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Infant Election

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Second London Confession: **Chapter X; Paragraph 3**

Though scarcely preached from the Sunday morning pulpit, the subject of infant salvation is an intensely personal and pastoral issue deserving of proper treatment in the Baptist church. It is not so explicit in Scripture as to escape a measure of speculation, yet not so incidental a doctrine as to warrant “secondary” status. Standing at the intersection of enormous theological doctrines such as original sin, soteriology, and even Christology, the fate of dying infants demands pastoral attention for what it means to grieving families and for what it communicates about the God we worship.

The 1689 Baptist Confession and the Westminster Confession of Faith

In the *1689 Baptist Confession*, the issue is taken up in paragraph three of Chapter 10, entitled “Of Effectual Calling.” Matching the *Westminster Confession of Faith* almost verbatim, it reads, “Elect infants dying in infancy are regenerated and saved by Christ

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through the Spirit; who worketh when, and where, and how he pleases; so also are all elect persons, who are incapable of being outwardly called by the ministry of the Word.”¹ Nearly as important as the substance of the article is its location. Like the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, the *2nd London Confession* addresses infant salvation as an immediate corollary to effectual calling (rather than, for example, to election) due to the concepts of agency and instrumentality germane to both doctrines. Though some modern rescensions of the Confession omit the word “Elect,” the original framers retained it. The idea of “elect infants” neither asserts nor denies that all infants dying in infancy are saved. Rather it tacitly concludes that at least some infants are redeemed. On one hand, the article is biblically consistent insofar as Scripture presents the doctrine of election ([Romans 9–11](#)). On the other hand, the ambiguity relative to the phrase and the difficulty of pointing to a direct affirmation from the Bible on this issue prompted at least one confessionally Reformed Baptist to suggest that perhaps its framers should have said nothing at all. “The Bible is silent on this issue.” Sam Waldron observed. “It would have been much better, therefore, for the Confession simply to say nothing at this point,” he continued, “for that, I am convinced is precisely what the Bible says.” Waldron does go on to suggest some doctrinal ideas from which one might construct a meaningful pastoral theology of what can be a vexing issue.²

Solus Christus

Nevertheless, the third paragraph still contains important theological assertions concerning the nature of infant salvation. For instance, infants dying in infancy are “saved by Christ.” Infant salvation is still salvation, and that exclusively by Jesus Christ the Son of God. There is one Mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus ([1 Timothy 2:5](#)). To suggest that any infant is delivered into eternity by any other means than by the finished work of Christ is to deny original guilt and to impugn the Gospel itself. Regardless of how Baptists choose to interpret this third article, the vexing question of infant salvation must begin with the inescapable truth that all infants are conceived in sin, condemned under the just law of God, and in need of redemption ([Psalm 51:1](#), [Romans 3:23](#), [5:12–18](#)). According to Andrew Fuller, founding secretary of the Baptist Missionary Society, “There is no difference between us respecting the number or character of those that shall be finally saved. We agree that whoever returns to God by Jesus Christ shall certainly be saved.”³ Through the disobedience of Adam, their federal

¹ *2nd London Confession*, 10.3.

² Samuel E. Waldron, *A Modern Exposition of 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith* (Durham, England: Evangelical Press, 1989 [3rd edition 1999]), 150.

³ *The Complete Works of Andrew Fuller*, Vol. 1, 506.

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head, infants are made sinners (5:19). As James P. Boyce explains, their lack of transgression does not imply innocence:

The Scriptures plainly assume and declare that God righteously punishes all men, not only for what they do, but for what they are. A corrupt nature makes a condition as truly sinful, and guilty, and liable to punishment, as actual transgressions. Consequently, at the very moment of birth, the presence and possession of such a nature shows that even the infant sons of Adam are born under all the penalties which befell their ancestor in the day of his sin. Actual transgression subsequently adds new guilt to guilt already existing, but does not substitute a state of guilt for one of innocence.⁴

Young age does not abrogate God's righteous judgment upon human depravity nor does it immunize infants from the necrotizing effects of sin. Regardless of physical development, sinners are dead in their sin, and this includes both spiritual and physical death ([Genesis 2:17](#), [1 Corinthians 15:22](#), [Ephesians 2:1-3](#); [2 Timothy 1:9-10](#)). The tragic reality that so many infants die in a fallen world is evidence to sin's pervasive, wrenching power as well as to the need for imputed righteousness and life found only in the last Adam and not in the first ([1 Corinthians 15:45](#), [1 John 5:12](#)). Arguments against infant depravity face perhaps their toughest and most sobering rebuttal in the grave. Sin is a potent killing force endemic to postlapsarian humanity, and through Adam's trespass, death reigns in all men ([Romans 5:17](#)). Hence the sixth chapter of the *1689 Confession* states plainly that all sinners are "now conceived in sin, and by nature children of wrath, the servants of sin, the subjects of death, and all other miseries, spiritual, temporal and eternal, unless the Lord Jesus set them free."⁵ Apart from the liberating grace of God in Christ, we are all children of wrath – including children themselves ([Ephesians 2:3](#)).

The Necessity of the Rebirth

A reasoned discussion on the fate of dying infants must also account for the means of salvation as set forth in Scripture. For instance, the third article declares that infants dying in infancy are "regenerated... through the Spirit." This stands in contrast with the first article of the chapter which states, "Those whom God hath predestinated unto life, he is pleased in his appointed, and accepted time, effectually to call, by his *Word and Spirit*, out of that state of sin and death in which they are by nature, to grace and salvation by Jesus Christ; enlightening their minds spiritually and savingly to understand the things of God." Whereas the first article includes both "Word and Spirit" as the means by which

⁴ James P. Boyce, *Abstract of Systematic Theology*, 249–50.

⁵ *2nd London Confession*, 6.3.

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the Father effectively calls His children to Christ, the article detailing infant salvation includes only the latter. The absence of the “external” call of the gospel to infants may appear somewhat obvious at first; however, more significant is the Confession’s emphasis upon the indispensable role of the Spirit in calling the sinner.

This “internal” call is nothing less than the voice of God calling out to a corrupt and obstinate heart and unshackling it from the captivity of sin in order that it might freely love Christ, or as the Confession states, “so as they come most freely, being made willing by his grace.”⁶ English Particular Baptist John Gill, the first Baptist to write a verse-by-verse commentary on the entire Bible, conceived of God’s effectual calling as an “internal call” and “an act of efficacious and irresistible [*sic*] grace.”⁷ In infants, as in all sinners, this is a completely sovereign work of God. Unlike the corresponding paragraph in the WCF which cites [Luke 18:15–16](#), [Acts 2:38–39](#), [John 3:3–5](#), [3:8](#), [Romans 8:9](#), [1 John 5:12](#), and [Acts 4:12](#), the 2LC offers [John 3:3](#), [5](#), [6](#), [8](#) as its sole proof text for infant salvation, underscoring both the monergistic work of God in salvation as well as the absolute necessity of the rebirth. Immediately after establishing the critical role of the Spirit, the 1689 *Confession* then declares that the Spirit “worketh when, and where, and how he pleases.”⁸ With this heavy emphasis upon God’s sovereign and mysterious work of salvation through the Spirit, Baptists within the 1689 tradition universally affirm the necessity of election and regeneration in the salvation of infants. So inseparable are regeneration and effectual calling that John Dagg, the first Southern Baptist systematic theologian, considered them virtually synonymous.⁹ The 1689 *Confession* does so implicitly, lacking a chapter “on regeneration.” Instead, the first two articles “on effectual calling” provide a clear exposition of the doctrine of the new birth, affirming that the effectual call unto Christ is a “taking away their heart of stone, and giving unto them a heart of flesh, renewing their wills, and by his almighty power determining them to that which is good”¹⁰ ([Ezekiel. 36:26](#)). Effectual calling, and thus infant salvation, spring from the power of the new covenant.

Infant Salvation and Baptist Ecclesiology

As a Baptist document, the 2LC does not distinguish between the infant children of believers and those of unbelievers. Although God often works His special, redeeming grace in and through particular families, Christ is the mediator of a new covenant wrought by His blood and applied individually through faith ([Hebrews 9:15](#), [Galatians](#)

⁶ 2nd London Confession, 10.1.

⁷ John Gill, *A Body of Doctrinal Divinity*, book 6, ch. 12, 541–542.

⁸ 2nd London Confession, 10.3.

⁹ John L. Dagg, *Manual of Theology*, 333.

¹⁰ 2nd London Confession, 10.1.

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[2:16–21](#)). Chapter seven of the 2LC is exclusively dedicated to the nature of this covenant of grace, insisting that the Lord “freely offereth unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ, requiring of them faith in him, that they may be saved.”¹¹ Any fanciful notions of a “half-way covenant” or paedobaptism have, in the words of 2LC signatory William Kiffin, “no part of the revealed counsel of God.”¹² Credobaptist views in late seventeenth century England not only demanded extraordinary faithfulness to Holy Scripture; they also summoned a tremendous amount of courage both legally and socially. With the restoration of Charles II in 1660 and the Established Church in 1662, Baptists were frequently the objects of ridicule and accusations of child-hating for their alleged dereliction of a church covenant that all but ensured the salvation of infants of believers. Advocating Baptist views on baptism, 2LC signatory Benjamin Keach’s primer *The Child’s Instructor* (1664) was an incredibly dangerous publication that eventually resulted in the harassment of his London congregation, a large fine, and his arrest. Therefore the insistence of the *1689 Confession* upon the sovereign, mysterious, regenerating work of the Holy Spirit in infants, while no different theologically than the WCF, would have appeared much more radical when combined with a credobaptist ecclesiology that emphasizes the necessity of faith without the notion of a so-called “age of accountability.” Texts such as [2 Samuel 12:23](#) (“I shall go to him, but he will not return to me.”), often used to support the idea of universal infant salvation, are not cited.¹³ Others such as [Luke 1:44](#) and [Jeremiah 1:5](#) are likewise excluded, most likely due to the fact that neither John the Baptist nor Jeremiah died as infants. Rather these are treated as special instances in which God uniquely called certain individuals in the course of salvation history. In the 2LC, the article addressing infant salvation is framed primarily in terms articulated in the first two paragraphs: Christ, Spirit, election. These provide the doctrinal bedrock for paedo-soteriological beliefs in the Calvinistic Baptist church.

A Diversity of Baptist Views

By no means, however, are these beliefs monolithic. Ironically, the particular clause concerning the sovereignty and freedom of the Spirit ([John 3:8](#)) is what simultaneously unites and divides Calvinistic Baptist theologians on the issue of infant salvation. What some view as the freedom of God to elect some infants and not others, others see as the same freedom to elect all infants. This diversity is demonstrated, for example, in the varying interpretations of [Luke 18](#) and the godly example of children. John Dagg, who

¹¹ *2nd London Confession*, 7.2.

¹² Benjamin Coxe, Hanserd Knollys, William Kiffin, et al., *A Declaration concerning the Public Dispute Which Should Have Been...Concerning Infants-Baptism...* (London, 1645).

¹³ The fulcrum of interpretation for this particular text is whether David is referring to Sheol, which is believed to have housed both believers and unbelievers ([Luke 16:19–31](#)), or paradise in heaven. If the former, David’s statement does not seem to offer support for those advocating universal infant salvation.

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believed in both the election and non-election of infants, writes, “An objection to the doctrine of natural depravity is founded on the fact, that Jesus referred to little children, as examples for his disciples. This fact, however, will not authorize the inference, that little children are not depraved.”¹⁴ For this reason, regeneration is imperative in the salvation of any sinner. Ye must be born again, as Christ exhorted Nicodemus ([John 3:7](#)). However, while almost all theologians in the 1689 tradition have generally agreed with Dagg’s conclusion regarding infant depravity, not all are convinced that [Luke 18](#) is off limits in the debate over infant salvation. Charles Spurgeon, for instance, who was not afraid to address such a topic from the pulpit, also vigorously defended the idea of infant depravity and the need for regenerating grace. He explains, “Some ground the idea of eternal blessedness of the infant upon its *innocence*. We do no such thing; we believe that the infant fell in the first Adam.” Nevertheless, admitting the limits of divine revelation on the subject, he continues, “No doubt, in some mysterious manner the Spirit of God regenerates the infant soul, and it enters into glory made meet to be a partaker of the inheritance of the saints in light.”¹⁵ Citing Anglican John Newton, Spurgeon appeals to [Luke 18](#) in order to advocate the “known character of our Lord Jesus Christ” and to the “very great part of the kingdom of heaven” made up of children. Ultimately grounding the redemption of infants in the sheer goodness of God, Spurgeon’s exegesis is in many ways characteristic of most arguments for the salvation of all infants.

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Meanwhile, the mysterious sovereignty of God articulated in paragraph 3 has provided for a noticeable plurality of Baptist views on infant salvation. Benjamin Keach, who upheld the election and non-election of infants, appealed to the same mystery and the same text in order to defend the election of *some* infants, not all:

We have ground to hope our children that Die are as happy as yours, tho’ never baptized; and that from Gods word. Hath not Christ said, *Of such are the Kingdom of Heaven*, no doubt God hath comprehended Infants in his eternal election Love that Die, for whom he also gave his Son, and in some secret way doth Sanctifie them, or makes them meet for glory above; and we have as much ground to hope, that God will give Grace to those Children of ours that live, as you have to hope he will give Grace to yours.¹⁶

Whereas Baptist theologians such as Keach, Dagg, and Boyce held that there were indeed non-elect infants, Baptist theologians like Spurgeon, Gill, and John Broadus believed

¹⁴ Dagg, *Manual of Theology*, 156.

¹⁵ Spurgeon, “Infant Salvation,” Sermon 411.

¹⁶ Benjamin Keach, *The Ax*, 25.

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that *all* infants were saved.¹⁷ The latter did so not according to the belief that all infants somehow escaped judgment, but that all infants, dying in infancy, were *elected* by the Father. This distinction is important for the way that Baptists of the 1689 tradition have understood effectual calling and infant salvation. Against the Landmarkists and Arminians of his day, John Dagg insisted, “All who will finally be saved, were chosen to salvation by God the Father, before the foundation of the world, and given to Jesus Christ in the covenant of grace.”¹⁸ Before the end of the nineteenth century and the rise of Dispensationalist thought, Calvinistic Baptists were incapable of discussing the salvation of any sinner without a covenantal framework, principally fixed in the covenant of redemption. In this eternal, intra-Trinitarian compact ratified before the foundation of the world, the Father promised to procure a chosen people for His Son. The 2LC calls it an “eternal covenant transaction that was between the Father and the Son about the redemption of the elect”¹⁹ ([Psalms 110:4](#), [Ephesians 1:3–11](#), [2 Timothy 1:9](#)). The salvation of any sinner—including infants—is unthinkable apart from this Trinitarian economy of redemption: the work of Christ on the cross, regeneration by the Spirit in the sinful heart, and the Father’s unconditional election. To submit to any other Gospel would be to contend that infants somehow enter into the kingdom of heaven apart from the Father’s grace, the Son’s headship, and the Spirit’s power.

Election and Epistemology

While these three soteriological axioms constitute the lowest common denominator of sorts among Calvinistic Baptist views on infant salvation, there are plenty of questions left unanswered, beginning with issues of election and epistemology. For instance, 3.5 of the 2LC (“Of God’s decree”) states that God “hath chosen in Christ unto everlasting glory, out of his mere free grace and love, without any other thing in the creature as a condition or cause moving him thereunto.”²⁰ Arguments for the election of *all* infants would seem to violate this principle as it appears to make infancy, something found “in the creature,” a condition for salvation. Does young age guarantee exemption from wrath? Moreover, unconditional election is traditionally understood to be God’s free choice of individuals, not of groups or classes. If indeed *all* dying infants were elected unto salvation, this divine

¹⁷ Broadus concluded, “No question is here made that those dying in infancy are saved. They are saved through the atonement of Christ and the work of the Spirit, but this must hold true of all alike, without reference to any ceremony, and no matter whether their parents were believers, unbelievers, or heathen” (*Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, 1888, p. 404).

¹⁸ Dagg, *Manual of Theology*, 309.

¹⁹ *2nd London Confession*, 7.3.

²⁰ *2nd London Confession*, 3.5.

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decision is made irrespective of anyone or anything outside His absolute sovereign pleasure.

The necessity of divine election then leads to the question of faith: can one be saved apart from faith in Christ? If Charles Spurgeon is indeed correct in his assertion that “faith is the indispensable requisite to salvation,” can infants meet this heavenly requirement?²¹ Scriptural connections so tie the called, regenerated heart to reaching out to Christ in faith that to affirm regeneration in the absence of demonstrable faith is highly difficult to conceive ([Hebrews 11:6](#); [James 2:18, 22](#)). Infants, however, lack any natural capacity to manifest the degree of rationality for manifestation of faith. Does that prevent them from knowing Christ in faith? Chapter 10, paragraph 1 of the 2LC (“on effectual calling”) clearly states that the Spirit comes “enlightening their minds spiritually and savingly to understand the things of God.”²² But what of those sinners who haven’t the basic cognition to understand?²³

While faith is certainly more than mere intellectual assent, it does entail a measure of human reason. The inability to transgress a law of which one is unaware or to render worship to a God largely unknown might very well prove exculpatory in the divine judgment of a sinful infant ([Romans 2:14–15](#)). According to the Apostle Paul, a sinner is “without excuse” when he or she “clearly perceives” God’s eternal power and divine nature, both of which are “plain to them” ([Romans 1:19–21](#)). Does this therefore mean that a child incapable of “clearly” perceiving God’s nature is “with excuse”? If 10.2 of the 2LC asserts that believers are “enabled to answer the call, and to embrace the grace offered,” how exactly do infants answer and embrace?²⁴ Can these young sinners be held responsible for their sin? To answer such a question in the negative would assume a theological paradox in which there is corruption of heart without sin, or sin without guilt, or intrinsic rebellion without condemnation and wrath. The fact that infants are saved “by Christ” certainly proves there is guilt of some kind, albeit a diminished guilt ([Luke 12:47–48](#), [James 4:17](#), [2 Corinthians 5:10–11](#)).

One possible solution to this vexing epistemological question would be simply to rest in the power of a sovereign God capable of working conscious faith in those lacking mental development. As every human being bears the *imago Dei*, he or she also possesses at least some capacity to know and relate to the living God. Furthermore, if God can indeed

²¹ James Leo Garrett, *Baptist Theology: A Four-Century Study*, 270.

²² *2nd London Confession*, 10.1.

²³ The question of rational “capacity” in infants touches on the issue of the *imago Dei*. It is obviously the belief of this author and the 1689 Confession that *all* infants fully bear the image of God and are worthy of the honor, dignity, and respect due all image-bearing humans.

²⁴ *2nd London Confession*, 10.2.

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regenerate an infant, can He not also bestow the gift of faith? The sovereignty of God leaves much to speculate due to the fact that Scripture itself is remarkably silent on this issue. No explicit mention is made to infant faith or infant repentance, begging another question: “Can one be saved apart from real conversion?”, or, perhaps, “Does real conversion always carry with it the opportunity for evidence of such?” How would an infant begin to “deny himself” when he doesn’t know his own name? ([Luke 9:23](#)) When Christ warned, “Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish,” He made no clear exceptions ([Luke 13:5](#)).

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With the knowledge that God has shrouded infant salvation in considerable mystery, James P. Boyce nevertheless upheld the necessity of conversion even among dying infants. Echoing [Romans 1](#) theology, Boyce avers, “Between [conversion] and regeneration must intervene in some cases some period of time until the knowledge of God’s existence and nature is given, before the heart turns, or even is turned toward that God. This must be true of all infants and of all persons otherwise incapable of responsibility, as for example idiots.”²⁵ In other words, infant salvation necessarily entails conversion, even after “some period of time.” This is concomitant with the revealed “knowledge of God’s existence and nature.” How this is accomplished with infants is not explained in detail. Utterly important, however, is the idea that every soul saved by God either “turns” to Jesus or “is turned” to Him.²⁶ For Boyce, this conversion also includes the mentally handicapped who seem unable to respond to the general call of the gospel. The 2LC describes these sinners as “persons, who are incapable of being outwardly called by the ministry of the Word.”²⁷ Like dying infants, they are not outside the bounds of God’s loving election and “internal call” to Christ simply because of physical weakness.

The Power of God to Call Sinners

Article three of the chapter “on effectual calling” also includes paragraph four, which examines those who receive the “external call,” but unlike the aforementioned handicapped and infant sinners, do *not* have their hearts and minds liberated from the bondage of sin. It reads,

Others not elected, although they may be called by the ministry of the Word, and may have some common operations of the Spirit, yet not being effectually drawn by the Father, they neither will nor can truly come to Christ, and therefore cannot be saved: much less can men that receive not the Christian religion be saved; be

²⁵ Boyce, *Abstract of Systematic Theology*, ch. 23, “Regeneration and Conversion.”

²⁶ Boyce seemed to believe this “turning” of some infants and the mentally handicapped would happen postmortem.

²⁷ *2nd London Confession*, 10.3.

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they never so diligent to frame their lives according to the light of nature and the law of that religion they do profess.²⁸

With respect to the issue of infant salvation, the above paragraph serves to underscore more profoundly the power and saving necessity of the Father's "effectual call" unto Christ. Adult sinners who hear the gospel "neither will nor can" come to Jesus apart from God's irresistible, drawing grace. Therefore the dying infant's lack of an "external" call no more disqualifies them from the grace of God than an adult sinner's exposure to the preaching of God's Word qualifies them for salvation. Jesus Christ is indeed mighty to save. Whether discussing the salvation of infants, toddlers, adolescents, teenagers, or adults, the glory of God's sovereign grace is not diminished with age or context. Infant salvation is nonetheless salvation, and salvation is the Lord's ([Psalm 3:8](#)). Furthermore, for the grieving parent, relative, or friend, lasting consolation is found not simply in the work of Christ for the infant sinner, but in the perfection and greatness of the Son of God Himself. Through many trials and tribulations, it is the aim of the pastor to lift the eyes of the troubled sinner so that they too may look to a Father without shadow of turning and declare with Abraham, "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?" ([Genesis 18:25](#)). In this age, the fate of dying infants will in large part remain a mystery. Thankfully for the church, Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever ([Hebrews 13:8](#)). Christians must ultimately trust that God will be God and will always do what is right. While Baptist pastors may not be able to answer infallibly many of the ultimate questions concerning infant salvation, the questions themselves inevitably lead us to many of the precious Trinitarian truths of the Gospel.



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²⁸ 2nd London Confession, 10.4.