
Infant Salvation - A Reformed Baptist Perspective

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The question of infant salvation is one that will not go away. It cannot be sidestepped. In the western world infant mortality rates are thankfully low but babies still sometimes die. Miscarriages are not uncommon either and with the continuing situation regarding abortion we can be sure that this perplexing issue is bound to come into focus again and again. 'Is my little one in heaven or hell?' comes the question from distressed parents. Pastors and elders must be either naive or callous not to realise that *they must have an answer*. This article arose out of a pastoral situation where the author was brought face to face with this vexed question in his own fellowship.

Augustine and Original Sin

In coming to the question of infant salvation we first face the matter of original sin. That is the truth that all are born sinners because of Adam's original sin. Some do try to short-circuit the argument by saying that infants are innocent, devoid of guilt, sinless. They are not worthy, therefore, of any sort of punishment. Yet the Scriptures clearly teach that all are born in sin (eg Ps 51:5, 58:3, Rom 5, Eph 2:3). This was the teaching of Augustine. He fully recognised that by nature all infants deserve damnation. They inherit both Adam's guilt and his inclination to sin. This 'free' and 'wrong' agency must be punished. He goes on to stress that the guilt of infants cannot begin to compare with that of adults who are clearly guilty of actual sin. Nevertheless their original sin cannot be discounted.

Roman Catholicism and Limbus Infanta

Although the Council of Trent is carefully non-committal on the subject many Roman Catholic theologians have spoken of a *Limbus Infantum*. This is said to be a place for unbaptised infants on the outskirts of hell. It is understood in different ways ranging from a place of positive punishment through to a place where *the beatific vision* simply remains unseen. Of course, if the baby has been baptised the Roman creed guarantees it a place in heaven.

Variety Among The Reformers

Luther seems to have been unwilling to leave behind this stress on baptism whereas Zwingli apparently took the view that all who die in infancy go to heaven regardless of baptism. There has been some debate over Calvin's view arising from the fact that he only approaches the subject indirectly. He certainly taught that some of the elect die in infancy. Evidently his view that *there are reprobate infants* must be tempered by the fact that he believed such reprobates always come to years of maturity. It is then that they 'procure' their destruction.

It is asserted by some that Calvin did not believe that any dying infant would be lost but there are certainly ambiguous phrases in his writings.³

Reformation Documents

The *Canons of the Synod of Dort* (1619) are unambiguous. In Article 17 of the first part we read:

Since we are to judge of the will of God from his Word, which testifies that the children of believers are holy, not by nature, but by virtue of the covenant of grace, in which they, together with their parents, are comprehended, godly parents ought not to doubt the election and salvation of their children whom it pleases God to call out of this life in their infancy.⁴

The question of what happens to the children of unbelievers is not addressed. The *Westminster Confession* (1647) is more ambiguous, the *Baptist London Confession* some forty years later much less so.⁵ They read, in X.iii respectively:

Elect infants dying in infancy are regenerated and saved by Christ through the Spirit who works when and where and how he pleases.

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It is unlikely that the Westminster Divines were making the point that 'non-elect infants dying in infancy' are not regenerated! Rather the contrast is between elect infants that die in infancy and elect infants who go on to mature years. However, there was certainly a reluctance on the part of some to speak in the less ambiguous terms of the Baptist Confession. Thus Shedd can speak of 'elder Calvinists' who, unlike John Owen for example, were reluctant 'to make the circle of election large enough to include all dying infants, and not a part only.' This, he claims, was due to a fear of Arminianism.⁶

Later Calvinists

There was little reluctance amongst later Calvinists particularly by the nineteenth century to teach that all who die in infancy are elect. At a meeting of the *Eclectic Society* in 1802 when this subject was discussed each speaker (including John Newton, Thomas Scott etc) accepted this view.⁷ Charles Hodge, the Princeton theologian, also taught this, as did many in a similar tradition such as Shedd and Warfield.¹⁰ C H Spurgeon was a popular advocate of the position. In a private letter he wrote,

I have never, at any time in my life, said, believed, or imagined that any infant, under any circumstances, would be cast into hell. I have always believed in the salvation of all infants ... I do not believe that, on this earth, there is a single professing Christian holding the damnation of infants; or, if there be, he must be insane, or utterly ignorant of Christianity.¹¹

Later writers in the Reformed tradition seem to be more cautious in their beliefs, especially in the matter of children of unbelievers.¹²

Biblical Parameters

There is no paucity of names to conjure with. Ultimately, however, we must come to the Word of God. What does it say there? Let us begin with these points.

1. Infants are not born innocent in the proper sense. They are under Adam's curse and in his image.
2. Salvation is only possible through the sovereign grace of God in election and regeneration. Election is from before the womb (Jer 1:5, Rom 9:1-12, Gal 1:15). Regeneration can occur¹⁴ in the womb (Lk 1:15)¹³ and is possible regardless of baptism or parentage.
3. There is a moral difference between a baby and an adult. An infant has no actual sin, it does not actively strive against conscience before the age of responsibility.¹⁵ The judgement will be according to works (cf Mt 25:31f, Jn 5:28,29, Rom 2:5,6, 2Cor 5:10 etc also Deut 1:39). Even if we do accept that some or all of those who die in infancy are not saved it is hard to see what actual punishment there justly can be.¹⁶

General Considerations

These are some of the general considerations that have led men to believe in the salvation of all dying in infancy. Firstly, there is **the goodness of God**. He is a gracious and compassionate God, the God who is love. As Spurgeon stresses, we do not worship Molech but the God who cares for his creatures. Nevertheless, as a contemporary of John Newton remarked, 'Yet there are other things which appear to be reconciled with these attributes with so much difficulty, that perhaps this ground is not tenable.'¹⁷

Then there is **the character of the Lord Jesus** and especially his attitude towards and teaching about children. (Mt 11:25, 18:3, 19:13f, 21:16 etc)¹⁸ Deut 1:39 and Jonah 4:11 are sometimes mentioned at this point too.

Another favourite argument with Spurgeon, Newton and others is that of **the numerical superiority of the elect**. They teach that in the end there will be more sinners in heaven than in hell. The greater part of the former will be made up of those who died in infancy.¹⁹ Such a general argument lacks solid biblical proof. At very best it can only serve as supporting argument. Post-millennialism does not demand belief in a universal salvation for those who die in infancy.

Those who accept the Presbyterian and Reformed **covenantal view of children of believers** seem to be in little doubt that all such who die in infancy will go to heaven. 1 Corinthians 7:14 is their most hopeful verse. Combined with 2 Samuel 12:23 they believe the problem is solved. As David Kingdon points out, however, **having believing parents is no ground for supposing a child to be regenerate.**²⁰ Of course, if one then seeks to extend the circle of election to all infants, the covenant argument becomes superfluous.

Many give great weight to the Lord's words in Luke 18:15,16, especially the phrase 'for of such is the kingdom of heaven'. Yet surely the point of Jesus' remark is that *childlikeness* is vital to receive the kingdom.²¹ It does not follow that simply being a child will secure entry to the kingdom. To be born and to be born again are two quite separate things.

Hodge and others turn for support to Romans 5 especially verses 18 and 19. He says,

All the descendants of Adam, except Christ, are under condemnation; all the descendants of Adam, except those of whom it is expressly revealed that they cannot inherit the kingdom of God, are saved.²²

The approach seems to be one of 'innocent until proved guilty'. These verses (like 1 Corinthians 15:22,23) really have nothing to say about infants. Paul addresses the matter of the heathen who never hear at the beginning of Romans but he has nothing to say about those who die as infants.

Other passages appealed to include 1 Kings 14:13, Psalm 8:2, Ezekiel 16:21, Zechariah 8:5 and Matthew 18:10. In which ever way these verses are understood they give very little hint of the scope of infant salvation which is the issue under discussion.

2 Samuel 12:23

The single most important verse for consideration of this matter is 2 Samuel 12:23. Here David recognises that God has not heard his prayer for his son by Bathsheba and so he speaks those famous words, 'But now that he is dead why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? *I will go to him* but he will not return to me.'

It is clear in the first instance that David is not merely saying, 'I too will die like my child. The baby will not come back but I will follow on and die too.' Equally he is not holding to some primitive or pagan idea that all go to the same place at death.²³ No, he expects to see his child in heaven.

The question this raises is, on what basis does he have such confidence and on what basis may we have equal confidence? Presbyterians may say that it is simply that David himself was a believer and so he believed his son would be saved too. But what about Absalom! David did not react to Absalom's death in the same way. 'O my son Absalom! My son my son Absalom! If only I had died instead of you - O Absalom, my son, my son!' What a contrast.

Surely the secret of David's confidence springs rather from the fact that he had committed that little one to God in prayer. While the child was alive he had fasted and prayed for its life. Now that the Lord had taken its life David could only conclude that although his initial request had been denied, the deeper concern that lay behind the prayer had been noted. Like Abraham he was confident that the Judge of all the earth would do right.

Pastorally, on the basis of this incident, we can assure parents who have faithfully prayed and committed their little one to the Lord in prayer that all will be well. Despite their many failings (perhaps as great as David's) they have every reason to expect to see their child in heaven. It is particularly striking that David had this confidence despite the sinful circumstances surrounding the birth.

Where this is not the case we are not in a position to say the child is in hell, especially if, although the parents do not believe, others have been praying. Further even if there are babies in hell we can be sure there is no unjust suffering of any sort. Believing parents and all who turn to the Lord in time of trouble can cast themselves on the sovereign God of mercy.

David Kingdon is surely right when he warns,

We dare not add to Scripture, but neither must one make the deduction from Scripture that God cannot or will not save all children dying in infancy. The salvation of all children dying in infancy is not asserted in Scripture, nor is the condemnation of such children asserted. The mercy of our God is free

and large. That we know.

Finally some appropriate closing words from Spurgeon to grieving parents,
Do you know what sorrows your little one has escaped? You have had
enough yourself. It was born of woman; it might have been full of trouble as
you are. It has escaped those sorrows; do you lament that?

Remember too your own sins, and the deeper sorrow of repentance. Had the
child lived it would have been a sinner, and it must have known the bitterness
of the conviction of sin... I think I might say, reserve your tears, bereaved
parents for the children that live.... There is subject for weeping for you. I
pray that you may never cease to weep for them until they have ceased to
sin. Never cease to weep for them until you yourself cease to breathe.... Plead
with Him, go before Him with the power of faith and earnestness, and He
will surely hear you.²⁴

References

- 1 See W G T Shedd, CALVINISM; PURE AND MIXED (1893, BoT ed 1986) p 109
- 2 According to Harry Buis in THE DOCTRINE OF ETERNAL PUNISHMENT (P&R 1957) p 137
- 3 See Loraine Boettner's quotation of R A Webb in THE REFORMED DOCTRINE OF PREDESTINATION (P&R 1932) pp 147,148. See also A H Strong, SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY (P&I 1907) p 663
- 4 As quoted by W Hendriksen in THE BIBLE ON THE LIFE HEREAFTER (Baker 1959) p 103
- 5 The Baptist London Confession follows the Westminster very closely. It was completed in 1677 but because of difficulties due to persecution was not adopted until 1689. The Congregationalist Savoy Declaration (1658) at this point is almost exactly the same as the Westminster.
- 6 Shedd, op cit, p 109
- 7 Shedd, op cit, p 111; Strong, op cit, p 663. I have been unable to trace Strong's incorrect reference to Owen.
- 8 Shedd, op cit, p 111
- 9 See THE THOUGHT OF THE EVANGELICAL LEADERS (1856, BoT ed 1978) p 260f. In a letter Newton wrote that in his private judgement he believed all dying in infancy are elect. He checked himself however, not wanting to 'indulge opinions about points not clearly and certainly revealed.' (WORKS, Vol V1, 1820, BoT ed 1985, p 182)
- 10 See the quotations given by Hendriksen, op cit, p 102. Strong quotes Prentiss, 'Lyman Beecher and Charles Hodge first made current in this country the doctrine of the salvation of all who die in infancy.' (p 664). A A Hodge is quite conservative compared with his father when he says 'It is not positively revealed that all infants are elect, but we are left, for many reasons, to indulge a highly probable hope that such is the fact.' (THE CONFESSION OF FAITH, 1869, BoT ed 1958, p 175)
- 11 LETTERS OF CHARLES HADDON SPURGEON, Iain H Murray (BoT 1992, letter 1869) p 150. Also see NEW PARK STREET PULPIT, Volume 3 (1857) and METROPOLITAN TABERNACLE PULPIT, Volumes 7, 24

(1861 & 1874)

- 12 Eg Bavinck (1854-1921), Berkhof (1874-1957), Hendriksen (1900-1982), Boettner (1901-1990), David Kingdon. See Hendriksen, op cit p 102 and Kingdon, CHILDREN OF ABRAHAM (Carey 1972) p 97. Boettner sounds more cautious than Charles Hodge, Warfield or Spurgeon. How much the climate of the age influences the sounder theologians is difficult to assess.
- 13 Strong posits the idea of regeneration in connection with the infant soul's first sight of Christ in the world to come. This is mere speculation, op cit, p 663
- 14 'As infants are included in the effects of Adam's sin without actual concurrence of their own, why should they not be included in the salvation of Christ without actual concurrence?' asks Rev B Woodd (sic) THE THOUGHT OF THE EVANGELICAL LEADERS, p 262
- 15 cp David Kingdon's helpful remarks, op cit, pp 70, 73, 94, 95
- 16 'Infants are not capable of remorse and anguish of conscience. There is reason to believe that this will be the chief feature of a future punishment.... But as infants commit no actual sin, so there is no consciousness of it: nor can it be conveyed to them by any imputed guilt from Adam. Infants are not capable of a sense of divine dereliction... as they have acquired no ideas of a God, a creature, a law, obedience and disobedience, sin and duty, the favour and the anger of God, they could not acquire these but by the immediate impression of God on their minds, and it is not to be imagined that God would give them these ideas purposely to punish them.' J H Pratt, THE THOUGHT OF THE EVANGELICAL LEADERS, p 260
- 17 Rev B Woodd, op cit, p 262
- 18 That 'Little ones' are chiefly believers is demonstrated by B B Warfield in the essay included in SELECTED SHORTER WRITINGS OF BENJAMIN WARFIELD (Essay 1904, P & R, ed 1970) p 234f
- 19 Eg Newton (tentatively, op cit, p 183), Spurgeon, NPSP, Vol 3, 1857, p 28
- 20 He quotes John Tombes, a 17th century Baptist, 'To make God consider (as the object of children's election) the faith of their parents, is worse than the opinion of the Arminians who make faith and works foreseen the object of every particular man's election.' Op cit, p 83f
- 21 Eg NICNT LUKE, N Geldenhuys (Eerdmans 1979) p 454
- 22 SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY (Abridged, Baker, 1988), p 38
- 23 See the helpful article on Sheol in Hendriksen, op cit, p 83f
- 24 MTP, Vol 7 (29th September 1861)

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Comments on this article by readers, particularly paedo-baptists, would be welcomed by the editor.