

INFANT BAPTISM: IS IT BIBLICAL?



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This tract is written in memory of my daughter, Marissa Carol Murphy (1981-1982) whose life in Jesus Christ and place in the kingdom of God are secure through her baptism into Christ's death and resurrection. And also in memory of Rev. Jerry Dumlner whose life and ministry still define the word "pastor" to me.

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INFANT BAPTISM:

Is it biblical?

As a follower of Jesus Christ, I often ponder the meaning of my Lutheran Christianity. I say *Lutheran Christianity* because for me Lutheran is an adjective describing the noun Christianity. Lutheran describes the way I see my faith and express it.

I wonder: How can I best be an obedient follower of Jesus Christ as a Lutheran? Do the teachings of the Lutheran Church accurately reflect the witness of the Holy Scriptures? And the inevitable questions about baptism: What is Christian baptism? Should infants and young children be baptized? Or should baptism be reserved for those who can profess faith in Jesus Christ?

If you are also asking questions like these, you are to be commended. It means you are serious about your Christian faith. You want to be obedient to the Truth, and you are not the first to wonder. These same issues have been raised by those who have been Lutheran Christians all of their lives as well as those who are new believers in Jesus Christ.

UNDERSTANDING COVENANT

Christian baptism is rooted in the Old Testament covenants (as is our Christian faith). A covenant, as used in the Hebrew Scripture, is a guarantee by God of God's faithfulness to God's people. It is a binding relationship conceived, established and revealed totally by God's action (see Genesis 9:9).¹

A covenant is not to be regarded as a contract whereby God and God's people exchange promises, even though the recipients of the covenant have an obligation to abide by the terms of the covenant (see Genesis 17:9-14). A covenant is a unilateral agreement established by God.

God established covenants with Noah (Genesis 6:18; 9:8-17), Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3; 15:18; 17:1-8), and Moses (Exodus 6:6-8). In the New Covenant inaugurated by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the grace of God exemplified in the preceding covenants was brought to its fullest completion (see Mark 14:24; Luke 1:67-79; 1 Corinthians 11:25; Galatians 3:15-18; and Hebrews 9:11-15).

We should note how the New Testament writers connected their understanding of Christian baptism to the covenants made with Noah, Abraham and Moses:

NOAHIC COVENANT (1 Peter 3:18-22) – Just as Noah and his family, secure in the ark, passed through God's judgment on sin in the form of the flood, so also the Christian, secure in Christ through baptism, will pass through God's future judgment on sin (see John 5:24). Baptism here establishes a new covenant and our personal entrance into its benefits.

ABRAHAMIC COVENANT (Colossians 2:11-12) – Just as circumcision is the sign and seal of righteousness for a Jewish believer (see Genesis 17:11 and Romans 4:11), baptism is God's seal of righteousness on the Christian.

¹ A full discussion of covenant can be found in Covenants And Promises by John Bright, Westminster Press, 1976, especially pages 19-77. Also Old Testament Covenant by D. J. McCarthy, John Knox Press, 1972.

MOSAIC COVENANT (1 Corinthians 10:1-2) – The Israelite’s “baptism” into Moses was their passage through the Red Sea, which meant separation from slavery and pagan Egypt and to God and the promised land. Baptism points us back to God’s wondrous act of deliverance and forward to a new life of obedience to God.

BAPTISM: DEATH AND RESURRECTION

In his letter to the Romans Paul writes, “*Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life*” (Romans 6:3-4).

Baptism into Christ is the Christian’s total identification with Christ. From God’s point-of-view, the Christian died when Christ died, and rose when Christ rose. What Jesus Christ has done for you in His death and resurrection, He wants to do in you through baptism. The Christian life is not merely a changed life, it is a new life. (See 2 Corinthians 5:17)

Again, we see that baptism is what God has done for us through God’s

G – God’s
R – Riches
A – At
C – Christ’s
E – Expense

There is no other definition of Christian baptism in the New Testament.

THE BENEFITS OF BAPTISM

Everything that has been said so far being clear in our minds, the question still remains, “What is the big deal? Why is baptism so important?”

BAPTISM WORKS THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS – Baptism works the forgiveness of sin in those who are born with the legacy of sin deeply embedded in their psyche and spirit. This is true for the youngest child as well as those who are baptized as adults (the Apostle Paul discusses this legacy of sin in Romans 5:1-21). The Book of Acts reports that on the day of Pentecost, Peter said to the repentant people, “*Be baptized...so that your sins might be forgiven*” (Acts 2:38). In the very next verse Peter announces that this promise is also applicable “*for your children*” (Acts 2:39).

BAPTISM DELIVERS FROM DEATH AND THE DEVIL – In 1 Corinthians 15:56, the Apostle Paul writes, “*The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.*” That is why Jesus Christ came to fulfill the Law, and suffered the deadly sting of sin. He atoned for our sin, bore the guilt and penalty of our sin, died on a cross and broke the devil’s power over us. Through baptism into Christ this deliverance is made ours.

BAPTISM GIVES ETERNAL LIFE – To all who believe in God’s promise spoken through Christ, “*The one who believes and is baptized will be saved*” (Mark 16:16), baptism brings salvation. This promise is repeated by Peter in his baptismal address, “*And baptism...now saves you...through the resurrection of Jesus Christ*” (1 Peter 3:21).

When a Christian is bothered by sin, the fear of dying, or questioning their eternal hope, what needs to be remembered is, “You are baptized. Jesus died to forgive our sins and his resurrection gives us new life.”

THE TEACHINGS OF JESUS – The Kingdom is for kids too!

One of the most radical points in Jesus' teachings was the high value he placed on women and children in the kingdom of God. It was especially radical in a time and culture when women and children were considered little more than the property of men. Mark's Gospel shows us this clear teaching of Jesus: "Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, 'What were you arguing about on the way?' But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, 'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.' Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me'" (Mark 9:33-37).

Now the parents who overheard Jesus talking that day with his disciples took Jesus at his word. They had understood the new and unique place Jesus had given to children. The word spread. When Jesus and the disciples went into the next region, Mark records that parents were bringing their children to Jesus: "People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, 'Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.' And he took them into his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them" (Mark 10:13-16).

Let us see clearly what Jesus is teaching in this passage. Some say children do not need baptism because Jesus says that little children belong to the kingdom of God. But that is not what he says. Rather "to such as these" belongs the kingdom. The kingdom of God is open to children and the childlike. But children need to be brought to Jesus to become partakers in the kingdom of God, just as everyone else must

come to Jesus to be saved. Jesus does not say, “Leave them alone until they become accountable for themselves, in the meantime they are blessed”. Instead he says, “*Let the little children come to me, do not stop them.*” ²

But Jesus did not baptize these children, he only laid his hands on them and blessed them, some would argue. That is true, but it is also true that Jesus never baptized anyone (John 4:2).

Before Jesus’ death, resurrection and ascension, all baptism was in the mode of John the Baptist – a baptism for repentance. The baptism of Jesus is the “baptism of the Holy Spirit” prophesied by John the Baptist and Jesus (Matthew 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:31-33; Acts 1:4-5) and was fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost. From that day on, there was a distinction between water baptism for repentance (John’s baptism) and baptism in water and the Spirit (Christian baptism). Notice that the Apostle Paul, upon encountering disciples who had been baptized by John, calls for them to receive Christian baptism (Acts 19:1-7).

So we see that Jesus clearly teaches that children may become members of the kingdom of God, but it is not automatic. But how can we know that baptism is the process by which children are to become part of God’s kingdom?

BAPTISM: The new Initiation into God’s Kingdom

In writing to the church at Colossae, Paul stresses the importance of baptism and he does this in the midst of warnings about cultic practices and human traditions. We Christians who want to put a clear emphasis on the grace of God conferred in the Sacraments find strong Biblical underpinning here.

² One of the best discussions of infant baptism is in *The Hammer of God* by Bo Giertz, Augsburg Publishing Company, 1960, pages 215-222.

Paul writes, "For in him [Christ] the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority. In him you were also circumcised with a spiritual circumcision by putting off the body of flesh in the circumcision of Christ; when you through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead" (Colossians 2:9-12).

Here Paul parallels the meaning of circumcision in the Old Covenant to the purpose of baptism in the New Covenant. Just as circumcision was the initiatory experience of an eight-day-old baby in the Jewish community, baptism is now the means by which a person is buried with Christ and raised with Christ. Remember that this is Paul's definition of baptism given in Romans. He reinforces the teaching here.

We have come to fullness of life in Christ through baptism. But the issue is infants – babies, young children. Remember that Paul is drawing a parallel in this passage. The normative experience of circumcision within the Jewish community was an eight-day-old baby. In drawing this parallel, Paul would have assumed that the Sacrament of Baptism should include infants, or else he surely would have made some exclusionary statement, "Now I would not have you ignorant regarding the candidates for baptism, my brothers and sisters. Unless they are able to confess for themselves that Jesus is Lord and believe that God raised him from the dead, they should not be baptized."

But no such exclusionary statement exists, here or anywhere else in the New Testament. Paul was so concerned with the many cultic practices in Colossae (see the verses which immediately follow this passage, Colossians 2:16-19) he would have excluded infants from baptism, unless it was an accepted practice within the New Testament community. It would not have been difficult for Jewish Christians to include infants as candidates for baptism when their tradition held that young children, even eight-day-old babies, were to be made part of the people of God.

HOUSEHOLD BAPTISMS

The following verses should be considered as supporting evidence for the Biblical witness of baptism as covenant, Sacrament and the initiatory experience of becoming the part of God's people:

“Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children”
(Acts 2:38-39).

“They answered, ‘Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.’ They spoke the word of the Lord to him and all who were in his house. At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay” (Acts 16:32-33).

“For the unbelieving husband is made holy through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy through her husband. Otherwise, your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy” (1 Corinthians 7:14).

The command-promise that Paul and Silas made to the Philippian jailer preceded the preaching and acceptance of the Gospel by the remainder of the family. This again shows that baptism is convenantal.

Paul writes that the children of believing parents are holy without any qualification of the profession of faith by the children. Baptism is covenantal and Sacramental.

A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

We have seen that there are clear indications within holy Scripture to substantiate the practice of baptizing infants. In addition to this Biblical material, some consideration should be given to the historical and theological implications of infant baptism.

There is documentation within the Roman catacombs that infants were baptized with their families at Easter baptismal services. As the dates of birth, baptism and death are given on grave markers, we can see some baptisms within a child's first months of life.

Written historical evidence of infant baptism is not found until late in the second century, but what we do find assumes its practice.

In *Against Heretics* (around A.D. 180) Irenaeus writes, "Jesus came to save all, I say, who are born again through him to God – infants [infantes], and children [parvulos], and boys, and youths and old men." The term born again [renasci] is a technical term for baptism. This is evidence of infant baptism in the 2nd Century. ³

The *Church Order* by Hippolytus (around A.D. 215) contains the command, "First the little ones should be baptized. All those who can speak for themselves should speak. For those however who cannot, their parents or another who belongs to their family should speak." Other sources from about this time show evidence of infant baptism so this should not be taken as a later addition. These church "orders" were not imposing new practices, but were an attempt to adjust common practices and make them uniform. ⁴

³ *Adversus Haereses*, II, 22, 4.

⁴ *Church Order*, XVI, 4f.

In Tertullian's treatise on baptism, we can see that infant baptism was practiced by the African church around the year A.D. 200. But Tertullian spoke against infant baptism, assuming that children were born innocent, concluding there was no need for baptism for the forgiveness of sins. He discourages infant baptism because: 1) postponing it would be beneficial to the individual; 2) children are born innocent; and 3) baptism places a burden on the non-parental sponsors in a hostile, pagan environment. These views show the seeds of Tertullian eventually joining the heretical Montanists.

In commenting on Paul's Epistle to the Romans, Origen (about A.D. 240) writes, "The church received a tradition from the apostles to give Baptism to infants too." He goes on to say that even a day-old infant is not free from sin. Origen's writings are from Palestine, the place of Christian beginnings. He claims there is apostolic tradition for baptizing infants.⁵

Infant baptism is therefore documented from geographically diverse sources (Gaul, Rome, Africa and Palestine) from about the year A.D. 200. It is remarkable how much the practice is considered self-evident. No where is infant baptism regarded as an innovation. Even Tertullian acknowledges infant baptism as valid, though he warns against it. Postponing baptism is debated into the third and fourth centuries. Gregory of Nazianzus suggests that it be postponed until a child is three-years old and can remember it. But he also notes that if the child's life is in danger it should not be postponed.

THEOLOGICAL CONCLUSIONS

"The fact that infant baptism established itself so self-evidently in the ancient church, that it was felt so little a problem, and that according to the sources, I was never rejected in principle, that is, was never

⁵ Commentary on Romans, V, 9.

regarded as invalid and needing repetition, rests in the first instance on the certainty that God is graciously active in baptism.”⁶

“If baptism is an act of public confession on the part of the person being baptized, it is silly or even absurd to baptize infants. A week-old baby cannot make a public confession of faith; everyone must admit that. But if baptism is a means of grace (an action appointed by Christ, in which the general promise of the Gospel concerning the forgiveness of sins for Christ’s sake is applied and sealed to an individual in the use of an external element – a Sacrament)... then it doesn’t really matter how old the person is to whom this seal is applied...the reality of [God’s] love does not depend on our intellectual comprehension of it.”⁷

In conclusion let me say this, “believer’s baptism” is a misleading term to me as a Lutheran Christian. Infants should not be excluded from the term “believer.” I am not saying that I think that all infants should be baptized, for it only makes sense when the child is part of a faith community. At the same time the proportionately few adult baptisms seen by liturgical Christians might suggest that we have too much of a “maintenance mentality” and are not as “Mission-minded” as we have been called to be.

But the final question which a person must answer is, “Does the New Testament teach baptism as a testimony of faith or is it the sacred act of God through which God gives the forgiveness of sins, the gift of the Holy Spirit, life eternal and victory over death and the power of the devil through Jesus Christ our Lord?”

⁶The Doctrine of Baptism, by Edmund Schlink, Concordia Publishing Company, 1972, page 142.

⁷The Augsburg Confession, “Baptism” by George Forell, Augsburg Publishing Company, 1968, pages 42-43.

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