

I. PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

If the great debate over *who* should be baptized could be distilled into one question, it would be this: Should only those who personally profess gospel faith be baptized, or should the children of those professing believers be baptized as well?¹

When an argument is made for the latter, paedobaptist² view, an appeal is inevitably made to those instances in the New Testament when a “household” is said to have been baptized. Since all agree that every other recorded instance of baptism is that of a professing believer, the interpretation of these texts is crucial. Only in these “household” passages can the paedobaptist allege that the Scriptures record the *actual baptism* of the non-confessing child of a believer (or, put more carefully, the baptism of one party on the basis of another’s faith). A close exegetical examination of those passages is therefore desirable.³

1 This is a modern way of putting the question. It ought to be stated, Should only those who profess gospel faith be baptized, or should those subject to that professed believer’s household authority be baptized as well? But because this more accurate phrasing seriously damages the paedobaptist argument in the modern world, the question is rarely framed in this more logically (and biblically) consistent fashion.

2 paedobaptist - one who advocates infant baptism

3 And yet, it is this close exegetical examination which is almost never present in paedobaptist apologetic. For example, James Bannerman, in his crucial and exhaustive work on the Presbyterian view of the church, spends 26 pages giving what amounts to a purely theological argument for infant membership in the covenant. He disposes of the household baptism passages in less than two pages, never undertaking an actual exegesis of any. Despite the lack of careful analysis, he does not hesitate to cite the verses as absolute and final testimony in favor of infant baptism, with overstatement that borders on the fantastic. He writes, “...nothing more is necessary, in regard to the practice of the Primitive Church in the matter of infant baptism, than to refer to the *frequent and almost constant mention* of the Baptism of ‘households’ and ‘families,’ in which it is *morally certain* that there must have been infant members....Such expressions as these, interpreted in the light of the previous undoubted practice of the Jewish Church, *can admit of only one meaning*....Under the circumstances of the Apostolic Church, the repeated mention of household or family Baptism is itself *decisive evidence* of the practice by which infants were baptized.” (Bannerman, James, *The Church of Christ*, 2:92-93).

Samuel Miller is carried away in similar fashion, but for Miller, two pages is two too many. After merely adducing three “household” passages, and admitting that there is no proof of actual infant baptism in any of them, he nonetheless offers them as a kind of impregnable defense. Miller writes “Now, though we are *not certain* that there were young children in any of these families, it is *highly probable* there were. At any rate, the great principle of family baptism of receiving all the younger members of households on the faith of their domestic head, seems to be *plainly and decisively established*. This furnishes ground on which the advocate of infant baptism may stand with *unwavering confidence*.” (Miller, Samuel, *Infant Baptism Scriptural and Reasonable*). Miller also exemplifies the characteristic misstatement of the question described in footnote 1 above.

John Calvin, after a discussion marked most by the number and diversity of its *ad personam* attacks on those who question the doctrine of infant baptism, dispenses with all the household passages in a single sentence. He writes, “For although this is not expressly narrated by the Evangelists, yet as they are not expressly excluded when mention is made of any baptized family, (Acts 16:15, 32), what man of sense will argue from this that they were not baptized?” (Calvin, John, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book IV, Chapter 16.8).

If they evidence a difference from the other recorded New Testament baptisms, or exegetically connect with the Old Testament concept of household circumcision⁴, much legitimate ground is gained in the argument for infant baptism. But, if the texts in question fail to yield such evidence, the argument for the practice of infant baptism will have been dealt a substantial blow.

Understanding the pivotal importance of these verses, it is worthwhile to consider briefly some simple interpretive principles which apply to the exposition of the Word. Scripture is the interpreter of Scripture. The clear passages of Scripture must be allowed to interpret the dark, and the complete passages to interpret the elliptical.⁵ There exist in Scripture both detailed and abbreviated accounts of these “household” baptisms. It is neither sound nor admissible for the paedobaptist to use the shorter accounts in such a way as to bring them into conflict with the fuller narratives.⁶ This implies, naturally, that the passages must be *exegeted*. It is entirely inadmissible, though common enough in practice, to merely reference such passages as conclusive proof texts, or to dismiss anti-paedobaptist arguments with a casual wave of the word “house” or “household,” without looking at what the verses *actually* record.⁷ With these ground rules in mind, we turn to the Scriptural narratives.

4 E.g. Genesis 17:23

5 This is not a controversial doctrine. It is standard Reformation interpretive practice. The principle is so widely recognized that it was made a matter of confessional bond by the Puritan authors of the Westminster documents. “The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is Scripture itself: and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of and Scripture (which is not manifold, but one) it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly.” (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, 1:10).

6 Again, this is hardly an extreme notion. Every Calvinist regularly uses the “Scripture with Scripture” methodology when explaining the meaning of the word “world” in the various passages concerning the extent of the atonement. And no sound interpreter would say that the more limited narratives in the Gospel of Mark control the interpretation of the longer accounts given in Luke or Matthew.

7 This is the interpretive norm in paedobaptist treatments. See footnote 3 for some notable examples.

II. THE PHILIPPIAN JAILER

Now it happened, as we went to prayer, that a certain slave girl possessed with a spirit of divination met us, who brought her masters much profit by fortune-telling. This girl followed Paul and us, and cried out, saying, "These men are the servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to us the way of salvation." And this she did for many days. But Paul, greatly annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, "I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And he came out that very hour. But when her masters saw that their hope of profit was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to the authorities. And they brought them to the magistrates, and said, "These men, being Jews, exceedingly trouble our city; and they teach customs which are not lawful for us, being Romans, to receive or observe." Then the multitude rose up together against them; and the magistrates tore off their clothes and commanded them to be beaten with rods. And when they had laid many stripes on them, they threw them into prison, commanding the jailer to keep them securely. Having received such a charge, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks.

But at midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were loosed. And the keeper of the prison, awaking from sleep and seeing the prison doors open, supposing the prisoners had fled, drew his sword and was about to kill himself. But Paul called with a loud voice, saying, "Do yourself no harm, for we are all here." Then he called for a light, ran in, and fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. And he brought them out and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" So they said, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household." Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their stripes. And immediately he and all his family were baptized. Now when he had brought them into his house, he set food before them; and he rejoiced, having believed in God with all his household. (Acts 16:16-34)

The Acts 16 narrative of the conversion and baptism of the Philippian jailer and his family is the most complete and detailed account of the household baptisms in the New Testament. A careful examination of this record will provide a solid foundation for understanding all the related texts.

The story is familiar. After the earthquake rocks the jail and opens the doors and bonds of the prisoners, the jailer seeks to kill himself, believing that all the prisoners have escaped, and that he will be held accountable. Paul dissuades him from suicide, and the jailer brings them out of their cell and asks them, "What must I do to be saved." Paul and Silas respond to the jailer, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved, you and your house."

It is evident from the narrative that the jailer's house was contiguous to the jail, so that when he "brought them out," and they gave the promise of salvation, he had actually taken them into an area where his entire household was assembled, for it immediately follows that Paul and Silas "spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house." After taking the preachers somewhere to clean the wounds from their previous beating, the jailer and his family are baptized. Returning to his dwelling, he "set food

before them, and rejoiced, having believed in God with all his household.”

The typical paedobaptist citation of the Philippian jailer is of the promise *only*, with no discussion of the material which follows, since the promise, taken by itself, seems to suggest that if the jailer believes, both he and his entire house will be saved.⁸ But an examination of the entire context reveals a careful maintenance of parallel which demands another interpretation of the promise - one that is consistent with the rest of New Testament teaching.

PROMISE: “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and *you* shall be saved, *and your house.*” (Acts 16:31)

PREACHING: “They spoke *to him* the word of the Lord, and *to all that were in his house.*” (Acts 16:32)

BELIEF: “*He*...rejoiced, believing in God *with all his house.*” (Acts 16:34)

BAPTISM: “*He*...was baptized, he *and all his*, immediately.” (Acts 16:33)

Everyone in the house heard the preaching.

Everyone in the house believed (and rejoiced in believing).⁹

Everyone in the house was baptized.

The pattern conforms to that of the New Testament baptisms of adult individuals: preaching of the gospel, followed by belief, followed by baptism.¹⁰ This is not merely a household baptism, but a household

⁸ But even this is immediately problematic for the paedobaptist, and a departure from the actual text is necessary. The paedobaptist is arguing that the household is to be *baptized on the basis of the head's faith, regardless of individual spiritual status*. This text, taken literally and alone, but using the paedobaptist construct on its grammar, would teach that the entire household will *actually be saved on the basis of the head's faith* - that is, if you believe, you and your house will be saved. While many a paedobaptist may secretly wish this to be true, it is contrary both to the confessions, and to the actual experience of Christians everywhere. Consequently, the meaning must be dialed down: saved doesn't actually mean saved, or rather, it means one thing for the jailer, but another for his family.

⁹ Acts 16:34 can also be translated “He...rejoiced with all his house, believing in God.” There is no real advantage to the paedobaptist in this reading. If they truly advocate that *only* the jailer believed, they must now explain why, contrary to the explicit teaching of Paul, John, and Jesus about lost mankind's reaction to the Gospel, his unbelieving family members are now rejoicing along with him on account of his new faith. Conklin shows an example of the desperate measures sometimes employed to evade the clear meaning of this verse. In his *Text Book on Baptism*, he resorts to the claim that the word used here *πανοικι* ought to be translated “through all his house,” so that the meaning would be that the jailer, after believing, went *through* his house, rejoicing from room to room. Unfortunately, this is the only place in the entire Bible where the noun *πανοικια* (whole house) is used adverbially as *πανοικι*, so there are no examples with which to compare. However, every major Greek tool shows the meaning as “with” and not “through.” Also, *πανοικια* is used in each of its four LXX appearances to refer to actual people, and not physical dwellings. Conklin himself, in a bizarre reversal, actually cites one of these LXX uses in a later effort to prove that *πανοικια* necessarily includes children, thereby collapsing his own escape tunnel. But if *πανοικια* necessarily refers to human beings (of whatever age), then the passage means that all of the human beings in the Philippian jailer's house believed (or at least, rejoiced).

¹⁰ E.g., Acts 2:37-41; Acts 8:12, 13, 27-38

salvation. Examining the complete context also reveals the proper interpretation of the promise: *anyone* who believes on Jesus will be saved. It requires a twisted exegesis to suggest that the promise and the baptism encompass the jailer's theoretical children or infants, who are yet excluded from the preaching and the believing.¹¹

There is no evidence here for infant baptism, and explicit evidence to the contrary (all believed). The passage neither establishes nor even allows for a doctrine in which members of a household are baptized on the basis of the head's faith.¹² Exactly the opposite is exemplified: all who heard the preaching actually believed and were therefore baptized.¹³

11 Although this is exactly what is done in certain recent attempts to actually exegete these passages in a paedobaptist fashion.

12 John Calvin in his *Commentary on Acts*, appears to actually teach *household salvation* on the basis of the head's faith. While he makes no specific exegesis of the promise, concerning v.33 he writes, "Luke doth again commend the godly zeal of the keeper, that he did consecrate all his whole house to the Lord; wherein doth also appear the grace of God, in that he brought all his whole family unto a godly consent." The text compels him to admit that this is a household salvation, but he appears to make that extended salvation the result of the jailer's own decision and subsequent actions.

13 See Footnote 18 for a full discussion of the οἶκος – οἰκία controversy, which, while usually confined to the passages about Stephanas, is sometimes brought to bear on the Philippian jailer.

III. THE HOUSEHOLD OF CORNELIUS

But a certain man, Cornelius by name, was in Caesarea, a centurion of a cohort being called Italian, one devout and fearing God, with all his house, both doing many alms to the people and praying continually to God. About the ninth hour of the day, he saw plainly in a vision an angel of God coming to him, and saying to him, "Cornelius!" And he was staring at him, and becoming terrified he said, "What is it, Lord?" And he said to him, "Your prayers and your alms went up for a memorial before God. And now send men to Joppa and call for Simon who is surnamed Peter. This one is lodged with one Simon, a tanner, whose house by the sea. He will tell you what you must do." And when the angel speaking to Cornelius went away, calling two of his servants and a devout soldier of those continually waiting on him, and having explained all things to them, he sent them to Joppa.

And on the morrow, these passing along on the road, and drawing near to the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray about the sixth hour. And he became hungry and wished to taste food. But as they were preparing, an ecstasy fell on him. And he saw the heaven being opened and a certain vessel like a great sheet coming down on him, being bound by four corners, and let down onto the earth; in which were all the four-footed animals of the earth, and the wild beasts, and the creeping things, and the birds of the heaven. And a voice came to him, "Rise up, Peter, slay and eat." But Peter said, "Not at all, Lord, because I never did eat anything common or unclean." And again a voice came to him a second time, "What things God made clean, you do not make common." And this happened three times, and the vessel was taken up into the heaven again.

And as Peter was doubting within himself what the vision which he saw might be, even behold, the men who had been sent from Cornelius stood on the porch asking about the house of Simon. And calling out, they inquired if Simon being surnamed Peter is lodged here. And as Peter pondered concerning the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Behold, three men are seeking you. But rising up, go down and go with them, not discriminating, because I have sent them." And going down to the men, the ones sent from Cornelius to him, Peter said, "Behold, I am the one whom you seek. What is the cause for which you are here?" And they said, "Cornelius, a centurion, a just man and one fearing God, and being testified to by all the nation of the Jews, was divinely warned by a holy angel to call you to his house and to hear words from you." Then calling them in, he lodged them. And on the morrow Peter went out with them. And some of the brothers from Joppa accompanied him.

And on the morrow they entered Caesarea. And Cornelius was awaiting them, having called together his relatives and his intimate friends. And as Peter was coming in, meeting him, Cornelius fell at his feet and worshiped. But Peter lifted him up, saying, "Stand up! I myself am also a man." And talking with him, he went in and found many having come together. And he said to them, "You know how unlawful it is for a man, a Jew, to unite with or to come near to one of another race. Yet God showed to me not to call a man common or unclean. Therefore, I also came without complaint, being summoned. Then I ask for what reason did you send for me?" And Cornelius said, "From the fourth day until this hour I have been fasting, and the ninth hour I was praying in my house. And, behold, a man stood before me in bright clothing. And he said, 'Cornelius, your prayer was heard and your alms were remembered before God. Therefore, send to Joppa and call for Simon who is surnamed Peter; this one is lodged in the house of Simon, a tanner, by the

sea. Having come, he will speak to you.’ Then at once I sent to you, and you did well to come. Now then, we are all present before God to hear all the things having been commanded you by God.”

And opening his mouth, Peter said, “Truly I see that God is not a respecter of faces, but in every nation the one fearing Him and working righteousness is acceptable to Him. The Word which He sent to the sons of Israel, preaching the gospel of peace through Jesus Christ, this One is Lord of all. You know the thing that happened throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John proclaimed, Jesus the One from Nazareth, how God anointed Him with the Holy Spirit and with power, who went about doing good, and healing all those having been oppressed by the devil, because God was with Him. And we are witnesses of all things which He did, both in the country of the Jews, and in Jerusalem. They did away with Him, hanging Him on a tree. God raised up this One the third day and gave to Him to become visible; not to all the people, but to witnesses, the ones having been before hand-picked by God, to us who ate and drank with Him after His rising again from the dead. And He commanded us to proclaim to the people and to witness solemnly that it is He who has been marked out by God to be Judge of the living and the dead. To this One all the Prophets witness, so that through His name everyone believing into Him will receive remission of sins.”

As Peter was yet speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell on all those hearing the Word. And the faithful of the circumcision were amazed, as many as came with Peter, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out on the nations also. For they heard them speaking in languages and magnifying God. Then Peter answered, “Can anyone forbid the water that these not be baptized, who the Holy Spirit received, even as we also?” And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord. Then they asked him to remain some days.

And the apostles and the brothers who were throughout Judea heard that the nations also received the Word of God. And when Peter went up to Jerusalem, those of the circumcision contended with him, saying, “You went in to uncircumcised men and ate with them.” But beginning, Peter set out to them in order, saying, “I was being in the city of Joppa, praying. And in an ecstasy, I saw a vision: a certain vessel was coming down, like a huge sheet, being let down by four corners out of the heaven; and it came as far as me. Looking intently on this, I observed. And I saw the four-footed animals of the earth, and the wild beasts, and the creeping things, and the birds of the heaven. And I heard a voice saying to me, ‘Peter, rise up, slay and eat.’ But I said, ‘Not at all, Lord, because never has anything common or unclean entered into my mouth.’ But a voice answered me the second time out of the heaven, ‘What God has cleansed, you do not make common.’ And this took place three times, and all things were pulled up into the heaven again.”

“And, behold, at once three men stood at the house in which I was, having been sent from Caesarea to me. And the Spirit said to me to go with them, not discriminating. And these six brothers also were with me, and we went into the man’s house. And he told us how he saw an angel in his house, standing and saying to him, ‘Send men to Joppa, and send for Simon who is surnamed Peter, who will speak words to you by which you and all your household will be saved.’ And in my beginning to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them, as also on us in the beginning. And I recalled the Word of the Lord, how He said, ‘John indeed baptized with water, but you shall be baptized in the Holy Spirit.’ Then if God gave the same gift to them as also to us, believing on the Lord Jesus Christ, and I, who was I to be able to prevent God? And hearing

these things, they kept silent and glorified God, saying, 'Then God also has granted to the nations repentance unto life.' " (Acts 10:1-11:18)

This narrative does not present us with a pure example of household baptism¹⁴, but as it does contain the "household promise" formula, it is usually cited in paedobaptist apologetic. It is the second most thorough of the accounts that we will consider, being found primarily in Acts 10, but also in Peter's recounting of the event in Acts 11 (and Acts 15).

The first words used to introduce Cornelius describe him as "devout and fearing God with all his house."¹⁵ Cornelius' house is more than just a nuclear family, if that at all. The only recorded members are two household servants and an unknown number of soldiers, one of whom is also called "devout." Cornelius called for Peter to come to his house in response to an angelic vision in which he was told that Peter would tell him words "by which you and all your house shall be saved." He gathered together "his kinsmen and near friends" to await the arrival of Peter. It was this group that Peter addressed in his preaching. As Peter preached, "the Holy Ghost fell on all them which heard the word." It would appear that all of them were heard to "speak with tongues, and magnify God." In response to their receiving of the Holy Ghost, Peter reasons that they should be baptized, and so commands them.

As in the case of the Philippian jailer, we find a maintenance of parallel within the account that is again serviceable to enlighten us regarding the nature of the household baptism.

FIRST ESTATE: 'A devout man...that feared God *with all his house.*' (Acts 10:2)

PROMISE: '...words, whereby *you* and *all your house* shall be saved.' (Acts 11:14)

PREACHING: '...we *all are here present* before God....Then Peter opened his mouth.' (Acts 10:33-34)

BELIEF: '...the Holy Spirit fell on *all them which heard the word*....they heard them speak with tongues and

14 The guest list on this occasion includes not only Cornelius and his household, but his "relatives and intimate friends" as well.

15 The issue of the spiritual estate of Cornelius prior to Peter's preaching is a difficult one. Cornelius is described as a "God-fearer" and "devout" who demonstrated his faith through constant prayer and giving. Clearly such language would only apply literally (spiritually) to a person who is regenerate. This is how Calvin interprets the passage in his *Commentary on Acts*, in which he treats expressly of this question, and concludes that Cornelius fell into the same category as "...the old fathers, who hoped for salvation of the Redeemer before he was revealed." And this interpretation has a great deal to commend it, until we encounter the issue of the Holy Spirit, and Peter's own summary of the angel's message to Cornelius as "words by which you and your house *shall be saved.*"

An alternative explanation views the language of devotion and God-fearing as a kind of shorthand to describe Gentile adherents to Judaism who had not themselves undergone the full proselyte process, especially circumcision. Typically a "God-fearer" was a Gentile who had rejected the polytheism of Rome and Greece for the God of Israel, attended (and even financially supported) the synagogue, and observed at least some portion of the Mosaic law code. Such individuals, however, should not be regarded as automatically regenerate simply because they had aligned themselves with 1st century Judaism, any more than Paul himself was regenerate when he was Saul, a Pharisee of Pharisees, and "concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless."

magnify God.' (Acts 10:44-46)

BAPTISM: 'Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized, which have received the Holy Spirit as well as we? And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord.' (Acts 10:47-48)

Everyone in the house heard the preaching.

Everyone in the house believed (evidenced by their manifest receiving of the Holy Spirit).

Everyone in the house was baptized.

Again, we observe a conformity with the rest of the NT pattern for baptism: the preaching of the Gospel followed by the baptism of those that believe. Like the first example, the baptism of Cornelius' house not only provides no presumption or possibility of the baptism of any based upon Cornelius' faith, it openly contradicts such an idea by making express assertions to the contrary regarding the subjects of that baptism. As we said before, we find not only no such ground or example, but an example that would lead us to a completely different conclusion; that faith must precede baptism for all who receive it, and that the evidence of such a faith is the warrant for that baptism.

IV. THE HOUSEHOLD OF STEPHANAS

For it has been declared to me concerning you, my brethren, by those of Chloe's household, that there are contentions among you. Now I say this, that each of you says, "I am of Paul," or "I am of Apollos," or "I am of Cephas," or "I am of Christ." Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, lest anyone should say that I had baptized in my own name. Yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas. Besides, I do not know whether I baptized any other. (1Cor 1:11-16)

I urge you, brethren - you know the household of Stephanas, that it is the first-fruits of Achaia, and that they have devoted themselves to the ministry of the saints - that you also submit to such, and to everyone who works and labors with us. (1Cor 16:15-16)

In all, the household of Stephanas is mentioned only two times in the Bible. Unlike Cornelius or the Philippian jailer, no record exists of the actual conversion of Stephanas,¹⁶ making this one of the abbreviated accounts. Still, a careful examination reveals that the established pattern of New Testament baptism is not here broken.

Stephanas and his house were some of the earliest converts in the region of Achaia (Paul calls them "the first-fruits") and were among those few that Paul himself baptized. But this is not all that we are told about them. Paul writes, "...you know the household of Stephanas...that they have devoted themselves to the ministry of the saints."¹⁷

We have here two clearly stated facts. One, the "household" of Stephanas was baptized by Paul. Two, the individual members of the "household" of Stephanas devoted themselves to the ministry of the saints.¹⁸

16 Based on their conjunction here with Crispus, and the reference to them as "first-fruits", it seems probable that they were among the "many...Corinthians" converted along with Crispus in Acts 18.

17 The Greek here is very specific. The contrast of the singular and plural is in the original language - "you know the household (οἰκίαν - singular) of Stephanas...that they have devoted themselves (ἐταξάν - 3rd person plural) to the ministry of the saints." The household is not here regarded as a unit, headed in Stephanas, and defined corporately by his choice. Rather, it is made up of a group of individuals, each one of whom actually devoted himself or herself to that ministry.

18 An attempt has sometimes been made to discriminate between the two passages by claiming a vital distinction between the use of the word οἶκον in 1Cor 1 and οἰκίαν in 1Cor 16. The central idea of the argument is that the word οἶκος always refers to a nuclear family unit including all minor children (i.e., "house"), while οἰκία refers to the larger domestic property, including servants (i.e., "household"). The baptism, then, is of the father (Stephanas) and his οἶκος or family, while the self-devotion to ministry is by the members of Stephanas' οἰκία or extended household. So, the argument goes, the text itself proves a distinction, and limits the act of service to adults, while including infants in the baptism.

There are a number of problems with this idea.

- 1) There is no separate word to distinguish an οἶκος which had no minor children. The word alone cannot

Devotion to the saints is evidence of gospel faith and regeneration.¹⁹ To argue that the baptismal account “obviously” includes infants, while the service account “obviously” does not, is to assume what one means to prove. The biblical evidence is that all the members of the household were believers, as demonstrated by their self-chosen way of life.²⁰

We cannot say, based on any part of these texts, that the members of the household were baptized *on the basis of* Stephanas’ faith. We cannot say how many individuals there were in this house, or what their exact ages were, or what was the precise nature of their relationship to Stephanas. We *can* say that the individual members of the household devoted themselves to the ministry of the saints. Yet again, we have a narrative which implies not the baptism of infants, or of unconverted members of the household on the basis of a profession by the head of the house, but the salvation and baptism of an entire household, and individual lives exemplary of true faith.²¹

prove or disprove the presence of minor children.

2) The New Testament itself confounds this hyper-exegesis. For example, οἶκος is used in Acts 7:10 to refer to Pharaoh’s entire estate, including servants, not merely his nuclear family, while οἰκία is used in Mark 6:4 and Mark 10:29 to refer to the family.

3) The distinction, even as stated, fails to achieve the stated goal. By paedobaptist reckoning, if the οἶκος is the nuclear family, the οἰκία is an extension of that nuclear family. That is, οἰκία does not mean property and servants, but *not* the family. It would mean the family, plus the property and servants. Thus, the distinction, for the intended purpose, is useless. If Stephanas and his *house* (οἶκος) were baptized, but Stephanas and his *household* (οἰκία) devoted themselves to the ministry of the saints, it is an add number which includes the nuclear family, not a separate group which excludes the family.

19 “We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren” (1John 3:14). “Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves Him who begot also loves him who is begotten of Him” (1John 5:1). Cf. 2Cor 9.

20 The Greek carries the sense that they were not *given* this ministry as a duty, but rather that they “appointed themselves” to the job.

21 John Calvin, in his *Commentary on Corinthians*, skips 1:16 entirely and makes no comment on the household baptism. Later, commenting on 16:15, Calvin seems to imply (or at least allow) that all the members of the house were actually believers. He writes, “Now, that they may be the more inclined to put honor upon that house...he reminds them that they were the first-fruits of Achaia, that is, that the household of Stephanas were the first that had embraced the gospel.”

V. THE HOUSEHOLD OF CRISPUS

After these things Paul departed from Athens and went to Corinth...And he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and persuaded both Jews and Greeks. When Silas and Timothy had come from Macedonia, Paul was compelled by the Spirit, and testified to the Jews that Jesus is the Christ. But when they opposed him and blasphemed, he shook his garments and said to them, "Your blood be upon your own heads; I am clean. From now on I will go to the Gentiles."

And he departed from there and entered the house of a certain man named Justus, one who worshiped God, whose house was next door to the synagogue. Then Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed on the Lord with all his household. And many of the Corinthians, hearing, believed and were baptized. (Acts 18:1, 4-8)

I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, lest anyone should say that I had baptized in my own name. (1Cor 1:14-15)

The account of the baptism of Crispus and his house is another of the shorter narratives. Though brief, the story is strikingly consistent with the larger New Testament pattern of belief followed by baptism, and provides no evidence for the paedobaptist view.

The story recounts that after many Sabbaths of preaching within the synagogue of Corinth to no effect, Paul departed from the Jews and began preaching to the Gentiles in a private house that adjoined the synagogue. It was after this striking lesson in the judgment of God that "Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed on the Lord with all his household." Later, in the first letter to the Corinthians, we learn that Crispus was among those baptized personally by Paul.²²

PREACHING: "[Paul] reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and persuaded both Jews and Greeks"; "And many of the Corinthians, hearing..." (Acts 18:4, 8)

BELIEF: "Crispus...believed on the Lord with all his household. And many of the Corinthians...believed" (Acts 18:8)

BAPTISM: "And many of the Corinthians...were baptized"; "...and I baptized none of you except Crispus..." (Acts 18:8; 1Cor 1:14)

This Acts passage is *not* an account of a household baptism.²³ Instead, it is a powerful and unambiguous account of a household salvation. The action here is "believed on the Lord." That is what Crispus did. He

²² But apparently not the entire household. While earlier in the letter Paul was careful to record that he had baptized the entire household of Stephanas, here he mentions Crispus alone.

²³ That is to say, the text does not refer to the baptism of "Crispus and his house" in the fashion of our other verses. In fact the Acts portion never specifically refers to the baptism of anyone except "many of the Corinthians."

did not do it alone. He did it “along with his entire household.”²⁴ The text does not say that Crispus believed on the Lord *for* his household, but *with* his household. The text does not even speak of their baptisms individually, much less state that they were baptized on account of Crispus’ faith. Rather, as if to emphasize the point beyond any misunderstanding, the narrative immediately informs us that many other Corinthians, “hearing, believed and were baptized,” revisiting the normal New Testament pattern.²⁵

24 The Greek here is “Κρίσπος...ἐπίστευσεν τῷ κυρίῳ σὺν ὅλῳ τῷ οἴκῳ αὐτοῦ.” The language is strong, ὅλῳ refers to something in its entirety or totality - the whole thing. Crispus believed on the Lord, and every last person in the house believed along with him.

25 John Calvin’s explanation of this verse in his *Commentary on Acts* is astonishing. He writes, “Nevertheless, lest we should think that Paul’s labor was altogether fruitless which he bestowed among the Jews, Luke reckoneth up two of them which believed, Crispus and Sosthenes...” Calvin appears to be saying that *only* Crispus believed. This is a clear demonstration of how thoroughly the ideological commitment to paedobaptist doctrine and the “household code” can override sound exegesis. In sharp contrast to Calvin, we find the Puritan (and paedobaptist) Matthew Henry correctly capturing the emphasis of the text when he writes, “Not only he, but his house, believed...” (Henry, *Matthew, Complete Commentary on the Whole Bible*, Acts 18).

VI. THE HOUSEHOLD OF LYDIA

And on the Sabbath day we went out of the city to the riverside, where prayer was customarily made; and we sat down and spoke to the women who met there. Now a certain woman named Lydia heard us. She was a seller of purple from the city of Thyatira, who worshiped God. The Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul. And when she and her household were baptized, she begged us saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay." So she persuaded us. (Acts 16:13-15)

This narrative is the final account of a household baptism, the last one with which we have to deal. It is the most elliptical of them all, though if we pay close attention to the context, we will see that there is no reason to interpret it any differently from the other narratives. Least of all can we take this narrative and on its strength alone propose a doctrine contrary to the express assertions of every other similar account.

Lydia was a seller of purple originally from the city of Thyatira, and "worshiped God."²⁶ She was either a single woman or a widow, and was the head of a household, and the provider for that house by her vocation. She seems to have lived in Philippi, and was a frequenter of the riverside gatherings which took place on the Sabbath, as there was no synagogue in Philippi. Paul came there and preached, and her "the Lord opened her heart to heed the things which spoken by Paul." She was then "baptized, and her household," and she invited and "persuaded" Paul and the others with him to "come to...[her] house, and stay there."

There are several things noteworthy in this account, but the most important item relates to who heard the preaching. It was at the river, *prior* to Paul's coming to her house, that they were baptized. This indicates that those of her household who were baptized were present with her at the river. If this was the case, then they too would have heard the things spoken by Paul, as it was a public speech, not private to Lydia only.

Hence our form begins to look very much like the earlier examples - all the members of the house hear the preaching, all the members of the house are baptized. We are told expressly only of Lydia's belief; but given the other narratives we have considered, and the elliptical nature of this account, it would be the wildest presumption possible to conclude that unbelieving members of Lydia's household were baptized on account of her faith, in open contradiction to every other narrative.²⁷ A far safer conclusion would be

²⁶ See the discussion regarding Cornelius. Lydia may have been a Gentile adherent who was here joining herself to the Jews who gathered by the river for their Sabbath worship.

²⁷ Unless, of course, you are Albert Barnes. In his *Notes on the New Testament*, he does just this, separating the Lydia account from all other household accounts, and giving an exegesis as if no other example existed. He writes, "*And her household.* Gr., Her house...Her family. No mention is made of their having believed. And the case is one that affords a strong presumptive proof that this was an instance of *household* or infant baptism. For,

(1.) *her* believing is particularly mentioned.

that, as in *all the other accounts* of household baptism, the entire household must have believed along with Lydia, and was therefore baptized.

While it cannot be proven that Lydia's house did not contain infants or small children, it is demonstrably unlikely, and certainly not mandated by the text. If Lydia was never married, she probably would not have had children. If Lydia was a widow, and one widowed long enough to have her own self-supporting vocation, it is likewise unlikely that she had any infants or very small children. If this is a true assessment, then the paedobaptist interpretation would not only *not* prove the baptism of an infant seed, it would mean that adult servants or children capable of faith, who neither believed nor even professed so much as a meager curiosity in the doctrine of Christ, were baptized on the basis of Lydia's faith. While there may be a handful of Reconstructionists who would applaud this interpretation, the fact remains that it is contrary to modern paedobaptist practice, and indeed repugnant to their own doctrines. Once again, we have a case of a verse which, given paedobaptist exegesis, would, rather than proving the baptism of infant seed, would prove far more, and go well beyond the doctrine they advocate.

All this being said, we return to the simple observation that the brevity of the narrative, if proper interpretive practice is utilized, forbids the verses being used as the basis for interpreting the longer accounts. Quite to the contrary, this verse must be interpreted in their light, rather than the reverse.

(2.) It is not intimated that *they* believed. On the contrary, it is strongly implied that they did not.

(3.) It is manifestly implied that *they* were baptized because *she* believed. It was the offering of her family to the Lord. It is just such an account as would now be given of a household or family that were baptized on the faith of the parent."

VII. CONCLUSION

The central proposition of the Reformed²⁸ paedobaptist is that the faith of the head of the house is sufficient to warrant the baptism the infant seed of that believer.²⁹ Obviously not having any example of such a thing in the baptisms of individuals recorded in the Bible, resort is made to the accounts of household baptism, as if they expose some fatal flaw in the baptist position, and set a scriptural seal to the paedobaptist practice.

What we have seen above is that far from providing an example, ground, warrant, or even possibility of such a practice, the New Testament narratives of household baptism illustrate something completely different, and totally in harmony with the other baptism narratives. Even here in these household baptisms we find preaching of the Gospel, followed by belief of the Gospel, followed by the baptism of those who believe. No infant seed. No baptism by proxy faith. Household baptism, yes; but more importantly, household salvation by faith!

If our exegesis of the above passages is correct, it means that the New Testament witness to the subjects of baptism, as far as the narrative portion goes, is perfectly agreed - faith precedes baptism for all who are rightly baptized. Furthermore, the very passages in which one would expect to clearly find the paedobaptist doctrine demonstrated, if it was truly the practice of the apostles, provide an illustration exactly contrary to that doctrine, and leave no room for its admission.

This is not the complete argument for paedobaptism. Nor is the correct exposition of these passages its complete refutation. But insofar as the paedobaptist view depends upon and draws strength from the claiming of these passages, to that degree it is weakened. And insofar as the baptist view and practice is illustrated in the very passages one would expect to find it contradicted, it gains in strength. The full understanding of the correct subjects of baptism, and the warrant for baptism, awaits a more exhaustive treatment of all the involved passages and doctrines. It is hoped that this consideration will contribute to that understanding.

David Cason, (revised September 2008)

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²⁸ Roman Catholicism especially has a completely different doctrinal argument, which actually justifies the baptism of anyone, anywhere, even by force and against their will. Nevertheless, Reformed paedobaptists continue to cite the RCC as proof of the ancientness of paedobaptism, while simultaneously rejecting the Catholic doctrine of baptismal justification.

²⁹ We have already shown that this is a misstatement of both the OT practice on which infant baptism is supposed to be based, and of the NT examples which "prove" their case.