

I

No Straw Men

John Murray's Case for Infant Baptism

What is the case *for* infant baptism? Before critiquing the doctrine, I want to summarize the case for it as honestly as I can. Christian love and integrity require that we avoid building “straw men” when representing the views of those with whom we differ. To do this, I will be using *Christian Baptism* by John Murray, widely regarded as a standard work by paedobaptist scholars.¹ To preserve continuity in Murray’s argument, I will not include the position of Pierre Marcel. Instead, I refer the reader to Appendix C which contains a critique of his classic work, *The Biblical Doctrine of Infant Baptism*.² Also, I have attached Appendix E, which is a book review of *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*, published in 2003 and edited by Gregg Strawbridge.³

In the pages that follow, Murray is allowed to speak for himself as much as possible. My objections are largely relegated to the footnotes and will be expanded in later chapters. The concluding section will include a brief evaluation of the central error of Professor Murray’s position.

¹ John Murray, *Christian Baptism* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1970).

² Pierre Marcel, *The Biblical Doctrine of Infant Baptism*, trans. Philip Edgcumbe Hughes (London: James Clarke and Company, Ltd., 1959).

³ Gregg Strawbridge, ed. et al., *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism* (Philipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 2003).

John Murray's Views

Professor Murray's arguments can be outlined in seven points, which are his chapter titles: (1) the import of baptism, (2) the mode of baptism, (3) the church, (4) infant baptism, (5) objections to infant baptism, (6) whose children are to be baptized, and (7) the efficacy of baptism.

The Import of Baptism

Murray begins with the explanation that the baptism being considered is Christian baptism, that of the Great Commission alone (Matthew 28:19–20), as opposed to the baptisms of John the Baptist and Jesus.⁴

Claiming that John's baptism and ministry was only preparatory to Jesus', Murray concludes:

We may no more identify the baptism of John with the ordinance instituted by Christ than we may identify the ministry and mission of John with the ministry and mission of Christ. Hence we cannot derive from the nature of John's baptism, the precise import of the ordinance of Christian baptism.⁵

According to Murray, the meaning of John's baptism must not be identified with later Christian baptism in any way. Although both involved water and the forgiveness of sins, the separation between John's baptism and Trinitarian baptism (Matthew 28:19–20) must remain.⁶

Second, Murray retains a distinction between the baptism of Jesus' apostles and later Christian baptism:

[W]e do not have warrant by which to identify this baptism during Jesus' earthly ministry with the ordinance of Matthew 28:19, 20. The latter

⁴ This position has surprised many laymen who have asked me about infant baptism. They assumed that perhaps John the Baptist's and certainly Jesus' baptism (practiced by His disciples, John 4:1ff.) are Christian baptism. It is noteworthy that many paedobaptists do not agree with Murray on this point, revealing one of their many internal debates on this issue.

⁵ Murray, *Baptism*, 5. Murray points out that he disagrees with Calvin (*Institutes*, 4:15:7–8 and 4:16:27) and others on this point. Calvin believed that John's and the apostles' baptisms were the same as the Great Commission's. This is just one example of the significant disagreement among paedobaptists on almost every point and ground of infant baptism. See *Should Babies Be Baptized?* by T. E. for a comparative list of contradictory positions on each point by paedobaptists.

⁶ Murray, *Baptism*, 5.

is baptism in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. We have no warrant to suppose that the earlier rite took this form. It is quite reasonable to believe that there was a very close relation between these two rites both in the mind of Jesus himself and in the recognition of the disciples. Indeed, so close may have been the relation that baptism in the name of the triune God was the necessary development of the earlier rite. But we are compelled to recognise the distinctiveness of the rite enunciated and embodied in the great commission. It is from the terms of this institution and from subsequent references in the New Testament that we are to derive the precise import of this ordinance.⁷

Again, by maintaining the distinction between Jesus' baptism and later Christian baptism, Murray has removed the data of the Gospels from consideration concerning the meaning and subjects of Great Commission baptism. We will examine this position in detail in chapter nine.

Third, even though purification is the central meaning behind John's and Jesus' baptism, Murray denies that purification is the central import of Christian baptism. Rather, "baptism signifies union with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection ... of this union baptism is the sign and seal."⁸ Yet later, Murray also states that "baptism is the circumcision of the New Testament" (Colossians 2:11, 12), thus symbolizing purification from defilement. His summarizing statement is: "baptism signifies and seals union with Christ and cleansing from the pollution and guilt of sin."⁹ Murray appears to be inconsistent with his own statements on this issue.

⁷ Ibid. This approach is difficult to maintain. Murray's own hermeneutical principle is that the inclusion of infants in the Abrahamic Covenant by circumcision has not been explicitly revoked or repealed, thus proving the inferred continuance of the covenant privilege of baptism to infants, 52–53, but he also argues that John's and Jesus' baptisms have no connection to Christian baptism because there is no positive "warrant" to connect them. This is inconsistent. According to Murray's own hermeneutic of "good and necessary inference," the connection should continue since there is no explicit revocation or repeal of their baptisms prior to or after the institution of the Great Commission. Further, Murray's position contradicts the Great Commission itself, which teaches the apostles to teach the church to do all that Jesus commanded; this includes His institution and practice of the baptism of disciples alone.

⁸ Ibid., 6. Suffice it to say now that baptism is never called a "seal" of the New Covenant; rather, regeneration by the Holy Spirit is so called (Ephesians 1:13; 2 Corinthians 1:22).

⁹ Ibid., 9. Baptists believe that the New Testament antitype to Old Testament circumcision is heart circumcision, not baptism directly (Colossians 2:11–12; Philippians 3:3; Romans 2:28–29; Galatians 6:15–16). In the Old Testament, circumcision is prospective of the need of regeneration; in the New Testament, baptism is retrospective of regeneration received.

The Mode of Baptism

Murray's argument concerning the mode of baptism concludes that *baptizo* does not mean to immerse. Rather, appealing to word studies in the Septuagint, it means to pour or to sprinkle.¹⁰ As noted in the Preface, this view puts Murray at odds with Calvin who understands *baptizo* to mean immerse.

The Church

Murray next discusses the relationship between baptism and the church. He opens this discussion with the statement that "baptism is the sign and seal of membership in the church."¹¹ Then he asks: What is the church?

THE CHURCH AS INVISIBLE

First, he considers "the church as invisible." That is, there is an aspect of invisibility to the church:

... it is comprised of those who are sanctified and cleansed by the washing of water by the Word, the company of the regenerate, the communion of saints, the congregation of the faithful, those called effectually into the fellowship of Christ.¹²

Since regeneration and faith are both spiritual and invisible, "no man or organisation of men is able infallibly to determine who are regenerate and who are not, who are true believers and who are not."¹³

Murray makes the point that only God can determine which persons are true and false believers (John 8:31; 15:1–8). Therefore, it must be admitted that not everyone in the church visible is necessarily regenerate.

¹⁰ Ibid., 9–33; and Duane Spencer, *Holy Baptism: Word Keys Which Unlock the Covenant* (Tyler, TX: Geneva Ministries, 1984). Murray's explanation of certain texts such as Mark 1:9 does not do justice to the grammar. Though a detailed study of the mode of baptism is beyond the narrow scope of this work, Appendix B outlines a brief refutation of John Murray's views, along with those of another paedobaptist, Duane Spencer.

¹¹ Murray, *Baptism*, 34.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

This aspect of invisibility cannot be finally determined by fallible men, but “the Lord knows them that are His.”¹⁴

THE CHURCH AS VISIBLE

Second, although the church has an invisible aspect, it is not an invisible entity:

Union with Christ and the faith through which that union is effected, though in themselves invisible and spiritual facts, are nevertheless realities which find expression in what is observable. Faith always receives registration in word and action.¹⁵

As a result, a visible organization is implicit in the very nature of what constitutes a church, whether in a house, city, province, the whole world or of all history.

Because human agency is at work in a church, “there is government and discipline in Christ’s church and such are administered by men, in accordance with Christ’s appointment.”¹⁶ How then shall these fallible men include or exclude members in the church visible? Murray says:

What we find in the New Testament is that the constituting bond of communion was common faith in Christ and that the condition of admission to the fellowship was this same common faith (cf. Acts 2:38–42; 8:13, 35–38; 10:34–38; 16:14, 15, 31–33). This faith, however, did not have any automatic way of evidencing itself and, consequently, could become effective in gaining admission to the fellowship of the saints only by confession or profession.¹⁷

Because a profession or confession of faith could be made by those who do not have true faith, we are faced with the problem that the visible

¹⁴ Ibid., 35–36. Baptists agree with Murray on this point, but he uses it to justify infants in the church and to criticize the Baptist goal of a regenerate membership. Baptists baptize upon profession of faith, not infallibly determined regeneration (*London Baptist Confession*, 19:2). Paul often gave the benefit of the doubt as to who were true Christians by profession and freely designated them so till proven otherwise (Philippians 1:5–7).

¹⁵ Ibid., 37.

¹⁶ Ibid., 38.

¹⁷ Ibid. This is exactly the Baptist position for admission to the church visible. Murray correctly references Acts 2:38–42 for this position yet, inconsistently, uses it as a proof for infant baptism in other contexts.

church may include individuals who do not really belong to the invisible body of Christ.

According to Murray, there are two dangers to avoid based on this problem of unregenerate church members. The first danger is to accept only an intellectual and historical faith as required for church membership. This can be avoided if church leaders make it plain to confessors that “only the regenerate can truly make the profession required.”¹⁸ The second danger is to accommodate the definition of the church to include as members the obviously unregenerate. This can be avoided by putting those who prove to be profane and not disciples outside the church.¹⁹

Baptism then is the sign and seal of membership in the church, based upon confessed faith in Jesus. It is an essential mark of discipleship. The person who refuses baptism is not to be considered a member of Christ’s body, the church.²⁰

THE CHURCH GENERICALLY ONE

The form of the church is different under the Old Testament and the New Testament. The fullness of the form in the New, however, must not remove the generic unity between the church in both dispensations,²¹ nor must it be forgotten that the New Testament form is founded upon the Abrahamic Covenant (Galatians 3:9, 14, 17; Romans 11:16–21; Ephesians 2:12–20):

New Testament believers of all nations are Abraham’s seed and heirs according to promise. ... In terms of the covenant union and communion

¹⁸ Ibid., 40–41. This is exactly the Baptist position. We do not claim to discern infallibly who is regenerate for baptism and church membership, as some detractors claim. We baptize and admit members upon a good confession of faith as evidence of a hoped-for New Covenant regeneration. A church of regenerate disciples is our *goal*; a good confession before baptism is our *method*.

¹⁹ Ibid., 43–44; and R. C. Trench, *Notes on the Parables of Our Lord* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1971), 35. By misinterpreting the parable of the wheat and the tares (Matthew 13:24–30), some paedobaptists have justified the inclusion of unregenerate infants in the church. However, the field is not the church, as some claim, it is the world (cf. Matthew 13:38). We are not knowingly to allow the unregenerate into the church visible.

²⁰ Murray, *Baptism*, 45. Of course, infant baptized members can never refuse to be baptized as Murray describes.

²¹ Ibid., 46. Murray argues for “generic unity” between the “church in the wilderness” and the New Testament church as an argument for infant baptism’s

the church is but the covenant people of God in all ages and among all nations.²²

In summary, Murray argues for a New Testament church visible built upon a confession of Jesus Christ as evidence of regeneration. This is exactly the Baptist position. He recognizes that false professors will enter in, but he argues that we cannot accommodate that fact by diminishing the definition of the church as God's people. The New Testament church is tied to the Old Testament church by the covenant with Abraham, by which the promises come. Thus, he concludes, the relationship between Abrahamic circumcision and infant baptism is preconditioned by "generic unity." Yet, it is Murray's admission of the different forms of the church visible in both dispensations that Baptists affirm with credobaptism and credo-membership in the New Testament administration..

Infant Baptism

Murray introduces this chapter by claiming that the import of baptism must be the same for infants as for adults: "Baptism is the sign and seal of membership in Christ's body, the church." He then summarizes:

The basic premise of the argument for infant baptism is that the New Testament economy is the unfolding and fulfillment of the covenant made with Abraham and that the necessary implication is the unity and continuity of the church.²³

parallel to circumcision. However, he overlooks that the church in the wilderness did not circumcise their infants.

²² Ibid., 47. Baptists agree with Murray's statement that only New Testament believers are Abraham's seed. However, this very fact is the reason we reject infant baptism as the fulfillment of circumcision. Only Abraham's faith-seed in Christ should receive the sign of baptism (Galatians 3:16, 19). Thus we also agree with the unity of the church invisible of all ages.

²³ Ibid., 48. In this attempt to make the meaning of baptism the same for infants and adults, Murray overlooks the *Westminster Confession's* statement that baptism "is unto *the party baptized* into the visible church...also to be unto *him* a sign and seal of the covenant of grace, of *his* ingrafting into Christ, of regeneration, of remission of sins, and of *his* giving up unto God through Jesus Christ to walk in newness of life..." [*WCF* 28:1; emphasis mine]. One wonders how an infant can benefit from this meaning of baptism in the same way as an adult who consciously understands.