

Infant Salvation: Savoy Declaration of Faith 10:3

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What is the eternal state of infants who die?¹ The question is of the utmost importance. High infant mortality rates still plague much of the world. In developed nations we know of crib deaths and of course the horror of abortion, 47 million of the latter in America over the last forty years. What do we say about the Christian hope to parents and others who are involved in these situations and how do we minister to them? Can we say anything at all with certainty? Beyond the pastoral concerns, related doctrinal discussions in the church impinge upon our thinking. Within the Reformed community baptismal regeneration, resistible grace, and salvation by works are being advocated.² Finally, the church has not been historically consistent or unified concerning what becomes of infants dying in infancy and those who are mentally incompetent. How do we sort out the many contending positions? We need a biblical answer.

The question of infant salvation is suspended on the doctrine of God's saving grace, without which there is no hope of reconciliation with God, deliverance from sin, or entrance into heaven. A broad survey of historical Reformed literature shows that the predominant views concerning infants who die are; that all such infants are saved, that all children of true believers are saved, or that all children covenantally within the church are saved. It is my contention that many statements emanating from these positions are in need of revision. Incautious statements have led many astray and the issue is worthy of careful consideration.

Rightly, as we shall see, the Savoy addresses the question of infant salvation under the heading of "Effectual Calling." But also rightly, we will not begin to grasp the depth of that doctrinal nexus unless we see its connection with the doctrines of election, original sin, and baptism. While it is not within the scope of this paper to examine at length these related doctrines or even that of effectual calling, we will not understand the means of God's grace to the sinner, including the infant, unless we at least wade into, if not swim in, those deep waters.

Before we enter, it is necessary to note that the phrase "elect infants dying in infancy" has been variously understood since its formulation at the Westminster Assembly. In our day many might be surprised to learn of the breadth of meaning that has been spun out of these five, seemingly clear, words. Giants of the Reformed faith have tilted, not only over the original intent of the authors, but over also the biblical foundations of such a statement.

In this paper we cannot possibly address all the arguments that have emerged over the years or address at length the authorial intent of the Assembly. Rather, we will briefly examine the historical understanding of infant salvation, state the three main relevant positions, examine their scriptural foundations, and propose an understanding of the Savoy statement that is, hopefully, not only biblically consistent but eminently practical within the life of the church. In doing so, it will be necessary to look also at the relevance for our subject of the doctrinal areas of (1) Effectual Calling and Regeneration, (2) Election, and (3) Baptism and Covenantal status.

¹ The term infant is not usually defined in this debate. Generally it is assumed to refer to one who has not yet developed a rational capacity. The vagueness concerning "infant" will become important, as we shall see. John MacArthur argues that this designation extends to an "age of accountability" or a "condition of accountability"- one of sufficiently "mature understanding in order to comprehend convincingly the issues of law of grace, sin and salvation." Yet it is argued that "accountability" does not apply to the heathen adults, though it does apply to mentally impaired adults (presumably in places where the gospel is known and available). MacArthur offer no scriptural proof for the existence of this "condition". John MacArthur, *The Salvation of Babies Who Die - Part 1 & Part 2*, Unpublished Sermon available at 'Grace to You' <http://www.gty.org/>, 2003.

² See, Steve Wilkins and Duane Garbner, ed., *The Federal Vision*, (Monroe, Louisiana: Athanasius Press, 2004). For a critical discussion see Guy Prentiss Waters, *Justification and the New Perspectives on Paul: A Review and Response*, (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2004).

THREE HISTORICAL POSITIONS³

It is fundamental to Christianity that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners. Christianity is nothing if it is not remedial. The gracious redemption of sinners that Christ accomplished is applied to those for whom he died by a secret, sovereign, unsolicited work of the Holy Spirit. All mankind, descending from Adam “by ordinary generation, sinned in him, and fell with him in his first transgression”.⁴ All, therefore, are in need of salvation by the only Redeemer. But what of infants who die in infancy? Do they need salvation? Can they be saved? Are they saved? Though various side branches, offshoots and admixtures have occurred, we can discern three main categories of thought within which the variations of the Reformed tradition can be considered.

No infants dying in infancy are saved. Taking this position are those outside the church who deny the necessity of salvation and those who deem the infant, *per se*, incapable of salvation. Others have argued that infants cannot be saved because salvation is primarily moral and infants are morally incompetent. Such positions are defeated, as we shall see, on the grounds that salvation is a sovereign provision of God and does not result simply from man’s acting as a moral agent. We may observe that to presume the eternal death of all infants seems to be contrary to the wisdom and the grace of God as that is revealed in the Scriptures.

All infants dying in infancy are saved.⁵ This view is common both outside and inside the church. Here, every infant who suffers “premature” death is presumed to be saved by God and taken to be with him for all eternity. Within this position the ground of salvation varies. The salvation of all infants is the logical corollary to universalism that views all people everywhere entering into eternal glory. It implies salvation by death. Some believe the dying infant to be faultless. Thus ancient and modern Pelagians, denying original sin, construe all infants as “saved.” There are those who see all infants saved on the ground of God’s general benevolence and kindness, those divine attributes apparently overshadowing any other.

The Arminians base infant salvation on their belief in the universality of the atonement. But their hope is confounded by their belief in the necessity of a conscious, expressed faith as the ground for salvation. As infants, however, cannot possibly possess such faith, Arminianism finds itself strenuously maneuvering to keep from falling into a hole of its own making. As those in this category often ignore or twist a foundational doctrine of the Reformed Christian faith, we can dispense with this line of thinking without further examination.

When we turn to consider Reformed doctrine, certain distinctions become necessary. We note that under the category of “All infants dying in infancy” we find the majority of modern Calvinists.⁶ And while rejecting the argument that all infants dying in infancy go to glory on the grounds of an unbiblical universalism, we must consider those who regard infants as sinners needing salvation.

Some see the salvation of all dying infants grounded in their unity as a *class* or *race* of people who have been saved as such by Christ.⁷ But Scriptural argument for such a position seems to be lacking. Only two classes of people are spoken of in the Scripture, the elect and the non-elect.

A common variation on the sinlessness of the infant is the view that infants, while possessing *original sin* have not committed *actual sin*. Advocates of this position argue that a person’s actual sin is

³ For the fullest overview of the historical development see B.B. Warfield, “The Development of the Doctrine of Infant Salvation,” *Works*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1932, Vol. IX), 411ff. See also R.A. Webb, *The Theology of Infant Salvation*, (Richmond, VA: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1907, Reprinted: Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 2003). Other valuable resources include: WGT Shedd, “Infant Salvation as Related to Original Sin” in *Calvinism: Pure and Mixed*, (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1986), Lewis Bevens Schenck, *The Presbyterian Doctrine of Children in the Covenant*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1940, Reprinted, Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2003), and Gregg Strawbridge, ed. *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*, (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2003).

⁴ Westminster Shorter Catechism, Question 16.

⁵ “The death of a child is revelatory of its eternal destiny.” Webb, *op. cit.*, 21.

⁶ “[S]alvation is only of the infants of believers, as in the elder Calvinism... salvation is of all infants as in the later Calvinism”. Shedd, *op. cit.* 112.

⁷ Shedd, *op. cit.* 109.

the only ground for condemnation.⁸ Yet we read in 1 Corinthians 15:22 that “in Adam all die...” and Romans 5:16 links condemnation particularly to Adam’s guilt, which all bear.⁹ Shedd answers this view, “Though the infant has committed no acts of known and willful transgression, yet his heart is estranged from God, and his will is at enmity with the holy law of God...Being fallen in Adam, they have a corrupt disposition or inclination, which is both voluntary and responsible.... An infant, therefore, needs salvation because he is really culpable and punishable. He requires the whole work of the Redeemer, both as expiating guilt and cleaning from pollution.... By reason of original sin the infant is truly culpable before the law and justice of God. He might be punished eternally for it, and no injustice would be done to him.”¹⁰ Consistent justice demands that *all* possessors of original sin deserve eternal death, but mercy and grace can give *different* decisions concerning pardon.

Some infants dying in infancy are saved. Historically, those who advocate the salvation of *some* infants dying in infancy constitute the majority within the church at large. The ‘some’ may be grounded upon the infant’s covenantal inclusion in the broader church by virtue of parental faith. It may be, as the Roman Catholic and other sacramental churches see it, based on the act or even the intent of baptism.¹¹ Some ascribe to the infant a form of ‘faith’, that while not precisely what we would see in an adult, is sufficient for the infant in its “seed form.”¹² Finally, there are those whose hope of infant salvation is grounded in the hidden, electing grace of God, which *does* or *may* include infants dying in infancy. It is here, in this category of “some” that we must spend our time looking at the biblical grounds for these positions, and attempt to understand the meaning of our confessional phrase “Elect infants dying in infancy”.

HISTORY OF THE DOCTRINE

The early church fathers linked baptism with regeneration and thus declared the corollary, ‘no unbaptised infant could be saved.’¹³ Augustine argued for this same position against the Pelagian error that even unbaptized infants might obtain eternal life. The development of a semi-Pelagian concept of original sin in the Middle Ages placed the infant dying unbaptized, not in heaven with the beatific vision, nor in eternal torment, but on the brink of hell, as Dante has it, where “there is no sharp agony” but “only dark shadows.”¹⁴

⁸ This is in accordance with the Semi-Pelagian doctrine that declares that original sin is not damning. The infant has a disordered nature, which tempts and prompts to sin, but is not in itself sin.

⁹ MacArthur claims that all babies inherit the guilt of Adam, and thereby corruption, which leads to death. They are totally depraved, yet all babies are elect and therefore are saved. He bases his view on the fact that God is compassionate and would not “catapult billions of helpless infants into hell,” and because the Scriptures “nowhere teach infant damnation.” Additionally, while Scripture clearly teaches salvation by compassionate grace, it also teaches damnation by works (Rev 20:11-12; Jn 8:21-24; Jn 3:36). So, because the infant has not committed sin, he is free from condemnation. “Infants who die, then, have never had anything written in the record because they’ve never committed the deeds - conscious deeds of rebellion and iniquity”. “God knows at what point they become accountable”. He quotes Webb as saying that an infant who died and went to hell would have no understanding for the reason of its suffering, having committed no sin, thus the meaning of its suffering would be unknown to it. The difficulties with this position are many. MacArthur, *op. cit.*

¹⁰ Shedd, *op. cit.* 107-108.

¹¹ Philip Schaff, “The Canon and Dogmatic Decrees of the Council of Trent, AD 1563,” *The Creeds of Christendom*, (Vol. II, Grand Rapid: Baker, 1983), 77ff. and 122ff.

¹² Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed., James Dennison, (Philipsburg: P & R, Vol. 2, 1994), 583.

¹³ Warfield, *op. cit.* 412.

¹⁴ This refers to the *Limbus infantum*, the place that unbaptized babies who die enter which is neither heaven nor hell but limbo. This doctrine has fallen on hard times lately and Pope Benedict XVI has expressed that the church should “let it drop, since it has always been only a theological hypothesis.” Kenneth Woodward, *Wall Street Journal*, January 13, 2006.

While the Roman Catholic Church has made much of baptism as the ground of infant salvation, it has allowed that unbaptized children whose parents “intended” to baptize them were possibly possessors of salvation. John Wycliffe (d. 1384), no friend of Rome, while expressing his unwillingness to pronounce as damned, infants as were intended for baptism by their parents, he could not, on the other hand, assert that they were saved.¹⁵

The council of Trent (1545) clarified Roman Catholic dogma that “unless men be regenerated to God though the grace of Baptism, they are born to everlasting misery and destruction, whether their parents be believers or unbelievers”.¹⁶ This doctrine was grounded in the belief that the Church held the keys of salvation. The Lutheran concept of baptism only partially restored a biblical formulation, the Augsburg Confession (Art. IX), still requiring baptism for salvation.

The Reformers principle that men are not constituted members of Christ by the Church, but become members of the Church through Christ, clearly struck at the very heart of Roman doctrine. Membership in the church is not mediated by the external act of baptism but by the internal regeneration of the Holy Spirit. It is the free electing love of God that is determinative, so that *how many* and *who* are saved is not only decreed by God but absolutely known to him alone. We may observe the marks and outward signs of such grace, but in the case of infants dying in infancy such marks are unobservable. Nevertheless, many early Reformed teachers held that birth within the bounds of the covenant community was a sure sign of regenerating grace, as the “promise is to you and your children” (Gen. 17:7; Acts 2:39). Beza hedges such confidence with the statement; “Covenant children having the “witness of election”, and “all children born of pious parents are saved, with exception of course for the hidden decree of God.”¹⁷ And, even those dying as infants outside the covenant community may still have hope, for the election of God is free.

Zwingli had perhaps the most inclusive understanding among the early Reformers, as he included all dying infants in salvation. He reasoned that: 1. All believers are elect and hence are saved, though we cannot infallibly know who are true believers. 2. All children of believers dying in infancy are elect and hence are saved, for this rests on God’s immutable promise. 3. It is probably, from the superabundance of the gift of grace over the offense, that all infants dying in infancy are elect and saved; so that *death in infancy is a sign of election*; and although this must be left with God, it is certainly rash and even impious to affirm their damnation. 4. All who are saved are saved only by the free grace of God’s election and through the redemption of Christ.¹⁸

Following Zwingli, Reformed thinking separated into several different tracks.¹⁹ Those that followed Zwingli held to death in infancy as a sign of election. Calvin, while speaking with caution, clearly believes that *some* infants dying as infants, are lost.²⁰ Others held that faith and the promise “to a thousand generations” are sure signs of election, and thus all believers and their children are certainly saved, but the lack of faith or inclusion in the promise of the covenant is equally a sign of reprobation. Some believe that we are simply in ignorance concerning the state of the unbelievers’ children.²¹ “Most Calvinists”²² have simply held that faith and the promise are marks by which we may know assuredly that all those who believe and their children, dying as infants, are elect and saved, while the absence of such marks leaves us without ground for any inference concerning them. These variant views were more carefully defined in the Reformed confessions.

¹⁵ Warfield, op. cit. 416.

¹⁶ Warfield, op. cit. 417. The Council of Trent, Session 7, on Baptism, Canon V, anathematizes those who deny that baptism is necessary to salvation. Schaff, op. cit. 123.

¹⁷ As quoted by Jonathan Neil Gerstner, *The Thousand Generation Covenant: Dutch Reformed Covenant Theology and Group Identity in Colonial South Africa, 1652-1814* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991), 7.

¹⁸ See Warfield, op. cit. 430-431.

¹⁹ See Warfield, op. cit. 431-435 for a fuller treatment.

²⁰ John Calvin, *Commentary on Romans*, 5:17.

²¹ John Owen, *A Display of Arminianism*, Works, (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, Vol. 10, 1967), 81.

²² Warfield, op. cit. 434.

THE REFORMED CONFESSIONS²³

The Reformation spawned some thirty Reformed and Calvinistic confessions. Many were intended for local use and never achieved the more general recognition accorded the Thirty-Nine Articles (1563), The Canons of Dort (1619), The Westminster Standards (1647), and its descendents, The Savoy Declaration (1658) and The Second London Confession (1689). All of these departed from the sacerdotalism and autosoterism of Pelagian and Semi-Pelagian schemes. Instead, salvation was recognized as a work of gracious, divine election, the saving benefits of Christ being applied to helpless sinners by the regenerating, sanctifying Spirit. Reformed paedobaptist communions, of which we are particularly concerned, have tended to emphasize and highlight the covenantal promises of God as the ground for our hope concerning those incapable of being called by the normal means of the Word preached. Let us briefly note how they address our concerns.

The Thirty-Nine Articles are silent on the issue of infant salvation, though in practice, the Church of England retained the sacramentalism of Rome.

The Canons of Dort, written to deal with the Arminian errors, formulated the following statement as Article 17, "The Salvation of the Infants of Believers." "Since we must make judgments about God's will from his Word, which testifies that the children of believers are holy, not by nature but by virtue of the gracious covenant in which they, together with their parents, are included, godly parents ought not to doubt the election and salvation of their children whom God calls out of this life in infancy." Note that Dort entirely avoided any characterization of what happens to the children of unbelievers. But note also that the ground of salvation has shifted away from baptism, as in Trent and Augsburg, to covenantal grounds.

The Westminster Confession, and the almost-identical Savoy,²⁴ also refrained from any stated opinions concerning the children of unbelievers. Unlike Dort, its emphasis falls not on the covenant *per se*, but on election. Death in infancy does not prejudice the salvation of God's elect. Yet, just what they intended by the brief statement "elect infants dying in infancy" has been subject to much debate. Whether these 'elect infants' include all infants, dying as such, or some only, whether there is such a class as non-elect infants dying in infancy, the Confession neither says nor suggests. Indeed, "no Reformed confession enters into this question. No word is said by any one of them which either asserts or implies either that some infants are reprobated or that all are saved. What has been held in common by the whole body of Reformed theologians on this subject is asserted on these confessions; of what has been disputed among them the confessions are silent. And silence is as favorable to one type as to another"²⁵

Generally, Westminster/Savoy has been understood in two ways. The first takes the antithesis of 'elect infants dying in infancy' to be 'non-elect infants dying in infancy'. According to this view, some infants (the elect) are saved, and other infants (the non-elect) are eternally damned. In the second interpretation, the antithesis is between 'elect infants *dying* in infancy' and 'elect infants *not dying* in infancy'. But, does the Confession, in fact, conceive of two groups of dying infants; some elect and other non-elect? Or, does the confession presume that all who die in infancy are elect? Both positions have been argued. Warfield asserts that the notion of any unsaved infants dying in infancy "is not only a wholly unreasonable opinion exegetically, but is absolutely negatived by the history of the formation of this clause in the Assembly as recorded in the 'Minutes' and has never found favor among the expositors of the Confession."²⁶

Contrary to this understanding is the statement made by Philip Schaff who writes, "If the confession meant to teach the salvation of all infants dying in infancy, as held by Dr Hodge and nearly all the Presbyterian Divines in America, it would have either said 'all infants' or simply 'infants.' To explain 'elect' to mean 'all' is not only ungrammatical and illogical, but fatal to the whole system of

²³ For a comprehensive overview of infant salvation in the various creeds and confessions of the church see Webb, op. cit. 298-330.

²⁴ The Westminster Confession is "Elect infants, dying in infancy, are regenerated, and saved by Christ, through the Spirit, who worketh when, and where, and how he pleaseth: so also are all other elect persons who are incapable of being outwardly called by the ministry of the Word." Savoy deletes "through the Spirit" which is retained by the Baptist 1689 Confession.

²⁵ Warfield, op. cit. 437.

²⁶ Warfield, op. cit., footnote 79, 436. "What has been said of the Synod of Dort may be repeated of the Westminster Assembly. The Westminster divines were generally at one in the matter of infant salvation with the doctors of Dort".

limited election.”²⁷ The argument that “elect infants” implies that all infants who die are elect is seemingly defeated by the following phrase “all other elect persons.” The word “elect,” modifying both “infants” and “persons”, clearly means that some infants and some persons incapable of outward calling are indeed elect, but not all. If all who are “incapable” are by that state considered elect, one might argue that those who are outside the providential spread of gospel preaching are “incapable” as well and are thus elect. It is clear that the Confession does not say “*all* who die in infancy,” an obvious wording if indeed that was the intent – though that belief, rightly or wrongly, has been generally held by those who subscribe to the Westminster and its daughter confessions.²⁸

In the centuries after the Confessions were written, further consolidation of opinion occurred. At the end of the 19th century Warfield states, “It is the confessional doctrine of the Reformed churches and of Reformed churches alone that all believers’ infants, dying in infancy, are saved.”²⁹ The agnosticism regarding the salvation of uncovenanted infants, “has given place to an evergrowing universality of conviction that these infants too are included in the election of grace; so that to-day few Calvinists can be found who do not hold with Toplady, Doddridge, Newton, Rice, Breckenridge, and Hodge that all who die in infancy are the children of God and enter at once into his glory...simply because God, in his infinite love, has chosen them in Christ before the foundation of the world, by a loving fore-ordination of them unto adoption as sons in Jesus Christ.”³⁰ Is that then what “elect infants dying in infancy” means, that all such infants are saved?

EFFECTUAL CALLING AND REGENERATION

It is particularly interesting that the Westminster Divines placed this phrase in Chapter 10, “Effectual Calling”. Many modern treatments of infant salvation, especially in Reformed circles, discuss it under the doctrines of baptism or faith. For how can the infant, who in this life has not the capacity to respond to regenerating grace with faith, be able to trust Christ? Indeed, is that question of ability to exercise faith what is at issue in infant salvation? In a Christian culture that emphasizes the necessity of “trusting Jesus” and a “personal faith relationship” we must address more closely the ground of infant salvation.

It is generally understood that the 17th century divines used slightly different terminology than we to discuss the *ordo salutis*.³¹ Their “Effectual Calling” is often wrongly *equated* with regeneration. Under the broader rubric of “Effectual Calling”, they properly draw a distinction between “effectually to call...” and “enlightening their minds spiritually and savingly” (10:1) and “being quickened and renewed by the Holy Spirit, he is thereby enabled to answer this call” (10:2). While the Westminster/Savoy clearly draws regeneration into the circle of effectual calling, they are not precisely the same thing. Robert Reymond explains, “Regeneration...is the effecting force within calling which makes God’s summons effectual.”³² This distinction is important when we consider that calling, when it comes to effectiveness in the believer’s response, implies a certain ability or disposition of the consciousness. Regeneration, or the new birth, takes place in the sub-consciousness, a secret, sovereign work of God (Jn 3:8), the Spirit blowing where it wills. Regeneration is not the replacing of one substance of human nature with another, nor a partial change of some of the faculties of the soul but a whole-souled renovation of the entire person. Regeneration is a spiritual action, bringing a dead, passive sinner to spiritual life and enabling his response to this calling. Christ is at work in this application of redemptive grace “effectually persuading them by His Spirit to believe and obey” (Savoy

²⁷ Philip Schaff, *Creed Revision*, 17, 18, as quoted in Schenck, op. cit. 119.

²⁸ The proof texts of the Confession 10:3 (Lk 18:15; Acts 2:38) certainly affirm the *possibility* of infant salvation but do not require it. There is a difference between what God can do and does do.

²⁹ Warfield, op. cit. 436.

³⁰ Warfield, op. cit. 437-438.

³¹ See discussion in Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1938), 470. See also Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, (Nashville, Thomas Nelson, 1998), 716, and John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1955), 94.

³² Reymond, op. cit. 710.

8:8). Thus regeneration is the effective force of the effectual call.³³ How that secret sovereign work of regeneration is evidenced and displayed will vary according to the abilities and capacities of the subject.³⁴

But can infants possess faith, or can they respond to the effectual call? Some early Reformation divines advocated that infants had a “seed” faith, or “infant faith”.³⁵ But is faith of any kind, the absolute ground, in the sense that it is the necessary precedent of our salvation? Scripture presumes the necessity of faith (Rom 3:28; 5:1; Eph 2:8-9; Heb 11:6), for the Bible is addressed to those who can respond in faith and repentance. But what of infants? As the infant is capable of neither, such must not be necessary, or no infant can be saved. But infants are saved in spite of their inability to repent and believe.³⁶ That is because faith is only the instrumental cause, by which the soul receives or comes into possession of, and obtains, an interest in Christ and his redemption. But prior to such expression and reaction to grace is the efficient and varied operations of the Holy Spirit, regenerating the elect and applying to them the benefits purchased by Christ, enabling them to enjoy the same and making them fit for glory. This must be seen in the light of how those meritorious benefits were procured. The meritorious cause of salvation, or the procuring of the benefits, is Christ and his perfect substitutionary work. His merits are applied to the elect in the manner that God chooses. Who then are these elect? They are the ones who are made so by the original and efficient cause of salvation, the sovereign will of God. That election is secret and eternally in the past “before the foundation of the world”.

This understanding of the doctrines of grace provides the only hope for infant salvation. “The doctrine of infant salvation finds a logical place in the Calvinistic system; for the redemption of the soul is thus infallibly determined irrespective of any faith, repentance, or good works, whether actual or foreseen.”³⁷

In their discussion of effectual calling, Westminster/Savoy 10:3 highlight the divine sovereign work of regeneration as the necessary component in the lives of infants and “other elect persons who are incapable of being outwardly called by the ministry of the word.” Thus the essential key to new life in Christ is not faith. Professed faith is but the result of regeneration (Jn 1:11-13). “Faith is a flower that grows not in the field of nature. As a tree cannot grow without a root, neither can a man believe without the new nature.”³⁸

³³ Murray, *op. cit.* 93. Murray says that the effectual call only actually unites one to Christ and that it is from this actual union with Christ that every other inwardly operative saving grace, including regeneration, therefore flows. “Murray conceives of regeneration, not as the effecting force in God’s effectual summons as the Confession of faith plainly does, but as a divine work which comes *after* God’s effectual call and *before* the human response, and which ‘provides the link between the call and the response on the part of the person called.’” *op. cit.* 94. (Taken from Reymond, *op. cit.* 716.)

³⁴ Paul uses the term “regeneration” (*palingenesia*) only in Titus 3:5. But the doctrine is elsewhere elaborated upon, “life giving” (Eph 2:3), “made alive” (Col 2:13; Rom 4:17), “new creation” (2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15; Eph 2:10). John refers to being “born from above” (Jn 3:3, 7) and “begotten” (1 Jn 6:44-5).

³⁵ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T McNeill, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), IV.xvi.17-20.

³⁶ David clearly believed (knew) his infant son was heaven bound (2 Sam 12:23). This text does not, however, prove the salvation of all infants dying in infancy (though see Webb *op. cit.* 21ff). David may have been mistaken, or may have been assured of such by divine revelation. The text does affirm David’s belief in the ability of an infant to be saved.

³⁷ Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1963), 144-145.

³⁸ Thomas Boston, *Complete Works*, (London: William Tegg, 1853, republished Vol. 8, Wheaton: Richard Owen Roberts, 1980). 170.

Calvin notes, “But how (they ask) are infants, unendowed with knowledge of good or evil, regenerated? We reply that God’s work, though beyond our understanding, is still not annulled. Now it is perfectly clear that those infants who are to be saved (as some are surely saved from that early age) are previously regenerated by the Lord...And what further do we seek, when the Judge himself plainly declares that entry into heavenly life opens only to men who are born anew [John 3:3]?”³⁹ God has provided proof of his regenerating work with infants in John the Baptist, whom he sanctified in his mothers womb (Lk 1:15).⁴⁰ A.A. Hodge notes that this work of the Holy Spirit on infants is accomplished in the same manner as that on adults. “Infants as well as adults, are rational and moral agents and by nature totally depraved. The difference is, that their faculties are in the germ, while those of adults are developed. As regeneration is a change wrought by creative power in the inherent moral condition of the soul, infants may plainly be the subjects of it in precisely the same sense as adults; in both cases the operation is miraculous, and therefore inscrutable. The fact is established by what the scriptures teach of infant depravity, of infant salvation, of infant circumcision and baptism (Lk 1:15; 18:15,16 Acts 2:39).⁴¹ The interests of elect infants are safeguarded here. They can be saved. Elect infants can be regenerated by God’s power, “which is as easy and ready to him as it is incomprehensible and wonderful to us”.⁴²

So, having established that regeneration of God’s elect is the required ground for salvation, who then are the “elect infants” spoken of in Westminster/Savoy 10:3? We must note that the context within which this statement occurs “is not that on the extent of redemption or that on the final destiny of the individual. It is the chapter on Effectual Calling, and its primary concern is to define the nature of conversion and especially the means of conversion.”⁴³ In other words, the purpose of 10:3 is not to say *who* is saved but *how*. Yes, the Word is the normal means but not the only means. 10:3 is more concerned about the application of redemptive grace than it is with the population to whom such shall be given.⁴⁴

If 10:3 does not address the *who*, but the *how* of salvation, how then can we know who among infants dying in infancy, are saved? Is it all or only some? In order to more fully understand this we must dive deeper than regeneration. The Confession unflinchingly guides us, by saying they are “*elect* infants.” We do not expect Chapter 10 to deal with such a groups as “non-elect infants” or anyone else for that matter. Such distinctions have already been considered in Chapter 3. Thus if we are to grasp the extent of the term “elect infants” we must consider a few points from Chapter 3 of the Confession, “Election”.

ELECTION

Having guided the ground of infant salvation to the doctrine of electing grace, it is here that we must rest. Without rehearsing the doctrine of election at length, let us affirm the following. The nature of election presumes that some are elected and some are not. It is a selection (Savoy 3:3 - Rom 9:22; Eph 1:5 Prov 16:4). The number of the elect is immutable (Savoy 3:4 - 2 Tim 2:19; Jn 13:18). And, most vitally for our purposes, election is based on the sovereign will of God, “his good pleasure” having chosen for his own, in Christ, those who would be his. They are chosen out of His mere free grace and

³⁹ Calvin, *op. cit.* IV.xvi.17.

⁴⁰ As the nature of conversion usually and normally involves God’s appeal to the mind though the Word and Spirit, the salvation of those who are incapable of such must be addressed. The Ministerial cause of salvation is usually though the means of the preached word (James 1:21, Rom 10), because it reveals to us where and how salvation is to be obtained. Thus the effectual call, under normal circumstances, occurs within the context of the proclamation of the law and gospel (Rom 10:14-17; 2 Thess 2:14). Yet, clearly, elect infants dying in infancy and the mentally incompetent are incapable of being outwardly called by the preaching of the Word.

⁴¹ AA Hodge, *Outline of Theology*, (London: Thomas Nelson. 1880), 463-464.

⁴² Calvin, *op. cit.* IV.xvi.19.

⁴³ Donald Macleod, “The Westminster Confession Today,” (*Banner of Truth Magazine*, Issue 101, February, 1972), 24.

⁴⁴ Of the eight texts cited by Westminster 10 (the same are cited by Saybrook -1708) only two deal with the inclusion of children. The remained are concerned with the necessity of regenerating grace, (Jn 3:3), the necessity of being joined to Christ (1 Jn 5:12; Rom 8:9; Acts 4:12), the freedom of God to save whom and how he wills (Jn 3:8).

love, without any foresight of faith, or good works, or perseverance in either of them, or any other thing in the creature, as conditions, or causes moving Him thereunto (Savoy 3:5 - Eph 1:4, 9,11, 14; Rom 8:30; Rom 9:11; Thess 5:9). There is not a class or group that commends themselves to his divine purpose; indeed all are equally obnoxious to him and deserving of his wrath (Mal 1:2-3). Ultimately, it is not election that saves but Jesus Christ (Titus 3:4-6). The elect will be saved to the glory of God (Jn 10:15; 6:37; Acts 13:48; Jer 31:3; Rom 8:30; Jn 17:12; 1 Pt 1:5; Titus 2:14).

To be sure, God's election of some, based on his mere good pleasure, is not a willy-nilly choice. Though inscrutable to us, he has his reasons. But we have no grounds to presume to know the identity of the God's elect, based on age at death, providential situations, class or group, or anything demonstrated or *not* demonstrated by the individual in terms of faith, repentance or good works. Reformed churches generally shy away from making such determinations in relation to rational, mature persons, accepting a credible profession of faith as a "hopeful" sign of regeneration, and thus of election. On what scriptural grounds then, can we do the same with those who die in infancy or suffer mental infirmity? Since all men and all infants are sinners and have forfeited the blessings of God, there is no basis upon which to make a distinction among them concerning election.

But now a difficulty arises. Those who affirm the necessity and *possibility* of infant election and regeneration for salvation come to a tremendously deep chasm over which they nevertheless often attempt to leap. Possibility suddenly becomes certainty. Many Reformed writers simply assert that *all* infants (or all covenant children) must be elect. Let us look at Shedd as one example.

Shedd says it is simply a question of exegesis of the key passage, Luke 18:16. Does Jesus' declaration 'Of such is the kingdom of God', mean 'Of *all* such', or "Of *some* of such"? He writes, "We contend that the first is the most natural understanding of the words of Christ, and we also think that it the most natural understanding of the Assembly's phraseology respecting 'elect infants dying in infancy.'"⁴⁵

Shedd advocates that all infants dying as infants are saved as a "class." But he admits that neither Augustine or Calvin could "find proof in Scripture that infant election is classical, and therefore left it individual like that of adults."⁴⁶ This is a telling admission. For herein seems to lie the leap in the modern doctrine of infant salvation.

Scripture demonstrates the election of individuals. Shedd speculates, "But had they, [Augustine and Calvin], like their successors in the Modern church, seen reason in the Word of God for believing that the Divine mercy is extended to all infants as infants, instead of to a part, they would have gladly affirmed this [classical election]."⁴⁷

Shedd further argues that the distinction in the Confession is between two different classes of the elect, adults and infants, and not between elect and non-elect. He argues that since only the elect are spoken of here in 10:3, in contrasts to the rest of the Assembly's work where elect and non-elect are held in contrast (3:3,6,7, and Larger Catechism 13, 68), this means that Assembly did not mean to teach that there are any non-elect infants dying in infancy.

Shedd writes, "all of the elect are elected as infants in the womb. (Jer 1:5; Luke 1:15; Rom 9:10-12; Gal 1:15). There is no election of men as adults or in adult years"⁴⁸ Shedd argues that "the phrase 'elect infants' is the only one that designates the entire body of the elect."⁴⁹ But this, we can say, is just not so. In fact, all who are elect are designated such from before the foundation of the world. True, the number is unchangeable, and all who are elect are elect when they are in that stage known as infancy, but it in no necessary sense follows, as Shedd has claimed, that all infants dying in infancy are elect.

Shedd tells us the original draft of Westminster Chapter 10 did not contain the third section, and that the Assembly instructed its committee to insert a section relating to the manner of regeneration in those instances where there can be no outward call by the ministry of the Word and no conviction of sin, as in the case of elect infants dying in infancy.⁵⁰ But this admission, far from helping Shedd, demonstrates that the point was to define the *means* of regeneration and not, as Shedd argues, the *persons* or classes upon which the Spirit does that work. Furthermore, it is saying more than the Assembly did to assert further that the term "elect infants" must be understood to include *all* infants, dying in infancy.

⁴⁵ Shedd, op. cit. 113.

⁴⁶ Shedd, op. cit. 112.

⁴⁷ Shedd, op. cit. 113.

⁴⁸ Shedd, op. cit. 112-113.

⁴⁹ Shedd, op. cit. 113.

⁵⁰ Shedd, op. cit. 114.

Warfield, while affirming that the general Reformed view is “all infants of believers are saved” qualifies that with “Salvation is suspended on no earthly cause, but ultimately rests on God’s electing grace alone, while our knowledge of who are saved depends on our view of what are the signs of election and of the clearness with which they may be interpreted.”⁵¹ But Shedd, Warfield and many others simply make the assumption, based on *covenantal grounds*, that all children of believers, dying in infancy, are elect. Furthermore, many extend salvation to include all who die as infants (or are mentally incompetent). This “premature death” is an infallible “sign of election”. I believe this is an unwarranted assumption.

BAPTISM or COVENANTAL STATUS

Before we controvert the assumption that all who die in infancy are saved, let us briefly examine the position of those who realize the necessity of God’s secret election, but link that election to outward indications. Two major approaches need to be considered. It is proper to make the distinction between those within the Reformed community who advocate baptismal regeneration and those who argue that the baptism of a covenant child is not the *means* of regeneration or election but a sure *sign* of such.

Setting aside the seemingly bewildering return to Rome that such a doctrine proclaims, is there any argument for baptismal regeneration to be found in the Reformed confessions? Contemporary scholar David F. Wright says yes.⁵² He claims that that the Westminster Confession teaches baptismal regeneration, indeed that it was the majority view at the Assembly.⁵³ From this we must dissent.

The Westminster Assembly discussed baptismal regeneration on the 15th of July 1644, and the relationship of inward to outward baptism July 19th 1644.⁵⁴ While the “minutes are brief at best”,⁵⁵ there is nothing in them to indicate agreement with the doctrine of baptismal regeneration. Indeed the voluminous writings of the divines outside the Assembly speak otherwise. But we need not go outside the assembly’s work. Their view is more clearly seen in their Directory for the public Worship of God (1645).

That the promise is made to believers and their seed; and that the seed and posterity of the faithful, *born within the church*, have, by their birth, interest in the covenant, and right to the seal of it, and to the outward privileges of the church, under the gospel, no less than the children

⁵¹ Warfield, op. cit. 437.

⁵² David F. Wright, in J. Ligon Duncan, ed., *Baptism at the Westminster Assembly*, (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2003), 161ff. Wright argues that the Confession clearly teaches baptismal regeneration. Though he admits that such a view is qualified in 28:5, 27:3, he writes “the central affirmation seems clear; the ‘grace promised is not only offered, but really exhibited and conferred by the Holy Ghost’ (28:6).”¹⁶⁸ But Wright truncated the quotation. The Confession goes on to say “conferred by the Holy Ghost, to such (whether of age or infants) as that grace belongeth unto, according to the counsel of God’s own will, in his appointed time.” Wright’s omission of this qualification is extremely regrettable. The Confession, while linking the sign with the grace, clearly places the grace in the hands of God and his good pleasure, not in the act of baptism.

⁵³ Wright, op. cit. 161ff. As Wright reads the Assembly ‘Minutes’, he sees Baptismal Regeneration. On Jan. 5, 1645/6, Jeremiah Whitaker delivered arguments on the grace of God in baptism that seemingly do *not* advocate baptismal regeneration. Whitaker said, “Accompanied with the sign and thing signified, it is a saving ordinance...and “I conceive that it doth not confer it [grace] *ex opere operato*...” For a different viewpoint on baptismal regeneration among the Assembly men see Appendix 1.

⁵⁴ Robert S. Paul, *The Assembly of the Lord. Politics and Religion in the Westminster Assembly and the ‘Grand Debate’* (T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1985) 374.

⁵⁵ Paul says “[T]hese manuscript ‘Minutes’ are something of a misnomer, since they appear to be little more than the hasty notes of a scribe, probably written in preparation for a fuller account to appear at some later date. The speeches are often cryptic to the point of being almost meaningless, there are frustrating gaps in the text where the scribe had possibly intended to insert summaries of the speeches to be obtained from the notes of the speakers themselves, and the whole is written in an execrable seventeenth century hand of extraordinary abstruseness and complexity.” Paul. op. cit. 72-3. Parts of the minutes have been printed. *Minutes of the Sessions of the Westminster Assembly of Divines, While Engaging in Preparing Their Directory for Church Government, Confession of Faith and Catechisms* (November 1644 to March 1649), Edited by Alex. F. Mitchell and John Struthers (William Blackwood and Sons, Edinburgh, 1874, reprinted, Still Waters Revival Books, Edmonton, Alberta, 1991).

of Abraham in the time of the Old Testament; the covenant of grace, for substance, being the same; and the grace of God, and the consolation of believers, more plentiful than before; That the Son of God admitted little children into his presence, embracing and blessing them, saying, For of such is the kingdom of God: That children, by baptism, are solemnly received into the *bosom of the visible church*, distinguished from the world, and them that are without, and united with believers; and that all who are baptized in the name of Christ, do renounce, and by their baptism are bound to fight against the devil, the world, and the flesh: That they are *Christians* [federally], and *federally holy* before baptism, and therefore are they baptized. [italics mine]

"And praying, That the Lord would still continue, and daily confirm more and more this his unspeakable favour: That he would receive the infant now baptized, and solemnly entered into the household of faith, into his fatherly tuition and defense, and remember him with the favour that he sheweth to his people; that, *if he shall be taken out of this life in his infancy, the Lord, who is rich in mercy, would be pleased to receive him up into glory; and if he live, and attain the years of discretion, that the Lord would so teach him by his word and Spirit, and make his baptism effectual to him*, and so uphold him by his divine power and grace, that by faith he may prevail against the devil, the world, and the flesh, till in the end he obtain a full and final victory and so be kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation, through Jesus Christ our Lord." [italics mine]⁵⁶

Thus the child baptized is signified to be part of the visible church, not necessarily of the invisible church. And, prayer is to be offered on behalf of a dying infant that the Lord might be pleased to receive such, an unnecessary prayer if all dying infants are elect. Is this clear? Apparently not. David Wright writes "The Westminster divines viewed baptism as the instrument and occasion of regeneration by the spirit, of the remission of sins, of ingrafting into Christ"⁵⁷ and cites Confession 28:1. This paragraph begins with the statement that "baptism...is into the visible church"⁵⁸ a distinction not noted by Wright. James Thornwell notes this distinction when he writes of covenant children "They are all incorporated into the Church, because many of them hereafter are to be of the Church."⁵⁹

But Wright is not alone. There is a resurgence in Reformed circles linking the outward act of baptism with regeneration. While there are variations on the theme, this obviously impacts the question of infant salvation. We cannot take further time on the issue, but it should suffice to say that while the Reformers often used incautious and seemingly contradictory language, it has been the united testimony of the Reformed church that regeneration is not the result of, nor even *necessarily* linked to the outward act of baptism.⁶⁰

But if baptism is not the cause or sure sign of regeneration, what other external grounds might there be to indicate who is elect? The inclusion of a child into the covenant is often seen as a sure sign. Indeed it is an infant's covenantal status that entitles him or her to baptism, if not to the assumption that the child is regenerate.⁶¹

It is argued that God's sovereign inclusion of a child into a covenant household is viewed as his work in time and space as a result of his prior election. It is not that God elects those who are born in into the covenant, but that he has elected all those who are thus subsequently so placed, including of

⁵⁶ The Directory for the Public Worship of God, (First published in 1646. This edition, Glasgow, Free Presbyterian Publications 1994) 382-383.

⁵⁷ Wright, op. cit. 169.

⁵⁸ That phrase was deleted in the Savoy.

⁵⁹ James Henley Thornwell, *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell Vol. 4*, (Edinburgh, Banner of Truth Trust, 1986), op. cit. 340.

⁶⁰ Though neither is baptism merely an outward sign. Calvin (IV.xvi.17) Beza, Peter Martyr Vermigli, Warfield, and Murray all "reject the idea that the significance of paedobaptism is confined to external privilege or legal relationship without any reference to internal spiritual grace and blessing." Reymond, op. cit. 946.

⁶¹ "It is true that some Reformed theologians (e.g. Ursinus, Polanus, Cloppenburg, Voetius, Witsius) have taught that covenant children, without distinction, by virtue of their status as covenant children, are regenerate from earliest childhood, are united to Christ, and are therefore entitled to baptism. Other Reformed writers (e.g. Zanchius, Ames, Spanheim, Ussher) hesitate to make any stipulation as to the time of regeneration for covenant children. I count myself among this latter group" Reymond, op. cit. 948.

course, infants who die in infancy.⁶² But that argument is easily defeated. Jacob and Esau demonstrate that covenant children are not all elect (Rom 9:13) and not all Israel are of Israel (Rom 9:6). Clearly not all mature covenant children demonstrate the fruits of righteousness, and many covenant children who grow to maturity appear to be lost. God surely determines who will live to maturity and who will not. But on what Biblical grounds are we to assume that God automatically elects all those who die in infancy? How then do we view covenant children?

During the debates on baptism at the Westminster Assembly, the majority of the divines stood against Thomas Goodwin who advocated a real holiness of the covenant infant, based on 1 Cor 7:14. The Assembly distinguished between a *real* and a *federal* holiness of the covenant child. Samuel Rutherford stated “the Lord hath election and reprobation amongst Infants noe lesse than those of age.”⁶³ This was the main objection against Goodwin’s contention that all infants dying as such would be saved. Rutherford and the others carried the day, as seen by the Directory phrase, “they are Christians, and federally holy before baptism.” The inclusion of “federally”, according to the ‘Minutes’, was added to clarify this point.⁶⁴ Thus the Westminster divines did not allow that all infants, nor even all covenantally born infants, were by nature elect.

Regardless of the cautionary statements of the Reformers, the Westminster divines, and others, the assumption of covenantal or universal infant election crept into the church and has held sway. Warfield argued that covenant children, as in the case of those adults who make a credible profession of faith, may be recognized in the judgment of charity as belonging to Christ and received as such.⁶⁵ He asserts that in his day (1891) few are found who do not hold that all infants who die in infancy are the children of God and enter at once into his glory. This is so, not because original sin is not worthy of judgment and eternal punishment, nor because the infants are in any way less guilty than others, nor simply by the fact that they die in infancy, “but simply because God in his infinite love has chosen them in Christ before the foundation of the world, by a loving foreordination of them unto adoption as sons in Jesus Christ.”⁶⁶

In 1813, the Cumberland Presbyterians revised the Westminster Confession to suit their theological views and changed it to read, “All infants dying in infancy...” Even more radically, in 1883 they again revised it to read “All infants dying in infancy, and *all persons who have never had the faculty of reason, are regenerated and saved*”. In 1903 the Northern Presbyterians revised the confession and appended a footnote to this passage, “With reference to X:3...it is not to be regarded as teaching that any who die in infancy are lost. We believe that all dying in infancy are included in the election of grace...”

Southern Presbyterians refused to modify the Confession, not because they disagreed with the salvation of all infants dying in infancy, but because they reasoned that “the present language of the Confession cannot, by any fair interpretation, be construed to teach that any of those who die in infancy are lost.”⁶⁷ To obviate all doubt as to the original intent of the Confession, the General Assembly of the Southern Presbyterian Church stated in 1901, “The Confession of Faith in this section does not teach the damnation of any infants dying in infancy for the reason that the contrast made in it is not between elect and non-elect infants dying in infancy, but between elect persons who die in infancy and elect persons who do not die in infancy.”⁶⁸ Furthermore, in 1902 they insisted that 10:3 “does not teach that there are any infants dying in infancy who are damned, but it is only meant to show that those who die in infancy are saved in a different manner from adult persons, who are capable of being outwardly called by the ministry of the Word. Furthermore, we are persuaded that the Holy Scriptures, when fairly interpreted, amply warrant us in believing that all infants who die in infancy are included in the election of grace, and are regenerated and saved by Christ through the Spirit.”⁶⁹ But such presumption may well lead in directions we do not want to go.

⁶² Presumptive regeneration is to be distinguished from baptismal regeneration.

⁶³ Mitchell & Struthers, op. cit. 256.

⁶⁴ Wright, op. cit. 182.

⁶⁵ Benjamin B. Warfield, “The Polemics of Infant Baptism,” in *Studies in Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1932), 389 -90, 405-06.

⁶⁶ Warfield, op. cit. 438.

⁶⁷ *Minutes of the General Assembly 1900*. p 614. Cited in Webb, op. cit. 307.

⁶⁸ Webb, op. cit. 307.

⁶⁹ *Minutes, 1902*, op. cit. 265. Cited in Webb op. cit. 308.

A belief in presumptive regeneration may well lead a church to adopt paedocommunion. Parents and churches that presume all covenant children are elect may cease urging soul-searching towards repentance and faith. They will soon lose the distinction between the visible and invisible church, and issues of communicant membership and church discipline will be clouded and gray.

But must we not say “that the promise is to you and your children” is not categorical? And, is there not a difference between covenantally holy and actually holy that is being expressed in 1 Corinthians 7? Thornwell notes that covenant children “are all incorporated into the Church, because many of them hereafter are to be of the church.” That some covenant children grow up to be outside the faith is irrefutable. Covenants are not without obligations. They call for obedience and faithfulness. As the covenantal promise is not universal to all who grow up to maturity, on what grounds can we assume that it is universal to all those who die in infancy, or are mentally incompetent? On what Biblical grounds can one say “that they die in infancy is not the cause but the effect of God’s mercy to them”⁷⁰ Robert Reymond summarizes, “neither my own nor the Westminster Assembly’s statements should be construed as advocating baptismal regeneration or baptismal salvation, for neither regards the covenant child as necessarily regenerate or saved by virtue of his covenant status or his baptism.”⁷¹

Yet, precisely because of God’s gracious covenant, there is much reason for hope. And this has been our hopeful expectation in every age. Beza noted, “The promise, accepted by the parents in faith, also includes their children to a thousand generations. . . If it is objected that not all of them who are born of believing parents are elect, seeing that God did not choose all the children of Abraham and Isaac, we do not lack an answer. Though we do not deny that this is the case, still we say that this hidden judgment must be left to God and that normally, by virtue of the promise, all who have been born of believing parents, or if one of the parents believes, are sanctified.”⁷²

Anthony Burgess, a Westminster divine, wrote, “Our church excludes none from participation of the inward grace of the sacrament; but knowing for certain that all the elect do partake of it, and not knowing at all that this or that particular infant is not elected, suffers not any of her children to speak or judge of any particular infant that he doth not receive the inward grace; no more than she permits him to say that such a particular is not elected. For ‘who hath known the mind of the Lord?’ and, ‘who are thou that judgest another man’s servant?’ Howbeit, our church knows very well, that in respect of election, they are not all Israel that are of Israel; and that of those many that be called but a few be chosen. But who those be, she will not determine, yet this much she doth determine, that any particular infant rightly baptized is to be taken and held in the judgment of charity for a member of the true invisible elected, sanctified church of Christ, and that he is regenerated.”⁷³

Louis Berkhof writes, “God undoubtedly desires that the covenant relationship shall issue in a covenant life. And He Himself guarantees by His promises pertaining to the seed of believers that this will take place, not in the case of every individual, but in the seed of the covenant collectively. On the basis of the promises of God we may believe that, under a faithful administration of the covenant, the covenant relation will, as a rule, be fully realized in covenant life.”⁷⁴

Thus we see that the ground for the salvation of all infants dying in infancy has not completely moved away from the sacerdotal baptismal formulations of the early church. Yet, largely, it is the Reformed principles of covenantal promises, election, and regeneration by grace falsely applied that ground a belief in the salvation of all believers’ children or even to all infants who die as such.

HOPEFUL EXPECTATION

We have surveyed the historical development of the doctrine of infant salvation, but the questions remain: is there indeed ample Scriptural warrant for presuming the salvation of all infants or even some who die in infancy? Does the Westminster/Savoy Confession necessarily teach the salvation of all who die in infancy, either all who are covenant children or all infants? Does not the varied interpretations of the Confession to the present day tell us more about those interpreters than the original intent of the Assembly? What can we absolutely affirm about 10:3, within the confines of Scriptural truth?

⁷⁰ Warfield, op. cit. 438.

⁷¹ Reymond, op. cit. 948.

⁷² As quoted by Geerhardus Vos, *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 1980), 263.

⁷³ As quoted by S. Joel Garver, “*Baptismal Regeneration and the Westminster Confession*” 28.6. Publisher and date unknown.

⁷⁴ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1938), 287 .

Ultimately the unifying points in all Reformed confessions is that “salvation is suspended on no earthly cause, but ultimately rests on God’s electing grace alone, while our knowledge of who are saved depends on our view of what are the signs of election and the clearness with which they may be interpreted.”⁷⁵

Let us remember the fundamental principle of theological method stated in the opening chapter of the Confession, “The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man’s salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture.” Where is it expressly said in Scripture that all who die in infancy are saved? Or from which passages of Scripture may such a doctrine be deduced by good and necessary consequences? “For the doctrine that God can and does regenerate some infants there was, in the judgment of the [Westminster] divines, competent Scripture proof. But for the doctrine that all who die in infancy are saved they could find no such proof. Sentiment was on its side, their aversion to the Roman doctrine of the *limbus infantum* commended it, there were perhaps Biblical considerations, which pointed to it in a general way – but they could not say ‘thus saith the Lord.’ And whatever light we may think God has given to His church since the Westminster Assembly it is very questionable indeed whether we have any warrant even now to include among ‘the things most surely believed among us, the doctrine that all who die in infancy are saved.’”⁷⁶

What then shall we do? What will assist us in our pastoral work? Infants die. We need to comfort those who mourn. But it is no comfort to offer that which is false or what we cannot offer on biblical grounds. Are we then, merely agnostic on the point, or do we fall into despair? By no means.

We rejoice that our doctrine enables us to have hope. “[I]t is only supposedly harsh Calvinism which is able to offer a reasonable hope for such cases on the basis of its principles. Those who restrict the scope of divine sovereignty in order to suspend the operations of grace upon the powers of man must logically pay a heavy price at this very point. They can offer no hope - on their principles - to those who they must admit have no ability or power!”⁷⁷ But as salvation rests entirely on the Sovereign purposes of an electing God, we have hope. Pastoral concerns are real and valid, but in our desire to comfort those who mourn the loss of an infant we must not go beyond the Scriptural truth. Those who have previously been taught a biblical view of the sovereignty of God and a willing submission to his providences will have a better foundation to stand upon when faced with such heart-wrenching pain.

We have hope, but we cannot say for certain. We reject false presumption. A Christian’s hope does not improperly presume upon our Sovereign God. We are fully cognizant of the wickedness of sin, even of infants, and the justice due such. Likewise, we know that Christ’s atonement is sufficient for all his elect. And we are hopefully expectant that God has indeed elected some children of believers. We rest on his righteousness in all things. What attitude do we then rightly have towards infants who die in infancy? Hopeful expectation. “O Israel, hope in the Lord; For with the Lord there is mercy, And with Him is abundant redemption. And He shall redeem Israel from all his iniquities” (Ps 130:7).

We grieve tragically over mature children who die outside of saving grace. We cannot offer false comfort there. We cannot assume that baptized covenant children are elect and regenerate. Neither can we assume the opposite. “God does not tell us to live on the basis of assumptions, but in the way of covenant faithfulness and hope in his promise. God will certainly preserve his church through the line of the generations,”⁷⁸ “for the promise is to you and your children” (Acts 2:39), as many as the Lord will call.

In the case of a mature person making a credible profession of faith we have grounds thereby to entertain a charitable hope that they are indeed saved. So we may also entertain like charitable hope with the infant, who, by the sovereign grace of God, is placed into the covenant community.

We affirm that the Lord has promised a seed to believers and that promise gives a right to covenant baptism. As to the infant who dies, we cherish expectant hope. As to the infant who grows and matures, we live in hopeful expectation, looking for the gracious fruits of repentance and faith now able to be expressed. Until we see such, we hope, we pray, we beg God, but we cannot presume that all our children are Jacobs and that there are no Esaus. We are right to regard the children of believers “as ‘of

⁷⁵ Warfield, op. cit. 437.

⁷⁶ MacLeod, op. cit. 25.

⁷⁷ G I Williamson, *The Westminster Confession of Faith*. (Philipsburg: P & R. 2004), 116.

⁷⁸ G I Williamson, *The Heidelberg Catechism: A Study Guide*, (Philipsburg: P & R 1993), op. cit. 126.

the world and in the church' and 'as unregenerate until their personal faith and repentance are evident.'⁷⁹

There is a world of difference between presuming all infants dying in infancy, or all infants within the covenant, are elect, and the hopeful expectation that God will save such.

In maintaining and advocating such hope we are not alone. We have seen that many in the Reformed church have made presumptions that appears to be biblically unwarranted. But many have stood where we stand. Our expectant hope, our confidence, is not in our ability to know or see who are the elect. Our hope is in the gracious work of God. "And far be it from you to do such a thing as this, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous should be as the wicked; far be it from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right? (Gen 18:25).

APPENDIX 1

Beyond the somewhat cryptic and easily misunderstood 'Minutes', we should also look at the published and unpublished writings of the Westminster Divines on this subject. The Assembly's sources should be read in company with the divines' many works on baptism. A careful reading of the divines would help clarify some of the theological debate at the Assembly. There are many works on the topic by divines that are not cited by Wright. Here are a few titles that reflect on the issues.

- Robert Baillie, *Anabaptisme, the true Fountaine of Independency, Brownisme, Antinomy, Familisme, and most of the other errorrs which for the time doe trouble the Church of England, unsealed. Also the questions of paedobaptisme and dipping handled from Scripture: In a second part of The Dissuasive from the errors of the time.* 4to. pp. 179. M. F. for Samuel Gellibrand: London, 1647.
- Cornelius Burgess (Burges), *Baptismall Regeneration of Elect Infants, professed by the Church of England, according to Scriptures, the Primitiue Church, the present Reformed Churches, and many particular divines apart.* 4to. pp. 347. I. L. for Henry Curteyn: Oxford, 1629.
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⁷⁹ See James Henry Thornwell, *Collected Writings*, (Richmond: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1886) 4:333-41, 348. and Robert Lewis Dabney, *Lectures in Systematic Theology*, Lecture LXVI, 792-95.