**Why Do We Baptize Infants?**

SHOULD WE BAPTIZE OUR INFANTS OR NOT? This is a question many people find themselves asking. There are those from Baptist backgrounds for whom infant baptism seems to deny the plain teaching of the Bible. There are those who were baptized as infants in churches that never nurtured them in vital faith. And there are those who have grown up with no church tradition at all and whose only exposure to baptism, consequently, has been their own baptism following their adult profession of faith. For all of these people and perhaps for others infant baptism seems to be something of an enigma.

Why then do we baptize infants? It is not because we believe, as some traditions do, that infant children are “born again” when they are baptized. To say this is to assume that the intuitional church (represented by its ministers) controls the Holy Spirit. That is the same fatal mistake the Israelites made when they brought the Ark into battle against the Philistines, thinking that by bringing the object which represented God’s presence with them, they were able to guarantee God’s presence itself (I Samuel 4:1-11). Such behavior is arrogant.

We baptize infants, rather, because we believe that it is disobedient not to. Jesus said, “Bring the little children and forbid them not. For of such is the kingdom of God” (Mark 10:14). It is difficult to imagine that such a statement would come from One who was less welcoming towards children than was the Lord in the Old Testament. And yet even in the Old Testament, the Lord instructed Abraham to include his infants in the “church” family through the rite of circumcision (Genesis 17:9-14). If Abraham, whom the New Testament repeatedly holds forth as the model of living by faith (Romans 4, Galatians 3:6-9, Hebrews 11:8-12; 12-19), had his infants welcomed into the covenant family long before they were capable of exercising faith, should we not expect a similar pattern in our experience?

**BIBLICAL EVIDENCE FOR INFANT BAPTISM**

Those who dispute the baptism of children cite the practice of baptism in Acts to support their position. They point out that there are no absolutely clear-cut examples in Acts of infants being baptized, whereas there are numerous occasions in which baptism follows faith. Peter’s teaching on the day of Pentecost seems to make this pattern normative. He tells his hearers that they must first “repent” and then “be baptized” (Acts 2:38), which is obviously impossible in the case of an infant.

In response we would note first those occasions in the New Testament when entire “households” receive baptism (Acts 11:14; 16:33, I Corinthians 1:16). While it cannot be proved absolutely that the term “household” includes babies, there is every reason, given the strong family structures of that time, to assume this to be the case. There is more be said. The fact that baptism seems to be administered primarily to believing adults need not to be constituted as evidence for believers’ baptism; it is just as easily explained by the fact that nearly all the people who are converted in Acts are first-generation believers. First-generation believers do not have occasion to deal with the question, “Was my baptism as an infant valid?” or “Must I be baptized again now that I believe?” One might argue that the book of Acts is not the place to look for the answer to the infant baptism question because it never really raises the question.

A key passage to consider as we ponder infant baptism is Mark 10:13-16:

And they were bringing children to him that he might touch them, and the disciples rebuked them. But when Jesus saw it, he was indignant, and said to them “Let the children come to me, do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.” And he took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands upon them.

It is plain from these verses that Jesus takes a special interest in small children (the word used here generally means child; in Luke’s parallel account [Luke 18:15] the word is clearly infant). His interest is so great that he is quite angry with the disciples for trying to keep the infants from him, and when He meets them he blesses them fervently and repeatedly (the meaning of the rare Greek word translated “blessed” in verse 16).

What is so striking is the explanation Jesus gives for why small children should be brought to him for blessing: the kingdom of God belongs to these and others like them. Given such a statement, we are compelled to ask, “If infants like these own the kingdom, should they not be given the sign and seal of kingdom membership?”

This question is impressed upon us with even greater force when we consider what Jesus did when the children were brought to Him. He did not just pray for them; He laid His hands on them and “blessed them.” To bless someone as Jesus did has far deeper significance than we might at first think. It is to do what Aaron and his sons were commanded to do over God’s ancient people, to give them God’s name: “So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them” (Numbers 6:27). What does it mean to have the covenant God’s name pronounced over you? It is to be given the supreme form of covenant blessing. It is to be told that you belong to Him. It is to be welcomed into God’s covenant family. It is, in the language of the New Covenant, to be incorporated “into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19). And this is precisely what baptism does.

Why then did Jesus not baptize the infants when they were brought to Him? Quite simply because the sign of incorporation into God’s family had not yet been changed. The children whom He blessed into the Lord’s name were Hebrew children, already recipients of the mark of welcome and cleansing (i.e., circumcision).

Another key passage to consider in the discussion of infant baptism is I Corinthians 7:12-14: “…if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he

should not divorce her. If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband is consecrated through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is consecrated through her husband. Otherwise, your children would be unclean, but as it is they are holy.”

Paul is dealing in these verses with the problem of “mixed” marriages, that is, those in which one member of a formerly pagan union has become a believer. Old Testament practice had been to break up such marriages on the assumption that the pagan spouse would contaminate both the believing spouse and the children born of their union (see Ezra 9-10 and Nehemiah 13:23-31).

Based on his case against harlotry in the previous chapter (“Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I therefore take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never!”[I Corinthians 6:15], we would expect Paul to promote the same notion.

Surprisingly, he turns the Old Testament assumption (at least part of it) on its head, arguing that

sexual union in a mixed marriage does not defile the believer; to the contrary, it “sanctifies” the pagan. It would seem that the grace of God in Christ is so powerful that it has reversed the trend of the past.

What is important for us to note in light of the issue before us is the reason Paul gives for his overturning of the Old Testament assumption: “Otherwise, your children would be unclean, but as it is they are holy.” The foundation of Paul’s argument is the assumption, based no doubt on Jesus Christ’s practice, that the children of believers (even one believer) are “holy.” Such language is characteristically covenantal; to call a child holy is to say that he or she belongs to the covenant family. But to say this is to say that the child should be baptized and welcomed formally into the family to which he or she belongs.

There is one final passage we need to consider in our discussion of infant baptism. It is Colossians 2:11-12:

In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.

In this passage there is a close connection in the Apostle Paul’s mind between baptism and spiritual circumcision. Motivated most likely by a concern to rebuke the false teaching of those who sought to enforce circumcision among believers, Paul underscores that Christ has accomplished through His suffering (the phrase, “the circumcision done by Christ,” could also be translated, “the circumcision that happened to Christ,” i.e., his death) on our behalf. That is to say, there is no need for outward circumcision anymore, since Christ has accomplished inwardly what the sign only spoke of outwardly. What is striking in the light of our discussion are the words that follow. Lest we conclude that the abolition of circumcision means the abolition of all outward signs pointing to covenant reality, Paul immediately (without ever ending the sentence) speaks of baptism. In simplified and literal language Paul says, “In Him you are (spiritually) circumcised . . .having been buried in baptism.” Baptism in Paul’s mind is the New Testament sign for spiritual circumcision.

It might be argued from what has just been said that if baptism speaks of spiritual (inward as opposed to outward) circumcision, then it should not be administered to a person before that person gives evidence of spiritual circumcision; that is, it should not be administered to infants. We respond that Paul’s intention in this passage is not to give us teaching on the proper sequence of the experience of faith and application of the sign. His concern is to rebuke those who would enforce circumcision as necessary to salvation; he does so by indicating the fullness and inwardness of Christ’s salvation (the appropriate application of this passage to the issue of baptism is to argue that, like circumcision, baptism is not necessary to salvation).

For our purposes at this point, we should simply note that Paul parallels baptism and circumcision. Both are signs of the cleansing righteousness which is ours by faith, circumcision for those belongings to the Old Covenant (“Abraham…received circumcision as a sign or seal of the righteousness which he had by faith…” Romans 4:11), and baptism for those belonging to the New Covenant. Baptism is the New Testament replacement of Old Testament circumcision.

It is good to ask, in the light of this seeming connection between circumcision and baptism, why the sign of incorporation into God’s covenant community should have changed at all, and why it should

have changed to baptism in particular. In answering the first question, we note simply that the New Covenant, though in continuity with the Old, is new. It should not come as a surprise, therefore, that something like the sign of incorporation into the covenant family might be changed.

The replacement of circumcision by baptism is fitting for a number of reasons. In the first place, the ending of a bloody rite for entrance into the church family reminds us that Christ’s blood was shed once for all. There is no more need for the shedding of blood. Second, baptism is extended to little girls in addition to little boys, and, therefore, speaks eloquently of the broad and especially gracious nature of the New Covenant (see Galatians 3:28). Third, the water of baptism connects with the rich symbolism of water that appears throughout scripture as it focuses on the blessings of the New Covenant. In Ezekiel 36 God promised that He would wash His people clean by His Spirit, and the Apostle Paul picks up on that promise in Titus 3 where he speaks of the washing of regeneration.

Water, in these passages, is seen as symbolic of the gift of the Holy Spirit. Jesus uses the same symbolism in His conversation with the woman at the well (John 4) and later in John 7 where he speaks of Himself as the giver of the water of life. Water pictures not only the renewal of the human heart by the Holy Spirit but also the removal of defilement and guilt caused by sin. The sprinkled water of baptism speaks eloquently of the sprinkled blood of Jesus, which removes guilt. It is entirely fitting, then, that entrance into the New Covenant, the covenant of grace and forgiveness and renewal, should be symbolized by water.

**ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS ABOUT BAPTISM**

# What, precisely, happens when an Infant is baptized?

First, the church as a whole is edified. Baptism, like the Lord’s Supper, is for the church. It is a means of grace, a sign or a “visual aid” of the meaning of the gospel. Whenever the church witnesses a baptism the individual members are reminded 1) of their ongoing obligation to introduce their children to Christ, 2) of the cleansing and forgiveness of which they themselves are recipients in Christ, 3) of God’s gracious initiative in the entire process of salvation. This latter truth is particularly clear in infant baptism, for in that setting the one baptized is utterly helpless and perhaps even reluctant to be baptized. It is because baptism is a sign for the church that we do not conduct baptisms without the people of God bring represented.

Second, baptism sets the baptized child apart and makes him a member of the visible believing community. This does not mean, of course, that baptism regenerates the child. Nor does it absolutely guarantee that the child will one day be regenerated. Regeneration is the work of the sovereign God and ultimately rests in the mystery of His providence. It does mean, however, that the child is marked as belonging to Jesus and is welcomed into the environment (i.e., the church) which in God’s providence is the ordinary and best means of a person’s coming to faith. Viewing the matter from a human perspective, we might say that a child who is baptized and therefore given access to all the means of grace which exist in a believing church, has a much higher likelihood of coming to know Christ than a child who is deprived of this means of grace.

Third, the parents are charged with the awesome responsibility of introducing their child to Jesus. Baptism seen in this sense is a call to the parents to believe in God and His promises regarding the families of believers.

# Do we accept Roman Catholic and Episcopal infant baptism?

Quite often, people who come to know Christ as adults from non-evangelical church traditions approach the Session wondering if their original baptism really “took.” They suspect that at the time of their baptisms their parents understood and believed very little about biblical Christianity, and, though they cannot be sure, they have grave doubts about the faith of the priest or minister who performed the baptism.

Our practice has been to honor any infant baptism as long as it is truly Trinitarian baptism (that is, in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit). We honor such baptism because we believe that the sacrament depends for its efficacy not upon the one who administers it but upon the sovereign God who instituted it. We think this way for the simple reason that the alternative creates insurmountable problems. If the efficacy of the sacrament of infant baptism depends upon the faith of the one administering it, then we could never be certain of the efficacy of any baptism if that baptism depends for its efficacy upon the spirituality of the man administering it. We are on safer ground if we look to the Author of the sacrament rather than to the performer of the sacrament to make it efficacious.

# Does it not muddy the waters to receive people into the visible church before they are old enough to demonstrate the credible profession of faith? Would it not make much more sense to wait until we know for sure if they are regenerate and then baptize them?

This line of reasoning is attractive to us largely because we find it hard to tolerate ambiguity, particularly when it comes to the question of who is really in the kingdom of God and who

isn’t. But scripture teaches us that we must expect a measure of ambiguity in this life. In the parable of the wheat and the tares (Matthew 12:24-30) Jesus made clear that the church would be infiltrated by bad seed throughout the age to which we currently belong. And in speaking of our present age in this way Jesus was echoing what was true throughout Old Testament history as well. In Romans 9:6 we read “not all Israel is of Israel,” by which Paul was endeavoring to make clear that even among the visible nation of ancient Israel there are always those who truly belonged to God’s kingdom and those who did not.

For us to demand closure on this question of who is truly in the kingdom and who is not is for us to ask for a spiritual insight which God alone possesses. In Jeremiah 17:9-10 we read, “The heart is deceitful and wicked above all else and is desperately sick. Who can know it? I the Lord search the heart…” We simply must leave the ultimate evaluation in God’s hand.

Furthermore, to require that children not be baptized until they demonstrate that they have saving faith is to treat them from the start as second-class citizens, as “guilty until proven innocent.” Not only does this run counter to Jesus’ stance towards children, but it leads us to embarrassing inconsistencies as parents. How, for example, can we permit our children to say the Lord’s Prayer if they do not belong to Him? After all, it addresses God as “Our Father,” covenant language that belongs only to God’s people.

We can put the matter another way. As we bring our children up in our Christian homes from the moment of their birth, are we continually to be treating them as non-believers and

enemies of God who must repent and believe? Or are we to treat them as members of God’s family, calling them to be faithful to the Lord who lives in their house with them? Scripture tell us to bring up our children in the “nurture and admonition of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:4). This phrase means not only that the Lord is to approve of our children’s nurture; it means further that He is to be in charge of it. How is He to be the nurturing Father of those who do not belong to Him?

Though the Baptist position seems at first glance to remove the ambiguities inherent in infant baptism, it creates a number of theological and practical problems of its own. Jesus’ attitude toward children seems to be so much better reflected in the Presbyterian practice than the Baptist.

# Do we baptize children of non-members?

Ordinarily, we do not because of our conviction that infant baptism represents the incorporation of the child into the local, visible church community. The ground upon which that child is welcomed into the local church is certainly not its own profession of faith; the ground, rather, is the membership that the child’s parents sustain to that local body. In other words, because of the biblical notion of the solidarity of the family, what is true of the parents is extended as well to the child. Conversely, what is not true of the parents is not reasonably extended to the child. Non-member parents seeking to make their child a member of a particular church does not make sense.

The matter might be put another way. Sacraments (both the Lord’s Supper and Baptism) are invisible signs of spiritual truth. It is our understanding that the visible signs belong, properly, to the visible church. We would never want to maintain that the mere administration of the outward sign guarantees the inward spiritual reality. Rather, the outward sign speaks of incorporation into the outward community, that is, the local, visible church. Many non-member parents, when seeking baptism for their child, see the outward sign of baptism as belonging in some way to the invisible, spiritual realm and that is why they have no difficulty in asking for their child to be baptized while they themselves remain unaligned with the church where the baptism is taking place. But this way of thinking confuses the outward and visible with the inward and invisible.

Our position regarding baptism of non-member children is not so rigid that it does not allow for the fact that a particular couple may be intending to join in the near future. Under those circumstances, we may baptize a child before its parents become members. We are also more than willing to baptize a child of whom only one parent is a member.

# Doesn’t the practice of John the Baptist indicate that only adults should be baptized?

Scripture teaches that John preached “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Luke 3:13). It would seem that Jesus’ disciples did the same, at least in the early stage of Jesus’ ministry (John 4:1-2). Since repentance is impossible for infants, it would follow by good and necessary consequence that infants were not baptized either by John the Baptist or by the disciples during Jesus’ early earthly ministry. Does it not follow, then, that we should avoid the practice?

It does not follow for the simple reason that John’s baptism and Christian baptism belong to two separate eras. John is the last in the long tradition of Old Testament prophets. He prepares the way for Jesus, but does not belong to the new order which Jesus initiates by His life, death, and resurrection. This is in part what Jesus means when He says in Matthew 11:11: “Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.”

It would be a mistake therefore to draw norms for Christian baptism from the practice of John the Baptist.

This position paper on infant baptism was written by the Reverend Charles D. Drew who was Associate Minister at Trinity Presbyterian Church, Charlottesville, Virginia, from 1981 to 1987 and has been Senior Minister at Three Village Church, East Setauket, New York, since 1987. 