

For You and For Your Children: A Biblical Case for Infant Baptism

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Video Transcript:

For many in the church today, Infant Baptism seems like either a strange practice that simply comes as a hangover from Roman Catholicism, or worse, an unbiblical twisting of what baptism is. So, there's lots of confusion around why so many evangelical, protestant, Bible believing churches still baptise believers and their children.

Now, throughout history, the majority of the church has believed in infant baptism, but obviously that in itself does not make it a valid practice. In order for it to be valid, there needs to be nothing less than a Biblical case requiring it. If it's found to be anything less than biblical, then let it be dropped and forgotten. But, as much as we might like, this is not an issue that we can solve by just pulling out a verse that either affirms or denies it. Baptism is a tricky issue that needs some depth to unpack. So, let's wade in and explore Infant Baptism.

As counterintuitive as it may seem, the best way to find clarity when it comes to arguments about baptism is to not talk much about baptism. Instead, we need to go to the root of the issue, which is our covenant theology - this is where the disagreement really lies. And there's a few areas in covenant theology that need to be explored, and as we do the relevance to baptism becomes obvious. But first let's start at the beginning: What is a covenant?

In one of the most respected books on the topic, called *The Christ of the Covenants* by O. Palmer Robertson, he says this "Asking for a definition of Covenant is like asking for a definition of Mother. A mother may be defined as the person who brought you into the world, and this is formally correct, but who would be satisfied with such a definition?" And he's right, it's hard to define because there's so much to them. But, to give a very basic definition, a covenant is a life and death agreement made by God with people. And there are a number of different covenants throughout the Bible,

with each of them containing a different element and a different promise. And they come with one or many of their own covenant signs - physical symbols from God to give His people a visual representation of His covenant promises. So, Noah is given the Rainbow, Moses is given the Passover and the Ark of the Covenant, and so on. The last covenant is the New Covenant which Jesus established by His death, resurrection, and ascension, and this is what we Christians live under. So we see plenty of times in the New Testament where Paul contrasts the Old Covenant with the New Covenant.

But here's the thing, the New Covenant isn't so new that's it's a stand-alone thing. Actually, if you open up the New Covenant you find it's got all the elements of the previous covenants in it in a fulfilled form. In fact, in Jeremiah chapters 31-33 where God promises the New Covenant, he does so by referencing every other covenant previously made. This is because none of these covenants are stand-alone, they are all part of a one covenant of grace- one covenant which God has designed to be the means of saving His people. And so, as these covenants are added they don't cancel each other out but expand the one covenant of grace. And so, In the New Covenant we don't start from scratch, the Bible is one story. And even though the one covenant of grace was expressed differently before and after Jesus, we should still assume continuity between the Old and New Testament- except for where Jesus makes discontinuity necessary.

But how does this relate to baptism? Well there's two questions we need to ask: who are God's covenant people? and what is the covenant sign given to them?

Who Are God's Covenant People?

In Romans 9, Paul describes God's people like this "*Not all Israel are Israel.*" And what he means by this is that within God's covenant there is a mixed community of believers and unbelievers. There are people who really do have faith in their Covenant Lord and some who merely claim to. Nonetheless, they are still viewed as God's people. So when we look back at the Old Testament, we see that in the Noahic covenant it wasn't just Noah that was saved through the ark but his children too. And again, in God's covenant with Abraham his children are included in the promises, and then the whole people of Israel are members of the Mosaic covenant. So, through all covenant history God's people have been a mixed community of believers and unbelievers.

Yet, at the same time, it's true for all of these that the heart of the covenant is faith in Christ. You weren't fully participating as a covenant member unless you were a

believer, faith was the expectation. Regardless, people who did not believe were still visibly part of the people of God, even if they weren't saved. Because, here's the thing- Covenant member does not necessarily mean saved person. But because being in the covenant brings the expectation of faith, so unfaithful people were judged as covenant breakers.

So, does this change in the new covenant? Well there certainly is a change. God declares in Jeremiah 31 that faith and obedience really would be a defining feature, and that he would deal with the lack of faith that plagued the old covenant. But this doesn't mean that the Covenant of grace is now only made up of believers. In fact children of believers are specifically included in the new covenant promise (Jer 32:39). As well as this, the New Testament says that children of believing parents are not unclean but holy (1 Cor 7:14) – this is covenantal language. Obviously the Bible is not saying that Christians give birth to born-again babies, faith alone is what saves us. Covenant membership is not the same thing as having salvation. But it does bring with it an expectation of growing into faith and relationship with Christ. No Christian parent treats their child like a pagan, we rightly use phrases like 'we are a Christian family' because we don't treat our children as peripheral to the family unit.

On the other side of the same coin, the New Testament still talks about people who are part of the covenant and of God's people falling away. These people haven't lost their salvation, because they never had it, but they have broken the covenant. Now we either allow this to contradict the teaching of the rest of the New Testament (that you cannot lose your salvation), or we recognise that not everyone IN the covenant is OF the covenant. There are people in our churches who visibly profess faith yet really may fall away, who we nonetheless consider part of the church. And there are plenty of analogies in the New Testament to describe this reality: like a field with both wheat and weeds growing in it (Matt 13:24-30), like a net with both good and bad fish caught in it (Matt 13:47-50), and like an olive tree with unfruitful branches on it that will eventually be cut off (Rom 11:17-24). Even though they may not be joined to God in an eternal sense, for now they are part of God's people (Rom 11:22). And so, there is continuity between the Old and New Covenant in that believers and their children are included in the covenant community.

What Is Their Covenant Sign?

So having looked at God's covenant people, now let's look at the covenant sign. In the Old Covenant the main sign given was circumcision, given to every infant male in

the covenant community. But what did the sign actually mean? What did it communicate to God's people about his covenant promises? Let's look at a few key texts to understand it.

In Deuteronomy 10 we first see a phrase that will appear lots of times throughout the Old Testament: *"circumcise your heart and no longer be stubborn"* (Deut 10:16). Now these people had already been physically circumcised but that wasn't it. What's being communicated here is that your physical circumcision is a symbol that communicates the need for repentance- cutting off the sinful flesh and following after God. It was a visual way to communicate that living as God's people means living a life of repentance- of turning away from sin towards God. And so later on in Deuteronomy we read this, *"the Lord will circumcise your heart...so that you will love him"* (Deut 30:6). This is showing that physical circumcision represents and brings with it an expectation of repentance and faith in God.

Circumcision is therefore not just a physical sign. In Romans 2 Paul says circumcision is not outward and physical, it's a matter of the heart, by the Spirit. And then in Chapter 4 he calls circumcision a *"seal of the righteousness Abraham had by faith."* And therefore, it gives everyone who is circumcised after Abraham an obligation to follow in the footsteps of faith, to live out their circumcision (Rom 4:12).

So how does this relate to baptism? Baptism equally symbolises repentance, the washing away of our sinful nature. In Romans 6 We read that baptism too gives an obligation to the ones who receive it to walk in newness of life- putting to death our sinful nature. Baptism is a sign of repentance just as circumcision was. This is because baptism is the sign of the New Covenant that has replaced circumcision. Baptism is the new visual demonstration of the covenant promises. One looked forward to the cross, the other looks back to the cross. And that's exactly how Paul understands it in Colossians 2. He says this, *'in him you were circumcised'* (that is, your old nature was cut off), *'by the circumcision of Christ'*, (that is his crucifixion) *'when he was cut off from the land of the living.'* And when did this happen? *'When you were buried with him in baptism'* (Col 2:11-12).

So the Colossians didn't need to be circumcised, because they already were when they were baptised. Before the cross the sign communicated that bloodshed was needed, now the sign communicates that blood has already been shed. Baptism and circumcision are, if you like, two different coats that hang on the same hook (ie- repentance/union with Christ). They are the same in everything, except outward ceremony. And this is why we see that when Peter preaches in Acts 2 and tells his

hearers to *'repent and be baptized'* he alludes to when circumcision was given to Abraham and His sons. He charges them to Repent and be baptised for the forgiveness of sins, and then says *'the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off'* (Acts 2:38-39), everyone whom God calls to himself. When we look back at Genesis 17 we see the same thing said about circumcision. God says *'...this is my covenant between me and you, and your descendants after you. Every male throughout your generations shall be circumcised, whether born in your house or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring'* (Gen 17:10-12). So Peter, by alluding to this passage, is linking circumcision with baptism.

Finally, the New Covenant brings with it a widening of God's blessings. It has better promises, its signs exhibit more grace, and now not just Jewish males, but also women and Gentiles receive the sign. So it seems odd that as the covenant widens, its sign is now denied to one of the old covenant's biggest recipients- infants. It is far more fitting to see that just as circumcision was given to even the infants in the Old Covenant community, so too should it's New Covenant equivalent – baptism. So, while the argument is normally framed *"Where does it say in the New Testament to baptise infants?"*, we would say *"Where are we told to stop giving our children the covenant sign?"*

Infant baptism is not a one-verse-and-solved issue, it requires a much more full orbbed understanding of God's covenant and his people, and this has by no means been an exhaustive look at the topic. There's also many good arguments from Baptist theologians against it which I haven't had time to explore here. But this is a topic really worth exploring further, and wherever you end up landing, it's important to see that for evangelical Infant Baptists this is not a matter of tradition, we really believe it to be the biblical view. So, let us be encouraged and motivated to raise godly disciples by the promise that God has made to us, *'I will be God to you and to your children'*.