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BAPTISM IN THE WRITINGS OF THE REFORMERS

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The baptismal theology of the Reformers was worked out in controversy. Firstly, there was conflict with the doctrine of sacramental efficacy of Rome as it came to expression in the role accorded to baptism as an instrument of justification. Secondly, thereafter the Reform faced the threat posed by the anabaptists' rejection of infant baptism, based on a radically different view of baptism, the sacraments and the church. It was this second front that was to occupy most of their energies after the initial skirmish with Rome.

I. The conflict with Rome: Luther and Zwingli.

a. The position of Rome 1520-1550

The position of Rome can be summarised as follows. The seven sacraments work *ex opere operato*. They contain and confer grace unless an obstacle is placed in the way. Thus, all who receive the sacraments receive grace by virtue of the act of reception. In baptism the guilt of original sin is removed with the consequence that there is nothing in the baptised that God hates. Moreover, an ineradicable spiritual quality, a *character indelebilis*, is imparted to the baptised, a spiritual mark which renders the sacrament incapable of repetition. Baptism was seen as the instrumental cause of justification and thus as indispensable to salvation. Therefore, the baptism of infants was essential; for if a child were to die unbaptised he would be in a state of condemnation. Under circumstances imperilling a child's life it was therefore permissible for the sacrament to be administered by laymen or women such as midwives. At root, therefore, baptism was dependent on Rome's doctrine of church and sacraments. It was closely connected with its doctrine of justification. It was part of the framework whereby soteriology was under the dominance of ecclesiology, with grace conveyed by sacramental channels. This structure became enshrined at *The Council of Trent* as official dogma.¹

Nevertheless, there were dissentient voices raised. The nominalist theology of Gabriel Biel maintained that baptism was not absolutely necessary to salvation. Underlying this denial was a different underpinning to its soteriology. Not the church but the decree of God was

1. Phillip Schaff (ed.), *The Creeds of Christendom*, Baker, 1983, 2. 89-95, 118-124.

the basis of its view of salvation. God who, according to his *potentia absoluta* could do anything, had freely bound himself according to his *potentia ordinata* and had established that he would by *pactum* save man who did his best (*facere quod in se est*). Due to the prevailing effect of God's decree, the elect might not therefore coincide with the church and so the role of the sacraments as the absolute *indicia* of salvation was undermined. It is important to realise two things. First, this did not receive the official stamp of approval by the church. Second, the theology of Biel and his disciples was the milieu from which Luther emerged in his evangelical breakthrough.²

b. Luther 1519-1520

Luther describes his position on baptism in *The holy and blessed sacrament of baptism* (1519). It is a sign in which we are thrust into the water in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It denotes dying to sin and a resurrection in the grace of God. The old man is drowned, the new man rises. Therefore immersion is the most appropriate mode, a plunging completely into the water until completely covered. The infant or whoever 'should be put in and sunk completely into the water and then drawn out again'. This form is demanded by the nature of baptism. It signifies that the old man is to be wholly drowned by the grace of God. 'We should therefore do justice to its meaning and make baptism a true and complete sign of the thing it signifies'.³ There are limits to the analogy. The sacrament is quickly over but the reality lasts a lifetime. The baptised is sacramentally pure and guiltless (he has died and risen again) yet the work of the sacrament will be lifelong since the flesh remains and is wicked and sinful. God has allied himself with the baptised in a covenant and he begins from that hour to make him a new person.⁴ Faith is necessary. We must believe all this, that the sacrament signifies death and our resurrection at the Last Day and that it achieves it, establishing a covenant between us and God, we pledging to fight sin and he committing himself to be merciful to us. In this way in baptism we become pure and guiltless yet full of sinful inclinations.⁵ It was views such as these, together with his opposition to "that heretical but usual opinion which says that the sacraments of the new law give justifying grace to those who put no obstacle in the way"⁶ that brought on Luther's head the Papal Bull *Exsurge Domine* (June 1520) excommunicating

2. See Alister E. McGrath, 'Mira et Nova definitio iustitiae: Luther and scholastic doctrines of justification', *ARG* 74 (1983), 37-60; Heiko Augustinus Oberman, *The harvest of medieval theology: Gabriel Biel and late medieval nominalism*, Grand Rapids, 1967.

3. *Luther's Works* (ed. Jaroslav Pelikan; St Louis, 1961), 35, 29-30. Hereafter = *LW*. Also *LW* 36, 67-68.

4. *LW* 35, 32-33. Also *LW* 36, 69-70.

5. *LW* 35, 35.

6. *LW* 31, 106-107.

him.⁷ His reply came in his *Defence and Explanation* (September 1520). Faith and repentance are necessary to a true participation in baptism, he insists. According to Paul, whatever does not proceed from faith is sin. Christ himself put faith before baptism. Where there is no faith, baptism does no good. The Bull teaches instead that faith and repentance are not requisite. As Augustine, it is not the sacrament but faith in the sacrament that makes us righteous and saves us. It is not the sacraments that grant grace. Rather, it is faith in God's word.⁸ Luther's epistemological departure from Rome is clear. Not the church doctrine of sacramental efficacy nor an ecclesiological qualified soteriology now governs baptism but, instead, a theology grounded on the Word of God with the command and promise of God paramount, in turn both eliciting and requiring faith in that Word of promise.⁹ Moreover, his discovery of justification by faith also has an important bearing on the controversy. Since baptism was an instrument of justification in the Roman scheme, Luther's insistence on the sole instrumentality of faith serves to detach baptism from a central place in the *ordo salutis*. It also qualifies his view on the relation of baptism to sin. Whereas Rome taught that the evil which remains after baptism is not itself sin since the sacrament has occasioned remission, Luther argues that while the baptized is pure in a sacramental sense, yet sin remains. Sins are forgiven but sin is still present. Justified man is *simul iustus et peccator*.¹⁰ In this clash it is clear that Luther's evangelical breakthrough on justification and his corresponding theology of the Word serves as the focus for his realignment of his baptismal theology.

One other point is of interest. Luther's training in nominalism also had a bearing on the stance he adopts. We have seen how Biel had a framework which challenged that prevalent in the hierarchy, one which undermined the idea of the necessity of baptism to salvation. Luther's own struggles with the nominalist doctrine of the *pactum dei* had been the occasion of his realisation of the soteric nature of the *iustitia dei* in Rom 1.17.¹¹ May it not be that this perception of reality consisting in the particular encouraged a detachment in his thought from the all-embracing umbrella of the church that was the controlling feature of the soteriology and sacramental theology of Rome?

c. Zwingli

For Zwingli, the medieval doctrine of sacramental efficacy is also unacceptable, but for quite different reasons. Baptism for him is not a sacrament but an initiatory sign. He is unable to accept that God's grace

7. See B. J. Kidd (ed.), *Documents illustrative of the Continental Reformation*, Oxford, 1911, pp. 75f.

8. *LW* 32. 14-18. See also *LW* 36. 65-67.

9. See Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, Philadelphia, 1966, p. 345f.

10. *LW* 32. 19-28.

11. See McGrath (1983), n. 2.

can be conveyed by material means. Therefore, Zwingli adopts a sharp distinction between the *signum* and the *res*. Baptism is not a means of grace but a sign. Before 1523, it is a sign by which God assures us. Then he understands it as a sign by which we pledge to others that we will live the Christian life. From 1525 both elements are present. Baptism does not give faith (here he parts from Luther as well as Rome) but it confirms a faith already present.

The reasons for this are not hard to find. Zwingli's theology is strongly based on the sovereignty of God. The doctrine of election is right at the heart of his thinking.¹² Consequently, he wishes to preserve the freedom of the Holy Spirit to give grace and does not want to restrict it to the sacraments. We do not read in Scripture of any channel or conduit for the Holy Spirit, whose actions are ineffable.¹³ Moreover, if grace is given to those who prepare themselves to receive it then either they are able to prepare themselves and prevenient grace is nothing or else and the Spirit prepares them and grace is given prior to and apart from the sacrament. If, in turn, the sacraments mediate this preparatory grace then an infinite process is set in chain whereby the sacraments prepare us for the grace of the sacraments. Hence, Zwingli concludes that baptism and the Supper are simply testimonies of grace given beforehand.¹⁴ They cannot convey grace since spiritual realities cannot be conveyed by physical means nor can we be made clean by an external thing.¹⁵ The word *sacramentum* means an oath or pledge. Therefore, baptism is a pledge. As a man wears a white cross to indicate he is a confederate so a man who receives baptism proclaims his willingness to listen to God.¹⁶ Baptism is merely a covenant sign. The error, Zwingli thinks, is to ascribe to the sign the reality it signifies with the result that it ceases to be a sign.¹⁷ Its significance is simply to pledge us to a new life before God, immersion in water signifying the death of the old man while emergence from the water signifies the resurrection of Christ.¹⁸

With Zwingli we note a radical separation of sign and reality. The background is his concern for the sovereign freedom of God, that his grace be not tied to a temporal channel. However, more far reaching still

12. Robert W. A. Letham, 'Saving faith and assurance in Reformed theology: Zwingli to the Synod of Dort' (Ph.D thesis: University of Aberdeen, 1979), 1. 17-22. Gottfried W. Locher, *Zwingli's thought: new perspectives*, Leiden, 1981, pp. 121-141. W. P. Stephens, *The theology of Hildrich Zwingli*, Oxford, 1986, pp. 86-107.

13. In his *Fidel ratio* (1530) he writes: 'Dux autem vel vehiculum spiritui non est necessarium: ipse enim est virtus et latio qui cuncta feruntur non qui ferri debeat: neque id unquam legimus in scripturis sacris, quod sensibilia, qualia sacramenta sunt, certo secum ferrent spiritum; sed si sensibilia unquam lata sunt cum spiritu: iam spiritus fuit qui tulit, non sensibilia'. Huldrich Zwingli, *Opera* (ed. Melchioro Schulerro et Io. Schultessio; Zurich, 1841), 4. 10.

14. *Ibid.*, 4. 10-11.

15. Zwingli: *On Baptism*; Library of Christian Classics, London, 1953, 24. 130.

16. *Ibid.*, 24. 131.

17. *Ibid.*, 17.

18. *Ibid.*, 24. 150-152.

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is his dualistic world view which forbids him from recognising that spiritual grace can be conveyed by physical means. We shall note how this Nestorian view of the sacraments weakens his defence of infant baptism when faced by the challenge of the anabaptists. The conflict with Rome is relatively short-lived and superficial. The new threat is to consume the energies not merely of Zwingli but of all the Reformers.

II. The anabaptist challenge

Considerations of time forbid us from giving more than a brief overview of the anabaptists' main lines of attack on the Reformers' position on the nature and subjects of baptism. There were, of course, a variety of baptismal theologies among the early anabaptist groups.¹⁹ We shall summarise the main features of the views of Menno Simons, since these are representative of the main arguments the Reformers felt obliged to address. His works *Christian Baptism* and *The Foundation of Christian Doctrine* were both published in 1539.²⁰ In the first of these, Simons explains why his colleagues practise believers, baptism only; it is on the grounds of the command of Christ,²¹ the teaching of the apostles²² and the practice of the apostles.²³ This is foundational to the structure of Simons' whole argument. The point of interest is that this is an exclusively New Testament framework. It enables Simons to claim that since there is no explicit New Testament command to baptise infants therefore infants should not be baptised. Subordinate arguments follow from these premises. Thus he insists that faith precedes baptism in the New Testament and so, since they cannot believe, infants should not be baptised but should wait until they can hear the gospel and respond to it.²⁴ So baptism is a token of a person's obedience, which proceeds from faith. It is proof to the church and before God that he truly believes. It is the testimony of a good conscience.²⁵ Those who baptise infants are misguided in that they suppose that baptism admits the child into the covenant of grace. Instead, it is solely by the election of grace that this takes place. 'They baptise before the thing which is represented by baptism, namely, faith, is found in us' thus putting the cart before the horse.²⁶ Therefore, Simons self-consciously operates from a principle of

19. See George Huntston Williams, *The Radical Reformation*, Philadelphia, 1962, pp. 300-318

20. In *The complete writings of Menno Simons c. 1496-1561*, ed. John C. Wenger; Scottsdale, Pa, 1956.

21. *Ibid.*, pp. 237-243.

22. *Ibid.*, pp. 243-275.

23. *Ibid.*, pp. 275-282.

24. *Ibid.*, pp. 238-241.

25. *Ibid.*, pp. 244-247.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 259. See also p. 131, where he makes the same mistake in his *Foundation of Christian doctrine*.

individualism for 'the candidate for baptism must believe for himself,'²⁷ and so the household baptisms are interpreted in terms of an aggregate of believing individuals, no infants being recorded as present, rather than in terms of the corporate nature of the household as such.²⁸ Again, the hermeneutic of exclusive reliance on the New Testament requires explicit New Testament sanction for the practice of baptism and consequently an express command is needed to justify the baptism of infants. Since there is none, the practice is invalid.²⁹ The charge of rebaptism levelled at Simons' colleagues is a *non sequitur* since the baptism of infants is no baptism and, in any case, the apostles baptised the twelve disciples at Ephesus (Acts 19) although John had previously baptised them, since his baptism and theirs were not the same.³⁰

Simons' discussion demonstrates features that are present throughout the anabaptist case. First, there is the hermeneutical issue of an exclusive reliance on the New Testament in severance from its context in the ongoing history of salvation that lay behind it in the Old. Flowing from that commitment is the use of the New Testament as a regulative principle by which only what is explicitly commanded is permissible in the church. Second, the anabaptists' individualism may owe much to nominalism and its insistence that reality is to be found exclusively in the particular. Third by making baptism to be dependent on something present in man an anthropocentric doctrine is seen to emerge, a kind of primitive proto-Arminianism or proto-pietism that prescind from an objective view of the sacraments and instead is grounded on a subjective inner change in man. Baptism is a testimony to one's faith. Fourthly, Simons misunderstands his opponents. He views them through the lens of his own hermeneutic. He regards the exponents of the covenant argument to teach that a child is introduced into the covenant of grace by baptism. This, we shall see, is a serious error. In making this elementary mistake, Simons has misunderstood what his opponents consider the nature of baptism to be. As a result, they will be talking largely at cross purposes.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 254.

28. *Ibid.*, pp. 277-281.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 263.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 277.

III. The response (development from tentative beginnings to greater sophistication and complexity)

a. Luther and Melanchthon

Luther

Luther's first major treatment of infant baptism occurs in *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520), written before the anabaptist crisis had begun. He unfolds his teaching that the sacraments are dependent on the word of promise and are only fulfilled when faith is present in the recipient. He then indicates baptism to signify death and resurrection, or complete justification. While it is correct to say that it is a washing away of sins, by itself this is too weak an expression to bring out its full significance. That, again, is why immersion is the most complete sign since the sinner needs not so much to be washed as to die.³¹ Since it signifies resurrection its effect is lifelong and is only fully realised when we rise on the last day.³² Since faith is necessary how do infants fit in? The faith of the church avails for them. The Word of God has power to change a godless heart and so 'through the prayer of the believing church . . . the infant is changed, cleansed, and renewed by inpoured faith'.³³ He hints that the faith of the sponsors may also suffice,³⁴ and in the *Defence and Explanation*, also written in 1520, he makes this explicit.³⁵ However, later he changes his ground. In his *Concerning Rebaptism* (1528), designed expressly to counter the anabaptists, he argues that infants themselves have faith. First, he points out that it cannot be proved from Scripture that they do not have faith. Then he indicates biblical passages that tell us that children can and do believe. However, the main thrust of his argument is that the claim that infants cannot believe is false since John the Baptist believed, although he could neither hear nor understand. Consequently, to hold that a child believes is not contrary to Scripture. Therefore, to claim infants cannot believe is unscriptural.³⁶ Luther answers other anabaptist arguments too, although he acknowledges his contacts with them to be minimal, so that his knowledge of their teachings is vague.³⁷ He points to the inevitable uncertainty that will arise if the basis of baptism is the faith of the one baptised. We can be certain of no-one's faith, child or adult. People can deceive. We might then be led to repeated baptisms as we became in turn

31. *LW* 36. 65-68.

32. *LW* 36. 69-70.

33. *LW* 36. 73.

34. *Ibid.*

35. *LW* 32. 14.

36. *LW* 40. 241-242.

37. 'I am not sure as to the ground and reason of their faith, since you do not tell me . . . My answer cannot be very definite'. *LW* 40. 230. See also *Ibid.*, 40. 261-262.

uncertain and then sure of our own faith. 'You think the devil can't do such thing? You had better get to know him better. He can do worse than that, dear friend'.³⁸ Christ commands us to bring the children to him. They did not bring the humble to him, but children. He blessed children, not the humble.³⁹ He hints at an argument based on the covenant, already used by Zwingli, Bullinger and others.⁴⁰ In response to the claim that Christ has not specifically commanded the baptism of children, he counters by pointing out that he requires the baptism of the Gentiles and that children are a great part of the heathen, that the apostles baptised households, that John writes to little children that they know the Father and that God's Word spoken in baptism will not be void but will bear fruit in due course.⁴¹ If faith appears years after baptism, there is no more need for rebaptism than for a fresh engagement and marriage should a girl gain affection for her husband two years after the wedding. Are the Ten Commandments to be replaced because some do not understand or obey them? '. . . verily baptism can be correct and sufficient even if the Christian falls from faith or sins a thousand times a year'.⁴² It is evident that Luther regards the validity of baptism to reside in the command of God. It has an efficacy that comes from God and is consequently not dependent on the state of the administrator. After all, he claims, how can you be sure of the baptiser's faith?!⁴³ Faith is required by baptism. Baptism is not dependent on faith. To make baptism depend on faith is idolatry. It is dependence on a gift of God, not on God's Word alone.⁴⁴ As a parting shot, he points to the practice of infant baptism in the church since the time of the apostles. If the practice was wrong, for a thousand years there would have been no true baptism in the church, a state of affairs impossible to contemplate.⁴⁵

While Luther's defence of infant baptism is interesting throughout, its weaknesses are fairly evident. He hints at baptism being the New Testament successor of circumcision, but it is questionable whether he gives adequate expression to the underlying unity between the Old and New Testaments. He tends to stress the elements of discontinuity and antithesis rather than of comparison and development. While this contrast is seen mainly in soteriological terms, as man's reception of the Word of God as law or as grace, rather than in a redemptive-historical sense, and while his prevailing Christocentric exegesis of the Old Testament provides unity to both yet even this discussion of the connection between

38. *LW* 40. 240.

39. *LW* 40. 243.

40. *LW* 40. 244.

41. *LW* 40. 245-246.

42. *LW* 40. 246-248.

43. *LW* 40. 250-252.

44. *LW* 40. 252.

45. *LW* 40. 254-260.

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circumcision and baptism is couched in terms of separation and contrast. There is the covenant of circumcision and in addition the covenant of baptism. The former is rooted in the faith of Abraham, from which those circumcised were descended, while the latter is grounded on the merit of Christ to whom the children are brought.⁴⁶ Hence, he is not able to mount a radical challenge to the anabaptists' hermeneutic. His position under the patronage of his Elector shields him from the need to confront the anabaptists in practical conflict. He is consequently not fully aware of their teaching. Moreover, he shares the same tendency to individualism as they. There is no sense of the corporate dimensions either of baptism itself or of the household unit to which infants belong. He regards them purely as individuals. His nominalistic training may be influential here. It is this perspective that leads him towards infant faith.

We should note that Luther has restructured the basis for infant baptism. Whereas Rome maintained that infants are to be baptised because without it they cannot be saved, Luther argues that it is the command of God that validates it and faith that fulfils it. The domination of soteriology by ecclesiology in Rome is ended. Justification by faith alone now requires that baptism, as the entire doctrine of the church, be based on the Word and received in faith.

Melanchthon

Much of what Melanchthon says of baptism bears close resemblance to Luther. For instance, in his *Loci Communes* (1521 edition) he describes the sacraments as signs and seals reminding us of God's promises and testifying his goodwill towards us. Thus, baptism as immersion into water signifies a work of God 'as definite as if God himself should baptise you . . . so you shall consider this immersion as a sure pledge of divine grace'.⁴⁷ A transition from death to life is signified, the submersion of the old Adam into death followed by a revival of the new man. Like Luther, he sees its efficacy as continual and lifelong. Not until our own resurrection is its significant role exhausted. No more effective consolation to the dying can exist than to remind them of their baptism.⁴⁸ The baptism of John the Baptist was different from Christian baptism, since John baptised with respect to grace that was to come later whereas now baptism is a pledge and a seal of grace already conferred. So those baptised by John had to be rebaptised to be certain they had received remission of sins.⁴⁹ How Melanchthon has to rue this rash admission when the anabaptists appear on the scene! He has stressed the discontinuity of Old and New Testaments. The law has been completely

46. *LW* 40. 244.

47. *Philip Melanchthon: Loci Communes Theologici*; Library of Christian Classics, Philadelphia, 1969, 19. 133, 136.

48. *Ibid.*, 19. 137.

49. *Ibid.*, 19. 138-139.

annulled (*abrogatio*) in all respects by the New Testament. There is a relation of promise and fulfilment, a soteriological unity throughout, but the contrast is paramount, which accounts for the discrepancy between the two baptisms.⁵⁰ By the 1522 edition he tones this down. *Abrogatio* becomes *mutatio*. The anabaptists will force him to reconstruct the relationship. By the 1555 edition he will insist that there is, after all, no distinction between them. The difference consists simply in that between John and Jesus and what they did.⁵¹ In fact, the anabaptists destroy the meaning of baptism by claiming that the sacraments are only signs of good works, baptism indicating that we are to suffer much. There is nothing in their thinking on baptism directing us to the promise of God which baptism attests.⁵² In fact, 'anabaptism is a frightful, evil error and blasphemy of the divine name' for in their baptism they break the third commandment by taking the name of God in vain.⁵³ They are heretics, for they have rejected the baptism of the church. Infant baptism has been practised since the early, pristine church as Origen, Cyprian and Augustine maintained. Consequently, they have introduced a novelty without testimony in the early Christian Church.⁵⁴ The promise of God relates to children. To whom the promise belongs the sign is to be administered. Children need forgiveness but outside the church there is no forgiveness. Therefore they are to be brought into the church by baptism so as to receive forgiveness. Infant baptism fulfils the law of circumcision and, since baptism is commanded for all without distinction, it should be given to children. The anabaptists oppose this saying that since infants have no faith their baptism is useless. But they forget that God is active in the young only if they are brought to him in baptism. Christ tells us that children in the church are saved. No such grace occurs in the children of the heathen. So, because children are certainly saved in the church we should baptise them, for God then accepts them and gives them the Holy Spirit who is active in them according to their capacity.⁵⁵

There are hints here of Luther's discussion of infant faith, although for Melancthon this appears to follow from baptism itself rather than being something which may be present in the child already. In summary, the anabaptists view baptism as a covenant obligating us to kill evil lusts and to suffer, something which children can neither understand nor do. For Melancthon, however, baptism is first and foremost a testimony of

50. *Ibid.*, 19. 120-130.

51. *Melancthon on Christian Doctrine: Loci Communes 1555*, ed. Clyde L. Manschreck; Grand Rapids, 1982, p. 207.

52. *Ibid.*, p. 203.

53. *Ibid.*, p. 207.

54. *Ibid.*, pp. 209-211.

55. *Ibid.*, pp. 211-215.

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God's grace towards us, a covenant through which he promises us his grace.⁵⁶

While there is in Melancthon a developing appreciation for the underlying continuity between the Testaments, still he bases baptism not on any redemptive-historical ground but on an assortment of somewhat lightweight arguments. As with Luther, he has not fully grasped the corporate dimension of baptism and instead still grounds it in an individualistic sense. As such, he is not fully equipped to do battle with the hermeneutic of the anabaptists. His theme is that baptism incorporates into the church. We incorporate infants into the church by baptism. We do so because we are commanded to do so. Are we justified again in seeing an underlying impact of nominalism?

b. Zwingli and Bullinger: the beginnings of the covenant argument

Zwingli

Zwingli's thinking on baptism and the sacraments undergoes change in the course of his short career as a Reformer. Before 1523 he sees the sacraments as signs of the covenant by which God assures us of his grace. However, he does not say much about baptism at this time and is unwilling to use the word *sacramentum*, as we noted. He focuses more on faith than on baptism. Thus, in the *Sixty Seven Articles* (January 1523) while he stresses that the covenant of grace in Christ is God's pledge to us, and while he relates the covenant integrally to the Lord's Supper, nevertheless he does not say anything about its connection with baptism and has little of any significance on infant baptism.⁵⁷ The anabaptists have not yet surfaced. In 1524, however, he makes a sharp turn in his thinking. The sacraments in general, and baptism in particular, are now simply pledges which we give to others. This is his thesis as the new controversy begins. He will not be able to sustain it for long, for it will offer no defence for infant baptism. In *A commentary of true and false religion* (January 1525) there is little on the relation of the covenant to the sacraments. The stress is on the discontinuity between Old and New Testaments. The sacraments are the oath of a Christian to Christ and to other believers. Baptism is simply an initiatory sign by which a man proves to the church that he aims to be a servant of Christ. It cannot cleanse the conscience. Infant baptism is permissible.⁵⁸ In

56. *Ibid.*, pp. 215-216.

57. Kidd (1911), pp. 411-415. See Stephens (1986), pp. 180, 194-195; Jack W. Cottrell, 'Covenant and baptism in the theology of Huldreich Zwingli' (Ph.D dissertation: Princeton Theological Seminary, 1971), pp. 36-58.

58. 'Sic sunt ceremoniae exteriora signa, quae accipientem aliis probant eum se ad novam vitam obligavisse, aut Christum confessorum esse etque ad mortem'. *Opera*, 3. 773. See Stephens, p. 198.

Those who give cause for tumult he argues that the absence of a record of a baptism of an infant in the New Testament should no more prevent us from baptising infants than an absence of a record of a baptism in Calcutta prevents the church from baptising there.⁵⁹ Then in May 1525 he launches a major work, *Concerning baptism*, which follows along similar lines but which focuses obviously on baptism itself. It is directed against Rome's doctrine of baptismal efficacy,⁶⁰ but principally against the rising anabaptist sects. The stress is still on *discontinuity* between Old and New Testaments. He does accept similarities, so that baptism is the fulfilment of circumcision with an identity of meaning between the two, but there is no awareness of covenant unity.⁶¹ Moreover, baptism is still a sign of willingness by those who receive it to amend their lives and to follow Christ.⁶² There is nothing novel in Zwingli's treatment except his insistence on the identity of the baptism of John the Baptist and that of the apostles, a theme which was to become dominant thereafter. The twelve disciples at Ephesus in Acts 19 had not been baptised before their encounter with Paul but had simply received John's *teaching*. There was no question of their having been rebaptised.⁶³

However, Zwingli is about to make another alteration in his baptismal thought. At the moment he is unable to defend infant baptism. He is groping for an answer. Unfortunately for him, he shares many of the assumptions of the anabaptists; their stress on discontinuity between Old and New, their dualism between nature and grace, their focus on man's response rather than what God does in baptism. It is in his *Commentary on Genesis* (March 1527, but written from June 1525) that the change is first evident. Here he stresses *covenant unity* for the first time. There is but one faith and one church in all ages, the one covenant finding its unity in Jesus Christ. This covenant is God's promise to be our God. So, since the children of believers received the sign in the former era, so they are to receive baptism in the latter era.⁶⁴ Then, in his *Reply to Hubmaier* (1525) he applies this new-found theme of covenant unity to baptism in greater detail. The covenant is *God's* covenant and it is one. Our children have the same privileges as Israel's since they are in the same covenant. He provides a tabular comparison of the Abrahamic and the New covenants and indicates that the differences are purely relative to the degree of revelation given at the respective times. The new is the fulfilment of the Abrahamic and both are set in contrast with the Mosaic law. Baptism is now a sign of our belonging to God's covenant, not a

59. Stephens, p. 197.

60. *LCC* 24. 122-123, 127, 130f.

61. *Huldreich Zwinglis Samtliche Werke*, eds. E. Egli, W. Kohler und G. Finsler; Berlin, Leipzig, Zurich, 1905-, 4. 317f, 326-333. Hereafter = Z. See also Cottrell (1971), pp. 160-166; Stephens (1966), pp. 199-203.

62. *LCC* 24. 122-123, 127, 130f.

63. *LCC* 24. 161-174.

64. Cottrell (1971), pp. 179-184.

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pledge relating to our covenant. Baptism shows that our children belong to god's people no less than the children of the Jews.⁶⁵ This is to be the thrust of his teaching for the rest of his short life. He will oppose Luther's idea of infant faith.⁶⁶ He will write a further reply to Hubmaier, his *Refutation of anabaptist tricks* (July 1527), in which he will argue that infant baptism dates from the time of the apostles,⁶⁷ and will again major on the unity of the covenant as its ground.⁶⁸ He will berate the anabaptists because 'you reject the whole Old Testament.'⁶⁹ He concludes that since there is only one immutable God and testament, we who trust God are under the same testament as Abraham and Israel. Therefore since children were circumcised in the old covenant they are to be baptised in the new. Since Abraham's faith included the Hebrew children in it, not only believers but their children also are in the church and consequently ought not to be deprived of the covenant sign.⁷⁰ He was to progress no further than this.

Zwingli has advanced significantly on Luther in theological terms. He has discovered the hermeneutic principle of covenant unity that was to be developed further by others.⁷¹ He is therefore able to ground infant baptism on the covenant promise of God rather than, as Luther, on something in infants themselves or in the church. To do this he has escaped from the theme of discontinuity that the anabaptists were exploiting. To be sure, he recognises the differences between Old and New. However, he sees them as existing within an overriding unity and continuity. Unless he had done that he would never have been able to suggest a radical challenge to the anabaptists' hermeneutic. Not that this challenge spawned the theme; it was suggested independently and prior to the conflict. Instead, the conflict provided the occasion for it to be brought into prominence.⁷²

Nevertheless, Zwingli's constructions are bedevilled by serious structural weaknesses. His radical nature-grace dualism he shares with the anabaptists. He cannot regard baptism as a means of grace. The soul cannot be affected by what is bodily. The consequence is that baptism

65. Huldrych Zwingli, *Opera* (Zurich, 1545), 2, 29b, 112. See Cottrell (1971), pp. 194-212; Stephens (1986), pp. 206-209.

66. In his *A friendly exegesis* (Feb. 1527), Z 5, 649-650.

67. In *Selected writings of Huldreich Zwingli* (ed. S. M. Jackson; Philadelphia:, 1901), pp. 131-166, 247-251. Hereafter = *SW*.

68. *SW*, pp. 219-235.

69. *SW*, p. 179.

70. *SW*, pp. 235-236.

71. It is evident that Zwingli was the first to utilise the theme of covenant unity. Heinrich Bullinger acknowledged that this was so; see Cottrell (1971), p. 338. Cottrell produces extensive evidence to refute the claim of Schrenck that the anabaptists were the first to use the concept and that Zwingli simply responded; pp. 296-374. See Gottlob Schrenck, *Gottesreich und bund im alteren Protestantismus*, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1967 (1923), pp. 36-37. J. Wayne Baker, *Heinrich Bullinger and the covenant: the other Reformed tradition*, Athens, Ohio, 1980, pp. 1f, supports Cottrell.

72. See Cottrell, 1971, p. 212.

(and the Eucharist) cannot be integrated satisfactorily into his soteriology. There are loose ends that must be tied together before a coherent theology of baptism can be produced. His successor at Zurich, Heinrich Bullinger, will make an attempt at this.

Bullinger

With Bullinger lies the distinction of having written the first treatise specifically devoted to the covenant. His *De testamento seu foedere Dei unico and aeterno brevis expositio* (1534) sets out his thinking at length.⁷³ As the title indicates, his theme is the unity of the *one* covenant of God. In the same year he also expounded the covenant in his *Antiquissima fies et vera religio*.⁷⁴ These were no novelties for him, for he had followed the theme since Zwingli had introduced it.⁷⁵ For Bullinger, God made the covenant with Adam after the fall. God's grace has been expressed in unbroken unity in all ages of redemptive history. Since there has only ever been one covenant of grace, infants are to receive the sacrament now as they did before Christ came. His explicit hermeneutic is that of the unity and continuity of the covenant. However, he differs from Zwingli in his definition of covenant. Whereas with Zwingli covenant, while a theme of importance, is not central and is subordinate to his strong doctrine of election and to his Christology. Bullinger places it right at the heart of his theology. His is a more redemptive-historical treatment. He is concerned for history, for the ongoing revelation of covenant in the flow of the biblical record. Correspondingly, he does not share Zwingli's interest in predestination and election. Indeed, these matters are very much in the background in Bullinger's thought. This has an impact on his view of what the covenant actually is. Whereas Zwingli had construed it as primarily a one-sided, unilateral action of God,⁷⁶ Bullinger takes a different position. For him, the covenant is bilateral. It is conditional. God has established it out of mere grace, it is true, but at the root the pattern is one of mutuality. God makes certain promises. At the same time, he has placed on man stipulations he is to observe. In turn, man promises allegiance to God.⁷⁷ The decalogue is a summary of the conditions God requires man to fulfil. The Mosaic covenant is crucial, in unbroken harmony with the rest of God's covenants, in contrast to Zwingli who had set it apart from the Abrahamic, which latter was fulfilled in the new covenant. For Bullinger, this underlies covenant conditionality. Baptism is a condition

73. Heinrich Bullinger, *De testamento seu foedere Dei unico & seterno brevis expositio*, Zurich, 1534. An English translation is available as an appendix in Peter A. Lillback, 'The binding of God: Calvin's role in the development of covenant theology' (Ph.D dissertation: Westminster Theological Seminary, 1985).

74. Heinrich Bullinger, *Antiquissima fies et vera religio* (Zurich, 1534).

75. Baker (1980), *in passim*.

76. Lethan (1979), 1. 21-22; 1980, pp. 14-16.

77. Bullinger, *De testamento*, pp. 4-6.

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of the covenant required of man by God. The anabaptists have neglected this condition. They cannot therefore expect to receive the promises.⁷⁸

In an earlier work of 1531, translated into English in 1551 as *A most sure and strong defence of the baptism of children against the pestiferous sect of the anabaptists*,⁷⁹ Bullinger writes against the anabaptists. The work takes the form of a dialogue between Simon the anabaptist and Joiada the true Christian. Covenant unity is again the basis for baptism. From the Abrahamic covenant it is clear that God has included infants in his covenant. Believers' infants are in the covenant. This covenant still stands, or God would not be our God as he says he is in it. Thus, in the New Testament the faithful are called the children of Abraham. Christ receives young children. Paul writes of the children of Christians that they are clean. How can this be unless by the mercy and promise of God?⁸⁰ Simon replies that this makes carnal birth the key to belonging to the church, in conflict with John 1:12-13. Joiada's reply is that it is the promise of God that is the ground for membership of his church.⁸¹ He rehearses a range of arguments for infant baptism, largely supplementary to this main one, some of which he will repeat in his *Decades*. The crucial point is that the infants of the faithful are not baptised so as to belong to the covenant. They are baptised because they are in the covenant and are members of the church already. Moreover, this status is grounded not on anything in them as infants or in the relationship they sustain to their parents but rather on the promise of God's grace. Bullinger then turns his guns on the opposition. He attacks the naturalistic fallacy that pervades their reasoning, *is therefore ought*. 'We may never . . . make our argument, *a facto ad ius* . . . baptisme ought not to be denied unto infantes on the grounds that we do not read expressly that the apostles baptised infants'. They may have done so but it is not written. No man's facts, still less things left undone, should prejudice the law. Christ did not baptise; does that mean we should not baptise? If the apostles did not baptise infants, yet they baptised lawfully. Therefore we shall baptise infants lawfully. 'Bring ye therefore any lawe ye forbiddeth to baptise children'. The foundation for our practice is that which is lawful according to God's word not whether a thing was done or left undone.⁸² Finally, he highlights a deep hermeneutical clash. Simon retorts, 'Why dost thou take all thinges out of the olde Testament?', to which Joiada responds, 'I know what the matter is, ye cast away the olde Testament'. Why did Christ and the apostles defend their teaching from

78. *Ibid.*, pp. 9-12.

79. *A most sure and strong defence of the baptisme of children, set forth by that famous Clerke, Henry Bullinger: & now translated out of Laten into Englysh by John Deron (sic), Seno noys Worcester, 3 Apr 1551.* Hereafter = SSD. The original was *Von dem unverschampten . . . leeren der selbsgesandten Widertouffern*, Zurich, 1531.

80. Bullinger, SSD, pp. c. v. a-b.

81. *Ibid.*, p. C. vi. a.

82. *Ibid.*, pp. E. viii. a-b.

the Old Testament? Why do you blame us if we follow the example of Christ?⁸³

Later in his career, Bullinger turns his attention to baptism during the course of a series of fifty sermons, divided into five sets of ten and correspondingly known as the *Decades* (1549-1551, first published 1552). The sacraments, he states, are signs given to us by God representing his promises and thereby strengthening the faith of those who receive them. He likes Calvin's definition which has regard more to what God does than to man.⁸⁴ Thus, baptism is a sign involving water which signifies remission of sins, everlasting life, fellowship with Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit.⁸⁵ The Word is necessary to accompany the sign, since it is by the Word that God testifies to us his will.⁸⁶ A likeness exists between the signum and the res, 'a most apt and very near affinity between themselves'⁸⁷ but they must not be confused (an attack on the Roman Catholic teaching).⁸⁸ They do not give grace but rather confirm or testify the truth to us.⁸⁹ They are seals, baptism sealing to us that God certainly cleanses us from sin and makes us heirs of eternal life,⁹⁰ signifying and representing to us this cleansing as we have water sprinkled or poured on us and, as we have been dipped we are taken out of the water, that we are buried with Christ and raised to newness of life.⁹¹ Baptism is a dipping or plunging,⁹² although the apostles have not bound us 'so that it is free either to sprinkle or to dip'.⁹³ Only an ordained minister ought to baptise. Midwives are not permitted to do so, since Scripture forbids women to teach.⁹⁴ Baptism is to be administered to all whom God declares to be his; either those who profess faith or those who are acknowledged by God's promise to belong to his people. The infants of the faithful God reckons among his people. Therefore they are to be baptised.⁹⁵ So much is clear from God's covenant promise in Genesis 17 to be the God of Abraham and his seed throughout their generations. It is evident in Jesus' reception of the children that he had not come to abrogate this promise. That infants belong to the church is not grounded simply on a birth connection but upon the promise of

83. *Ibid.*, pp. E. v. a-b.

84. *The Decades of Henry Bullinger*, ed. The Revd Thomas Harding; Cambridge, 1849, 4. 233-234. Hereafter = *D*.

85. *D*, 4. 250.

86. *D*, 4. 254; see also 4. 272.

87. *D*, 4. 280.

88. *D*, 4. 266-279. See also 4. 286, 328.

89. *D*, 4. 299-311.

90. *D*, 4. 316-323.

91. *D*, 4. 328-331.

92. *D*, 4. 352.

93. *D*, 4. 364.

94. *D*, 4. 369.

95. *D*, 4. 382-383.

God.⁹⁶ 'Letting pass these brainsick, frantic, and foul-mouthed railers', God has commanded that all nations be baptised and infants are part of all nations. The *res* is greater than the *signum*, and since infants are not debarred from the *res* neither should they be from the *signum*. Women are not to be excluded from the Lord's Supper although there is no explicit command to admit them. All who receive the Holy Spirit are to receive baptism; the kingdom of heaven is for infants; no-one enters that kingdom who is not a friend of God; children are therefore friends of God and so have God's Spirit; who, therefore, can forbid baptism?

Circumcision was given to infants; the universal opinion of the fathers is that it has been replaced by baptism; therefore baptism is for infants. The apostles baptised whole households; children are the greatest part of the household; therefore the apostles baptised children; even if no infants were present in the households whose baptism is recorded, if there had been any they would have been baptised due to the household unit being the significant frame of reference for the baptism. Infant baptism, moreover, has been practised from the time of the apostles until now, as is witnessed by Origen, Jerome, Cyprian, Cyril and Augustine.⁹⁷ Consequently rebaptism is a defilement of the name of God. No-one in the Old Testament was ever circumcised twice. The twelve in Acts 19 had already been baptised but now received the baptism of the Holy Spirit.⁹⁸ In these sermons, the link with the covenant is more implicit than expressed. It is nevertheless obvious that it lies in the background. The most striking and important comment that Bullinger makes is to ground baptism in the promise of God. This obviates any counter-claim that the practice of infant baptism is based simply on birth. It is an assertion that God himself has a claim upon the child according to his gracious covenant, a claim that outweighs and predates any purely human connection that may obtain.

A further advance has been made. Going beyond Zwingli, Bullinger has made covenant unity explicit and has used it consistently in his baptismal theology. He has a closer relationship between *signum* and *res* than did his predecessor. If Zwingli's sacramentalism (or non-sacramentalism) can be seen as Nestorian in its radical separation of the two, and if Rome is virtually Eutychian in its view of the transubstantiation of the elements, Luther also leaning in that direction, Bullinger's is a mediating position. This better fits him to expound and defend his application of baptism to infants and to see it in a covenantal light, in which the relation of grace to the sacrament is neither automatic nor absent. Grace is not dispensed automatically to all, rendering faith superfluous, nor is it abstracted from the elements making faith ultimate.

96. D. 4. 383-388.

97. D. 4. 388-392.

98. D. 4. 394-396.

However, Bullinger's weak doctrine of election wedded to a conditional covenant may have been the achilles heel of his formulation. The prospect of baptism being more our response to God's grace, rather than something which God does for us, could be seen to follow from his idea of baptism as a condition of the covenant which we are to fulfil. If so, we are back with the anabaptist concept of baptism as a badge of our faith. However, the Reformed doctrine of baptism was soon to mature.

c. Bucer, Calvin and Vermigli

It is with Martin Bucer and the two most prominent of those in some way associated with him that we find the mature flowering of the Reformed doctrine of baptism. In this case, so close are their baptismal theologies that we will consider their contribution as a whole rather than as separate units. Bucer's major thought on baptism occurs in his commentary on the gospels, *In sacra quattuor evangelia enarrationes* (1530); in a treatise on infant baptism written to Bernard Rothmann, leader of the radical evangelicals at Munster, *Quid de baptisate infantium* (1533); in *excursus* in his Romans commentary, *In epistolam D. Pauli apostoli ad Romanos* (1536); and, more questionably, in the posthumous lectures on Ephesians edited by Tremellius from oral lecture notes, *Praelectiones doctiss, in Epistolam D. P. ad Ephesios* (1551). For Calvin we have concentrated on the first edition of his *Institutes* (1536), compiled before his sojourn in Strassburg, and the final edition of 1559. In addition, there is his *Brief instruction for arming all the good and faithful against the errors of the common sect of the Anabaptists* (1544), and a series of letters dating from 1554 to 1559. The principal works in which Vermigli discusses baptism are his Romans commentary, *In epistolam ad Romanos* (1558) and his commentary on I Corinthians, *In priorem epistolam ad Corinthios* (1562). Both latter men spent important formative years with Bucer at Strassburg. Calvin's thought shows definite changes during his stay there and is thereafter set on course for development but not for divergence. It is not without reason that both Calvin and Vermigli have been seen as Bucerans.⁹⁹

Bucer, Calvin and Vermigli are in agreement on the nature of baptism, viewing it as a sign of God's promise attesting his good will toward us. As Calvin puts it, it is 'an outward sign by which the Lord seals on our consciences the promises of his good will towards us'.¹⁰⁰ It exhibits

99. Joseph C. McLelland, *The visible words of God: an exposition of the sacramental theology of Peter Martyr Vermigli AD 1500-1562*, Edinburgh, 1957, pp. 272-281; D. F. Wright (ed.), *Common places of Martin Bucer*, Appleford., 1972, pp. 17, 53.

100. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian religion*, 4. 14. 1. Hereafter = *Institutes*. See also *Ibid.*, 4. 15. 1, 4. 15. 4, 4. 16. 2; *Institutes* (1536) = *Institution of the Christian religion*, trans., Ford Lewis Battles; Atlanta, 1975, p. 118. Hereafter = *Institutes* (1536), pagination referring to the 1975 edition. See also Peter Martyr Vermigli, *In epistolam S. Pauli apostoli ad Romanos* (Basel, 1558), p. 202; Martin Bucer, *Quid de baptisate infantium* (Strassburg, 1533), pp. A. vi, A.

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what it signifies, for it is no bare sign but has sacramental relation to that which is signified. 'We should see spiritual things in physical, as if set before our very eyes'.¹⁰¹ Hence, baptism as a sacrament is a seal of our salvation, sealing our regeneration and union with Christ in his death and resurrection,¹⁰² our cleansing from sin,¹⁰³ mortification of sin and renewal through union with Christ.¹⁰⁴ In contrast to Rome it is simply a sign, for it does not convey of itself what it portrays. In opposition to the anabaptists, it exhibits and seals what it signifies, for it is more than a simple memorial or badge of human profession. Consequently, both Bucer and Vermigli are fond of citing Augustine's dictum, that baptism is a visible word of God.¹⁰⁵

All three are quick to point out that the foundation of baptism is God's covenant with Abraham in Genesis 17. The chief thing in baptism, says Bucer, is the covenant of salvation. It is an instrument of the divine mercy.¹⁰⁶ Therefore, the principal point is what God does, not what we do, for the church baptises in the name of God, not of ourselves.¹⁰⁷ For Calvin too the covenant undergirds baptism. Circumcision in the Abrahamic covenant has yielded to baptism in the new covenant.¹⁰⁸ The Abrahamic covenant is no less in force today than with the Jews. There is an essential continuity in the covenant in all ages. The divine promises before Christ were spiritual. Christ has not abrogated them.¹⁰⁹ Vermigli insists that circumcision confirmed the promise of God to be God of Abraham and his seed, a promise applying to soul as well as body.¹¹⁰ Thus Bucer can reject the anabaptists' basing of baptism on the faith of the one baptised. 'Vide, frater. Baptisamur, non baptismus: baptisamur in mortem Christi, consepelimumur, rescuscitamur, vivificamur: non sepelimus, nos, resurgimus, vitam arripimus. Omnia fiunt nobis, nos nihil facimus. Ipse elegit, assumitque nos, non nos illum'.¹¹¹ Calvin is prepared to recognise that baptism is also a confession before men, but only in a strictly subordinate and secondary sense.¹¹²

viii; *In epistolam D. Pauli apostoli ad Romanos*, Basel, 1562 (Strassburg, 1536), pp. 195, 321, 323.

101. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4. 15. 4.

102. Vermigli, *ad Romanos*, p. 202.

103. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4. 15. 1-4.

104. *Ibid.*, 4. 15. 5-6.

105. Bucer, *Quid de baptisate infantium*, pp. A. vi, A. viii, B. i; *ad Romanos*, pp. 195, 321, 323; Vermigli, *ad Romanos*, pp. 199-202; McLelland, 1957, pp. 129, 140-145.

106. Martin Bucer, *Praelectiones doctiss. in epistolam D. P. ad Ephesios*, Basel, 1551, p. 146.

107. Bucer, *Quid de baptisate infantium*, p. A. viii. b.

108. Calvin, *Institutes*, (1536), p. 138. See also *Institutes*, 4. 16. 5-15.

109. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4. 16. 5-15.

110. Vermigli, *ad Romanos*, p. 204.

111. Bucer, *Quid de baptisate infantium*, p. C. i.

112. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4. 15. 13.

In terms of the efficacy of baptism, all three acknowledge the need for faith.¹¹³ They see baptism as confirming faith.¹¹⁴ For Calvin, it has an objective efficacy such that it is lawful to baptise the children of excommunicates or idolators providing there are sponsors belonging to the church, for God's covenant promise is to be faithful to the offspring of believers to thousands of generations. It is impossible that the impiety of successive generations can obstruct the promises of God. If three hundred or more years ago God had thought an ancestor worthy of adoption, the child today is due the privileges of the church, for baptism is grounded not on the basis of one of his parents alone but on the perpetual covenant of God. Since faith is required, a believing sponsor must be available to undertake instruction of the child.¹¹⁵

The uniform thinking on the mode of baptism follows the customary preference for immersion, while accepting that providing water is used, the precise manner in which it is applied is not of primary importance.¹¹⁶

It is in their defence of infant baptism that Bucer, Calvin and Vermigli are able to develop the covenant argument further.

Infants are to be baptised since the covenant is one and baptism replaces circumcision, which has been administered to infants before the coming of Christ.¹¹⁷ So much has been argued before. The testimony of the fathers to the apostolic origins of infant baptism had also been deployed in support of the practice.¹¹⁸ Each makes distinctive contributions of his own. Bucer argues in support of the unity and continuity of the covenant by indicating that the change in sacraments from circumcision to baptism occurred in terms of the *modum revelationis*, circumcision belonging to a time in which revelation was more obscure, in which the Spirit of Christ had not been made known fully and Christ had only been promised, whereas baptism belongs to a time which regards Christ as having already come.¹¹⁹ By this means he

113. Bucer, *Quid de baptisate infantium*, p. E. vii. See also Calvin, *Institutes*, 4. 14. 15.

114. Bucer, *ad Romanos*, p. 321.

115. John Calvin, 'Letter to John Knox (1559), in *Selected works of John Calvin: Tracts and Letters*, eds. Henry Beveridge and Jules Bonnet; Grand Rapids, 1983 (1858), 7. 74-75. Hereafter = SW.

116. Bucer, *ad Romanos*, p. 321; Calvin, *Institute*, 4. 15. 20 (although he insists that neither the unordained nor women can administer baptism, *Ibid.*, 4. 15. 21-22); Vermigli, *ad Romanos*, p. 199; McLelland, 1957, p. 140.

117. Bucer, *Quid de baptisate infantium*, pp. B. ii-iii, A. vi; *ad Romanos*, p. 331; Calvin, *Institutes* (1536), p. 138; *Institutes*, 4. 16. 5-15; SW, 6. 282-283; Vermigli, *ad Romanos*, pp. 115-116, 204. See also John Calvin, *Brief Instruction* (1544), in *John Calvin: Treatises against the anabaptists and against the libertines*, ed. Benjamin Wirt Farley; Grand Rapids, 1982, pp. 46-49; Peter Martyr Vermigli, *In selectissimam D. Pauli apostoli priorem ad Corinthios epistolam*, Zurich, 1579 [1562], p. 93.

118. Bucer, *Quid de baptisate infantium*, pp. D. v. b-D. vi; *ad Romanos*, p. 329.

119. The Old Testament sacraments were limited in their rôle of exhibiting Christ by the current *modum revelationis*. With the coming of Christ a change in the sacraments was therefore necessitated. Covenant history was a progressive revelation and the sacraments exhibited the promise of Christ. So when the promise had fully come a vehicle suitable to exhibit the fullness of the covenant was needed to replace that which had signified it in part. 'Cum itaque sacramenta

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safeguards the continuity while allowing for distinctive differences of administration. He also talks of baptism as a natural remedy, by which bodily health can be maintained, its efficacy residing in its conjunction with the Word of God, the latter providing the powerful sanitising effect on the physical constitution of the elect, thereby capacitating them to appreciate better the numerous benefits of God given in baptism.¹²⁰

Perhaps the anabaptists should have seen the doctor! Bucer rejects anabaptist arguments with vigour. From the fact that those who sought baptism and confessed faith were baptised it does not follow that only those who make confession are to be baptised. The anabaptists are guilty of selective exegesis. The passages they use relate to some aspects of baptism, not to all. Moreover, Luke in Acts intends to show the power of the apostles' preaching, not to construct a complete theology of baptism. He does not record all those who were baptised.¹²¹ Calvin had followed Luther and allowed for infant faith in the 1536 edition of the *Institute*.¹²² After moving to Strassburg in 1538, he drops the idea. Instead, infants of believers are part of the church and are to receive baptism on that basis. Because the covenant promise is for them, they belong to the church. Baptism is therefore the consequence of the status they enjoy and not its cause. If a convert is made 'at the time his posterity is made part of the family of the church. And for this reason infants of believers are baptised by virtue of this covenant, made with their fathers in their name and to their benefit'.¹²³ Hence, infants are not baptised in order to become sons and heirs of God but because they are already considered by God as occupying that place and rank. Because the covenant of salvation which God enters into with believers is common also to their children they are already of the family of God. If this promise had not been given it would be wrong to confer baptism on them.¹²⁴ But if they participate by God's grace in the reality, why should they be deprived of the sign? Since the sign is inseparable from the Word, if the sign is withheld, Word and sign are severed. Moreover, the grace of the new covenant would be more restrictive than that of the old.¹²⁵ Vermigli says the same.¹²⁶ But how can we give the sign if we are uncertain whether the infant will himself eventually believe? This problem is no different from that which obtains with adults professing faith. They can mislead us. We cannot judge of their election, for that is

unam redemptionem Christ promittunt & adducunt, & spiritum Christi exhibent'. Bucer, *ad Romanos*, p. 324.

120. Bucer, *ad Ephesios*, p. 146.

121. Bucer, *ad Romanos*, pp. 326-328.

122. Calvin, *Institutes* (1536), p. 138.

123. Calvin, *Brief Instruction*, in *Treatises*, p. 47.

124. Calvin, Letter to John Clauburger (1556), in *SW* 6. 282-283. See also *Ibid.*, 7. 74-75; *Institutes*, 4. 15. 22.

125. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4. 16. 5-6.

126. Vermigli, *ad Romanos*, p. 203, 115.

hidden from us. We follow the *indicia* which we have; thus adults confess faith in words and infants are offered to the church.¹²⁷ Perhaps Vermigli's most significant contribution is his discussion of the holiness of Christian children in his commentary on I Corinthians. The children of Christians belong to the church in exactly the same way as did the children of the Jews belong to God's people. God promised to Abraham that not only he but his seed also were included in the covenant of God. Therefore our children are members of the church. In this way the apostle calls them holy. They are able to have the Spirit and grace of Christ. Not that natural propagation is the basis of this status. Our free salvation is ultimately grounded on the election and mercy of God. But we ought not curiously to inquire into the hidden depths of God's election but rather attend to his promise, which is made on the basis of family lines. We thereby regard the children of the saints as holy, not excluding them from the church but hoping well of them.¹²⁸ Thus the promise of God comes first, by which our children are graciously included in the covenant and declared to be living members of the church of Jesus Christ. As circumcision, so baptism does not precede the promise. It follows.¹²⁹

For all three, Bucer, Calvin and Vermigli, it is the promise of God, and not physical propagation *per se*, which is the basis of baptism. It is this unbreakable promise which constitutes an adult or infant part of God's covenant. If this reality and status is thereby given, the sign must follow. Together, their predestinarianism is stronger than Bullinger's. So also they each regard the covenant as something God has made and which Christ has fulfilled for us, rather than as a bilateral construction the stipulations of which are to be fulfilled in and by us.¹³⁰ In this, they are better able to preserve a focus on the sovereign and gracious promise of God, on 'Christ clothed with his gospel'. Together with the parallel redemptive-historical setting in which covenant unity can find expression they have succeeded in bringing to full development the Reformation thinking on baptism.

IV. Conclusion: the hermeneutical issues

The differences that existed between the Reformers and anabaptists were not such as could be resolved purely by biblical exegesis. A vast chasm lay between them. It was a clash of world views. As the professor of philosophy remarked to two women he saw having a flaming row while each polished her doorstep on opposite sides of the street, 'It's no use,

127. Vermigli, *ad Romanos*, pp. 115-116.

128. Vermigli, *In priorem ad Corinthios*, p. 92a.

129. *Ibid.*, p. 93b.

130. Lethan (1979), 1. 79-80, 101-103, 119-122. Bucer, *ad Romanos*, pp. 440, 518; *ad Ephesios*, pp. 75-79; Vermigli, *ad Romanos*, pp. 167, 1167-1168; Calvin, *Institutes*, 2. 6. 3-4, 2. 10. 8, 3., 2. 32, 3, 14, 6, 3. 17. 2, 5-6, 4. 14. 6.

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you'll never come to an agreement; you're arguing from different premises'. The following are principal areas of conflict at the hermeneutical level.

a. Continuity/discontinuity between Old and New Testament

For the anabaptists an explicit New Testament command was necessary to justify infant baptism. Lacking such a command, the practice was deemed unlawful. Hence, the New Testament as such was seen as the handbook for church practice, taken in isolation from the Old Testament. The tendency was therefore to see the covenants more in discontinuity. The Reformers, on the other hand, viewed Old and New Testaments, for all the differences in administration, as in essential continuity and thus took a canonical approach to baptism seeing its theological roots in the Abrahamic covenant.

b. Corporate/individual

For the anabaptists each individual must believe for himself before he can be baptised. The focus was on the individual. Was this perhaps related in some way to late medieval nominalism, which denied the reality of universals and insisted that only the particular was real? For the Reformers, the corporate unit had priority. Certainly, individual responsibility was vital. However, the individual was seen to find his place in the group. The household had been adopted by God as the vehicle for covenant administration.

c. Unitary/dualist

The anabaptists posited a radical separation between nature and grace. God's grace was regarded as essentially spiritual, abstracted from the physical realm. Thus, objectively efficacious sacraments in which spiritual grace was conveyed by means of material objects found scant support. Some reformers, such as Zwingli, had sympathy for this position. However, for Luther, on the one hand, and Bucer and his friends on the other, there was no problem in conceiving of sacramental grace in which the Spirit worked in conjunction with physical elements. The doctrines of creation, incarnation and resurrection underlay such thinking. If, however, sign and reality were seen as radically separate, then the theological weight in the doctrine of baptism would automatically fall on the spiritual condition of the baptised rather than on the exercise of grace by God.

d. Theocentric/anthropocentric

For the anabaptists, baptism was to be administered on the basis of something present in the one baptised. Consequently, baptism was

viewed as a testimony to the baptised's own faith. It was a badge of his Christian commitment. For the Reformers, baptism was regarded as based on the promise of God given in his covenant. Therefore, baptism was seen to refer to what God does for us, not to what we do in return. This was true, irrespective of whether the baptised was an adult or an infant. But a believing adult and a believer's child were in God's covenant already, baptism signifying and sealing what he had done for them.

e. 'Calvinist'/'Arminian'

In terms of the relation between baptism and faith, the anabaptists exhibited what we could term a *proto-Arminian* or *proto-pietist* order. At heart, baptism was regarded as relating to the faith that precedes. First there is faith, then baptism follows. The stress is on what we do, on something present in us. For the Reformers, baptism was seen as related more to the faith which follows, placing on the baptised a continuing and ongoing responsibility for commitment to God's covenant. Baptism was seen as exhibiting and sealing God's grace. This grace correspondingly had precedence over man's response of faith. This was a *proto-Calvinist* order. The anabaptists alleged that this opened the door to impiety and moral laxity. The Reformers countered by arguing that the anabaptists made faith a work and so encouraged legalism.

No amount of purely biblical exegesis could solve these differences. Mutually incompatible worldviews were at war. Both could not be correct. Compromise and agreement could only take place by at least one side abandoning its worldview. Today such agreement could conceivably occur. Yet it would not be an agreement between the *weltanschauungen* of the anabaptists and the Reformers.