

A Reformed Baptist View of I Cor. 7:14

by

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For the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her believing husband; for otherwise your children are unclean, but now they are holy. I Cor. 7:14

Introduction

The implications of I Cor. 7:14 for the issue of infant baptism have often been debated by baptists and paedobaptists. Regrettably, both sides have been guilty of handling this passage in a simplistic manner. The paedobaptist errors are particularly disturbing, since most paedobaptists appeal to this passage to help establish their case for infant baptism. To read some of their claims, one would think that the passage implies infant baptism in a most obvious way. A closer examination, however, reveals that this passage offers no support for infant baptism; in fact, we will see that the passage actually argues against infant baptism.

A Critique of the Paedobaptist Interpretation

The paedobaptist argument from I Cor. 7:14 is expressed well by John Murray:

The apostle was writing to encourage them against this fear [that their Christian standing would be prejudiced by this mixed relationship]. The encouragement he provides is that the unbelieving husband is sanctified in the wife and the unbelieving wife is sanctified in the brother. In order to reinforce the argument drawn from this principle he appeals to what had been apparently recognised among the Corinthians, namely, that the children of even one believing parent were not unclean but rather holy. (*Christian Baptism*, p. 64)

This argument, though plausible on the surface, reveals serious difficulties upon closer examination. The Greek term "is sanctified" referring to the unbelieving spouse is simply the verb form of the adjective "holy" that refers to the children. Therefore, we must question any interpretation that posits a different meaning for the two terms. But the paedobaptist argument does just that. The holiness of the children is taken to be such that it qualifies them for

baptism. The holiness of the unbelieving spouse, however, does not qualify him or her for baptism. What exactly is the holiness that the children possess? According to Murray, it "evinces the operation of the covenant and representative principle." However, this meaning must be denied in connection with the unbelieving spouse. Otherwise, the unbelieving spouse would be "in the covenant" and have a right to baptism.

Strangely enough, few paedobaptists address this difficulty. Although Murray, Calvin, Henry, Hodge, Marcel, Sydenham, and Poole all make the argument for covenant status of the child from the passage, none of them seem to recognize that this implies covenant status for the unbelieving spouse too. (Or maybe they consider the objection so trivial and the rebuttal so obvious that they don't bother with it.)

One might argue that "holiness" has the same meaning but different implications for adult and child. But this is not generally what is claimed concerning the meaning of "holiness". Holiness for the child here does not simply imply covenant status; it denotes it. Murray says "there is a status or condition that can be characterised as 'holiness'." Hodge says, "The children . . . are universally recognized as holy, that is, as belonging to the church" and "Otherwise, your children would be unclean, i.e. born out of the pale of the church." (I *Corinthians*, p. 116) Quotes could be multiplied from Marcel and others.

Bromiley, on the other hand, is bold enough to admit the connection: "[the unbelieving spouse] is separated to God, enjoys a status within the covenant, and comes into the sphere of evangelical action and promise." (*Children of Promise*, p. 8) But if the unbelieving spouse is in the covenant, then how can baptism be denied to him or her? It is a cornerstone of paedobaptist theology that "the covenant is the sole basis of infant baptism" and that "the ground of baptism is thus identical for adults and children." (Marcel, *The Biblical Doctrine of Infant Baptism*) Bromiley does not tell us how to resolve this difficulty.

Another difficulty in drawing a distinction between the sanctification of the unbelieving spouse and the holiness of the children is this: The more one presses the distinction between the two concepts, the more one weakens the force of Paul's argument in the passage. Paul's argument is predicated on a similarity between the two parties. If the two cases are different, then the

logic breaks down. The covenant status of the children is no encouragement for a believer to remain with his unbelieving spouse if the unbelieving spouse does not also enjoy the same status.

The holiness of the children is assumed to be sufficient to include them in the covenant and qualify them for baptism. This holiness is adequate for the believer not to be defiled by his own children. Is the holiness of the unbelieving spouse also adequate to prevent the defilement of the believer? If we adopt the paedobaptist understanding of the passage, we are left in doubt. The sanctification must be at least as thorough and of the same character as that of the children, else we cannot be sure that the holiness of the children implies a holiness in the unbelieving spouse that is sufficient not to defile the believer.

Any attempt to distinguish the sanctification of the unbelieving spouse from the holiness of the children is necessarily an exercise in eisegesis rather than exegesis. Nothing in the passage suggests that these two concepts differ, and the language itself and the proximity of the terms is a strong argument that they are the same. Eisegesis may be necessary to harmonize a difficult passage with passages that speak more clearly, but it is arrogant at best to eisegete a passage and then claim it as a proof-text for your doctrine. At best, eisegesis can vindicate your doctrine in light of a difficult passage; it cannot be used as an argument in favor of your doctrine.

The objection we have brought forward is serious. It calls into question the value of one of the pivotal passages used in the paedobaptist apologetic. I would hope that paedobaptists would drop this passage from their apologetic in light of the serious difficulties in their interpretation. In spite of that, I acknowledge that my disproof of the paedobaptist assertion from this passage is not the same as proving the contrary. Furthermore, baptists have also been guilty of misinterpreting this passage.

A Critique of the Usual Baptist Interpretations

John Gill states the common baptist view of this passage as follows:

The children are holy in the same sense as their parents are; that as they are sanctified, or lawfully espoused together, so the children born of them were in a civil and legal sense holy, that is, legitimate. (Gill's *Expositor*)

This view rightly interprets "is sanctified" and "holy" in a similar sense; that is, both terms refer to lawfulness or legitimacy. Even so, one might justifiably object that different nuances creep into these terms as expounded by proponents of this view. If the language "is sanctified" is derived from the concept of the marriage covenant as the proponents of this view usually maintain, then the "holiness" of the children necessarily takes on a different focus. It seems that the proponents of this view are flirting with the very error that they seek to avoid.

An even more decisive critique of this view is enunciated by Richard Baxter. According to the common views of both baptists and paedobaptists, Paul argues from a fact accepted by the Corinthians — the holiness of the children — to prove the sanctification of the unbelieving spouse. We should ask then how it is possible that the Corinthians knew the former while still questioning the latter. Baxter argues that it is impossible to know that one's children are legitimate without also knowing the sanctity of the marriage from which they sprang. By very definition, a legitimate child is one who is born of a legitimate marriage! One cannot conceive of the notion of a legitimate child apart from the legitimacy of the union from which that child came. Therefore, this interpretation does not account for the state of knowledge assumed in this passage. (*Plain Scripture Proof*, pp. 86-87).

One might respond that the children contemplated here are only those that were born before the conversion of one parent; in this case, the legitimacy of these children is beyond question. That is true, of course, but this restriction completely undermines the power of the argument. These children's legitimacy only testifies to the sanctity of the marriage before the conversion of one of the parents. It says nothing of the legitimacy of the marriage after one parent's conversion, nor does it address the legitimacy of children born after this conversion. To restrict the scope of the children here would leave the Corinthians' question unanswered.

Another view of this passage is given by David Kingdon:

. . . the offering up of the believing spouse sanctifies the whole, not in the sense of making inwardly holy but in setting the family apart for the operation of the grace of God in salvation through the witness of the believing partner (I Cor. 7:16). Paul is confident of the power of the Gospel to exert, in many cases, a truly converting and sanctifying

influence on the family through a Christian father or mother. Therefore, the believer should on his part not break the marriage bond if the unbelieving partner is willing to continue in it. (*Children of Abraham*, p. 90)

While this is true as far as it goes, it does not fully come to grips with the nature of Paul's argument. In fact, it fails at exactly the same point as the view described previously — it fails to account for the Corinthians' state of knowledge. It appears from Kingdon's description that sanctified and holy mean "set apart to the power of Gospel influence." If so, why would the Corinthians know that the gospel has a powerful converting and sanctifying influence on their children but doubt this in the case of their unconverted spouse? Contrary to the previous view, it is possible that this describes the Corinthians' understanding. However, such a peculiar state of understanding cries out for some plausible explanation of its origin, and no such explanation is offered.

Furthermore, even if the Corinthians were convinced of the sanctifying influence of the gospel in the life of an unbelieving spouse, how does this remove the scruple they had about remaining with the spouse? Gospel influence may often come even through unlawful associations. One might argue with equal validity that it is lawful to marry an unbeliever because the believer can exert a sanctifying influence on the unbeliever through the marriage.

Finally, on what basis are we to believe that the holiness of the children implies holiness of an unbelieving spouse? This interpretation does not show us why Paul's logic is compelling. It is conceivable that the Corinthians would have been left with continuing doubts about the issue.

Thus, the common interpretations of baptists and paedobaptists alike are clearly inadequate.

A Stronger Baptist Interpretation

A great deal of confusion has arisen over this passage because interpreters have failed to consider the nature of Paul's logic in the passage. The common baptist and paedobaptist views both understand Paul to be making a cause/effect argument. In their view, Paul is arguing from the presence of a known effect to the presence of its cause or necessary condition. The argument can be stated in the form of a syllogism:

Major premise: Sanctification of the unbelieving spouse is necessary for the holiness of your children;

Minor premise: Your children are holy;

Conclusion: Therefore, the unbelieving spouse is sanctified.

This construction of Paul's reasoning is an assumption unwarranted by the text. In my view, Paul considers the case of the children to be parallel to that of the unbelieving spouse. He is arguing from analogy rather than by cause/effect. If the unbelieving spouse is holy, the children are holy; if the unbelieving spouse is unclean, the children are unclean — not because one causes the other but because they are like cases. This view was proposed by John Dagg (*Manual of Theology*, Part II, pp. 155-156, and "A Decisive Argument Against Infant Baptism, Furnished by One of Its Own Proof-Texts") in the mid-1800's and was adopted by several of his contemporaries. However, it appears to have fallen into obscurity in later years; I have not seen it so much as mentioned in any discussion of the passage published after the mid-1800's. It is time then to blow the dust off this view and give it the consideration that it deserves. In the discussion that follows, I rely heavily on Dagg's work.

According to Dagg, Paul considers the question and

decides that a believer and an unbeliever may lawfully dwell together The intercourse of a married pair with each other, and that of parents with their children, must be regulated by the same rule. An unconverted husband or wife stands on the same level with unconverted children. If intercourse with the former is unlawful, intercourse with the latter is equally unlawful. [The contrary decision] would sever the ties that bind parents to their children, and [force them to leave their children]. By showing that this monstrous consequence legitimately follows from the doctrine, he has furnished an argument against it which is perfectly conclusive.

Is there evidence for a parallel argument as Dagg advocates? Yes. The language of the passage points strongly in this direction. First, there is the pronoun "your" (plural in the Greek). Virtually all commentators assume without question that "your children" are the children of the mixed marriages being discussed in the passage. But why would Paul say "your children" instead of "their children", since in the immediate context he is referring to

the marriage partners in the third person? Paul is in the middle of a section in which he is dealing case-by-case with various questions that had been addressed to him by the church as a whole (v. 1). He is addressing the church as a whole in his answer, even though he is discussing the cases of various subgroups within the church. When he says "your children", he is signifying the children of those whom he is addressing, that is, the children of the church members as a whole, not the children of the mixed marriages exclusively.

In v. 8, he addresses a specific subgroup with the statement, "I say to the unmarried and to widows". Yet he goes on to address them in the third person -- "it is good for them if they remain even as I". He follows the same pattern in v. 10 and again in v. 12. In vv. 13-15 on both sides of the pronoun in question, Paul consistently uses the third person to refer to the believing partner. Following the same style, Paul would have said "otherwise their children are unclean" if he had been referring exclusively to the children of these mixed marriages. In v. 16, he addresses the believing partner in the second person, but he explicitly states the party that he is addressing, and even here he uses the singular.

In v. 5 Paul uses the second person to address a specific subgroup without a formal notice of the restricted audience. However, in this context he is addressing a general concern touching the church as a whole (see vv. 1-2 and v. 7). He is issuing a directive, which makes the shift to the second person natural and expected. This is an extended statement whose intended audience is utterly unambiguous. It applies to all who were married just as "your children" applies to all who had children.

Finally, if we insist on finding a reference to "your" in the immediate context, the logical referent is the unbelieving spouse. The unbelieving spouse is the subject of the previous sentence and is more prominently in view than the believing spouse. But is it likely that Paul addressed those outside the church with "your" when in the broader context he is addressing specific questions of the church?

These considerations point us to the conclusion that "your children" refers to the children of all the church members and not to those of mixed marriages exclusively. But how does this bear on the nature of Paul's argument? If some of "your children" are not the fruit of mixed marriages, then we cannot

explain how they could hypothetically be unclean as the effect of an unsanctified unbelieving parent. In other words, the argument must be understood as an argument of analogy rather than of cause/effect.

Another evidence that Paul was arguing from parallel cases is the tenses of the verbs in the passage. Literally, we have the following translation: "The unbelieving [spouse] is made holy in the [believing spouse]; otherwise your children are unclean, but now they are holy." The verb "is made holy" is in the perfect tense, and "are" is in the present. The implied major premise is: If the unbelieving spouse is not made holy, your children are unclean. In contrast, cause/effect arguments ordinarily use a temporal progression in their verb choice to signify a dependent consequence. In such a case, a more natural choice for the implied major premise would be: If the unbelieving spouse had not been made holy, then your children would be unclean. The passage would then read: "The unbelieving spouse is made holy in the believing spouse; otherwise your children would be (or "were") unclean, but now they are holy". (Regrettably, this word choice appears in many translations, although there is no warrant for it other than the mistaken notion that Paul is making a cause/effect argument.)

The use of "would be unclean" is the most natural wording for the situation in which the contrary is an established fact to the audience. When Christ said to the Pharisees, "If God were your father, you would love me", the contrary fact "you do not love me" was established and known to the audience. Christ did not need to say explicitly "but you do not love me" since this fact was known to both him and his audience. On the contrary, in I Cor. 15:16, when Paul said "If the dead are not raised, then neither is Christ raised", he did not assume that his audience accepted Christ's resurrection. Instead, he went on to show that the denial of the resurrection leads to absurdity to complete his argument. In Dagg's argument, the cleanness of the children is not so much taken as an established fact; instead, the contrary notion leads to absurdity. Paul's use of "is unclean" and his conclusion with the statement "but now they are holy" more naturally suggests that his argument does not assume the children's cleanness as an established fact. Therefore, it suggests that the common cause/effect interpretation is in error.

Another phrase in the passage also suggests a parallel argument. We note that the Greek phrase "*epei ara*" translated "otherwise" is only used one other

time in the New Testament. The other occurrence is in a nearby passage, I Cor. 5:10, where Paul makes a similar argument concerning a similar issue. He argues that we are not to avoid contact with immoral people as a class; otherwise, it is necessary for us to go out of this world. In this passage Paul is arguing using parallel cases. He argues that if we avoid contact with immoral people, then we must also avoid contact with other people to whom we need to relate. The similarity of word choice and issues in the two passages suggests that the nature of the argument is similar too.

None of these arguments is conclusive in itself. Taken together, however, they form a strong case for understanding the argument as one of parallel cases rather than cause/effect. Furthermore, even if all of these arguments can be overturned, it would not provide any positive evidence for the opposing view. In fact, the parallel cases view would still be preferable simply because of its natural accord with the passage and the insurmountable difficulties of the alternative. This interpretation is strong in exactly the ways in which the others are weak. It assigns an identical meaning to the holiness of the children and the sanctification of the unbelieving spouse. Furthermore, it accounts for the fact that the holiness of the children is accepted as true, for the contrary would call into question the relation between all believing parents and their children, which the Corinthians agreed was contrary to all Christian principles. Finally, it gives cogency and strength to Paul's logic. It applies directly to all mixed marriages, whether there are children or not. And the effect of the opposite conclusion would be so horrible that it compels agreement with Paul's decision.

The Question of Infant Baptism

Interestingly enough, the interpretation given here does more than free us from an argument for paedobaptism. It actually provides a strong argument against paedobaptism. Paul's argument is founded on the similarity between the case of unbelieving spouses and the case of believers' children. If the holiness of the unbelieving spouse falls short of qualifying him/her for baptism, then by Paul's reasoning the holiness of believers' children falls short of this too. If the church at Corinth admitted their children to baptism and church membership but denied this to unbelieving spouses, then the two groups were in quite different circumstances. Thus, Paul's argument would be completely invalid. Since Paul's argument must be valid, we are forced to

conclude that the church at Corinth did not admit their children to baptism or church membership.

It may be objected that this interpretation forces us to understand children to refer only to unconverted children if we are to maintain the parallel with the unbelieving spouse. We grant that the children considered must be outside the church to maintain the parallel. However, we need not read the word "children" as "unconverted children". The word for children here is *tekna*, which can equally well be translated "offspring". Paul is contemplating them in the natural state as they are born to believing parents, not as they may eventually come to be by the grace of God. Moreover, we should observe that the paedobaptist view is subject to the same objection, since the holiness of children in their view only applies to the offspring of believers as long as they are literally children and have not yet repudiated the covenant.

Having shown the weaknesses of the competing views and the strength of this view, I commend it to you as the true sense of this passage.

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