

Infant Baptism

Why it is appropriate where parents have faith in Christ and participate in the Christian Community.

I believe that it is appropriate for infants to be baptized. There are several reasons why I believe it is appropriate.

First, it is difficult to imagine a church composed primarily of Jewish people not using the sign of the New Covenant for their children. It would have been a radical departure from the communal and family understanding of faith if children had been excluded. The norm was child circumcision, not adult circumcision. Children were participants in the Passover. Converts to Judaism, including their children underwent ritual baptism. I believe it would have created at least as big a stir as the question of Gentile circumcision and yet we find no mention of it in the New Testament.

The Jewish understanding of circumcision was that for Abraham it was a sign given to him after he came to faith, but that it was given to his descendants as a sign of God's faithfulness and reflected future "faith to come" in the case of children. It is hard to believe that early Jewish Christians would see their children in any other light. I am convinced that infant baptism, in a family where adult faith is present, is a valid, covenantal expression of that faith.

Second, when the head of a Gentile family became Jewish ("God fearing") he would be circumcised, but also he and his entire family would be baptized to wash away their gentile stain, and the sin of the gentile world. This was such common practice that it seems likely that the ready acceptance of baptism as a religious practice (both for John the Baptist and later early Christians) is due to this fact of family baptism. Again, a radical change, wherein only adults would be admitted for baptism would seem to merit comment, either in the New Testament or in the early Christian writings, but we find no evidence of a conflict over infant or for that matter female baptism (since circumcision was exclusively male, baptism of women into the New Covenant was radical stuff!). In Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost, he indicates that the promise of the Gospel "is for you and your children..." (Acts 2:39).

Third, baptism of infants is one thing that was a universal practice in all Christian communities. The fact that all the early church for all of their liturgical diversity had this in common points to an apostolic practice from the very beginning. The historical evidence is that infant baptism was part of regular Christian life from the beginning. Justin Martyr mentions it very early on, by A.D. 150.

Fourth, there are many layers of meaning in baptism. It is a sign of regeneration, incorporation into the body, of our dying and rising with Christ, of forgiveness, of cleansing, of faith, etc. There is no way to single out one aspect, i.e. that baptism should *only* be a sign of an adult profession of faith.

Fifth, there is (as alluded to above) the argument from silence. Granted that is not always a valid historical method, but given the seemingly universal practice of early Christians in the first 3 centuries, how could a radical departure from the New Testament Jewish treatment of children be passed on without comment? There is also the practice and the mention of the baptism of entire households several places in the New Testament (Acts 16:15, 1Cor. 1:16). Given that households in those days consisted of a much larger extension of the family unit including servants and slaves, it is hard to believe that there would not have been infants baptized along with the heads of those households.

Finally, a God whose Son instructs us all to call him "Father" like a child, who told his followers to become like children, and who openly blessed and welcomed children seems unlikely to introduce a practice that would exclude children. Yes, children as they come of age need to reaffirm their faith and state that they intend to continue in the covenant in which they were raised. But even those of us who are adults need to periodically reaffirm that covenant long after our own baptism.

When faced with an omnipotent God, we are all children, even those of us who are most mature. We are raised to the privileged position of sonship by his grace and the merits of our Lord Jesus, not by our own adulthood.

Why it is inappropriate in situations without faith in Christ or participation in the Christian Community.

Unfortunately over the years, a slow accretion of bad theology of baptism brought the church to a point where baptism was almost completely divorced from faith. It became either an almost magical rite of protection or simply a nice thing to do to keep grandmother happy, and to preserve family tradition.

Views of baptism that see the act simply as social convention or as magical protection are totally unbiblical. Baptism cannot be divorced from faith on the part of the parents and godparents, and a later affirmation of this faith by the baptized person once they have come to an adult age.

Baptism is very similar to circumcision in the Old Testament (OT). The OT simply gave circumcision as the beginning of an individual's entry to the covenant relationship. This was the initiation, not the end. Circumcision was never divorced from instruction, which was a family affair (Deut. 6:4-9). Nor was it enough simply to be circumcised. All the men of Israel had to go up and offer their worship to God at least 3 times a year.

Adult demonstrations of faith by participation in sacrificial and (later) synagogue worship were the result of carrying on the work begun at circumcision. Circumcision was never divorced from the need for faith, and in fact when it was, the people were admonished by the prophets that circumcision demanded an inner response of the heart to the outward sign (Jer. 4:4). Therefore, baptism as the New Testament equivalent of circumcision cannot be divorced from regular attendance at worship, and real faith on the part of the parents.

I said at the beginning that I felt that it was appropriate for children to be baptized. But, just as with circumcision, baptism of infants should only be done in the context of families who are themselves faithful. The rite is not magic, nor simply social convention, but symbolizes a type of relationship to the living God and the family of the faithful.

If this type of situation does not exist, then baptism of infants is not appropriate! The adults in these situations must become faithful believers before baptism of children should take place. This does not mean that infants should not be baptized; it simply means that no one should be baptized until such time as there is evidence of faith in Christ on the part of a parent or guardian, and faithful Christian community.

In fact baptism of infants where there is no parental participation in the life of faith is probably detrimental to children. It teaches hypocrisy, since they were taken to a religious rite that is never again validated and where their parents made public solemn promises that they did not believe or intend to keep. Or worse it stems from a magical understanding of God, rather than faith in a God who requires obedience and community participation in the faith and thus teaches children a faulty and pagan view of God. Finally in cases of family pressure it can create (in addition to hypocrisy) animosity between pressured young parents and the grandparents.

Nevertheless, where parental faith is active, and parents are engaged in a worshipping community, infant baptism is very appropriate. However they must be sincere about providing instruction in the Christian faith by their life and teaching in their home, including but not limited to: regular daily family prayer, blessings at meals, reading the bible to their kids and explaining it, bringing the kids to church, teaching the Lord's prayer, etc.

Finally, the child baptized must be taught that they must appropriate this faith on their own, and make a willing, knowing profession of faith in Christ. This is critical to their own well being, and to a healthy understanding of baptism for them. Someone has said that the Christian Faith is always

one generation away from extinction, for God does not have grandchildren, only children. These children must know that baptism is not magic, but a sign of their faith and a sign of God's ultimate faithfulness.

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