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## SUFFER THE LITTLE CHILDREN II

Though the Scriptures are silent on the question of whether to baptize infants or not, other texts do shed definitive light on the question: those that speak about circumcision (the Old Testament sign that corresponds to Baptism), and the participation of the children of the covenant people in the blessings of the covenant. In modern times hyper-individualism has obscured the corporate solidarity of the family and people of God which we find in Scripture. But Peter could tell the crowds on Pentecost that "the promise is unto you and your children" (Acts 2:39); Paul could speak of the children of Christian converts as "holy" rather than "unclean"; and Paul is reported to have baptized entire households (Acts 16:15, 33; 1 Corinthians 1:16), some of which may have included children unable to make a mature profession of faith. In that context, it is significant that Scripture does not prohibit the baptism of infants. If believing Jews needed to be told that the promised blessings did not apply to their children, surely this would have been made explicit.

The Biblical text which in the Christian tradition has received as the touchstone of thinking about infant baptism is St. Mark 10:13-16 – the account of the little children welcomed and blessed by Jesus. The best commentary on this lesson is the one that used to follow it in the Prayer Book service of baptism, until a misguided abbreviation pruned it out in 1928: "Beloved, ye hear in this Gospel the words of our Saviour Christ, that he commanded the children to be brought unto him; how he blamed those that would have kept them from him; how he exhorteth all men to follow their innocency. Ye perceive how that by his outward gesture and deed he declared his good will toward them; for he embraced them in his arms, he laid his hands upon them, and blessed them. Doubt ye not therefore, but earnestly believe, that he will likewise favourably receive this present Infant; that he will embrace him with the arms of his mercy: that he will give unto him the blessing of eternal life, and make him partaker of his ever-lasting kingdom. Wherefore we being thus persuaded of the good will of our heaving Father towards this Infant, declared by his Son Jesus Christ" – this is where the present exhortation on page 276 begins, "let us faithfully and devoutly give thanks unto him...."

That this gospel does not say that Jesus baptized these children is immaterial: according to Saint John's gospel, Jesus baptized no one (John 4:2). The argument for baptism is this: if Christ receives infants

brought to him, and blesses them, then we can hardly deny them the outward and visible sign of his receiving and blessing them, which is baptism. Likewise, if Christians teach their children to call upon God as "Our Father, who art in heaven", and to sing "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so" - then they can hardly deny that they believe that these children have indeed been received by God as his own children, and received by Christ has members of his own body. Either this belief is ill-founded, and such Christians are teaching their children lies, or it is true: and if is true, then they should not withhold from their children the sign of that grace and mercy conferred in Christ.

To be continued GGD

**The Rev'd Gavin G. Dunbar**

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