict church membership to all who have been called and, following faith and repentance, been baptised in obedience to Christ – and to no one else – there would be no need for this discussion. As the infant baptiser John Legg quite properly put it: 'The idea of members in the New Testament, that is in the picture of the body of Christ,

¹⁷ See the chapter 'Argument 7: "Household Baptism"' in my *Infant Baptism Tested*.

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certainly involves living, spiritual union with Christ and this would militate against saying that the children were members'. When defining church membership, the Savoy Declaration wisely omitted 'and of their children' from their version of the Westminster Confession, but even so the Independents and Congregationalists still wanted their children included in the 'covenant status' in some way. They do to this day. Trying desperately to get round the difficulty, Legg said that 'the church consists of believers with their children'.¹⁸ Reader, did you spot it? To be a Reformed infant-baptiser, one certainly needs to be master of the nuances of the English language; one has to be able to read and digest the small print! 'Believers *and* their children' is it; or 'believers *with* their children'? To the man or woman in the pew, what is the difference? It appears to be a distinction without a difference.

Ezekiel 16:20-21, Romans 11:16, Genesis 3:15 and Genesis 17:7 complete the texts the Westminster Confession produces to 'prove' that churches should be composed of professors and their children. These verses have nothing at all to say upon the subject.¹⁹ Nothing at all! Romans 11:16 gives a principle, namely that if a sample has certain characteristics then the whole batch has the same characteristics; 'if the firstfruit is holy, the lump is also holy; and if the root is holy, so are the branches'. But it has nothing to say about church membership. Nothing! Since infant baptisers quote this verse to support their claim, I presume they understand it to mean that if a parent is a church member, so is his child. Really? Therefore, if a man

¹⁸ John Legg: 'Children of the Covenant', being a paper given at the 1982 Congregational Studies Conference, The Evangelical Fellowship of Congregational Churches, p13.

¹⁹ In any case, how can *Old Testament* verses be *proof* texts for the practice of church membership? It is the continuity/discontinuity question, once again. Infant baptisers want to argue for what they claim is the continuity (sameness) of the old and new covenants, and the corresponding continuity of the church in both covenants.

is a Christian, his child is, too? If a man is holy, so is his child? The argument is ludicrous.

The blunt fact is the New Testament never speaks of visible churches. It does speak of churches which are found in particular localities – Corinth, Ephesus, and so on. Hence the proper term is *local* churches, not visible churches. Naturally the invented concept of a visible church, where the members are professors and their children, is very acceptable – indeed, it is essential – to infant baptisers, who have to live with the consequences of their mistaken practice. The New Testament churches, however, were composed only of believers who were baptised after profession of faith, and who lived consistently with that profession.

This is the nub of the matter for my purpose in this booklet.

One historical example must suffice.²⁰ In 18th-century New England, Solomon Stoddard ‘and many other great divines’, no doubt because of their views on infant baptism, came to the remarkable conclusion that ‘even excommunicated persons are still members of the church of God; and some suppose, the worshippers of Baal in Israel, even those who were bred up such from their infancy, remained still members of the church of God’. So wrote Jonathan Edwards. He even added that some held that Papists who continue to practise their idolatry and superstitions ‘still are in the visible church of Christ’.²¹ It takes one’s breath away!

Even where men draw back at that, it is almost inevitable that infant baptisers end up with mongrel churches that have a partly regenerate and a partly unregenerate membership. They invent a variety of ways to try to cope with it, but they are left with a diabolical confusion.²² It is even worse than

²⁰ For three more examples, see the chapter ‘Three testimonies: 17th century New England, Jonathan Edwards and D.Martyn Lloyd-Jones’ in my *Infant Baptism Tested*.

²¹ Edwards p434.

²² ‘In the 16th century some of the leading Reformers went through phases of extreme frustration at trying to promote a godly faithful

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that. Their system tends to produce – it actually does produce – some men and women who, though unregenerate, think they are children of God. And it can produce more than 'some' who are deluded; as I have shown, it can produce many.

church on the basis of universal infant baptism. Some of them resorted, for a time, to working with small groups of true believers [who were] pledged to a committed evangelical devotion and discipline incapable of being expected from the whole population' (Wright: *What...?* p100). The former concern, mission impossible, is still being attempted; the latter is an admission of the New Testament position. Note the hypocrisy in all this. The Reformers lambasted the Anabaptists for their views on baptism, yet secretly (and not so secretly) envied them, and wanted their discipline and spirituality. See my *Battle*. The phrase for the invented escape-route is 'a church within a Church'.