



Baptism is for children of believers

Baptism of infants challenged

The doctrine of infant baptism has been and continues to be the subject of disagreement and division among Christians. Some find the arguments of those who deny infant baptism to be rather convincing. The New Testament does not give a direct command to baptize children.

Objections to infant baptism are not new. The Anabaptist movement of the sixteenth century taught that prior to being baptized you should be able to give a testimony of how you have experienced God's love in your life. Baptism becomes the visible evidence that you have accepted Jesus as your personal Saviour. It is the outward symbol of the Christian life which should only be given to those who show evidence of having begun the Christian life; of having been regenerated and born again (Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*).

Infant baptism is a confessional matter

Denying infant baptism is not a minor point or a nonessential. Both the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism deliberately draw our attention to the importance of maintaining the doctrine of infant baptism. With Article 34 of the Belgic Confession we confess,

"We believe, therefore, that anyone who aspires to eternal life ought to be baptized only once. Baptism should never be repeated, for we cannot be born twice. Moreover, baptism benefits us not only when the water is on us and we receive it, but throughout our whole life. For that reason we reject the error of the Anabaptists, who are not content with a single baptism received only once, and who also condemn the baptism of the little children of believers."

In the Heidelberg Catechism we are asked, "Should infants, too, be baptized?"

The answer is familiar, "Yes. Infants as well as adults belong to God's covenant and congregation. Through Christ's blood the redemption from sin and the Holy Spirit, who works faith, are promised to them no less than to adults. Therefore, by baptism, as sign of the covenant, they must be grafted in the Christian church and distinguished from the children of unbelievers. This was done in the old covenant by circumcision, in place of which baptism was instituted in the new covenant."

Infant baptism is not an isolated doctrine

The doctrine of infant baptism is not isolated from other teachings of Scripture. Baptizing children of believers underlines the gospel of God's sovereign grace in Jesus Christ, highlights the doctrine of the covenant the Lord established with believers and their children, and stresses our position as people of God – as those who are sanctified in Christ (1 Corinthians 7:14) and called to live holy and blameless lives. Where infant baptism is disputed, the manner in which we are saved is brought into question: Is it an act of God whereby He sovereignly and graciously makes us alive through Christ's redemption or can we, through the exercising of our free will, decide to accept Christ into our lives? Is baptism a symbol of beginning the Christian life and therefore only for those who make a credible profession of faith, or is it a sign of God's faithfulness to us?

Infant baptism and God's sovereign grace

Baptism neither causes regeneration (Roman Catholics) nor symbolizes the fact that inward regeneration has occurred (Baptists). No one, adults or children, should be baptized because of

their faith in God and commitment to the Christian life. Baptism is administered because of the gospel of God's sovereign grace in Jesus Christ which is received through faith. The LORD has ordained and chosen to work his salvation by showing his faithfulness to believers and their children. Both the Old and New Testament are unmistakably clear on this. The Lord proclaims his sovereign grace to believers and their children (Psalms 102:28; 105:5, 6, 8; 112:1, 2).

In Isaiah 59:20, 21 the prophet first tells of the salvation which will come for the people God has chosen, *"The Redeemer will come to Zion, to those in Jacob who repent of their sins."* But then the prophet shows how this applies to the children too:

"As for me, this is my covenant with them," says the LORD. "My Spirit, who is on you, and my words that I have put in your mouth will not depart from your mouth, or from the mouths of your children, or from the mouths of their descendants from this time on and forever," says the LORD."

Redemption from sin and the Holy Spirit, who works faith, is promised to them no less than to adults.

The Lord in his sovereign grace chooses whom He wills and where He wills. He chose Cornelius and the Philippian jailer. Christ adds them to his church. And when the gospel of grace was made known to them, they and their children were baptized just as Abraham and his family were circumcised. We read in Acts 16:32, 33, *"Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized."* The Lord in his sovereign good pleasure grants children of believers the same promises of the gospel as their parents. They, too, are promised the washing away of sins and the daily renewal of life. As Peter stated in his sermon on the day of Pentecost, *"The promise is for you and your children..."* (Acts 2:39). God binds himself to us and our children. He establishes a relation with believers and their children. He gives the sign and seal of what He promises in the sacrament of holy baptism.

Infant baptism and the covenant

The Lord establishes his covenant with believers and their children. When the LORD established his covenant with Abraham, He not only initiated it but also determined who would be included in it.

Thus we read in Genesis 17:7, *"I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you."*

As a sign of this covenant the LORD commanded that baby boys be circumcised when they were eight days old (Genesis 17:12, 13). In infant baptism *"nothing more of present effectiveness must be required than to confirm and ratify the covenant made with them by the Lord. The remaining significance of this sacrament will afterward follow at such time as God himself foresees."* (John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* Book IV.16.22).

Throughout our life we may ask God to continue showing us the covenant faithfulness He displayed to us the moment we arrived into the world. Since the LORD is loyal and committed to the covenant He established with us no one is hindered in coming to Him with prayers and supplication. He hears the cry of the lonely and afflicted. Those who are without a true friend or companion on this earth can pray,

"Heal the sorrows of my heart and regard my life as precious."

(Psalm 25, *Book of Praise*)

Baptism and circumcision

Those who deny infant baptism suggest that there is no connection between baptism and circumcision. They argue that circumcision had no spiritual meaning for the people of Israel but only marked them as members of the nation of Israel. Baptism cannot be placed on an equal level with circumcision because baptism's significance is entirely spiritual and circumcision material.

Nevertheless, already in the Old Testament the spiritual meaning of circumcision is also emphasized. Circumcision is more than a sign of national unity. Israel is told to remove sin from their hearts in the language of circumcision (Deuteronomy 10:16; Jeremiah 4:4). Furthermore, the Lord commanded Abraham and his household to be circumcised when He established his covenant of grace with him. Abraham's circumcision spoke of spiritual blessings. His circumcision was a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised (Romans 4:9-13).

Abraham was declared righteous, not through any act of his own. God makes Abraham's way straight and allows him to walk before Him because the Messiah is coming. He will wash away Abraham's sins. The same sign, sealing what was promised to Abraham, is given to the children. A child, at eight days old, does not have faith but receives the seal of the righteousness that comes by faith.

Colossians 2:11, 12 is the classic New Testament text demonstrating how baptism replaces circumcision as the sign of the covenant. We were circumcised in Christ with a circumcision made without hands so that being buried with Him in baptism we also be raised with Him to walk in the newness of life.

The LORD God decides *who* will receive the sign of the covenant and *when* they will receive it. That decision is not left up to us. Circumcision was not based on Abraham's faith or on what he experienced in his relation with the Lord. This ceremony displayed the riches of God's grace for his covenant people.

Children belong to Christ's church

Children of believers belong, with their parents, to the congregation and church of God. When Joel is commanded by the Lord to call a congregational meeting he is to include the children, even nursing infants (Joel 2), because they belong to the Lord. Children are part of Christ's sheep. Just as a shepherd does not throw out the lambs from the fold, Christ, the loving Shepherd, gathers his lambs into the sheepfold and grants them the same promises and benefits as the adults. Since children belong to the covenant and congregation of Christ they ought to be baptized.

The argument, "Nowhere in the New Testament do you find a text stating infants should be baptized" starts from the wrong premise. A more pertinent question, in line with what both Old and New Testament Scriptures reveal, would be, "Where in the New Testament are we told that infants should not be baptized?" To the contrary, Christ continues to acknowledge children as part of his flock. He tells Peter to feed His lambs (John 21). In his letters to various churches, Paul addresses the children as well as the parents, considering both to be members of the churches (Ephesians 6:1-3; Colossians 3:20).

Parental responsibility

Parents have a duty to teach their children to know the significance of their baptism. This is why they vow to instruct their children, and to have them instructed in the doctrine of salvation. Knowing why children must receive the sign and seal of God's covenant in baptism ought to be the driving force behind what parents do for their children and how they educate and discipline them. Parents will not allow their children to soak up the thinking of the world. Instead they will do everything they possibly can to teach them to know the ways of the Lord.

Knowing what the Lord gives in baptism, parents and fellow congregational members will do everything to expose the children to the good news of salvation in Christ. As John Calvin correctly concludes,

"For when we consider that immediately from birth God takes and acknowledges them as his children, we feel a strong stimulus to instruct them in an earnest fear of God and observance of the law."

(Book IV.16.32)

The children must learn to use their baptism. This is why fathers and mothers have an obligation to take their children to church where they can hear the voice of the Holy Spirit and the message of forgiveness in Christ's blood. Parents will encourage their children to read the Bible, to study their catechism and learn Christian doctrine. It becomes a high priority for all adults to see to it that the children of the church grasp that their life from beginning to end is directed by the grace of the Lord.

“How sweet it is to godly minds to be assured, not only by word, but by sight, that they obtain so much favour with the Heavenly Father that their offspring are within his care ... Accordingly, unless we wish spitefully to obscure God's goodness, let us offer our infants to him, for he gives them a place among those of his family and household, that is, the members of his church.”

(Book IV.16.32)

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