

# ORIGINAL SIN, INFANT SALVATION, AND THE BAPTISM OF INFANTS

—A Critique of Some Contemporary Baptist Authors—

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## Introduction

IN REFORMED THINKING the covenant of grace forms the basis for the practice of infant baptism. This practice, however, has been much contested within Protestant theology, causing the mercury on the theological thermometer to rise from time to time. Heated polemics, of course, are not foreign to the topic of infant baptism. Countless articles, treatises, books, and pamphlets have been written in favor of and in opposition to the baptism of infants. Certainly theologians and scholars have not lacked resolve and conviction regarding this subject; nonetheless, no unanimity has resulted as a consequence of nearly half a millennium of polemics. Proponents from each side of the debate have been unable to achieve a consensus among Protestants regarding the proper subjects of baptism. The issue remains a cause for division.

Thus, after nearly five hundred years of debate, some theologians are pleading for a truce within the evangelical church. Wayne Grudem, for example, while himself arguing vigorously for believer's baptism, does not think baptism ought to be a point of division among churches. He suggests that paedobaptists and advocates of believer's baptism jointly acknowledge that "baptism is not a major doctrine of the faith." Grudem recognizes that this would require concessions on the part of

Baptists and paedobaptists alike so that *both* views of baptism could be “taught and practiced” in their respective churches.<sup>1</sup>

Grudem’s suggestion comes, as noted above, after he has waged his own polemic against infant baptism. While his desire to see greater unity in the evangelical church is highly commendable, especially since evangelicals hold so much in common confessionally, Grudem’s plea for accommodating (or tolerating) one another’s theology and practice reflects a doctrine of baptism that must be challenged. In other words, in advocating that Baptist and paedobaptist churches agree to disagree regarding the theology and practice of infant baptism, and even agree to *permit* one another’s theology and practice of baptism within the same ecclesiastical circle, Grudem shows that he is ready to underrate baptism’s place and importance. Consequently, while Grudem’s plea is attractive, it fundamentally misunderstands the doctrine of infant baptism that was given confessional shape among the Reformed during the Protestant Reformation. What is more, other recent Baptist theologians have sounded a different note regarding the permissibility of infant baptism and the necessity of believer’s baptism.

Stanley J. Grenz, in offering what we might call a distillation of the Baptist assessment of infant baptism, notes that proponents of believer’s baptism “reject infant baptism as an inferior, even dangerous, practice.” Since infants lack personal conscious faith, the rite either comes to a meaningless “baby dedication” or “is inflated to a regenerative act which encourages confidence in baptism rather than in Christ.” Moreover, infant baptism is deemed to be “harmful,” for it does not allow the child to make use of “the divinely ordained means of declaring conscious and responsible belief in Jesus Christ later in life.” The “dangerous” character of infant baptism is also evident in the phenomenon of “a national church which extends the boundaries of the faith community to the political boundaries of the land.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House; Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 982.

<sup>2</sup>Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (1994; repr., Grand

Rhetoric of this sort, with words like “dangerous” and “harmful,” hardly represents a softening of the polemic or an openness to accommodate diverse perspectives pertaining to the baptism of infants. It is apparent that not all advocates of believer’s baptism are prepared to make their peace with the paedobaptist position. Likewise from the Reformed side, paedobaptists have not historically been of the conviction that the baptism of covenant children is optional. On the contrary, historic Reformed practice argued not merely for the permissibility of infant baptism but for its necessity. As G. C. Berkouwer notes, “the practice of infant baptism rests upon a definite confession.”<sup>3</sup> This is reflected, for example, in the old Dutch Reformed “Form for the Baptism of Infants.” In this Form believing parents acknowledge that their children are sinful from conception and birth and are therefore subject to all manner of misery, even eternal condemnation; yet, as recipients of the divine promise of grace, they are “sanctified in Christ” and so as “members of His Church *ought to be baptized*.”<sup>4</sup>

Since this is so, Baptists and paedobaptists are faced with the temptation simply to agree to disagree and go their separate ways. A better avenue seems open to us, however, and that is frankly to acknowledge how far apart advocates of believer’s baptism and infant baptism remain, while attempting to explore and clarify the debate.

This leads us to inquire into the status of the debate. What precisely is the hinge upon which the disagreement pivots? Is there any possibility of narrowing the gap between these two positions in a manner other than Grudem’s proposal of mutual toleration?

In an attempt to clarify and continue the discussion we do well to examine the shape of the current consensus against infant baptism among evangelical-Baptist theologians in North

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Rapids: Eerdmans, Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2000), 528-529.

<sup>3</sup>G. C. Berkouwer, *The Sacraments*, trans. Hugo Beker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 161.

<sup>4</sup>Quote taken from appended pages of *Psalter Hymnal* (Grand Rapids: Board of Publications of the Christian Reformed Church, 1976), 125; italics added.

America. More specifically, we do well to examine a facet of the debate that is often neglected, namely, the role that the doctrine of original sin plays in determining the status of infants and children—both the children of believers and unbelievers—which in turn has direct implications concerning the proper subjects of baptism. I maintain that the doctrine of original sin has significant implications for the assessment of infant baptism. In other words, the theological pre-commitment on the nature and scope of original sin and who therefore may be reckoned as participants in Adam’s sin plays an important role in how both opponents and proponents of infant baptism “size up” the Scriptural evidence for the practice of baptizing children. In short, the doctrine of infant baptism is intimately connected to the doctrine of original sin. The current evangelical-Baptist consensus in opposition to the traditional formulation of the doctrine of original sin significantly downplays the effects of original sin upon infants and all others who have not reached a state of moral accountability. What this means for the issue of infant baptism is that children, before reaching an age of moral accountability, are not reckoned in strict need of the redemption that baptism symbolizes.

However, if either the classical, broadly Augustinian conception or the federalist scheme of original sin is valid, such that even infants are corrupted and guilty in Adam’s sin, then they too, even as infants, stand in need of Christ’s redemptive work as those who are guilty and condemnable in God’s eyes. Thus in opposition to the current Baptist consensus, the Reformed understanding of original sin maintains that infants are dirty and need to be washed in the blood of Christ—even as they are guilty and need to be justified by Christ’s perfect sacrifice and active obedience in fulfillment of the law. Consequently, insofar as a certain class of infants are indubitably the objects of divine redemption, the sign and seal of that redemption—baptism—ought to be administered to them. Of course, in this connection baptism’s import looms large on the horizon of debate.

The argument of this essay will proceed in the following manner: First I shall present in outline the Baptist consensus

against the baptism of infants. Next I shall consider the rejection of the doctrine of *original guilt* that forms a part of that consensus—a rejection that paves the way for a doctrine of infant salvation. This discussion is followed by a brief analysis of how the denial of inherited guilt coincides with the rejection of infant baptism. Finally I shall offer an extensive critique of the evangelical-Baptist consensus on original sin and infant salvation, and its dismissal of infant baptism. In particular I shall argue that any doctrine of infant salvation which bypasses the necessity and fullness of Christ's redemptive work is contrary to Scripture and must be rejected. I also argue that all humans—whether young or old, mentally handicapped or of sound mind—reach eternal blessedness only through Christ's full redemptive work on the cross and the Spirit's renewing operation. From that perspective, I also argue that the sign of salvation may not be separated from the thing signified, which is to say, if one participates in the reality of salvation he or she must receive the sign of that salvation—the mark of baptism.

### An Outline of the Evangelical-Baptist Consensus against the Baptism of Infants

In considering the treatment of baptism among contemporary evangelical-Baptist authors, I will be examining the works of the following theologians: Millard J. Erickson's *Christian Theology*,<sup>5</sup> Gordon R. Lewis and Bruce A. Demarest's *Integrative Theology: Historical, Biblical, Systematic, Apologetic, Practical*,<sup>6</sup> and Stanley J. Grenz's *Theology for the Community of God*.<sup>7</sup> While

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<sup>5</sup>Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998).

<sup>6</sup>Gordon R. Lewis & Bruce A. Demarest, *Integrative Theology: Historical, Biblical, Systematic, Apologetic, Practical*. Three volumes in one (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996).

<sup>7</sup>Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (1994; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans., Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2000). Interestingly, in his *Systematic Theology*, Wayne Grudem, another contemporary evangelical-Baptist author, follows a more traditional Augustinian doctrine of original sin and therefore a trajectory distinct from these other writers; see his

complete unanimity cannot be found among these writers on all issues pertaining to baptism, it is fair to say that together they represent a major consensus among proponents of believer's baptism. What follows is a distillation of their arguments against infant baptism, gleaned from their own polemics as well as the sources they cite in defense of their position.<sup>8</sup>

In summary form, the baptism of infants is impermissible for the following reasons: (1) Practitioners of infant baptism fundamentally *misconceive* and *misconstrue* the nature and import of baptism; consequently, in allowing infants to be baptized, the proponents of this custom *misuse* the ordinance that Christ ordained *for the benefit of believers*.<sup>9</sup> (2) The New Testament witness is *silent* on the question of infant baptism, evident in that not a single instance of the practice can be adduced for its support, including the texts that describe household baptisms.<sup>10</sup> (3) The *key New Testament texts* that paedobaptists cite in support of the baptism of infants simply are *not applicable*, including the often vague appeal to the covenant of grace and the continuity that allegedly exists between the Old and the New Testaments on the nature and place of children in the covenant community.<sup>11</sup> (4) The *sequence* for the operation of salvation that prevails in the New Testament is contrary to the theology and practice of baptizing infants, for that sequence consists of gospel preaching, the hearing of gospel preaching, confession of faith, and then water baptism. Since infants are incapable of the requisite faith, their baptism is premature and inappropriate. The membership

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*Systematic Theology*, 494-501.

<sup>8</sup>For part of this list I have adapted the synopsis of James Leo Garrett, *Systematic Theology: Biblical, Historical, and Evangelical*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990, 1995), II:526-528.

<sup>9</sup>See Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, 529; Lewis and Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, III:288; Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1105-1106; also Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 978-79.

<sup>10</sup>See Garrett, *Systematic Theology*, II:526; Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, 528; Lewis and Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, III:289; Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1111-1112; Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 978.

<sup>11</sup>See Garrett, *Systematic Theology*, II:527; Lewis and Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, III:288; Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1112; Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 976-77.

of the church must respect this sequence, for only those are members of Christ and of his church who are united to him by *credible faith*.<sup>12</sup> (5) The case for believer's baptism does not depend upon mere occasions or instances of baptism recorded for us in the New Testament. Rather, it is determined by the wider and broader scope of the New Testament witness as such—that is, it rests upon “New Testament theology.” Thus Christ's person and work, the church's nature and function, as well as the eschatological significance of salvation in its entire scope must come into play as we consider the doctrine of baptism and see the support for believer's baptism in opposition to infant baptism.<sup>13</sup> (6) The *practical consequences* of infant baptism are often harmful, leading the recipients of infant baptism to presume that they are regenerate and do not need seriously to consider their spiritual state before God. Consequently, over time, the church is crippled by unbelief. Moreover, another practical consequence of the baptism of infants is that it easily links up with the idea of a national church (a *Volkskirche*) wherein the boundaries of the church are inclusive of all the citizenry of the state. The church is thus infected with nominal religion, since a large segment of the baptized population in such a circumstance tends not to worship God or live the *new life* in Christ which baptism, rightly conceived, symbolizes.<sup>14</sup> (7) Infant baptism is inordinately and needlessly linked to a doctrine of *original guilt*. In the early centuries of the church the baptism of infants was a “practice in search of a theology,” with the consequence that a theology of original sin, which imputed the guilt of Adam's first sin to infants so that they share in eternal damnation, needed a theology of

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<sup>12</sup>See Garrett, *Systematic Theology*, II:526-27; Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 969-70; G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*. W. T. Whitley Lectureship, 1962, American Paperback Edition (1973; reprint edition, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 272, 274.

<sup>13</sup>See Garrett, *Systematic Theology*, II:528.

<sup>14</sup>See Garrett, *Systematic Theology*, II:527; Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, 529; Lewis and Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, III:288-89; Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 980.

baptism that delivered infants from that guilt and its consequences.<sup>15</sup>

This list of arguments constitutes quite a polemic against baptizing infants. Of course, numerous Reformed responses to such arguments are within easy reach.<sup>16</sup> Our purpose here is not to engage each of these theses, except for the last and, in some respects, the most decisive one, the argument that infant baptism is inappropriately linked to the doctrine of original sin. This argument is particularly curious in view of the consensus that can be discerned among evangelical-Baptist writers regarding the doctrine of infant salvation, or more specifically, the doctrine that affirms the salvation of all persons who die in infancy or before reaching a state of accountability. We wish to subject this doctrine to analysis and critique, particularly as it forms part of the Baptist polemic against the baptism of infants.

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<sup>15</sup>See Garrett, *Systematic Theology*, II:527.

<sup>16</sup>See B. B. Warfield's response over a century ago to the arguments of Augustus Hopkins Strong, entitled "The Polemics of Infant Baptism," *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield*, vol. 9, Studies in Theology (1932; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1991), 398-408. Warfield offers a cogent rebuttal to Strong, and many of his polemical arrows hit the target of the criticisms summarized above. Also see G. C. Berkouwer, *The Sacraments*, 161-187; Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (1871-1873; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), III, 546-579; Robert Dabney, *Lectures in Systematic Theology* (1927; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985), 777-799; Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (1939, 1941), 631-643; Wilhelmus à Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, 4 vols., trans. Bartel Elshout (Ligonier, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1993), II:504-511; John Murray, *Christian Baptism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1980), 45-82; H. Westerink, *A Sign of Faithfulness: Covenant and Baptism*, trans. J. Mark Beach (Neerlandia, Alberta; Pella, Iowa: Inheritance Publications, 1997); Pierre Ch. Marcel, *The Biblical Doctrine of Infant Baptism*, trans. P. E. Hughes (London: James Clarke & Co., 1953), 187-245; John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), IV.16.1-32.

## The Evangelical-Baptist Consensus Regarding Original Sin and Infant Salvation

In setting forth his doctrine of original sin, Millard Erickson begins by arguing for a realist conception or what he terms the “natural headship of Adam.” Humans participate in Adam’s sin by being “actually present within Adam.” This means that “we all sinned in his act.” Erickson believes this scheme solves the problem of alien guilt and answers the charge of injustice, for we sin with Adam.<sup>17</sup>

Yet a problem remains. What is the condition of infants and children? If his realist conception of original sin is correct, this implies that all persons—including infants and children—are born with a corrupted nature and reckoned guilty in being sinners with Adam. This brings Erickson to consider whether children who die in infancy, before they make a conscious decision of faith, are lost and condemned to eternal death. At this point his doctrine of original sin softens: “While the status of infants and those who never reach moral competence is a difficult question, it appears that our Lord did not regard them as under condemnation.” This means that all those who fail to attain an age of moral competence are exempted from the guilt and consequent condemnation that is part of original sin. In fact, Erickson argues that Jesus held little children up as an example of the type of person who will inherit the kingdom of God (Matt. 18:3; 19:14), meaning they are free from the guilt and eternal penalty of original sin. Erickson also appeals to 2 Samuel 12:23, wherein David expresses confidence that he would again see his child who had died. “On the basis of such considerations,” writes Erickson, “it is difficult to maintain that children are to be thought of as sinful, condemned, and lost.”<sup>18</sup>

Erickson maintains that in taking this position he is not being “sentimental.” On the contrary, he believes this position is biblically required, for Scripture tells us that “persons are not morally responsible before a certain point, which we sometimes

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<sup>17</sup>Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 654.

<sup>18</sup>Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 654.

call ‘the age of accountability’.”<sup>19</sup> Erickson offers the following arguments in support of this idea:

In Deuteronomy 1:39, Moses says, ‘And the little ones that you said would be taken captive, your children who do not yet know good from bad—they will enter the land. I will give it to them and they will take possession of it.’ Even with the Hebrew idea of corporate personality and corporate responsibility, these children were not held responsible for the sins of Israel. In the messianic prophecy in Isaiah 7, there are two references to the time when the boy ‘knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right’ (vv. 15, 16). Finally, Jonah quotes God as saying, ‘But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?’ (4:11). Although this is less clear, it appears from the context that the reference is to the ability to distinguish morally. Underlying these statements is the apparent fact that prior to a certain point in life, there is no moral responsibility, because there is no awareness of right and wrong.<sup>20</sup>

Erickson further argues that just as Christ’s righteousness is not imputed to believers without a conscious act of faith—otherwise all would automatically be saved—so the imputation of Adam’s guilt requires “some sort of volitional choice as well.” If “unconscious sin” is valid, then “unconscious faith” is valid. Both notions are dubious in Erickson’s mind.<sup>21</sup> As for children who die in infancy or an early age, despite their participation in Adam’s sin, “they are somehow accepted and saved.” The “spiritual effects” of the original curse are canceled out in their case inasmuch as they have made no conscious choice of Adam’s sin. Referring to the parallelism between Adam and Christ in Romans 5, Erickson asserts that while some theological constructions preserve this parallelism “by allowing both unconscious or unconditional imputation of Adam’s guilt and

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<sup>19</sup>Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 654.

<sup>20</sup>Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 654-655.

<sup>21</sup>Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 655.

Christ's righteousness," he believes an alternative construction is preferable.<sup>22</sup>

The current form of my understanding is as follows: We all were involved in Adam's sin, and thus receive both the corrupted nature that was his after the fall, and the guilt and condemnation that attach to his sin. With this matter of guilt, however, just as with the imputation of Christ's righteousness, there must be some conscious and voluntary decision on our part. Until this is the case, there is only a conditional imputation of guilt. Thus, there is no condemnation until one reaches the age of responsibility. If a child dies before becoming capable of making genuine moral decisions, the contingent imputation of Adamic sin does not become actual, and the child will experience the same type of future existence with the Lord as will those who have reached the age of moral responsibility and had their sins forgiven as a result of accepting the offer of salvation based upon Christ's atoning death. The problem of the corrupted nature of such persons is presumably dealt with in the way that the imperfectly sanctified nature of believers will be glorified.<sup>23</sup>

For Erickson, then, our voluntary decision ends our childish innocence and constitutes a ratification of the first sin of the fall. Wishing however to avoid the Arminian view which postpones the imputation of the first sin until we commit a sin of our own, whereby we ratify Adam's first sin so that it is imputed to us, Erickson aims to preserve the parallelism between our accepting the work of Christ and that of Adam, while simultaneously affirming our responsibility for the first sin. "We become responsible and guilty," says Erickson, "when we accept or approve of our corrupt nature." Upon recognition of "our own tendency toward sin," we can either repent of it and seek divine forgiveness, or we can acquiesce in it and in effect embrace the sinful nature. "By placing our tacit approval upon the corruption, we are also approving or concurring in the action in the Garden of Eden so long ago." This means that "we become guilty of that

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<sup>22</sup>Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 655-656.

<sup>23</sup>Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 656.

sin without having committed any sin of our own.”<sup>24</sup> Thus guilt attaches itself to corruption along the path of personal sin. Retroactively, upon a personal and morally responsible act of transgression, original guilt is imputed to the sinner.

In their joint work entitled *Integrative Theology*, Gordon R. Lewis and Bruce A. Demarest also address the topic of original sin and the baptism of infants. Lewis and Demarest, like Erickson, affirm original sin, with a doctrine of depravity, and the solidarity of guilt.<sup>25</sup> They conceive of this solidarity in the way of “realism,” for humans are a single race and Adam’s natural headship is presupposed in the theological argument of Romans 5.<sup>26</sup> However, in defining the *grounds* of judgment, guilt, and punishment, Lewis and Demarest, again like Erickson, do not affirm a doctrine of imputed guilt but focus upon personal rebellion, for all are “accountable for breaking faith with the Creator.” “Before God himself we find ourselves repeatedly guilty of illicit desires, relationships, words, and acts.”<sup>27</sup>

Having said this, Lewis and Demarest likewise (as an inevitability) raise the question regarding the moral and legal standing of children who die in infancy. They observe that children born of flesh are flesh (John 3:6; cf. Ps. 51:5; Eph. 2:3). Moreover, such children are included in the universal curse that God placed upon humanity in Adam (Rom. 5:16, 18) and consequently they physically die (v. 12). “Nevertheless infants who die do not suffer the eternal penalty, for *that penalty falls only on those who themselves responsibly sin.*”<sup>28</sup>

In defense of this position Lewis and Demarest argue that whereas the parents who sinned during the wilderness journey died without entering the Promised Land as a consequence of their sin, the children, not yet being morally responsible, did not

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<sup>24</sup>Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 656.

<sup>25</sup>Gordon R. Lewis & Bruce A. Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, II:208-222, especially pages 214-15, 218-19.

<sup>26</sup>Lewis and Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, II:221-222.

<sup>27</sup>Lewis and Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, II:221.

<sup>28</sup>Lewis and Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, II:223.

undergo their parents' penalty; instead, they entered the land of promise (Deut. 1:39).

The age of responsibility here indicated was twenty years for inclusion in the census of adult citizens (Num. 14:29-31). Other passages show that children may suffer the natural consequences of their parents' sin until the third and fourth generations (Exod. 20:5; 34:7), but their spiritual relation to God, whether good or bad, was not determined by their parents. "The soul who sins is the one who will die" (Ezek. 18:20). Children are not capable of responsibly committing the sins attributed to those who eternally alienate themselves from God. For reasons like these, minors who die before reaching moral accountability, will not suffer the execution of the penalty of imputed condemnation.<sup>29</sup>

Since infants are incapable of repentance and faith, they cannot take hold of the benefits of Christ's atoning work except by way of "special application." Lewis and Demarest argue that this does not constitute a "different ground of salvation," though it does entail a "different mode of application." They accent the fact that in Scripture punishment is always according to merit and befits the crime. Children who die in infancy therefore do not suffer eternal punishment for their parents' sins. "The eternal welfare of each soul is determined by itself irregardless [sic] of whether the parents were wicked or good (Ezek. 18)." What this comes to in Lewis and Demarest's analysis is that, though infants are "under the sentence of eternal death" inasmuch as they share solidarity with the human race, they will not suffer eternally since they "have not themselves responsibly sinned."<sup>30</sup>

Lewis and Demarest also appeal to Matthew 18:2-14 and 19:14.

[A]lthough these passages are not as explicit as we might like, they may justify a special application of the provisions of Christ's atonement to children. Since they have not responsibly committed any sins and have no sins of which to repent, and since they could not consciously believe on Christ to deliver

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<sup>29</sup>Lewis and Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, II:223.

<sup>30</sup>Lewis and Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, II:223.

them from their innate inclination to sin, surely Christ will pardon them of their sinful natures and welcome them to his kingdom, whether or not the parents are in the covenant, whether or not they have had the child undergo infant baptism or last rites.<sup>31</sup>

Children who die in infancy, indeed all those who fail to attain a state of moral accountability, stand justified and are forgiven their inherited inclination to commit sin. Infant death therefore is indicative of divine election.<sup>32</sup>

Stanley Grenz is another author whose doctrine of original sin does not fit within classically Reformed theological categories. In considering what he calls “the Reformed view” of original sin, a doctrine that entails the idea that all Adam’s offspring inherit both a depraved nature and actual guilt, Grenz challenges the Reformed exegesis of Ephesians 2:3 and Romans 5:12-21. Grenz argues that the phrase in Ephesians 2:3 “by nature children of wrath” is better translated “by nature wrathful children,” so that what the apostle teaches in this verse is not that Adam’s offspring are guilty with Adam’s sin but all humans are by nature “wrathful people.”<sup>33</sup> Grenz also challenges the Reformed understanding of Romans 5:12-21. Inasmuch as Paul affirms “the universality of sin” through Adam’s disobedience and “the divine solution” through the obedience of Christ, making “righteousness available,” the apostle’s point is that “Adam and Christ are similar because the results of their actions affect us.” However, according to Grenz, Paul does not conceive of humankind as particular individuals whose volitional actions determine their destiny. Instead he conceives of humanity as a single entity. “Into his mass of humanity Adam’s act injected sin as a power or force hostile to God, which in turn brings the reign of death.” In contrast to this, Christ’s obedience “injected righteousness as a power and with it the reign of life.” What is left unanswered in Romans 5, argues Grenz, is how individual persons participate in Adam’s sin and Christ’s obedience. Grenz is concerned to

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<sup>31</sup>Lewis and Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, II:223.

<sup>32</sup>Lewis and Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, II:223-224.

<sup>33</sup>Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, 203-204.

maintain the parallelism between Adam and Christ. “If Adam’s guilt is imputed to all, then fairness demands that Christ’s righteousness be as well.”<sup>34</sup> The answer actually comes elsewhere in the Epistle where the apostle makes clear that God bestows righteousness on those united to Christ by faith. Similarly, individuals come under the power of death—the death introduced into the world by Adam’s sin—through their own “personal sin.” Grenz thus concludes that the case for “original guilt” is not strong.<sup>35</sup>

Grenz does affirm original sin in the sense of inherited corruption or depravity. He likens our inheriting of a depraved nature with our inheriting of other basic traits; in fact, they come to us in the same way. Wishing to steer clear of a purely Pelagian notion of original sin, Grenz states that the source of our sinful nature is not limited to the external environment; rather, our sinful attitudes and actions spring forth from “the inner core of our being, from the human heart.” Meanwhile we derive our corrupt nature from our ancestors, going back to our first parents. Yet Grenz also wishes to recognize a social factor: “We teach each other to sin.”<sup>36</sup> Thus, given both of these factors, “Each of us will and does sin, once we are in a position to reflect moral choices in action and thereby to act out what is present within our nature by heredity and socialization.”<sup>37</sup>

For Grenz, however, guilt is not part of what constitutes original sin, which is to say, depravity alone is not indicative of guilt and condemnation. Scripture declares that God judges us according to our works (Jer. 17:9-10; Rom. 2:6), which means we are not condemned for a fallen nature but for sinful actions. Indeed, all humans miss the mark either willfully or passively.<sup>38</sup>

The question still remains as to the time and point at which each individual actually begins to participate in humanity’s common failure. The best response, according to Grenz, is one

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<sup>34</sup>Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, 204-205.

<sup>35</sup>Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, 205.

<sup>36</sup>Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, 205.

<sup>37</sup>Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, 206.

<sup>38</sup>Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, 206.

that realizes the potential present in all persons even from infancy to partake in the break-down of community, although the egocentric and self-absorbed survival characteristics of infancy do not entail “guilt.” This is not to say, however, that “the self-absorption of infancy” cannot ripen into “a community-destructive force within each of us—a depraved nature.” The inevitable consequence is that “this depraved nature expresses itself in moral choices that are either overly egotistical or overly self-abasing, and hence are displeasing to God.”<sup>39</sup>

Grenz also queries whether the idea of condemnation can apply to persons who have not come through the process of normal human development, such as infants and the severely mentally retarded. He argues that only “our works” will form the basis for the final verdict.<sup>40</sup>

Consequently, although all persons inherit a sinful disposition, only those who have given expression to the fallen nature through wrong moral choices stand under condemnation. The sentence falls only on those whose deeds mark them as guilty. On this basis, we conclude that persons who do not develop the moral potential do not fall under the eternal condemnation of the righteous God.<sup>41</sup>

This fits with Jesus’ declaration that the kingdom belongs to children (Matt. 18:1-14; 19:14), for children are still in the stage of innocency and not yet in the stage of responsibility. “Somewhere in childhood we move from a stage in which our actions are not deemed morally accountable to the responsibility of acting as moral agents. In short, we cross a point which some refer to as the ‘age of accountability’.”<sup>42</sup> Following A. H. Strong, Grenz acknowledges that infants are in a state of sin and need to be regenerated. What this means is that those who die in infancy, according to Strong, “are the object of special divine compassion

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<sup>39</sup>Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, 206.

<sup>40</sup>Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, 208-209.

<sup>41</sup>Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, 209.

<sup>42</sup>Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, 209. Grenz cites Deut. 1:39, Num. 14:29-31, and Isa. 7:15-16.

and care, and through the grace of Christ are certain of salvation.<sup>7743</sup>

We see then that for Grenz, as with Erickson and Lewis and Demarest, all persons who do not come to an age or mental state of accountability are not reckoned guilty in Adam's sin, for though they inherit corruption and are inclined to sin, they do not inherit original guilt and have not committed a sinful act for which they are accountable. All such persons are therefore the objects of a distinctive sort of divine grace, coming to eternal blessedness through God's peculiar saving actions.

### The Denial of Inherited Guilt and the Rejection of Infant Baptism

The notion of original sin as set forth by these evangelical-Baptist authors has direct implications for the doctrine of baptism in general and infant baptism in particular. Given their rejection of original guilt (infants being infected only with an inherited pollution), it is not surprising that the Reformed doctrine of infant baptism is adjudged biblically out-of-bounds. Of course, the question of the meaning of baptism plays a significant role in the assessment of infant baptism as well. More will be said about that below. Here I observe that if infants and children, and more particularly, if the infants and children of believers, are considered to be without guilt, standing in no need of the remission of sin, indeed, having no sin of their own and in no way culpable with Adam, then the symbol of baptism (even as defined by Reformed writers) cannot legitimately be administered to them.<sup>44</sup> It is nonsensical to administer the sign of baptism, signifying the washing away of sins, where no sin exists. Those

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<sup>43</sup>Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (Philadelphia: Griffith and Rowland, 1907), 2:661.

<sup>44</sup>It would seem that the mark of circumcision, prescribed in the Old Testament, is likewise misapplied if administered to "guiltless" children. On the import of circumcision, see John Murray, *Christian Baptism*, 44-48; and especially O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1980), 147-166.

who are not (yet) sinners do not qualify as candidates for full redemption. Consequently, they likewise do not qualify as candidates for the sign of that full redemption, namely baptism. Indeed, the symbol of washing is inappropriate for those who are not dirty.

Baptist authors, however, typically assign a meaning to baptism that subverts the divine testimony and promissory character of the sacrament. Lewis and Demarest offer this comprehensive definition:

(1) *Ontologically*, baptism signifies that the Holy Spirit has already renewed the human spirit's capacities to know, love, and serve God. (2) *Intellectually*, baptism declares one's assent to the Gospel's objective truth for all and one's subjective reception of it as true personally. (3) *Volitionally*, baptism manifests the person's entire soul commitment to the crucified and risen Messiah. (4) *Emotionally*, baptism expresses one's deep desire to love God with one's whole being. (5) *Ethically*, baptism marks the transfer of one's ultimate loyalty from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light and to Christ as King. (6) *Relationally*, by being baptized, a person gives visible testimony to an invisible communion with the crucified and exalted Christ and to other members of the institution Christ heads, universally and locally. Through baptism a person expresses an initial public acceptance of both the privileges and the responsibilities of membership in that church.<sup>45</sup>

Another contemporary Baptist author defines baptism as follows: Baptism is "the sign of the believer's identification with the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus; the outward sign of an inner cleansing or of the remission of sins; the sign of the eschatological resurrection of believers; the sign of the believer's entry into the body of Christ; a testimony both to believers and to nonbelievers; and an act of obedience to Jesus Christ."<sup>46</sup> What is fundamental here is the conviction that baptism is a "token" or "an outward symbol"—serving as "a public testimony"—of what God has already effected in the person who believes in Jesus

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<sup>45</sup>Lewis and Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, II:286.

<sup>46</sup>Garrett, *Systematic Theology*, II:529.

Christ.<sup>47</sup> It “is the God-given means whereby we initially declare publicly our inward faith.”<sup>48</sup> As a public testimony of rebirth, it is fitting that this sign should be reserved “for those who give evidence that that is actually true in their lives.”<sup>49</sup>

What must not be missed in these definitions is that baptism is fundamentally a human testimony—it is the sign of *the believer’s* identification with Christ; baptism declares *the believer’s* assent to the gospel; it manifests *the believer’s* entire soul commitment to the risen Messiah; it marks the transfer of *the believer’s* loyalty from darkness to light; *the believer* gives visible testimony to an invisible communion with the Lord and offers an initial public acceptance of the duties of church membership. In short, baptism is *the believer’s* activity, an activity infants are incapable of performing.

We see then that when baptism is defined in this way, infants are automatically disqualified as the proper recipients of the symbol. Indeed, by consigning the “ordinance” of baptism to a species of human testimony, coupled with an emasculated doctrine of original sin, the idea of infant baptism is rendered both unnecessary and ridiculous. But this scheme, in affirming the salvation of infants while despising the baptism of infants, meets with its own serious problems, as will become evident in what follows.

## Critique of the Evangelical-Baptist Consensus on Original Sin and Infant Salvation

In the foregoing we have seen that, according to the consensus formed by these evangelical-Baptist writers, infants and others who have not attained the status of moral accountability participate in Adam’s sin in an attenuated manner, being infected with a corrupt nature but free from the guilt of Adam’s first sin. Since such persons are guiltless, they are under no penalty of sin, yet they still need deliverance from their inherited sinful condition. The Spirit’s regenerative operation is

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<sup>47</sup>Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1105.

<sup>48</sup>Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, 529.

<sup>49</sup>Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 979.

therefore necessary. Strictly speaking, however, the recipients of this restorative action are sinful only in being inclined to commit sin, for without reaching an age for making genuine moral decisions, their actions are born of a poisoned condition rather than a conscious desire. They are therefore neither guilty of sin nor under the penalty of eternal death. In short, their fallen state and need for salvation is understood in an attenuated way, which means that the need for divine redemption (and for baptism) is likewise conceived in an attenuated manner.

*“Somehow” Saved?*

Erickson, as we saw above, argues that all persons who fail to attain an age of moral competence are exempted from the guilt and consequent condemnation of original sin. Erickson speaks of children who die in infancy as participating in Adam’s sin, yet they “somehow” are accepted and saved. What is peculiar about this assertion is that while Erickson maintains that infants participate in Adam’s sin and therefore need salvation, he also argues that this participation is negated inasmuch as they have not consciously endorsed Adam’s sin. Guilt may be reckoned to infants only on condition they reach an age of responsibility and consciously sin themselves. In fact, Erickson emphatically steers away from the idea that children, so long as they are in their morally immature state, are to be regarded as sinful, condemned, and lost.

We may ask, following Erickson, what it actually means to participate in Adam’s sin and need salvation. To answer that query exposes Erickson’s position as incoherent. For if children are not sinful, why do they need to be redeemed? If they are not lost, why do they need to be found? And if they are not condemned, why do they need to be justified? In light of what Erickson has written, it appears that infants do not in fact need redemption and justification. But what then does salvation mean in this framework? The incoherence of Erickson’s formulation is borne out by his use of the word “somehow.” Infants are “somehow” saved. The reason he uses such a word in referring to the salvation of infants is that they cannot exercise faith and

repentance and consequently cannot appropriate Christ. Erickson is emphatic: without a conscious and willful act of sin on the part of those who have become morally mature, guilt may not be imputed to individuals even if they have inherited corruption through Adam's fall. Similarly, without a conscious act of faith on the part of believers, Christ's righteousness may not be imputed to them. This means in the case of children who die in infancy that salvation has become a "somehow," for nobody is automatically condemned or automatically saved.

Meanwhile, there is no such thing as "unconscious sin," just as there is no such thing as "unconscious faith"—which means, following Erickson's scheme, *children are not yet sinners in need of salvation*. Instead, children are victims, subject to inherited corruption, needing rescue from that condition. According to Erickson, God in fact provides such rescue by way of regeneration, bringing deceased infants to perfection when he ushers them into glory. This takes place after the same manner that believers obtain perfection upon entering eternal glory. But we should observe that this is not salvation in the full New Testament sense of the term, involving expiation, propitiation, and remission of guilt. Rather, we may liken the salvation of children who die in infancy as analogous to the renewal of the created order itself. Just as the creation was subjected to frustration through Adam's fall, infants and children likewise find themselves in the misery of this predicament. Similarly, as the created order awaits liberation from its bondage, groaning in the pains of childbirth, so those who are subjected to corruption through no fault of their own await deliverance in the way of regeneration and renewal (cf. Rom. 8:19-22). This in effect gives us an amended and significantly diluted notion of "sin" and of "sinner," at least in the case of infants, and implicitly produces sinners of diverse sorts and salvation of different kinds.

### *Two Types of Sinners, Two Types of Salvation*

Lewis and Demarest travel with Erickson along this trajectory. They speak of infants as involved in the universal curse of Adam's sin. After all, infants are subject to the curse of

sin, which is death, and to any number of other miseries. Yet they are exempted from “the eternal penalty,” for they are not capable of the transgressions which would eternally alienate them from God. They are free from “imputed condemnation.” Similarly, since infants are incapable of faith and repentance, the saving benefits of Christ’s redemptive work come to them by way of “special application.” This is not salvation from sins *as such*, that is, from sins for which they must repent, for they have not responsibly committed any sins. This is not salvation from guilt and condemnation. Rather, this is salvation from corruption. In other words, all children who die before coming to an age of moral responsibility are pardoned of their *sinful nature*. Meanwhile, children *as such* cannot be under the curse of eternal death, for they have not yet transitioned to a state of personal guilt. They are not yet actual sinners in need of a full-orbed salvation. Nonetheless, Lewis and Demarest wish to maintain that children who die before reaching moral responsibility are “saved” by way of a special application of redemption. It is a special application since children are incapable of faith and repentance. Thus children need a special kind of salvation.

But here a problem is manifest. In waging their polemics against the doctrine of original guilt, Lewis and Demarest, despite their assertions to the contrary, speak of sin and salvation in an equivocal manner and implicitly posit two types of sinners and therefore two types of salvation. Sinners of the first sort are those who stand *guilty* before God, having committed personal and willful sin. They are subject to sin’s penalty for their own sins, which involves physical and spiritual death as the divine curse upon sin. As “guilty” sinners they need the remedy of Christ’s expiatory sacrifice—that is, they need Christ’s vicarious sacrifice on the cross as the remedy for the liability that accrues to them because of their individual sins. As their Substitute, Christ bears their guilt and pays the penalty that is upon the guilty.<sup>50</sup> However, following the theological construct of these authors, they

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<sup>50</sup>Lewis and Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, II:401-408; Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 828-840; Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, 345-353; Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 570-81.

implicitly put forward another and second class of sinner. Sinners of this second sort stand before God *without guilt*. Although they are subject to the corruption or depravity of original sin, until they reach an age of moral accountability they do not sin willfully or knowingly and therefore are not guilty of sin even if their behavior is not strictly in conformity to the law in all respects. Because of their inherited corruption, they are born with the inclination to sin—a wicked propensity that will inevitably manifest itself upon reaching moral maturity. Thus, even in the state of infancy such individuals stand in need of deliverance from their corrupt condition. But they do not need salvation understood as rescue from divine wrath or as the expiation of guilt. This class of sinner is guilty neither of Adam’s sin nor of personal sin.

A gross inconsistency is evident in this position. While advocates for believer’s baptism maintain that faith is the necessary prerequisite of salvation and argue vigorously against the permissibility of infant baptism since infants cannot exercise or evidence faith, nonetheless they reckon all infants in a state of “salvation”—that is, salvation of the second type, for they are not yet condemnable. This is salvation *apart from faith*. Those who die before reaching a state of accountability are, *apart from faith*, brought to the same state of eternal bliss that is promised to those who are saved from eternal condemnation as *sinner guilty* before God. These advocates of *believer’s* baptism, in positing a doctrine of infant salvation, put forward a doctrine of salvation that is *apart from belief*.

But who is the agent of this salvation? Why need Christ be this agent? Or another why of asking these questions: How is Christ’s sacrifice relevant to this kind of salvation?

### *Diverse Grounds of Salvation?*

Questions of this sort are sharpened when we focus upon *the ground* of salvation. Grenz asserts that God regenerates those whom he knows will die in infancy. Apparently Grenz wishes to distinguish regenerate infants from unregenerate infants—the former God regenerates because he foreknows that they will die

in infancy, the latter God leaves in an unregenerate state because he foreknows that they will reach moral maturity and transition to a stage of personal moral guilt. This however does not address what “status” infants have before God prior to death or prior to transitioning to a state of condemnation.<sup>51</sup>

According to Grenz, in regenerating dying infants God performs a work of special divine compassion and care. While this work may exhibit special divine compassion and care, it is not a work born out of Christ’s sacrificial death on the cross. Grenz, in line with Erickson as well as Lewis and Demarest, argues that persons are not condemned for a fallen nature but for their own sinful actions. Only those who have committed wrong moral choices stand under condemnation, which means all others are free from this verdict. If infants are free from eternal condemnation, then the divine rescue that comes to them is not gracious, though it is compassionate. But even this compassion seems to arise from obligation. God must regenerate those whom he knows will die in infancy, otherwise he would unjustly punish those who are not guilty and consequently not worthy of (eternal)

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<sup>51</sup>This is a recurring and problematic feature of the scheme these authors present. What is the status of infants prior to death? Are we to regard all infants as “saved” until they transition (through personal sin) to guilt and condemnation? If so, it appears that death has become a superior remedy for the human condition than the cross. In fact, death becomes an instrument of salvation and curse becomes a blessing. In short, for infants, salvation becomes salvation “by death alone.” However, if we do not regard all infants as “saved,” another option would be to regard all infants as “damned”—in which case, only death brings the verdict of salvation. Indeed, Lewis and Demarest suggest that infant death is indicative of divine election. But it is askew and even mistaken to regard infants as “damned” following the paradigm of these authors. For until infants mature and commit personal sin, they are without guilt before God and under no condemnation. Neither of these options looks very promising. A third option would require us to consider infants as neither saved nor damned, but floating in a kind of (Protestant style) *limbus infantum*, being neither in Adam (and condemned) nor in Christ (and saved). But such a notion is wildly speculative and has no more biblical support than the Roman Catholic version of *limbus infantum* whereby infants are damned in being denied a vision of God but delivered from physical torment. Rome, however, no longer officially holds to this view, see *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, art. 1261.

condemnation. In this way, if God is to remain just and righteous in all his actions, his regenerating dying infants has become an act of necessity. But if this is so, the word salvation has been stretched to the breaking point. For salvation is a grace-word. If God must regenerate infants whom he knows will die before reaching moral maturity, then the “salvation” these children experience is no longer of grace.

Lewis and Demarest manifest this problem in a slightly different way. They speak of a salvation that, by way of exception, does not require faith and repentance. According to their scheme, the exception applies not because there are different grounds of salvation—one for infants who die, and another for adults—but because infants are incapable of committing sin and of exercising faith. The ground of salvation remains the same for all persons. But this claim cannot bear up when scrutinized. The grounds of salvation must be diverse since the reasons for needing salvation are diverse. To be sure, Lewis and Demarest may legitimately argue that the agent of salvation remains the same. But clearly *the need* for salvation is different in the case of morally guilty adults over against morally guiltless children, which makes the *ground* or *basis* of salvation different. For in the case of adults, Christ’s saving work must answer the problem of personal guilt, whereas in the case of infants his work of salvation need not address that problem—no such guilt exists. Lewis and Demarest argue that infants need “pardon” for their sinful natures. Pardon is a word that assumes the idea of guilt and involves forgiveness. But, given the scheme Lewis and Demarest set up, how are infants guilty for their fallen nature since they did not consciously choose to inherit that nature? If sin and guilt require conscious choice, as Lewis and Demarest maintain (along with Erickson and Grenz), then children do not need to be pardoned for possessing such a nature. Rather, at most, they need to be rescued from the entanglements of that nature. But if that is true, *the ground* of salvation shifts from sacrifice for guilt to a restorative act by divine fiat. Upon death, God delivers infants from their corrupt condition by a re-creative act of regeneration. This act, however, is not (as noted above) grounded in grace, in

undeserved favor, for infants who die are not guilty of sin and therefore they are not worthy of condemnation. On the contrary, this act is incumbent upon God inasmuch as he would be unjust to condemn those who are not guilty of sin. Thus Lewis and Demarest (like Grenz) give us a notion of salvation that, as it applies to dying infants, entails a necessary divine act of restoration. But why would the cross be an ingredient in this recipe of salvation? Atonement hardly seems necessary. Despite what these authors assert to the contrary, the ground of salvation is indeed different in the case of infants than in the case of adults. The difference is nothing less than deliverance from guilt and divine wrath.

### *The Injustice of Guiltless Suffering*

A further inconsistency is evident as well, for it is not clear why infants should come under any condemnation at all, *eternal* or *temporal*. In other words, if inherited guilt is denied, why is temporal condemnation merited while eternal condemnation is not? What sins have infants committed? Indeed, what guilt bears upon them? If they are not worthy of condemnation, how are they subjects of salvation?

These opponents of infant baptism, in advocating a doctrine of universal infant salvation, find themselves arguing for a position that is hopelessly inconsistent. For they contend that God would be unjust to punish eternally those who have not committed personal sin. Yet they maintain that these same *guiltless* individuals may suffer sin's temporal penalties. Infants and young children then are created to suffer the curse of death for no sin of their own—a curse that includes agonizing disease, lingering illness, debilitating injury, emotional and physical abuse, and the ravages of famine, plague, and pestilence. This is a self-contradictory stance. If infants and children are not worthy of punishment, why should they suffer any temporal penalties? If they are *not guilty* in and with Adam, so that Adam's sin has *not* been imputed to them, then even the temporal retributions they endure are unfair and impermissible.

This problem is further exhibited in the nature of death itself, for death is the key ingredient of curse. If infants and children are unworthy of suffering *eternal death*, not needing rescue from divine wrath, how are they, being guiltless, under the curse of death—even *temporal* death?

According to these evangelical-Baptist proponents of infant salvation, while baptizing covenant children is regarded as presumptuous and harmful, *all* children are declared guiltless before God—a privileged status Lewis and Demarest seem to extend to youth up to twenty years of age. They further declare *all* children free from a state of condemnation until each child individually transitions to a condemned status through personal sin. Nonetheless, as just noted, prior to committing personal sin, these children are subject to sin's curse. Thus advocates of believer's baptism allow guiltless infants to suffer all the maladies of original sin with one exception—if they die in their guiltless state, God is obliged to deliver them from eternal death. It is hard to see how this paradigm protects the justice of God.

To be sure, in denying inherited guilt, or the imputation of Adam's first sin to infants, it is precisely the justice of God that these authors wish to safeguard. But the paradigm they present to replace the various Reformed constructions of original sin is, as has become evident, permeated with numerous problems and inconsistencies, including the problem of innocent suffering. For, if children are without personal sin and guilt, then they have not merited the suffering they are made to endure. This is nothing other than *unjust* suffering.

It is evident that these Baptist authors have not established a just and necessary connection between the miserable state of children and the guiltless status children have before God, for Grenz and Erickson suggest that children who have not committed personal sin are not properly speaking sinners.

Advocates of the Augustinian doctrine of original sin or the federalist scheme on the other hand, in viewing children as participants in Adam's sin, corrupted and guilty, have a much better explanation for the suffering and death of infants, not to mention a much better explanation as to how the sacrifice of

Christ's full redemptive work applies to those whom God has declared recipients of his promised salvation in Christ. In fact, because a certain class of infants falls within the scope of this promised salvation, these infants also qualify for the sign and seal of that promise, that is, the sacrament of baptism.

### Final Observations

In the foregoing we have seen that certain Baptist writers reject the doctrine of infant baptism, in part, by positing a doctrine of original sin that frees infants and children from Adam's guilt. In this way, infants and children do not stand in need of the full redemptive accomplishment of Christ's sacrifice on the cross. In fact, it is not evident that such individuals need the cross at all. Although they do need restoration, they do not need Christ's expiatory and propitiatory sacrifice inasmuch as personal guilt may not be reckoned to them. Given this model, infants and children are not the proper objects of salvation in the full biblical sense of the term and therefore they are not the proper subjects of the sign of baptism.

We have seen that this model or paradigm is not without serious problems, for not only is the idea of salvation treated in an equivocal manner—the ground of salvation being different for children than for adults—but the instrumentality of faith likewise acquires a different role in these diverse schemes of salvation, being necessary for adults but unnecessary for children. This is a peculiar stance to take given the sharp polemic Baptist theologians wage against infant baptism and the inability of infants to exercise faith. Only by positing two types of sinners and therefore two types of salvation—even if this is posited only implicitly—are these writers able to make sense of their paradigm as an alternative to the Augustinian or federalist models.

We have also seen that the problem of guiltless suffering emerges as a prominent and perplexing problem in this model. God's justice is not protected by arguing for universal infant salvation. On the contrary, insofar as infants are subject to the

universality of the curse, including death itself, their suffering is unjust if they are reckoned as guiltless.

Although Baptist theologians have alleged that the doctrine of infant baptism was a practice in search of a theology, it seems instead that contemporary advocates of believer's baptism have been in search of a diluted doctrine of original sin for children. By allowing infants and children to escape the guilt of Adam's sin, the morally immature stand guiltless before God and come to "salvation" *apart from faith*. Meanwhile, since faith figures so prominently in the Baptist conception of baptism, only *believers* may be baptized as a testimony to their rebirth and faith in Christ. Indeed, why baptize persons unless they have faith in Christ? In this way the salvation of infants is affirmed while the sign of salvation (baptism) is administered only to those who exercise faith. This brings forth the inevitable question: How are children who die at a young age, before coming to faith, saved *apart from faith*? According to Erickson and Grenz, along with Lewis and Demarest, since infants and children are without personal guilt, they do not need "faith" in Christ. They simply need to be ushered to glory and made new. Thus, proponents of universal infant salvation have yielded the principle that salvation belongs only to those who embrace Christ by faith. We should note however that if salvation is no longer strictly administered to those who can exercise responsible faith, then it seems quite unreasonable to withhold the symbol of salvation from those who enjoy this status. But such is the scheme these authors present in opposition to the Reformed model.

Naturally, the Reformed model of original sin, with its vigorous doctrine of imputed guilt, paints a different portrait of infant sinners. According to the Reformed model, infants and children are sinners from birth, sinful from conception, and therefore under the judgment of God. Consequently, they stand in need of redemption as fully as adults do, for they are estranged from God and at enmity with him. They are corrupt and guilty, sinfully warped and accountable for their sin-and-sinfulness in Adam. Thus, so long as Adam is their head and they remain outside of Christ, they are under the curse of eternal

condemnation and death. They cannot enter the kingdom of God unless they are born again. Infant sinners need cleansing and forgiveness, which means they need Christ's atoning sacrifice for the remission of their sins. They also need the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, for their lives will not proceed along the path of repentance and faith in Christ except through rebirth. This means, then, that if any class of children are recipients of the divine promise of salvation, such that they are savable and in fact saved only by the saving operation of Christ and his Spirit, then they are likewise the proper subjects of the sign and seal of that salvation, baptism.

Contrary to the assertions of these Baptist theologians, infants and children find themselves under the curse of sin as Adam's children—the curse of eternal death! Indeed, Scripture reveals that they are under the penalty of sin. If this were not so, they would be exempted from the condition of sin itself. What is more, if all children alike were free from sin's curse, particularly the guilt of sin, then it would be inappropriate for God to distinguish the children of believers from the children of unbelievers and to grant a privileged status to the former and not the latter. Yet Scripture shows us that God consistently does this very thing.

- During the flood, Noah and his children are spared the punishment of the universal deluge, whereas unbelievers and their children come under the divine judgment. The children of unbelief, with their parents, perish (Gen. 7:21-23).
- Circumcision, a mark applied to believers and to their male-infant offspring, carried the import of inclusion in the covenant community of God's gracious favor and blessing, as well as the need for cleansing and the actual removal of defilement (Exod. 6:12; Lev. 19:23; 26:41; Deut. 10:16; 30:6; Jer. 4:4; 6:10; 9:25). This mark clearly distinguished children who were the objects of God's favor and kindness from children who were under the sentence of death.

- The curse upon the firstborn of Egypt included infants (cf. Exod. 11:4-7; 12:12, 29-30). The firstborn of Israel, however, were unharmed by the judgment of death, sharing with their parents the mark of the blood of the lamb (cf. Exod. 12:13).
- During the period of the conquest, those under the sacral ban (*cherem*)—that is, those under the penalty of God’s righteous judgment and devoted to complete annihilation—included the children of unbelievers (Num. 21:21-35; Deut. 2:34; 3:6; 7:2; 20:16, 17; Josh. 6:21; 7:24-25; 8:24). They were not spared. Thus we see that a principle of inclusion applies: the children of unbelievers are included in the divine curse; however, the children of believers are included in the divine blessing.
- The children of believers are regarded as holy—even when there is only one believing parent (1 Cor. 7:14). Such an affirmation is irrelevant—even inappropriate—if all children share the same status of guiltlessness before God. Indeed, how are the children of believers *holy* if all children alike are free from personal guilt and condemnation? What is more, if God is obliged to save *all* children who die in infancy, then what distinguishes one infant from another is not the faith or unbelief of the parents, and not whether an infant participates in the divine promise of salvation, but whether death comes upon a child prior to reaching the age of accountability. The divine promise of Acts 2:39 is rendered null and void in this scheme. The salvation of children, being a salvation apart from faith, is dependent upon death. *Holiness*, then, is determined by death, not by the covenant-promise of God.

The Reformed conception of original sin likewise offers a superior answer to the question regarding the status of infants prior to death. In fact, the Reformed answer to this question has direct bearing on the question of infant baptism.

As noted earlier, since all children are both corrupt and guilty in Adam, they need divine redemption fully as much as adults do.

This means that all persons find themselves either in Adam (and condemned) or in Christ (and saved). There is no status independent of these two heads of humanity—it is either Adam or Christ. The question, then, is under whose headship children come. Are they in Adam or in Christ?

The authors we examined above cannot give an unequivocal answer to this question. Clearly, each of them wishes to say that all persons are in Adam with respect to the corruption of sin. But corruption does not automatically render a person guilty and condemnable. Thus infants, should they die before reaching an age of moral accountability, find themselves candidates of a kind of requisite divine mercy to rescue them from their inherited corruption. Meanwhile, if their inherited corruption is left unchecked and allowed to progress, it will bear its inevitable fruits and come to ratify Adam's sin, whereby guilt is incurred and there is a transition from guiltlessness to a state of guilt. Infants as such, however, are not worthy of damnation since they are not culpable for any sin.

But, as already observed, according to the scheme set forth by these authors infants appear to be neither in Adam nor in Christ. And this again illustrates what is implicit in their position: there are two kinds of sinners and therefore two kinds of salvation. Similarly, given their attenuated doctrine of original sin, along with their equivocal statements regarding the status of infants before God, it is easy to see why children fail to qualify as candidates for baptism. Yet, ironically, they do qualify as candidates for a thinned down variety of "salvation"—a salvation that is apart from expiation and propitiation. Following the path of these authors, it is not clear that Christ is responsible for the salvation of infants. In fact, the cross seems superfluous.

The Reformed position recognizes that all persons are polluted and guilty in Adam, subject to eternal condemnation, and needful of the divine rescue that only Christ can give. Only those who are the recipients of the divine promise of salvation in Christ find deliverance from their sinful state and the remission of their sins.

Insofar as any child (or for that matter, any person) is in possession of the reality and substance of salvation—that is, Christ himself—it is inappropriate to withhold salvation’s sign and seal from him. We must remember that that which is signified by the sign is always greater than the sign itself. Christ and the salvation he bestows are greater than the sign of baptism which depicts and portrays salvation. Similarly, the forgiveness of sins and being made alive in Christ are greater than the rite announcing and promising those blessings. Since the children of believers are counted as those to whom the promise of salvation is directed and for whom it applies, it is altogether fitting and necessary that these children receive the sign and seal that testifies to their status *in Christ as children of promise*. In short, in possessing Christ, they must be *baptized*.

We see then that given the Reformed understanding of baptism’s import and the inclusive nature of the divine promise of salvation, embracing believers and their seed, the mark of that salvation—baptism—is rightly and necessarily administered to them. For it is beyond dispute that the gracious blessings of salvation are extended to them: the washing away of sin, the remission of guilt, rebirth, and new life in Christ. This new life *in Christ*—salvation—stands in stark contrast to the former life *in Adam*. To deny the sign of baptism to those who are identified with Christ undermines the divine intention in ordaining the sign.

Our examination of contemporary Baptist authors has demonstrated that the polemic against infant baptism involves more than issues of baptism’s import and mode. In back of these issues is the question of original guilt and its consequences. We have shown that those who are guilty in Adam need the remedy that comes only in the second Adam, Christ the Lord, the remedy that saves infants as well. Indeed, those who are united with Christ, according to divine promise, are the objects of God’s saving mercy and so likewise the proper subjects of baptism—believers and their children.