

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

**PayPal**

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *Vox Evangelica* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_vox\\_evangelica.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_vox_evangelica.php)

## *The Early Brethren and Baptism*

H.H. Rowdon

[p.55]

One of the divisive issues in modern church history has been baptism—its subjects, its mode, its theology and its implications for church membership and salvation. Somewhat surprisingly, the Brethren movement which has suffered more than its fair share of controversy largely escaped involvement in this one. Not that Brethren were of one mind on the subject. Far from it, as we shall see. But they seem to have achieved a degree of success in their attempts to contain their disagreements.<sup>1</sup>

Baptism was a burning issue in the first half of the nineteenth century. Disillusionment with the established church and consequent secession was frequently the result, in part at least, of doubts about the validity of infant baptism. Groups such as the pre-Brethren assemblies revealed in the *Letters concerning their Principles and Order from Assemblies of Believers in 1818-1820*, the Walkerites in Ireland and the Western Schism in England made an issue of baptism. So did individual seceding clergy such as Roger Hitchcock, William Tiptaft, William Morshead, John Peters, J. C. Philpot and Frederick Tryon.<sup>2</sup> Later, the matter was agitated even more widely as a result of Tractarian and Anglo-Catholic teaching on the subject and the celebrated Gorham Case.

Among the Baptists, too, there was widespread discussion and controversy mainly connected with the advocacy of open communion as opposed to the practice of admitting to communion only those who had been baptised as believers. The outstanding name here was that of Robert Hall who accepted as a 'term of communion' nothing that was not a 'term of salvation'.<sup>3</sup>

This paper examines the grounds on which opposing positions were adopted within the Brethren movement, and suggests some reasons why this difference of opinion, unlike others, did not occasion internecine strife.

### I

Although J. N. Darby renounced so much of his Anglican heritage, he did not repudiate infant baptism. The indiscriminate use of that rite he upheld no more than any other of the early Brethren, and he did pass through a phase of doubt as to the validity of the practice.<sup>4</sup> But he continued to regard the baptism of the children of believers as thoroughly scriptural, though he defended the practice with arguments somewhat different from those usually adopted by exponents of paedobaptism.

Darby made use of the customary proof-texts, as we shall see, but the dogmatic basis of his defence of paedobaptism was dispensational rather than covenant theology. Since this developed over the years there is not only the problem of interpreting Darby's tortuous

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf. the entertaining story told by W. B. Neatby in his *History of the Plymouth Brethren*, 238.

<sup>2</sup> H. H. Rowdon, 'Secession from the Established Church in the Early Nineteenth Century', *Vox Evangelica*, 1964, 76ff. [[http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/vox/vol03/secession\\_rowdon.pdf](http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/vox/vol03/secession_rowdon.pdf)]

<sup>3</sup> See his 'On Terms of Communion', *Works*, 2.

<sup>4</sup> 'If ever I hesitated, and like others, I was exercised about it, I have NO doubt as to infant baptism of the children of a Christian.' *Letters*, 2, 56 (letter of 1869).

English but the additional hazard of allowing for the development of his thought.<sup>5</sup> We shall not attempt to trace the development, but will content ourselves with the finished product.

Darby was convinced that the Baptist position was unscriptural.<sup>6</sup> His attitude was perhaps conditioned by horror at the sectarian implications of the emphasis

[p.56]

placed upon baptism by the denominational Baptists. His basic objection was therefore the 'feverish activity and propaganda about it, which is not Christ'.<sup>7</sup> Further, Darby took issue with the Baptist contention that believers' baptism is a matter of obedience to a plainly articulated divine ordinance. Rather lamely, he argued that baptism is 'the act of him that baptizes, not of him that is baptized', and that the command is to baptize, not to be baptized.<sup>8</sup> He also asserted that baptism is a matter, not of obedience to a command but of a privilege granted.<sup>9</sup> Further, he disliked the stress on obedience to a command on the ground that this idea runs contrary to the whole spirit and character of the Gospel.<sup>10</sup> Since he regarded baptism as an initiatory rite normally preceding conversion, he could also argue: 'Christ could not as to Christianity give a command to those without. If a man is within it is by baptism, so that there can be no command to be baptized.'<sup>11</sup> So, in reply to the question, 'Where are children commanded to receive baptism?', he could answer, triumphantly, 'Of course they are not, nor believers'.<sup>12</sup> A fair example of Darby's logic!

If baptism was not to be thought of in terms of believers obeying a dominical command, neither was it a formal testimony to a spiritual blessing received. 'I see no trace in scripture of its being a testimony to others,' wrote Darby in a letter of 1878, 'though,' he added, 'every faithful confession of Christ turns to a testimony'.<sup>13</sup> Darby may seem to be quibbling when he asserted of baptism, 'It is the sign of dying and rising again—not of being dead and risen,'<sup>14</sup> and may appear to be verging on baptismal regeneration when he affirmed that we are baptized 'to death—not because we have died', and when he appealed to 1 Peter 3: 21 as proving that baptism 'saves us' and is not 'a witness of being saved'.<sup>15</sup> Such, however, is not his intention. Rather, he is asserting that the essential thing about baptism is not its subjective effects but its objective significance. Baptism, he insisted, is an 'outward public sign of that whereto Christ's death and resurrection are available a witness of that—not that the person has availed himself of that: that may or may not be true'.<sup>16</sup> He is plainly horrified at what he regards as Baptist particularism, for he understands Baptists to mean that baptism 'does not now proclaim that I have become a Christian but that I have become a Baptist'.<sup>17</sup> To prove his

---

<sup>5</sup> By way of illustration we may cite the note in the *Collected Writings* (I, 402), to a passage in Darby's 'Remarks on the State of the Church', which comments, 'The doctrine of the ruin, or the house, was not distinctly brought out then.'

<sup>6</sup> *Letters on Baptism* (taken from Darby's correspondence), 5, 11f., 13, 15, 16-20, 21 *et alia*.

<sup>7</sup> *Letters*, 2, 330 (letter of 1874).

<sup>8</sup> *Letters on Baptism*, 4.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 18f.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 4, 11, 14, 17-19, 24.

<sup>11</sup> *Letters*, 2, 331 (date unknown).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 2, 58 (letter of 1869).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 3, 560.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 2, 332 (date unknown).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 2, 58, 59 (letter of 1869).

<sup>16</sup> *Letters on Baptism*, 21.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

point that baptism is a privilege conferred rather than a testimony to blessing received he draws an analogy with the Lord's Supper, arguing that we do not partake as a sign that we have eaten Christ!<sup>18</sup>

Darby's own view of baptism is articulated with reference not to the parallels between the old and new covenants but to the contrasts between the dispensational stages of development that he perceived in the New Testament, and particularly to the difference between the baptismal commission given to the Twelve and the preaching commission given to Paul. In this, as in so much of his thinking, Darby was—or thought he was—Pauline. Unlike E. W. Bullinger, he did retain the practice of water-baptism, but only by relating it to the sphere of outward profession rather than to that of spiritual experience. The distinction that resulted was not that between the natural and the spiritual Israel of covenant theology, nor did he use the terms 'visible' and 'invisible' Church. Rather, he distinguished apostate Christendom (in terms of the 'great house' of 2 Timothy 2: 20) from the Body of Christ. Entry into the former is by means of water-baptism, whereas baptism by the Holy Ghost constitutes entry to the latter.

The result of this distinction is strikingly similar to that produced by the distinc-

[p.57]

tion between the natural and the spiritual Israel, but it is one unrelated to the Old Testament. Both forms of baptism have as their fundamental point of reference the death and resurrection of Christ. For this reason Darby dismissed the baptism of John as less than Christian. Not only did it have no reference to death and resurrection, but it appeared to Darby to be in opposition to the very idea 'for it proposed to receive Christ, and, as far as it went, that He should not therefore die at all'.<sup>19</sup> That John's baptism differed essentially from Christian baptism was proved for Darby by the fact that some who had received the former were also given the latter (Acts 19: 5).<sup>20</sup>

Darby seems to have regarded the Baptist case as resting on the baptismal commission given to the Twelve. But, he argued, apart from Mark 16: 20 we have no record of their having fulfilled this commission, which was transmuted, taken from them and given to Paul. The commission to the Twelve had been 'to bring the nations into connection with an accepted remnant of Jews on earth', and was 'a saving force founded on faith, but that is not the question now'.<sup>21</sup> To clinch the matter, Darby argued that since the Twelve were never baptized as Christians—nor the 120, Darby thought—to make baptism the initiatory rite into the Body of Christ would exclude the Apostles from that Body which—be it noted—Darby described as 'a little too absurd'.<sup>22</sup>

Paul was not sent to baptize because baptism is entry into 'the assembly on earth—the house builded on earth for a habitation of God—not into the body'.<sup>23</sup> Baptism is 'a formal admission into the place of privilege', but that privilege is no more than 'admission into public outward association with God.... It is not a sign even of life—not of being baptized into Christ's body,

---

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>19</sup> *Letters*, 2, 331 (date unknown).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* Darby opposed the idea of baptising those who had once received a form of Christian baptism. *Letters on Baptism*, 3, 13.

<sup>21</sup> *Letters*, 2, 56f. (letter of 1869); 3, 559f. (letter of 1878).

<sup>22</sup> *Letters on Baptism*, 31.

<sup>23</sup> *Letters*, 3, 333 (date unknown).

not of being made children.<sup>24</sup> Yet Darby went on to say that this place of privilege includes 'the presence of the Holy Ghost, who is among the saints in God's house as Satan is in the world'. Those received into 'the house' should be 'brought up and educated in divine life'. The sin of Christendom is that this is not done. The house has become corrupt and is ripening for judgement. Darby frequently expressed his approval of the term 'christening' for water baptism, since it aptly summed up his view of what that ordinance signified. It was an external act by which the individual was brought into a position of privilege where he might grow up in Christian instruction and nurture. In due course, it was to be hoped, he would be brought to a personal faith in Christ and receive 'the baptism of the Spirit, which is the seal of faith, as scripture repeatedly declares'.<sup>25</sup> Darby believed that it was by the One Spirit that we are baptized into the One Body, and 'of this unity, the Lord's Supper is the sign, not baptism'.<sup>26</sup>

It goes without saying that Darby regarded infants as fit subjects for baptism. He went so far as to agree that believers who had not previously been baptized might receive the ordinance, but since he regarded it as an initiatory rite he would not require it of such. It was otherwise with those wishing to become Christians. Darby felt justified in using Mark 16: 16 when dealing with a Jew who shrank from baptism on the ground that it would be the death of his mother. He was prepared to say to such a man—however loud his verbal profession of faith—"I cannot recognise you as saved". Commented Darby, 'It is not a poor obedience to an ordinance when already a Christian which is in question here, but a shrinking from being one'.<sup>27</sup>

Darby utilized many arguments to support his contention that the children of

[p.58]

believing parents (or only one) were fit subjects for baptism. He made oblique reference to the old covenant, but appealed mainly to the words of Christ Himself.<sup>28</sup> Matthew 19: 14 was the proof text here, together with Matthew 18: 1-6. The former was taken to mean that children are eligible for the kingdom of heaven (as distinct from the kingdom of Christ, Darby pointed out). The latter was a warning against despising a little one, since 'the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost'. The epistles provided further support, since Darby regarded 1 Corinthians 7: 14 as showing that children of a Christian parent are 'relatively sanctified' and even argued that children cannot obey their parents 'in the Lord', according to Ephesians 6: 1 unless they have been brought into the sphere of privilege.<sup>29</sup>

More important than such proof texts was Darby's oft-repeated assertion that there is 'a divinely instituted place in which blessing is, independently of the question of personal conversion, and to which responsibility is attached according to the blessing'.<sup>30</sup> Scriptural authority for this was found in passages such as 1 Corinthians 10 and also Romans 11 (where

---

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 2, 59 (letter of 1869).

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 2, 332 (date unknown).

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 1, 363 (letter of 1860).

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 3, 560 (letter of 1878); 2, 334 (apparently referring to the same incident).

<sup>28</sup> 'Now the rejecting of them as infants was clearly not God's way of old, nor Christ's mind.' *Ibid.*, 2, 275 (letter of 1873).

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 2, 59-61 (letter of 1869); *Letters on Baptism*, 21-25. Darby realised that 1 Cor. 7: 14 can prove too much, and so argued that whereas the children of a Christian parent are described as 'holy', the unconverted partner is merely 'sanctified'!

<sup>30</sup> *Letters*, 2, 58 (letter of 1869); 3, 557-559.

the olive tree includes branches which were ultimately cut off), 1 Corinthians 3 (where wood, hay and stubble are regarded as reprobate elements in the divine building) and the warning passages in Hebrews. The pastoral problem facing Christian parents is well brought out in this passage which sums up Darby's view:

'They cannot leave their children without, in Satan's world: they bring them to be received as holy, as regards God's ways and dealings. The Church cannot receive them but through death, but receives them in Christ's name as if receiving Him, as He says, and the name of Jesus is called upon them through this image of His death too; and while received into God's congregation where the Holy Ghost is, and where all should be a pattern to them, they are given back to the parents in grace with Jesus' name on them to bring them up for Him, not for the world "in the nurture and admonition of the Lord". I receive them then because they are holy relatively, because Christ received them, and "of such is the kingdom of heaven", and I can receive them in no other scriptural way—with the sign of Christ's death and of His love.'<sup>31</sup>

Darby, then, sees infant baptism as reception into a kind of half-way house, which is nevertheless a place of spiritual privilege where the Holy Ghost dwells and in which the 'christened' child may be 'brought up and educated in divine life'.<sup>32</sup> He bases his assertions on Scriptures and arguments strikingly similar to those used by traditional exponents of paedo-baptism, though the analogy with the old covenant is not invoked and some novel dispensational distinctions are employed against the Baptist position.

Dispensational presuppositions were also of use in explaining the pastoral problem inherent in paedo-baptism. This was attributed to failure to maintain discipline in Christendom—a failure which had resulted in apostasy. For Darby, the Lord's Supper was the sign of the unity of the Body of Christ, and if those who remained no more than members of the kingdom of heaven, had been barred from the Lord's Table, all would have been well. Scripture, however, had foretold the degeneration of the 'house' into a 'great house', and its ultimate judgement.<sup>33</sup> Yet, strangely, Darby seems to have acted on the principle, *abusus non tollit usum* in retaining the practice of baptism.

[p.59]

With regard to the mode of baptism, Darby was dubious about sprinkling, and doubted whether affusion was adequate. His guiding principle was expressed in the followings words: 'Burial and death is the idea which implies something like immersion—at least, going into the water and then being covered with it by pouring, as was in the sea and the cloud'. His own practice was 'to immerse unless there is special hindrance, or, at any rate, standing in the bath pour water over them'. But he was not greatly concerned about the mode, and added, 'I should not think of repeating a *bona fide* baptism because of the greater or smaller quantity of water, any more than I should think I had not taken the Lord's Supper if the pieces had been partially cut up before celebrating the supper'.<sup>34</sup>

Darby was not alone in retaining belief in the validity of infant baptism. B. W. Newton affirmed that H. Borlase was of this mind,<sup>35</sup> and Neatby stated that W. H. Dorman (a

---

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 2, 62 (letter of 1869).

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 2, 334 (date unknown).

<sup>33</sup> *Letters on Baptism*, 24f.

<sup>34</sup> *Letters*, 1, 498f. (letter of 1865).

<sup>35</sup> *Fry MS.*, 289.

Congregationalist before throwing in his lot with the Brethren) also remained a paedobaptist. Another was Charles Hargrove, the former Anglican vicar of Westport in Ireland. Hargrove is one of the few Brethren of either persuasion to have expressed in print in a systematic way his views on this controversial issue. His 'Thoughts on Baptism' were included in the third volume of his collected writings.<sup>36</sup>

Hargrove freely admitted that there was much to be said on both sides. The strength of the Baptist position he felt to lie in the commission of Mark 16: 15, 16, and the absence from Scripture of any account of the practice of infant baptism or of precept to warrant it. Hargrove made greater use of arguments drawn from covenant theology than Darby did. He pointed out that the baptismal commission was given to Jews who were familiar with the reception of children. The statement of Acts 2: 49 that the promise is to 'you and to your children' he regarded as significant. Further, the Abrahamic covenant to which appeal is made in Galatians 3 and Romans 4 promised blessings to the children—of believing parents, Hargrove hastened to add. He insisted that Christ's blessing of infants had a bearing on the subject, for 'it strongly shows us the Lord's mind towards infants'. Whereas our Lord identified the parent and the child in blessing, the Baptist separates them, thus losing a strong motive to train the child for the Lord and depriving the child of a strong motive to yield to the Lord. Like Darby, Hargrove thought the exhortation to children in Ephesians 6: 1-4 meaningless apart from infant baptism. How, he asked, could those who are dead in sin obey their parents 'in the Lord'? The households baptized in Acts 16: 15, 33 and 1 Corinthians 1: 16 may well have included infants, and Hargrove could find no evidence in Acts or the epistles of anything like baptismal classes! Responsibility for the abuse of infant baptism was laid by Hargrove at the door of the parents: the ordinance itself was not at fault. Baptism, in short, is the door into God's house—which Hargrove defined as 'the whole body of professing Christians'—on the analogy of circumcision under the old covenant. Hargrove was an old-fashioned paedobaptist.<sup>37</sup>

## II

Opposition to the practice of paedobaptism was not confined to the 'Open' wing of the Brethren Movement. G. V. Wigram, one of Darby's staunchest supporters, was a deviationist as far as baptism was concerned. W. Kelly was another who differed from Darby on this matter, and Neatby has pointed out that when the

[p.60]

division arose between Darby and Kelly, most of those who followed Kelly were baptist.

It is a little difficult to determine whether Andrew Miller advocated the baptism of believers or merely carried the ideas of Darby a little further along the road to Bullinger's repudiation of the rite. In his *Answers to Six Questions on Baptism*, first published in 1855, Miller clearly asserted that there was no positive scripture in favour of the practice of infant baptism, and asked the pertinent question, 'How can you be either a disciple or a professor when an infant?'.<sup>38</sup> Yet he faithfully reproduced ideas of Darby, such as the difference between John's

---

<sup>36</sup> J. Hargrave (ed.), *Notes on the Book of Genesis with some Essays and Addresses by the late Rev. Charles Hargrave*, 3, 58-65.

<sup>37</sup> *Op. cit.*, 237.

<sup>38</sup> *Op. cit.*, 10.

baptism and Christian baptism,<sup>39</sup> the command being to baptize rather than to be baptized,<sup>40</sup> the difference between baptism into the kingdom by water and baptism into the Church by the Holy Spirit,<sup>41</sup> and the distinction between baptism up to the conversion of Paul as 'the grand line of demarcation between professors and those who make no profession', and baptism, typical of death, burial and resurrection, as of divine appointment.<sup>42</sup> This last distinction he drew rather more sharply than Darby, and he emphasized rather more strongly the distinct character of Paul's commission, the secondary place occupied by baptism in Paul's gospel, and the danger of making baptism a sectarian issue. Disciples on earth, he averred, are now 'gathered to the Person of a heavenly Christ by faith and in the power of the Holy Ghost, and not *around water-baptism*'.<sup>43</sup> Miller further argued that the relative unimportance of baptism is shown by the fact that—in contrast to the Lord's Supper—it is non-repeatable.<sup>44</sup> He concluded: 'While I profoundly respect individual consciences and would give all credit for sincerity to those who hold infant baptism, I fail to see that raising the question... is service to the Lord or to His saints'.<sup>45</sup>

Among the unequivocal exponents of believers' baptism, some, such as R. C. Chapman, G. Müller and H. Craik, had been Baptists before they became known as Brethren. Others, such as A. N. Groves, E. Cronin and J. Parnell had been paedobaptists, but early came to adopt a baptist position. None of these has left a detailed exposition of his views. For example, Müller merely stated in his Narrative that he became convinced by Scriptures such as Acts 8: 36-38 (in particular) that believers were the proper subjects for baptism, and that Romans 6: 3-5 showed him that immersion was the scriptural mode.<sup>46</sup>

B. W. Newton, however, has furnished us with a fuller account of his views on the subject in the dissertation, *Baptism, briefly considered*. This treatment, evidently written after the close of his Brethren period, regarded baptism as an ordinance attached to the New Covenant. The nature of the ordinance being determined by the nature of the covenant to which it is attached, Newton asserted that Christian baptism is an ordinance of promise and of grace. It is God's 'seal and sign of a work which His grace has effectually accomplished for us in the death and resurrection of His Son',<sup>47</sup> and in it 'He visibly pledges His faithfulness and His power to maintain the blessings and effectuate the results that are in this sign signified'.<sup>48</sup> Despite the calvinistic undertones, Newton was warned off infant baptism by the spectre of baptismal regeneration. He denied that baptism is no more than the rite of admission into the visible church since this would nullify the force of Biblical teaching on baptism as the sign of regeneration.<sup>49</sup> Baptism is, on the part of the baptizer, a public and formal recognition of the person baptized as eligible for the fellowship of God's people, and, on the part of the baptized, 'a

[p.61]

---

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 6f.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 11-16.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 18-20.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 28f.; cf. 4, 5.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>46</sup> 1, 66.

<sup>47</sup> 9.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 34, 21-24.



public and formal confession of the name of Jesus, and of the mercies in Him received, and also an expression of their desire to enter the visible communion of God's people'.<sup>50</sup>

Newton asserted that they alone were fit subjects for baptism who had first been discipled, taking his stand on Matthew 28: 19, Acts 2: 41 and 1 Peter 3: 21. That infant baptism was practised in the early church did not surprise Newton, for he regarded it as 'an almost necessary adjunct' to the idea, which arose early, that the waters of baptism have in themselves 'a mystic efficacy'. The words of 1 Peter 3: 21, however, 'stood like a mountain in the path' of the development, till eventually they were surmounted. The notion that 'the answer of a good conscience' can be given by vicarious sponsors Newton dismissed with scorn.<sup>51</sup> If we can repent on behalf of others, he asked, can we not become the saviour of others? The argument that baptism is a God-appointed way of commending children to God's care he likewise rejected, since baptism is far more than this (which Newton accepted as a commendable practice).<sup>52</sup> The scriptural evidence for the baptism of infants Newton regarded as 'slender indeed'. The households baptized may, or may not have contained infants—'the one supposition is as probable as the other'. But the fact that all the jailor's household were baptized proved to Newton that all believed!<sup>53</sup> The paedobaptist interpretation of 1 Corinthians 7: 14 proved too much for Newton's liking!<sup>54</sup> The analogy with circumcision did not demand the baptism of infants since a new covenant does not require an exactly parallel initiatory rite to that of the old. As for the difficult matter of the status of infants, Newton argued on the basis of Romans 4: 15 and 5: 13 that infants who die are saved. The children of believers may enjoy a privileged position, but not such as to warrant their baptism.<sup>55</sup> Here, then, we have a fully articulated view of baptism in terms of covenant theology yet aware of the significance of the newness of the new covenant.

### III

It may well be asked why baptism did not become a controversial issue between the early Brethren. Part of the answer may lie in the fact that the cleavage of opinion did not coincide with that on prophetic interpretation. True, Darby was on one side, with Newton, Müller, Craik and Chapman on the other. But Wigram and, later, Kelly, were also among those who differed from Darby on baptism. To have pushed the matter might have left Darby well-nigh isolated, apart from Dorman, Hargrove (who differed from Darby on matters connected with the ministry) and perhaps a few others. Nevertheless, this is not the whole answer. Various factors seem to have operated, and we must examine the attitude of each side.

From Darby's point of view there was first, and perhaps foremost, the fear of becoming involved in a denominational issue. It is difficult to exaggerate the strength of denominational feeling in the nineteenth century and the horror felt by Anglicans at the 'sectarianism' of dissent. It may well have seemed to Darby that the Baptists had made baptism a sectarian issue, and to have insisted on a particular view of baptism—even a paedobaptist one—would have seemed a sectarian act. Darby insisted that to maintain a dogmatic view on baptism would have made Brethren sectarian. He even went as far as to say that if Brethren were to maintain

---

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 36ff.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 44f.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 45f.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 47-49.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 57-64.

[p.62]

dogma on baptism they would have given up their first principles, 'and I for one,' he added, 'could not be among them'.<sup>56</sup>

But further, Darby seems to have regarded baptism as of little importance. He included it among the things which 'for our present condition' Scripture leaves 'in the background'.<sup>57</sup> This judgement is probably coloured by the fact—to which we have already drawn attention—that water-baptism does not figure largely in the writings of Paul. It may also indicate that Darby regarded baptism as a matter, like the setting up of church government, which constitutes an attempt to 'put the clock back' to the unfallen condition of the Church. This is suggested by a footnote in Darby's *Collected Writings* to a tract written in 1843. In the tract, 'Remarks on the State of the Church,' he had described baptism in terms of entry into 'the universal assembly on earth', though 'not necessarily into the assembly in heaven'. This is not very different from saying that baptism is the mode of entry into the visible church, but not necessarily into the invisible church. The footnote, however, makes the assertion that baptism is not 'admission to the body' since that is by 'baptism by one Spirit', and explains that 'the doctrine of the ruin, or the house, was not distinctly brought out then'.<sup>58</sup> The point is made even more explicitly by Richard Holden, who in most respects was a popularizer of Darby's teaching, when he stated: 'The baptism of the Holy Ghost brings into the body, the baptism of water into the house'.<sup>59</sup> Since 'the house' was an expression (drawn from 2 Timothy 2: 20) which Darby employed to denote the apostate Christendom from which believers were urged to separate, it is surprising that Darby continued to countenance the practice of water-baptism. Perhaps it was his love for children and his perception of the baptist dilemma over their status that determined his attitude.

At any rate, the lack of importance he attached to the external rite of baptism goes a long way towards explaining his consistent refusal to make an issue of baptism.<sup>60</sup> In a letter of 1878 he affirmed: 'I have never sought to convince or influence any one, and have no intention to do so'.<sup>61</sup>

The fact that Darby had not annexed the baptismal commission to the promise of Christ to be present with the 'two or three' made it possible for baptism to be regarded as a private matter. So, infant baptism took the form of household baptism, administered at home by the head of the family, while believer's baptism was regarded as a matter between the evangelist and his convert.<sup>62</sup> This made it easier for differing practices to be followed without too great a strain being placed on Christian tolerance, though it is worthy of note that in the first great exclusive rupture, most of those who followed Kelly were said to have been 'baptist', and most of those who remained with Darby 'paedobaptist'.<sup>63</sup>

---

<sup>56</sup> *Letters on Baptism*, 16.

<sup>57</sup> *Letters*, 2, 55 (letter of 1869).

<sup>58</sup> *Collected Writings*, 1, 402.

<sup>59</sup> *Six Letters*, 41.

<sup>60</sup> *Letters*, 1, 52, 244, 444; 2, 273 (letters of 1840, 1851, 1863, 1873), *et al.*

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 3, 560.

<sup>62</sup> R. Holden, *op. cit.*, 28.

<sup>63</sup> W. B. Neatby, *A History of the Plymouth Brethren*, 237.

Whereas Wigram and those of like mind in the exclusive ranks mostly maintained silence on the subject of baptism, this was not true of those who were on the other side of the Brethren fence. Such made no secret of their hostility to the practice of infant baptism. When referring to his willingness to tolerate strict communion at Barnstaple until all were of one mind, Chapman added: 'I was enabled to bear with their unduly pressing a right course; I could not thus have waited had they been pressing a wrong thing, such as infant baptism'.<sup>64</sup> Groves indignantly rejected Darby's contention that to preach on baptism was to become sectarian, saying, 'as well might our dear brother H[all] have been told not to publish his tract against war, lest he should be identified with the Society of Friends'.<sup>65</sup> Thus,

[p.63]

unlike Darby, the 'Open' Brethren were not prepared to tolerate advocacy or practice of a contrary view. It was as well that, as far as we know, militant advocacy of paedobaptism did not raise its head in their assemblies.

At the same time, they were not prepared to discipline those who were not convinced that they should be baptized as believers. For thirteen years, the wife of Henry Soltau refused to be baptized, until eventually on 1 August 1854 she was baptized by Robert Chapman, together with three of her daughters.<sup>66</sup> Müller's position, learned from Chapman, is well-known.<sup>67</sup> His argument boils down to the assertion that failure to see the truth of believers' baptism is not an issue of fundamental importance warranting the full rigours of church discipline. What is not so well-known is that this argument is strikingly similar to that of the Baptist opponent of the practice of strict communion, Robert Hall, who argued that 'terms of communion' must be confined to 'terms of salvation'.<sup>68</sup>

---

© 1979 *London School of Theology* (<http://www.lst.ac.uk/>). Reproduced by permission.

Prepared for the Web in September 2007 by Robert I. Bradshaw.

<http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/>

---

---

<sup>64</sup> W. H. Bennett, *Robert Cleaver Chapman of Barnstaple*, 32f.

<sup>65</sup> *Memoir*, 231 (20 Oct., 1833).

<sup>66</sup> M. Cable and F. French, *A Woman who laughed*, 38.

<sup>67</sup> I have dealt with this in *The Origins of the Brethren*, 122f.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 9; R. Hall, *Works*, 2.