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SUFFER THE LITTLE CHILDREN

The window on the south-west corner of the nave depicts Jesus' blessing the children: an illustration of the ancient gospel lesson (Mark 10:13-16) for the baptism of infants. Poignantly, it is dedicated by its donors, David and Mary Wells, in memory of their children, Willie, Violetta, and Charlie, who died in one of the terrible epidemics that raged through 19th century Savannah. Originally the font stood below this window, before it was moved to its present location on the north side, just under the Ascension window.

The combination of window and font underlined the participation of little children in the benefits of salvation in Christ, which is intrinsic to infant baptism. Since the radical reformation of the sixteenth century, and the organization of churches composed entirely of persons baptized upon a mature confession of faith (what we now call "Baptists"), the practice of infant baptism has come under skeptical examination. In a culture like that of the south, where Baptists are common, Episcopalians and other "paedo-baptist" Christians need to be able to demonstrate the biblical, historical, and theological rationale of the practice.

The origins of infant baptism are lost in the mists of history. In the early centuries, most baptisms must have been of adult converts. Nonetheless, the practice of household baptism (Acts 16:30-34) renders it likely that little children were baptized along with adults in the same household. While adult baptism was normal in the early centuries, it was not normative. The examples of Saint Augustine and the emperor Constantine, whose baptisms were deferred to prevent irredeemable sin after baptism suggests that adult baptism was a concession, not the norm.

The practice of household baptism implies a corporate solidarity that is strange to our individualistic culture, but it has ample Biblical precedent. The understanding that the children of the covenant people of God enjoy the blessings of the covenant, even before they are capable of personal faith, is found in the Old Testament. Circumcision, the sign of the blessings promised to Abraham, was administered by divine command to male children eight days old (Genesis 17:12). Not to circumcise one's son, is in effect to break the covenant (17:14). Saint Luke is careful to record Christ's own circumcision on the eighth day (Luke 2:21).

Circumcision, the Old Testament sign of the blessings yet to come, corresponds to baptism, the New Testament sign that in Christ those promised blessings have come – which is why in the letter to the Galatians Saint Paul considers it a destructive contradiction for the baptized to receive circumcision (Galatians 3:23-29; 5:1-12; 6:15, 16). This suggests that baptism is the sign of the present spiritual reality which circumcision prefigured and fore-shadowed. Thus baptism takes the role that circumcision did: and on the same basis is rightly administered to the children of the covenant, as well as those capable of making a mature confession of faith. On the feast of Pentecost, in the first publishing of the gospel, when Peter told the polyglot crowd of pilgrims that “the promise is to you and your children” (Acts 2:39), he extended to the people of the new covenant the solidarity of infants and adults which is found in the old. St. Paul makes much the same point, when he tells the Christians of Corinth that their children are not “unclean”, but “holy” (1 Corinthians 7:14). He could not say this if these children were not counted as participants of the covenant blessings of Christ.

GGD

To be continued

The Rev'd Gavin G. Dunbar

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