

The Biblical Basis For Infant Baptism

Selected Scriptures

The Reverend Bryn MacPhail / November 16, 2003

We take up this subject of the baptizing of infants and young children mindful of a number of things. First, we are mindful that many denominations do not recognize infant baptism as being consistent with the teachings of Scripture. Baptists, Pentecostals, Missionary Alliance, and the Plymouth Brethren are among those who would take up this opposing position.

Second, we must recognize that not all denominations practice infant baptism in the same way and for the same reasons. There are, for instance, some important distinctions between how a Presbyterian views baptism and how a Roman Catholic views baptism.

Thirdly, we must readily admit that neither side of this debate has as much supporting evidence as we would like. What we'll call 'the Baptist position' has plenty of evidence to support the practice of 'believer's baptism'. However, what is missing is overwhelming evidence to support 'believer's baptism' to the *exclusion* of infant baptism.

And those who endorse the baptism of Christian children must admit that this endorsement is made by *reasonable inference* rather than according to a *clear mandate*. What I mean is that there is no verse in Scripture that reads, 'You shall baptize every child born to Christian parents'—there is no *explicit* biblical mandate to baptize children.

By the same token, there is no verse that reads, 'You shall *not* baptize children; you may only baptize those who profess faith in Jesus Christ'—there is no *explicit* verse forbidding the baptism of children. So, again, in the absence of explicit New Testament instruction on this matter, neither side of this debate has as much supporting evidence as we would like.

And fourthly, I'd like us to be mindful of the fact that both groups—those in favour of infant baptism, and those opposed—are in this sanctuary today. For those who favour the practice, I pray you might better your understanding of why we do this. And, for those who oppose this practice, I pray that I can, at the very least, assure you that we do not support our position by giving undue authority to tradition or church history, but that we do, in fact, base our position on the Word of God.

I should also say, before we get immersed in the text (friends that is baptism humour, you are supposed to laugh!), *I do not believe that disagreement on baptism is reason enough to divide the Body of Christ*. We live in a day and age where there is deep disagreement over what constitutes the Christian Gospel. We live in a day and age where there is disagreement over whether the Bible is the Word of God. We should unite, or divide, over these issues, but not over baptism. The doctrines pertaining to the sacraments are significant doctrines to be sure, but they are secondary doctrines, and we should not break

fellowship over them.

We begin our study of Scripture this morning in Genesis 17—a text that says nothing about baptism, but a text that says a great deal about the nature of a covenant. God appeared to Abram for the purpose of establishing His covenant with him and his posterity (17:1,2). The wording is very interesting here. God doesn't simply ask that there be *a* covenant between Him and Abram; He says, **“I will establish My covenant between Me and you”** (17:2). As *God's* covenant, God unilaterally sets out the terms of the covenant, and then He promises to reward Abram as he upholds the terms of the covenant.

The specific terms of the covenant are not immediately given to Abram, but they are summarized in the general command, **“walk before Me, and be blameless”** (17:1). God, in turn, promises to make Abram **“the father of a multitude of nations”** (17:4,5), and changes his name to **Abraham** (17:5). Abraham is also promised **“the land of (his) sojournings, all of the land of Canaan”** (17:8).

Once the terms of the covenant are given, and once the promises are explained, God introduces the sign of the covenant (17:10). By appropriating the sign of the covenant, Abraham would be demonstrating his willingness to enter into the covenant.

In chapter 17, verse 10 and following, God tells Abraham, **“every male among you shall be circumcised. And you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin; and it shall be *the sign of the covenant* between Me and you. And every male among you who is eight days old shall be circumcised throughout your generations . . . A servant who is born in your house or who is bought with your money shall surely be circumcised”**.

A few observations: First, *Abraham had an existing relationship with God*. And since Abraham had a relationship with God, what circumcision did was it ratified that existing relationship. For Abraham, the sign of the covenant followed faith. Abraham willingly chose to demonstrate his allegiance to God by appropriating the sign, which He had ordained. But we should also note that the sign is not simply for Abraham, but for **“every male”** in this community. And while we can be certain that Abraham willingly entered into this agreement, we can also be certain that some individuals entered into the covenant, not by their own choice, but by Abraham's choice, exercised on their behalf. The servant, and the newborn, did not appropriate the sign of the covenant by their faith, but according to Abraham's faith.

For Abraham, the sign follows faith, but for his son, Isaac, the sign precedes all understanding (21:4). We infer from this, that an individual's willingness to agree to the covenant terms is not a prerequisite for membership in the covenant community. We can safely infer, from Genesis 17, that an individual may enter the covenant through the faith of another.

A qualification is necessary at this point: *Being a part of a covenant community does not guarantee salvation*. The covenant community does not equal the heavenly community. God, through the prophet Jeremiah reminds us of what ultimately matters when He says, **“Circumcise yourselves to the Lord and remove the foreskins of your heart”**(Jer. 4:4). And, elsewhere He warns, **“the days are coming when I will punish all who are circumcised and yet uncircumcised”**; the Lord promises to eventually punish **“all the house of Israel (who) are uncircumcised of heart”** (Jer. 9:25, 26).

We can conclude, therefore, that circumcision does not convey salvation; we conclude that the sign does not automatically

transmit the reality of what it represents. It is possible then, to have the sign without faith, but it is not possible to have what the sign signifies without faith.

But what does all of this have to do with baptism? Hopefully, some of you are connecting the dots with me here. The Old Testament teaches us that God made a covenant with Abraham and his posterity, and that the sign of this covenant was circumcision. The New Testament speaks of the establishment of a new covenant, mediated by Jesus Christ (Heb. 8). With the changing of the covenants, we witness points of continuity and points of discontinuity. We see that the covenants are similar, but not identical. And, as we consider the change in covenants, we need to ask: *Does the new covenant have a sign? And, if it does, what is the sign?*

As we survey the New Testament, we see that the sign of the New Covenant is *baptism*, **“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit”** (Mt. 28:19).

Now, *to whom, is the sign given?* Admittedly, we read the Book of Acts and we see countless individuals who are baptized after responding to the preaching of the Gospel (Acts 2:41; 8:35-38). But we also see occasions where entire households are baptized when only one member of the household is explicitly said to have come to faith in Christ. In Acts 16:14, we read about a woman, named Lydia who responds to Paul’s teaching and, subsequently she, and her entire household is baptized.

Since there is no explicit command to either baptize or withhold baptism from young children, interpretive prudence requires us to look for precedence in the previous covenant. As we do this, we see that God, at least one time in history, has *explicitly commanded* that the sign of the covenant be administered to a person who does not yet possess that which the sign signifies.

We see that the sign of the covenant is commanded by God to be given to infants—not to all infants, indiscriminately—but only to those infants within the covenant community; only to children of parents who are within the visible household of faith (R.C. Sproul).

The question that remains then is: *What degree of continuity do we find between the sign of the old covenant and the sign of the new covenant?*

There is, of course, discontinuity in the outward form of the sign. The sign of the new covenant is not circumcision; it is baptism—so there is discontinuity in terms of the actual sign.

There appears, however, to be tremendous continuity in terms of what the sign signifies. *Circumcision signified a being in a right relationship with God* (Gen. 17). Moses, and the prophets qualify this for us by saying that, in reality, only circumcision of the heart can accomplish this right relationship. In a similar manner, *baptism signifies union with Christ* (Rom. 6:3-5). But similar to the qualification given by the prophets, the apostle Paul explains that it is baptism by God’s Spirit, which actually unites us to Christ (1Cor. 12:13).

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And what about those permitted to receive the sign? The new covenant, which is described by the author of Hebrews as “**a better covenant**” (Heb. 8:6), is superior for a number of reasons. It is superior, first and foremost, because we have the perfect high priest, Jesus Christ, mediating the covenant. But, it is also superior because it is *a more inclusive covenant*. The New Covenant extends beyond ethnic boundaries and welcomes individuals from every nation. The sign of this covenant is also more inclusive. The sign of the old covenant, circumcision, could only be applied to males, whereas, baptism can be applied to males and females.

Now, as we consider the more inclusive nature of the new covenant, and the new covenant sign, are we to understand that it has, in one respect become more exclusive? Are we to understand that, in the new covenant we are forbidden to give the sign to children, when they were recipients of the sign in the previous covenant? Beloved, this exclusion does not make much sense.

In the absence of explicit New Testament instruction for either side of the debate, I reckon that the burden rests on those who oppose infant baptism to demonstrate that God now forbids, that which was previously commanded in the earlier covenant.

Beloved, in the absence of explicit New Testament instruction on this subject, my prayer is that Presbyterians and Baptists would be gracious with one another. The fact that, in this congregation, Baptists and Presbyterians worship together tells me we are doing well in this respect. Now let us get on with the work of labouring together for the Gospel of Jesus Christ that, in all things He might get the glory. Amen.