

## Argument 7

### *Infant Baptisers Claim that Apostolic Household Baptism Justifies the Baptism of Infants*

Infant baptisers appeal to the apostolic practice of baptising households; Lydia's for one: 'And when she and her household were baptised' (Acts 16:15). However, there is no hint whatsoever of what is meant by 'her household'. Whether it included infants is impossible to say, but that it included (or meant) servants and employees is impossible to deny. We just do not know. To build a practice as far-reaching as infant baptism on this verse would seem to be ludicrous.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I return to an earlier extract from Sibbes. While I do not say he *built* his case upon Lydia's experience, he did not mind lurching from the clear statement of Scripture to this: Lydia 'had the means of salvation, and she had the seal likewise, which is baptism. [It is not – see earlier]... As the whole Trinity was at the baptism of Christ, so every infant that is baptised is the child of Christ... You see the holy [believing] woman here would be baptised immediately; she would have the seal of the covenant... For our children... let us make use of baptism. Do they die in their infancy? Make this use of it: I have assured hope that my child is gone to God. He was born in the covenant, and had the seal of the covenant, baptism; why should I doubt of the salvation of my child? If they live to years of discretion, then be of good comfort, he is God's child more than mine; I have dedicated him to God and to Christ, he was baptised in the name of Christ, Christ will care for him as well as for me. If I leave my children behind me, they are God's and Christ's children. They have received the seal of the covenant, baptism. Christ will provide for them. And he that provides heaven for them will provide all things in the way to heaven necessary. God has said: "I will be the God of you and of your children" (Ps. 132:12). They are in the covenant. Yours they were, Lord. A man may commit his children to God on his death bed... as before... by baptism. All this we have by thinking of our baptism... And to our children, when they come to years, baptism is an obligation to believe; because they have received the seal beforehand, and it is a means to believe' (Sibbes: *Lydia* pp530-531). I have no doubt that Sibbes, 'after [William] Perkins... was the most significant of the

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As far as Lydia's household is concerned, nobody can say that infants were included, and nobody can say that they were not included.<sup>2</sup>

There is more evidence in the case of the family of the Philippian jailer: 'And immediately he and all his family were baptised' (Acts 16:33). We know that Paul and Silas included the household with the man when they issued the gospel promise (Acts 16:31), after which 'they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house' (Acts 16:32). Then he and all his family were baptised, and 'he rejoiced, having believed in God with all his household' (Acts 16:34). I frankly admit that I have no idea of the ages of the parties involved. Nor does anybody else. It is irrelevant.<sup>3</sup> But what is very clear is this:

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great Puritan preachers of Cambridge' (Packer's cover blurb), but judging by the above, when these great Puritan preachers saw the word 'baptism' in a passage, reason, commonsense and – above all – proper biblical exegesis, went out of the window, and sentiment flew in. See earlier for my comments on this extract. All I ask, now, is for some infant-baptiser to write to me and explain how all this talk about babies comes from a passage which does not mention the word. Did Lydia have a husband, let alone a baby?

<sup>2</sup> 'It is not to be doubted but that [Lydia] received and embraced the faith of Christ sincerely... before Paul would admit her unto baptism... Lydia had not in her hand the hearts of all those who were of her household, that she might turn unto Christ whomsoever she would; but the Lord did bless her godly desire, so that she had all her household obedient' (Calvin: *Commentaries* Vol.19 Part 1 pp104-105). Lydia was not baptised until she had believed. Good! Lydia could not make her household believe, although she no doubt desired it. Good! But what did Calvin mean when he said: 'The Lord did bless her godly desire, so that she had all her household obedient'? Did he mean that the Lord granted her wish and answered her prayer so that all her household were obedient to Christ in his gospel? I think so. If so, I agree. But if he meant (I do not think his words can possibly bear the meaning, myself – see also his comments on Acts 16 below) that Lydia got her household servants to obey her command to be baptised even though they were unbelieving, I staunchly disagree. All who believe and are obedient to the gospel must be baptised; and no others. Nobody may be baptised on the faith and obedience of another. And although there is not a suggestion of any baby in the passage – not even a baby may be baptised because of the faith of its parent.

<sup>3</sup> But if infants are involved, we have to believe that they were taken from their beds (cots) in the small hours, listened to the preaching, were baptised, and then sat down to a meal and rejoiced in their father's new-found faith. See Beasley-Murray: *Baptism in the New Testament* p315.

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however old or young they were, they all heard the gospel, and they all believed, following which they were all baptised.<sup>4</sup> This is the constant and consistent practice throughout the New Testament. Household baptism is perfectly apostolic – as long as all the above conditions are met. If only infant baptisers would stick to this pattern and order, there would be no need for this discussion. All who hear the gospel and believe must be baptised, and only they – household or no household.<sup>5</sup>

There is another point. The notion that the children were included in the father's faith, proves too much. Acts 16:31 is unequivocal. Paul's promise cannot be limited to baptism. He did not even mention baptism! If the children are included in the father's faith, then the children are *saved*. 'Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be *saved*, you and your household'. What Paul meant, of course, when addressing the jailer thus, was that the way of salvation is by faith; only those who believe will be saved; but all who do believe will be saved; *and this is as true as much for your house as for you*. All who believe are saved. Paul certainly did not mean that if the jailer believed he would be saved, and that his family would be swept into Christ on the coat-tails of his faith.<sup>6</sup>

In Acts 11, Peter told the Jews that he had been sent by God to preach the gospel to Cornelius. That this was of God, was confirmed to the apostle by the revelation to Cornelius himself, that Peter would come and 'tell you words by which you and all your household will be saved' (Acts 11:14). This is highly significant. All the household would be saved – not merely baptised. Infant baptisers want to be dogmatic and say that households include infants. If that is the case, then in this instance the promise meant that the infants would be saved with all the rest of the household. And it must have meant saved in

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<sup>4</sup> 'God... brought all his whole family unto a godly consent' (Calvin: *Commentaries* Vol.19 Part 1 p122). This is all I ask; all who come to 'a godly consent' must be baptised; and no others. Nobody may be baptised on 'the godly consent' of another, whoever he or she may be.

<sup>5</sup> See Lloyd-Jones: *The Church* p41.

<sup>6</sup> See Beasley-Murray: *Baptism in the New Testament* pp319-320; *Baptism Today and Tomorrow* pp116-123. Alford: "'And your house" does not mean that *his* faith would save his household – but that the same way was open to them as to him: "Believe, and you will be saved; and the same of [goes for] your household"' (Alford p764, emphasis his).

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such a way that everybody could see it. Reader, we must be very clear about it. Peter was not given a promise that salvation would take place at the time, but would become evident only after several years had passed. Most definitely not! The promise was that the household would be saved under Peter's preaching. And it would take place *at that time*. That was the clear intention of the promise. Infant baptisers must be consistent. If the household included infants, those infants would be saved that very day under Peter's preaching. And their salvation would be clearly evident. If there was an intended delay, why was the salvation of the adults not in the same category? Were the adults to be saved that day, yet the evidence be delayed for several years? Is this what the promise amounted to? The idea is preposterous.

It is certain, is it not, that the promise referred to the members of the household who could believe the gospel and give credible evidence of faith. That is what happened in any event. As Peter preached to the household – and Cornelius' 'relatives and close friends' (Acts 10:24) – 'the Holy Spirit fell on all those who heard the word' (Acts 10:44). On all of them! He then baptised those who gave evidence of having received the Holy Spirit (Acts 10:47-48). But he baptised all of them who clearly had been saved. By God's grace they had repented (Acts 11:18).<sup>7</sup> It is beyond question that households, in this context, are

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<sup>7</sup> 'This is the... lawful order, that the minister admit those unto the receiving of the outward sign whom God has testified to be his children by the mark and pledge of his Spirit; so that faith and doctrine are first'. So it is! Calvin, however, went on to dismiss, as 'without all reason', 'the unlearned' who 'infer... that infants are not to be baptised'. Calvin was sure 'that God has adopted the children of the faithful before they be born', and therefore they can be baptised. What an 'unlearned' deduction from the passage and his own comments! 'As touching the manifest grace of the Spirit, there is no absurdity' in baptising infants, said Calvin, 'if [the grace of the Spirit] follows [in point of time] after baptism' (Calvin: *Commentaries* Vol.18 Part 2 pp453-454). But this 'if' takes us back to an earlier point; *if* baptised infants do not, in the end, experience grace, then their baptism *was* an absurdity – and worse! And even if they do, Calvin was still putting the cart before the horse.

In any case, there is a far more important point. Did Calvin mean 'since' and not 'if'? Was he teaching that the reality always follows the figure? If so, not only is it an abominable claim, it contradicts what he said elsewhere; namely, that because babies have the reality, they must be given the figure. Which did Calvin believe comes first – the reality or the figure? I ask again: Does

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those in the family or home who are capable of hearing the gospel preached, who are capable of repenting and believing, and thus capable of being baptised.<sup>8</sup> What is more, even before conversion, Cornelius was said to be ‘a devout man and one who feared God with all his household’ (Acts 10:2). It would seem very clear that either his household could not have included any infants, or that the infants in the family were not, for this purpose, included in the term ‘household’. Can infants be properly said ‘to fear God’? If they can, why do infant baptisers agree that infants cannot exercise repentance and faith?

Crispus ‘believed on the Lord with all his household. And many of the Corinthians, hearing, believed and were baptised’ (Acts 18:8). There is nothing here to support infant baptism, for the reasons given above concerning the households of the jailer and Cornelius. They all believed before they were baptised.<sup>9</sup> Nor can anything be built upon ‘the household of Stephanas’ (1 Cor. 1:16) except, that since Crispus is mentioned in the context (1 Cor. 1:14), it would appear that the same conditions applied in his case. There is one other thing. We know that ‘the household of Stephanas... the firstfruits of Achaia... devoted themselves to the ministry of the saints’, and that the church at Corinth had to submit to them (1 Cor. 16:15-16). Would infant baptisers apply *these* words to *infants*?<sup>10</sup>

Infant baptisers cannot support their practice by the baptism of households, which is, on the contrary, entirely consistent with the

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anybody know Calvin’s position? The Bible is clear as to which comes first – the reality! Only those who believe are to be baptised.

<sup>8</sup> Is there any suggestion, in the text, that infants or children were present? Or if they were, that they believingly heard Peter’s preaching of the gospel, openly received the Spirit and were baptised? Or if too young to believe, that they were baptised because one or other of their parents (or grandparents or great-grandparents) believed and was baptised? Or if the infants and children were not present, that they were fetched to be baptised with their parents upon *their* profession of faith? And what about the servants? And what about *their* children?

<sup>9</sup> The house believed *with* him – not through or in him.

<sup>10</sup> Ignatius, writing to Polycarp about his wife, spoke of ‘the whole of her house and her children’, thus clearly distinguishing between the ‘house’ and the ‘children’. S.I.Buse, quoting this, went on to dismiss the attempt to establish infant baptism by reference to ‘households’, as ‘efforts to prop up a tottering edifice’ (Buse p124).

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baptism of believers only. Despite this, Legg blatantly said: ‘The point is that in each case baptism is given to the household because of the faith of the head of the household’.<sup>11</sup> This is manifestly untrue. The evidence of Scripture is that all in the household who were baptised, were baptised because *they all individually believed*, not because the head of the family believed. As Wright said:

In the New Testament documents... the intimate association between being a believer and being baptised is inescapable, both in that faith and its profession are a requirement for baptism... If infants were included in these household baptisms [at Philippi], they were so as believers.<sup>12</sup>

Such a testimony, from such a source, ought to put a stop to the excessive (and nonsensical) claims made by infant baptisers over household baptism. I fear, however, it will not.

What is more, if all the persons in a household are to be baptised when the head of the house is converted, does this mean that all adult children and servants will be baptised, even if they are not converted, make no profession, and are, in fact, totally hostile to the gospel? Will they be forced to be baptised? Or will they be baptised only if they are merely acquiescent and nominally Christian? Legg tackled this very real and practical question: ‘We should baptise the children of believers within our churches. This will include the children of new converts. This raises the problem of those who are no longer babies or even little children. At what age does one draw the line?’ he asked. But why does Legg want to draw any line? Who gives him the right to draw a line? If a son is living at home, under the authority of the head of the household who has just been converted, why should the son not be baptised, whatever his age, according to the views of infant baptisers? Legg went on to say:

If the father today has authority to bring up his older children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, to insist that they attend worship or family prayers, then he can have them baptised. However, in these days, when the practice has been virtually unknown and where society and children are not familiar with such authority, this would be very difficult and might be counter-productive, hardly a means of grace! Wisdom is

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<sup>11</sup> Legg p5.

<sup>12</sup> Wright: *What...?* p36. But since infant baptisers agree that infants cannot exercise faith, how could the infants have been included ‘as believers’?

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called for and it is hardly wise to insist on something which will probably be misunderstood or resented.<sup>13</sup>

Here we have yet another amazing admission of the breakdown of the infant baptism system. The practice may – to some – sound alright on paper, but when it comes to the practical test then it is found wanting. And how! Apparently the church must now govern its practice by what is acceptable in society, and familiar to present-day children!<sup>14</sup> This is an appalling suggestion. Surely infant baptisers realise that the households which were baptised in the New Testament were not households living in times which were amicable to the gospel, for they were living in gross and blatantly pagan societies. The gospel, the church and all its ordinances, worked – and how! – in those hostile circumstances.<sup>15</sup> The early church did not have to wrestle with the peculiar problems which come from the arguments of infant baptisers! No! Whatever the society, however bleak the times, the glory of the gospel is that it works; and it works today. Reader, can you imagine Paul or Peter baptising according to what a pagan society finds acceptable? Infant baptisers, seemingly, need a fairly moderate ‘Christian society’, a gently benevolent attitude on the part of the world, for its system to work. ‘Wisdom is called for’, said Legg. It certainly is! The wisdom of the New Testament pattern is called for! As Berkhof put it: ‘The New Testament contains no direct evidence for the practice of infant baptism in the days of the apostles’. Astonishingly, he went on to account for this by saying:

Moreover, conditions were not always favourable to infant baptism. Converts would not at once have a proper conception of their covenant duties and responsibilities. Sometimes only one of the parents was

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<sup>13</sup> Legg p10.

<sup>14</sup> I have already noted how infant baptisers have curtailed what they believe about baptism by the limitations imposed by babies. Here we have limitations imposed by an ungodly society. This is not the last of it! Wright: ‘Because fewer requests for baby baptism are now [2005] being made, in many local situations a responsible baptismal discipline is more feasible’ (Wright: *What...?* p102). All such talk lets the cat out of the bag. Society, the limitations imposed by babies... these things are not to govern baptism. Scripture is!

<sup>15</sup> Lydia, the jailer and Crispus lived in hostile pagan – Greek and Roman – and Jewish cultures (Acts 16:16-40; 18:1-17).

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converted, and it is quite conceivable that the other would oppose the baptism of the children. Frequently there was no reasonable assurance that the parents would educate their children piously and religiously, and yet such an assurance was necessary.<sup>16</sup>

This is a remarkable statement, not least for its frankness. Infant baptisers need favourable conditions for their system to work – when pagans are being converted it runs into insurmountable difficulties, apparently. If so, then it will be of precious little use in pagan England at the beginning of the 21st century!<sup>17</sup> What is more, it will never work. Society is *always* ungodly: ‘The whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one’ (1 John 5:19). This age is ‘this present evil age’ (Gal. 1:4), and always will be. In any case, where in the New

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<sup>16</sup> Berkhof p634. As I have noted, Wright saw the problem the other way round, pointing out infant baptisers have had to adjust their belief and practice to cope with ‘the limitations of babies’ (Wright: *What...?* p7; see also Wright: *What...?* pp20-24). But he also owned recent changes to try to accommodate unbelieving parents; see below.

<sup>17</sup> As for modern developments to cope with a shifting culture, take Wright, commenting on the 1928, 1940 and 1994 changes in the Church of Scotland’s *Book of Common Order*: ‘The reasons behind these tendencies are not hard to seek. They reflect a desire to accommodate parents... who may not be comfortable confessing their own faith in Christ’ (or may not even have one to confess)! The changes are ‘altogether less challenging... a pale substitute for professing personal faith in Christ... disappointing features... [which] may be... indicative of a growing emphasis on the way of the Christian as a pilgrimage with no firm starting point, and in this life no attainable goal. So being a Christian [in this modern-day infant baptising system] has no decisive beginning from non-faith in Christ to faith in Christ, but is a quest, a journey within faith, and also within non-faith and doubt’. Other accommodating efforts by other infant baptisers include ‘talking of baptism itself as life-long’. Wright properly dismissed this ‘strange notion’ since it ‘runs up against all kinds of objections... [not least] plain common sense. One either has or has not been baptised at any one time’. ‘Infant baptism in many churches has to be rescued from being more a family occasion than a church event, and so has to be saved from sentimentality and baby worship’. ‘We might conclude that for some who minister in one of these mixed churches the price of continuing to dispense baptism to babies is not believing too much about it’ (Wright: *What...?* pp59-62,82,87; see also Wright: *What...?* pp83-88,100-102). Phew! With friends like this, infant baptism in contemporary culture needs no enemies! I shall return to the abomination of regarding conversion as a process started by baptism.



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Testament do we find evidence of the parents of infants to be baptised being vetted as to their understanding of ‘covenant responsibilities’, and all the rest of it? If the conditions Berkhof listed were so important, and since, according to him, their lack of fulfilment practically prevented the baptism of infants in the days of the apostles – there is no direct evidence for the baptism of infants, he said – where is the scriptural evidence for the apostolic concern over the lack? Berkhof’s words are pure speculation. Above all, what now of infant baptiser claims? Are infants to be baptised or not? What about the covenant now? What now about the misguided deductions from 1 Corinthians 7:14? – only one parent was converted in that instance. What about their view of household baptism? In theory, infant baptisers are definite; in practice they fudge! Infant baptisers appear to have shot themselves in the foot!

Getting back to ‘household baptism’, and probing it a little further. If a man is converted, not only should his unbelieving children be baptised, but so should his unbelieving wife, according to the teaching of infant baptisers. She is in the household, she is under the authority of the head of the house, the man. Now if infant baptisers find it difficult to baptise infants in a pagan society – and on their own admission they do – what will they do about the unbelieving spouse? Shall we see an unbelieving wife forced to be baptised on the grounds that her husband has been converted? If not, why not? And if she is baptised, what if she is a Muslim, a Papist, a Jehovah’s Witness, or simply a rank pagan? Will she be baptised and become a member of the church, only to be immediately excommunicated? The mind staggers at the very idea.

As one who has no first-hand experience of the attempt to put the theory of household baptism into realistic effect, may I ask if infant baptisers really do believe in household baptism? In a practical way, I mean. What are the rules of household baptism? The Greek word οὐκος means ‘the inmates of a house, all the persons forming one family, a household’. Are infant baptisers prepared to baptise all in the household when its head is converted? Will they baptise the wife, the children, the grandchildren, the great-grandchildren, the servants and their children, of whatever age or in whatever spiritual condition they happen to be? Will they, in the years which follow, demand the baptism of all babies that are born in that household? Will they baptise

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all adopted and fostered children? Will they baptise all the dependants of a prospective household servant they wish to employ, and will their job adverts make this requirement explicit? Does any infant baptiser do these things? Do infant baptisers actually believe in household baptism or not?

I do! Sadly, I have never had the joy of seeing a whole family converted. But if I had, I should have found it well-nigh impossible to describe my joy at baptising every member of that family – all of whom had come individually to repent and believe, and had given a credible testimony of their experience.