

Faith Pulpit

The Reformers' Defense of Infant Baptism

The question of infant baptism has embroiled the church for centuries. Though Baptist theologians have repudiated this teaching, it is still prevalent in many churches today. This widespread practice means that church leaders need to continue to address this important issue. In this article, Dr. Ken Rathbun, a graduate of Faith Baptist Bible College and Theological Seminary, focuses on the Reformers' statements regarding infant baptism and shows that they were not consistent with their guiding principles. This well-researched treatment of the subject will help you better understand the issue and enable you to express the Scriptural teaching more clearly.

Sola Gracia. Sola Fide. Sola Scriptura. These affirmations are held to be the guiding principles of the Reformers. However, one of my professors in graduate school, a Catholic scholar of the Reformation, openly questioned the Reformers' commitment to the last of these principles: sola scriptura. At the time I quickly dismissed his query, considering the source of the objection. But later, as I studied the Reformation at another university, I began to rethink his idea, especially regarding infant baptism. I concluded it was important to revisit the 16th century baptismal controversy in order to understand how the Reformers justified infant baptism.

Baptists see the Reformers' defense of infant baptism as a concession to a historical practice over the Word of God. Is that a correct assessment? Did the Reformers violate their own guiding principles in defending infant baptism?

The issue of infant baptism affected many other areas of doctrine in the Reformation, including the use of church discipline, the concern for the purity of the lives of church members, and especially the practice of allowing the unsaved into the membership of the Reformers' churches. All of these issues in the Reformation have left tangible results in the contemporary church scene and deserve further investigation.¹

This article will briefly explore how the Reformers defended infant baptism.² The three major recognized Reformers are Ulrich Zwingli, Martin Luther, and John Calvin. I will add a lesser-known Reformer, Martin Bucer, who also was prominent in the controversy over infant baptism.

Ulrich Zwingli (1484–1531)

Zwingli is especially significant because in his city of Zurich several famous Anabaptists first took their stand (and later met their deaths) for practicing believer's baptism. Many contend that these Anabaptists were only applying the principles of Scripture that Zwingli had taught them.³

Zwingli was clear in his writings that baptism did not forgive sin.⁴ He wrote: "Christ himself did not connect salvation with baptism: it [salvation] is always by faith alone."⁵ However, he also wrote that baptism was not connected to faith either. "Hence it follows that water-baptism was given even when there was no faith, and it was received even by those who did not believe."⁶ Thus to Zwingli baptism was proper for infants. This position was a step further than other Reformers had been willing to take to justify infant baptism.⁷

As to the argument from the Anabaptists that those baptized in Acts had the Holy Spirit, Zwingli allowed for this possibility in infants. He stated that both Jeremiah and John were sanctified in their mothers' wombs; therefore, it could be possible that some even had the Holy Spirit already as infants.⁸

Zwingli also brought the issue of election into the discussion of infant baptism. He said, like Luther, that since people cannot know who the elect are, church leaders must not drive children of Christians from the church. Also, if only those who have faith can be baptized, then no one can be baptized since no one can know for certain about another's personal faith.⁹ In supporting infant baptism Zwingli said that children belong to God; therefore the church is to baptize them. He emphasized the now-familiar stance that baptism replaces Old Testament circumcision. This last point came about because of Zwingli's understanding of the covenant basis of this sacrament.¹⁰

Martin Luther (1483–1546)

Beyond question, Martin Luther truly believed in justification by faith alone for salvation. That theme even appears in his baptismal writings. However, at the same time he also made statements that seemed contradictory. Luther's Small Catechism (1529) stated that when the Word is added to the water, forgiveness of sin takes place in baptism: "It effects forgiveness of sins, delivers from death and the devil, and grants eternal salvation to all who believe, as the Word and promise of God declare."¹¹

Writing against the Anabaptists regarding the matter of faith and baptism, Luther strenuously denied that faith needed to be present in order to baptize. He even turned the argument around and stated that the "rebaptizers" could never know for sure if anyone really had faith.¹² Luther left open the question of whether infants could have faith in some mysterious way: "There are Scripture passages that tell us that

children may and can believe, though they do not speak or understand. . . . I grant that we do not understand how they do believe, or how faith is created. But that is not the point here.¹³

Luther clearly appealed to tradition to justify infant baptism: “Since our baptizing has been thus from the beginning of Christianity and the custom has been to baptize children, and since no one can prove with good reasons that they do not have faith, we should not make changes and build on such weak arguments.”¹⁴ Some scholars consider such statements as an overreaction against the Anabaptists.¹⁵ If so (and not all agree¹⁶), then Luther was clearly willing to go to almost any length to validate infant baptism. However, his appeals to the Bible in the context of the faith of infants are dubious, and his reliance on arguments from silence is weak.

Martin Bucer (1491–1551)

Martin Bucer was a Reformer in Strasbourg, Germany (though the city is now located in France) for about 25 years. He interacted personally with all of the three major Reformers. He was a Zwinglian who attempted to bring about a doctrinal agreement with the Lutherans in the Lord’s Supper controversy. He mentored John Calvin in Strasbourg during the latter’s three-year exile from Geneva in the late 1530s. After the Catholic armies defeated the Protestants in 1547, Bucer was eventually forced into exile. He moved to England to teach at Cambridge University where he attempted to influence the Anglican Reformation.

Bucer is recognized as a leading defender of infant baptism during the Reformation.¹⁷ Much of his interest in infant baptism was due to the fact that Strasbourg, where he labored, harbored so many “Sectarians,”¹⁸ with whom Bucer engaged in both verbal and written debates. Because Bucer dealt so much with the Anabaptists in Strasbourg, other Reformers looked to him for guidance in combating them.

Ironically, Bucer’s defense of infant baptism included reliance on the church tradition against which he and the Reformers protested.¹⁹ He also depended on testimony from the church fathers who claimed the church received the command to baptize infants orally from Christ and the apostles.²⁰ He followed the other Reformers saying that infant baptism was not prohibited by Scripture, it could be proven compatible with Scripture, and it did not require the faith of infants.²¹

Earlier in Bucer’s thinking, baptism only joined an infant to the church. He had asserted no automatic efficacy in baptism. Efficacy depended on one’s faith. Since infants could not have faith, they were marked out at baptism for future faith: “The Lord will grant them [infants] the Spirit and faith when he sees fit, but our washing them with water will not for one moment grant them faith of God’s Spirit as some important persons affirm, no less ill-advisedly than irreligiously.”²²

In the early 1530s Bucer made a major shift in his theological position. He never repudiated infant baptism; rather, he found new ways to justify its practice. However, this change further obscured the Reformed understanding of justification by faith alone.

We confess and teach that holy baptism . . . is in the case of adults and of young children truly a baptism of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit, whereby those who are baptised have all their sins washed away, are buried into the death of our Lord Jesus Christ, are incorporated into him and put on him for the death of their sins, for a new and godly life and the blessed resurrection, and through him become children and heirs of God.²³

The significance of baptism joining one to the church became lost. Baptism now conveyed, imparted, or automatically gave benefits to the recipient. One writer called this a tendency toward “sacramental manipulation.”²⁴ This shift in Bucer’s thinking strengthened his defense of infant baptism.

The Reformers, and Bucer in particular, were left with a perplexing question with such a view of baptism: “How would true faith be recognized in actual believers in the life of the church?” Another religious practice became necessary. Bucer’s answer was the rite of confirmation, and he became known as the “father of evangelical confirmation.”²⁵ Needless to say, the Scripture gives no basis for this rite; it came about because believer’s baptism lost its New Testament significance.

John Calvin (1509–1564)

Calvin arrived on the scene almost a generation after the Reformation began. He identified baptism very closely with circumcision.²⁶ He asserted infants could even be regenerated, though he did not explain how.

But how, they [rebaptizers] ask, are infants regenerated, when not possessing a knowledge of either good or evil? We answer, that the work of God, though beyond the reach of our capacity, is not therefore null. Moreover, infants who are to be saved (and that some are saved at this age is certain) must, without question, be previously regenerated by the Lord. . . . But to silence this class of objectors, God gave, in the case of John the Baptist, whom he sanctified from his mother’s womb (Luke 1:15), a proof of what he might do in others. They gain nothing by the quibble to which they here resort, viz., that this was only once done, and, therefore, it does not forthwith follow that the Lord always acts thus with infants. That is not the mode in which we reason. Our only object is to show, that they unjustly and malignantly confine the power of God within limits, within which it cannot be confined.²⁷

Calvin contended that infants (presumably the elect) could be saved from birth in some unexplained way, and the infant examples of John the Baptist and Christ were of paramount importance to him. Of Christ, Calvin wrote: “If in Christ we have a perfect pattern of all the grace, which God bestows on all

his children, in this instance we have a proof that the age of infancy is not incapable of receiving sanctification.”²⁸

Apart from the fact that Calvin compared Christ’s perfect example positively with fallen humanity, it appears from these last two statements that Calvin allowed for the possibility of salvation apart from faith. At least he made no mention of personal faith. Giving more weight to this claim, he continued,

We confess, indeed, that the word of the Lord is the only seed of spiritual regeneration; but we deny the inference that, therefore, the power of God cannot regenerate infants. This is as possible and easy for him as it is wondrous and incomprehensible to us. It were [sic] dangerous to deny that the Lord is able to furnish them with the knowledge of himself in any way he pleases.²⁹

The fact that Calvin neglected to include faith in this discussion is disturbing, especially in the context of infants. To Calvin, baptism joined an infant to the church and provided the infant the benefit of receiving exhortation by older believers to embrace God and serve Him.³⁰

Calvin tried to address the question whether faith should precede baptism. He allowed for the possibility of faith in infants, but he could not explain how. It was certainly not the kind of faith adults have, Calvin maintained, but he stated he “would rather leave the question undecided.”³¹ He held that infants can have faith in some way. “Let them [rebaptizers] tell me where the danger lies if they [infants] are said now to receive some part of that grace, of which they are to have the full measure shortly after.”³² These statements indicate that Calvin thought salvation could come apart from personal faith in the case of infants.³³

As to the issue of whether there is anything automatically conveyed in baptism, Calvin seemed to leave that door open: “In fine, the objection [that repentance and faith precede baptism] is easily disposed of by the fact, that children are baptised for future repentance and faith. Though these are not yet formed in them, yet the seed of both lies hid in them by the secret operation of the Spirit.”³⁴ This statement seems precariously close to a sacramental view of baptism.

An Evaluation

The objections of the Sectarians to infant baptism forced the Reformers to clarify and assess how to defend the practice, and they did not always do so consistently with their previously stated ideology. Some disregard their statements as an overreaction to the baptismal controversies with the Sectarians. I think, however, that their statements were more than that. They reflected an actual misunderstanding of baptism.

To Bible-believing Baptists, believer’s baptism is essential because we take seriously (and literally) the Biblical precedence of baptism in the book of Acts: faith precedes baptism. To those of other Christian persuasions, this precedence is not compelling, and they have constructed alternative theologies to

justify infant baptism.

Let us return to our question of sola scriptura. The Reformers' statements on infant baptism not only bring into question their consistent commitment to sola scriptura, but they show that they also muddled the waters of sola fide.

Works Cited

1. Infant baptism is by no means a dead issue in current scholarship. Notable books are David F. Wright, ed., *Baptism: Three Views* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2009) and John H. Armstrong, *Understanding Four Views on Baptism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007, as part of the Counterpoint Series). From the Reformed perspective see Bryan Holstrom, *Infant Baptism and the Silence of the New Testament* (Greenville, SC: Ambassador International, 2008); Lewis Bevens Schenck, *The Presbyterian Doctrine of Children in the Covenant* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2003; originally published by Yale University Press, 1940); Gregg Strawbridge, ed., *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing Company, 2003); and Douglas Wilson, *To A Thousand Generations: Infant Baptism—Covenant Mercy for the People of God* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 1996). For a Baptist perspective see Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn D. Wright, eds., *Believer's Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2006).
2. For a copy of this article with fuller development and documentation, contact the author at kenrathbun70@yahoo.com.
3. For example, see William R. Estep, *The Anabaptist Story*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975), 14, 62.
4. Zwingli, "Of Baptism," translated and edited by Rev. G. W. Bromiley, in *Zwingli and Bullinger*, vol. 24, *Library of Christian Classics*, eds., John Baillie, John T. McNeil, and Henry P. van Dusen (London: SCM Press, Ltd., 1953), 131. Note this work dates from May 1525.
5. Zwingli, 134.
6. Zwingli, 135.
7. As Zwingli himself admitted, 130.
8. Zwingli, 149.
9. Zwingli, "Questions Concerning the Sacrament of Baptism," 1530, in W. P. Stephens, *Zwingli: An Introduction to His Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992; in the U.S., New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 92.
10. Stephens, 93. See Baptist Jonathan H. Rainbow, "'Confessor Baptism': The Baptismal Doctrine of the Early Anabaptists," in *Believer's Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, eds. Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn D. Wright (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2006), 198-200 for discussion of the significance of Zwingli's linking circumcision to baptism, though he was not the first theologian to do so.
11. Theodore G. Tappert, trans., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2000, c1959), 348, 349.
12. "Concerning Rebaptism," 1528, *Luther's Works*, vol. 40 (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999, c1964), 240, 241; henceforth LW.
13. LW, vol. 40, 242, 243.
14. LW, vol. 40, 241.
15. See discussion by Rainbow, 195, 196. However, Rainbow shows the issue is not clearly evident.
16. See Leonard Verduin, *The Reformers and their Stepchildren* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964), 203, 204, where he clearly questions Luther's commitment to sola scriptura.
17. See David F. Wright, "Infant Baptism and the Christian Community in Bucer," in *Martin Bucer: Reforming Church and Community*, ed. David F. Wright (Cambridge University Press, 1994), 95: "These factors combined with others to make Martin Bucer probably the most dedicated, and certainly the most prolific, champion of paedobaptism among the leading Reformers." The factors David F. Wright alludes to are: church tradition, near universal consensus and practice, and the agreement among the church fathers as to the legitimacy of this practice.
18. I use the word "Sectarian" simply to describe those who were not Catholic or Protestant in the Reformation. The Sectarrians are a theologically diverse group, and not all advocated the sole authority of Scripture or believer's baptism. The main issue that united them was opposition to a state-controlled church as the Reformers advocated. A subgroup of the Sectarrians is the Anabaptists or the so called "re-baptizers."
19. See further discussion in Ken Rathbun, "Shortcomings of the Reformation: Unity versus Purity in the Ecclesiology and Praxis of Martin Bucer," (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of the West Indies, Kingston, Jamaica, 2006), 220, available from the author.
20. Martin Bucer, "An Explanation of the Mystery of Baptism," from the *Commentary on Romans* (first published at Strasbourg in 1536) following the exposition of chapter 6:1-11, in *Common Places of Martin Bucer*, ed. David F. Wright, vol. 14, *The Courtenay Library of Reformation Classics* (Appleford, Abingdon, Berkshire, England: The Sutton Courtenay Press, 1972), 304. Needless to say, no evidence exists for such a claim. Appeals to undocumented oral tradition are weak.
21. Rathbun, "Shortcomings of the Reformation," 221-224.

22. Martin Bucer, Ephesians Commentary, 1527, in David F. Wright, "Infant Baptism and the Christian Community in Bucer," 97. He formed his position on the basis of Genesis 17:7.
23. Martin Bucer, "A Brief Summary of Christian Doctrine," 1548, in Common Places of Martin Bucer, trans. and ed. David F. Wright, 85.
24. See Leonard Verduin, The Reformers and their Stepchildren, 132–??159.
25. See Amy Nelson Burnett, "Martin Bucer and the Anabaptist Context of Evangelical Confirmation," Mennonite Quarterly Review 68, no 1 (January 1994), 95. For agreement with this statement, see David F. Wright, "Infant Baptism and the Christian Community in Bucer," 102.
26. Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, reprint, 1995), Book IV, Chapter 16, "Paedobaptism. Its Accordance with the Institution of Christ, and the Nature of the Sign," section 3, page 530. Henceforth: IV.16.3. See also *ibid.*, 531, 532, and especially 534. Calvin was not impressed with the "furious madmen" who saw differences between circumcision and baptism, *ibid.*, 535.
27. Calvin, IV.16.17, 541.
28. Calvin, IV.16.18, 541.
29. Calvin, IV.16.18, 541, 542.
30. Calvin, IV.16.9, 535. Presumably this belief occurs at some later time.
31. Calvin, IV.16.19, 542.
32. Calvin, IV.16.19, 542. Calvin's reference of Moses, just a few words before this quote, helps to link it to circumcision.
33. The late Reformed scholar, David F. Wright, interestingly commented, "But some sage heads reckon that the small dose of religion administered indiscriminately in infant baptism has effectively inoculated generations against catching real Christianity in later life," in "Infant Baptism and the Christian Community in Bucer," 105. I think this issue is a serious one that affects Reformed churches to this day.
34. Calvin, IV.16. 20, 543.

Dr. Ken Rathbun

VP for Academic Services; College Dean at [Faith Baptist Bible College & Theological Seminary](#) | rathbunk@faith.edu | [Other Articles](#)

Ken Rathbun (PhD, University of the West Indies) was a Baptist Mid-Missions missionary in Jamaica from 2002–16. He has preached and taught in many areas of the world and has served as vice president for Academic Services and dean at Faith Baptist Bible College and Theological Seminary since 2016. He and his wife, Cléa, have two young children.