

Baptism

The topic of baptism (who and how) has caused divisions among Christians for many centuries. Sometimes it has divided rightly, because sometimes the different views of baptism have reflected different gospels. This is most evident between Catholic thinking on baptism and evangelical thinking. Officially for Catholics, baptism is understood to actually wash away original sin and it does this irrespective of the presence of faith. This is of course a different understanding of the gospel and is rightly rejected.

However, among evangelicals, the differences between those who hold to infant baptism (reformed churches) and those who hold to believer's baptism (eg Baptist churches) are not those of a different gospel but rather grow out of a different understanding of the relationship between the old and new covenants. This is not always evident because many are simply unaware of the reformed position or have been given an overly simplistic version of it which creates the impression the only reason reformed theologians support infant baptism is because they love their traditions. In some cases this may certainly be so. But it is also true that many Baptists hold to their view on the basis of their own traditions. None of us are completely untainted by our traditions. However, reformed theology is passionately committed to 'scripture alone' and so seeks to develop a theology of baptism out of the Scriptures.

It is my hope that greater understanding of an evangelical understanding of infant baptism would not only facilitate gospel unity among Christian brothers but would perhaps even persuade some that there is more to infant baptism than they had previously been led to believe. Too ambitious you say? Possibly, but still I write!

I write, though, as one who often finds himself saying along with Paul "The Lord didn't send me to baptise but to preach the gospel"! For me this is a secondary issue and one that ought not distract us from our primary task – that of proclaiming Christ alone, grace alone, faith alone, Scripture alone and living godly lives in this present evil age.

The Bible's silence

I think it is important to note from the start that both sides of this debate are faced with very few NT statements that support one view or the other.

Believer's baptists might find it an extra-ordinary thing to lump them in with infant baptists at this point. Baptists make much of the fact that infant baptism is not commanded anywhere in Scripture and so is apparently lacking in any biblical support. It is certainly true that there is no command to baptise infants but the point that needs to be strongly stated on the other side is that it is equally true that there is not one single NT verse that says we are to wait for the infants of believers to reach a certain age before baptising them. Not one.

It may be said in reply that there are many statements concerning baptism that strongly imply we ought to wait until a child reaches adulthood before baptising. Perhaps so, but it must be acknowledge that these statements at best may only 'imply' such a practice and don't actually command it. Therefore they need to be applied with caution. This is especially so because of the context they are given in.

Consider a very popular starting point in the debate, the words of Peter at Pentecost. "Repent and be baptised everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins" (Acts 2:38). Many note that repentance precedes baptism and since no infant could repent they therefore don't qualify for the biblical pattern of baptism.

However, note the context. Peter is addressing a group of adults and calling on them to respond. His context is the missionary situation surrounded by Jewish adults who had yet to make a first response to Christ. It goes beyond his intent and his focus to insist that he was here deliberately laying down a principle that must be applied to a completely new situation – the situation of what to do with children born to those who have responded to the gospel.

This point is acknowledged even by opponents of infant baptism. Listen for instance to the words of John Piper (a believer's Baptist); "I gradually came to see that ...that Peter said, "Repent, and be baptised," to an adult audience does not rule out the possibility of his saying something different about infants." (from 'Brothers we aren't professionals').

Once it is recognized that Peter was speaking in a particular context and for that context then great caution needs to be exercised in stating dogmatically that Acts 2:38 teach us what to do with infants.

The fact is, there is no scripture that says we are to wait until the infants of believers get to a certain age before we baptise them, not one scripture at all. If we insist on only baptising children when they reach a certain age we do it without any explicit and direct statement from the Bible on it. The same of course can be said with the baptism of infants. There is no direct statement that says we are to baptise infants. My point is simply this - the Scriptures are silent both ways. Any practice we develop therefore will necessarily be based on principles drawn from texts written for other situations. We are wise therefore to apply them and hold them with humility.

I believe far better relationships between godly Baptists and godly infant baptists would be encouraged if everyone were to acknowledge this simple point.

Now, perhaps it might be said that we best honour Jesus' words about baptism by waiting until our children are adult disciples before baptising them. Perhaps. But it must be acknowledged that this is an inference drawn from statements about adult, first generation converts. And it might also help to acknowledge that if this practice is adopted a number of significant complications enter in. One of these complications is the almost inevitable departure from NT baptismal practice. All baptisms in the NT happened immediately upon conversion. Current Baptist practice, for all its claims to being *the* biblical pattern diverges at this point given that it is almost universally the case that children of believers aren't baptised until a certain arbitrary age is reached when it is felt the decision to follow Christ will be sufficiently mature. When did the child actually come to Christ? Certainly well before baptism. How long before is almost impossible to tell because the children of believers are a thoroughly unique category of person. The Scriptures alert us to their uniqueness in passages such as 1 Cor 7:14. Although a lesser witness, experience also alerts us to their uniqueness.

As every Christian parent knows, our children simply don't fit the NT categories of pagan adults being evangelised and called to a decisive moment of repentance and faith. If we were to insist that children raised in our families were to be treated in this consistent way then we would be wrong to teach our children to pray - or at least wrong to encourage them to pray - until they have come to the so called point of adult conversion and hence believer's baptism. The fact is, we universally treat our children as believers since we teach them to pray, we teach them to evangelise their friends, we encourage them to trust God in difficult times, we urge them to live lives that honour Christ, and we offer comfort to them that is only appropriate for those who know Christ as Lord and Saviour. My point here isn't to stop this practice. There is very good biblical reason for it in places like the household tables of Ephesians and Colossians. There, children of believers are addressed as if they are responsible followers of Christ (Eph 6:1; Col 3:20). In fact, the children addressed in Eph 6:1 are the same group identified as saints in Eph 1:1! The children of Christian parents are addressed as saints and urged to act "in the Lord". Given all of this, it is then highly odd that we withhold baptism from them, at least from a biblical perspective. The Bible's pattern was clearly baptism immediately upon conversion. Withholding baptism until an older age is therefore a clear departure from the biblical pattern and can often be read to mean the faith of a child is somehow inadequate (and indeed is sometime understood that way by parents and child).

With this departure from biblical practice comes another departure hot on its heels. The purpose of baptism shifts from its NT meaning - an enacted pledge to God (1 Peter 3:21) and a sign of union with Christ and his people (Rom 6:3-4) - to something altogether new - a public confession of faith. This sense has no strong support anywhere in Scripture. The baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch demonstrates clearly that baptism didn't have this public confession dimension since there is no evidence they cared whether there was a crowd to witness it or not (Acts 8:38).

Confusing? Yes!

When it comes to determining what to do with the children of believers (whether to baptise infants or wait until they are more mature) all of us must confess, we have no direct statement in Scripture insisting that one practice ought to be adopted instead of another.

I believe recognising this is extremely important because it defuses some of the rhetoric surrounding the debate. All of us are wrestling with the silence of Scripture. None of us have the definitive, lay down biblical reference that states emphatically what must be done with the children of believers.

I can't overstate how important it is to acknowledge this foundational and undeniable truth. And so will repeat it! None of us - infant baptist or believer's Baptist - have one verse which states what must be done with the children of believers. We are all working with biblical silence seeking to determine from theological inference and principles the best and most godly practice.

That is an important introduction to what follows. I believe the practice of infant baptism (within believing families) is "most agreeable with the institution of Christ". But I believe this because of theological principles and scriptural inferences drawn from passages focused elsewhere. I don't want to claim too much for my position and I would long for believer's Baptists to recognise that they are in exactly the same position as well!

Let me now offer some of the factors that have encouraged many of the great leaders of the Christian church to adopt the practice of infant baptism down through the centuries (Luther, Calvin, Whitefield, Wesley, Edwards, Packer, Stott, etc). This is not all the factors by any means but those which commend themselves to me.

The first is the continuity between the use of 'household' from Old to NT.

Now before the Baptists throw down this paper in disgust! consider the following.

On a surface reading, it is true that each household baptism in the book of Acts is reported in language that can be interpreted to suggest no infants were present.

Acts 10 tells us that "They all heard the Word...they believed it...the Spirit fell...they were all baptised." Acts 16 says that, "All heard the gospel...all were baptised." The house of Crispus in Acts 18 are said to have "All believed" and so "all were baptised." Etc.

Someone like John Macarthur Jnr (a Baptist) concludes – [these incidents] "exclude infants because infants can't hear and believe. The "household" then is defined—it is defined as "those capable of hearing, understanding, believing." That's the definition of the "household."" (from a sermon on baptism).

At a simplistic, surface level this logic makes good sense. But I believe it fails to take account of the character of historical narrative and the way events are reported. That is, it treats language as far more precise than it obviously is. If I report that at a recent church camp all who were there had a wonderful time of fellowship and that they all gave themselves to serving one another and studying the scriptures, does this justify the conclusion that there were no infants present at the camp? Not at all. I am using the language of reporting. And the precision of that language suits the context. In particular the word 'all' only means 'all who could serve and study and sing did so'. This is the normal and natural meaning of the word in its context.

Luke uses the word 'all' in the same way. I would suggest that he simply means "all who were able to hear and respond did so". It is a serious mistake to press his language beyond this normal usage and insist that he is deliberately and self consciously telling us that no infants were present. It is even more dangerous to use an overly precise use of 'all' to define 'household', especially since 'household' is such an important word throughout the Bible with a clearly defined range of meaning.

Pursue the meaning of *household* for a moment.

The word is used often in the OT and is clearly used in the book of Acts in the same way.

Let me show what I mean.

In the OT, the word deliberately expressed the idea of family solidarity in any spiritual choice and clearly included infants. Note for example God's dealings with Noah *and his household* (Gen 7:1) or God's provision for Israel and *his household* through Joseph (Gen 45:11) or the protection of the *household* during the Passover, or the promises to Abraham which included his children (Gen 17:9-10). In each case, 'household' encompassed any and all who lived under the roof – whether adult or infant. 'Household' is a common biblical idea and word. And in fact its secular use is not so very different. It simply meant any and all within the house – adult, child or infant.

If Luke were using it as Macarthur suggests he would be using it in a way that was very different to not only its OT usage but also its secular usage. Of course, it is not impossible Luke was doing just that but if so he would need to give clear evidence that this word was not to be read as a normal 1st century person would read it. He doesn't do this. In fact, the context of Acts actually suggests he is using it as it has always been used.

Consider particularly the way Luke describes Cornelius. Prior to his conversion, while still under the old covenant (which Baptist and infant Baptist alike agree clearly included infants in any spiritual blessing or identification) we are told that he and "*his whole household*" feared God. There is no doubt this is to be read in

the same way 'household' was read in the OT – *household* includes infants. Luke here uses the word in exactly the same way it has always been used and understood.

Extra-ordinarily, when the word of the new covenant came bringing news of the forgiveness of sins, it was a word of salvation to him "and all his *household*" (Acts 11:14). No qualification is offered to the use of *household*. In other words, the inclusion of the household in spiritual blessings, which existed under the old covenant, continued into the new covenant. Here there is clear continuity between the way *household* is understood in the OT and the way it is understood in Acts.

If Luke were deliberately signalling that there were no infants present and so none baptised he would have to have made it far more explicit. That is to say, if he were using *household* in the way MacArthur defines it, he would have been using it in a way that was totally new in his historical and religious context. The use of 'all' in no way changes the way an old covenant Jew would have read it. It is only our modern pre-occupation with adult only baptism that seizes on less than precise language and forces it to mean what it never means or meant.

I would suggest that Luke would therefore welcome the inference that infants were baptised along with their believing parents, and this despite the fact there may not have been any infants present in any of these actual households. Packer affirms as much when he says "Luke and Paul would hardly have said "house" without qualification if they had meant us to gather that on principle babies were excluded." (Entering In, baptism and conversion).

Add to this the reference to baptism in 1 Corinthians 10. There Paul speaks of Israel being baptised into Moses. This baptism clearly included infants since the whole nation "passed through the sea". Given that Paul is using this incident to draw a parallel with the Corinthian church under the new dispensation it would be highly odd for him to speak like this if he were opposed to the infants of believers being baptised.

Add further a lesser testimony gained from ancient Jewish practice of baptising converts to Judaism. In a place such as Qumran (no doubt small and sect like) baptism was practiced and it was always *household* baptism. That is, they baptised adult parents *and their infants*. For them baptism symbolized cleansing from paganism and entrance into the Jewish faith.

When all of this is added together, for the NT practice to be as the adult Baptist insists there would have been a very great shift in thinking of those first century Jews. The fact is, there is absolutely no evidence of this shift. No NT passage makes plain that Jews are to let go of previous baptismal practices and adopt an 'adult only' practice. In fact, as has been shown, the language of 'household' and its continuity from old to new covenant suggests there was no such change.

This continuity is also seen in the ministry of John the Baptist.

John was known for his ministry of baptism but it wasn't the fact that he baptised that was new. As mentioned above, evidence outside the Bible tells us that baptism was practised within Jewish circles (and it was *household* baptism with infants). The NT itself indicates baptism was a common practice among the Jews. Hebrews 9:10 speaks of "many baptisms" in the OT sacrificial system (lost in the NIV because it translates this word as "many washings"). Paul in 1 Cor 10:1-4 speaks of Israel as being baptised into Moses as it went through the Red Sea.

When John came baptising, he traded on assumed knowledge. His practice of baptism wasn't new. What was new was the fact that John was calling *Jews* to be baptised and not pagan converts. Radical!

Noting this context to John's ministry, the fact that he calls for baptism without any qualification on contemporary baptismal practice, suggests it was most likely performed as it had always been performed – as a family.

In fact, it is surely inconceivable that parents who responded to John's call would be baptised to escape God's coming wrath and leave their infants on the shore!¹

I believe it is hard to draw any other conclusion but that John baptised infants along with repentant adults.

Did this practice carry over into the new covenant?

¹ This insight is borrowed from an unpublished paper by Glenn Davies

As I have suggested, the way Cornelius is described in the book of Acts seems strong evidence that there was no change in practice or thinking. Infants were considered part of the household and were identified with their parents as participants in the blessings of the new covenant (This is not at all to suggest they therefore were necessarily regenerate. But it must be remembered that baptism never guarantees that for adult or infant).

Still more though!

There is other language in the book of Acts which indicates a strong continuity of thinking from OT to NT.

Returning to Acts 2:38 where Peter says "Repent and be baptised everyone of you...", it is important to note that a few lines later he tells the crowd that the promise of forgiveness is for "you and for your children..."

What did he mean by this?

Baptists say it is simply a statement that refers to the generations to come. That is, forgiveness is available (upon repentance) for them and their children and their children, etc. But this not only empties Peter's words of any significance, it ignores a very clear OT parallel.

If all Peter is saying is that forgiveness is available to their children if they repent then why say it? What does it add to what he has already said? He has already said forgiveness is available to all who repent and are baptised. He says it is for all who are far off. Why add their children. Of course it will mean their children and following children. Reading it this way turns Peter's words into meaningless fill (which they clearly were not).

Understanding the words in light of their OT parallels makes better sense of the words.

When God first established the Abrahamic covenant he said that the promise was for him and his children. No doubt this has as its deepest referent the Lord Jesus, as Paul points out in Galatians, but it also has the more immediate referent – Abraham's physical children. That is to say, they were to be included in the blessings of the covenant.

The parallel is too clear to ignore given that it sits in exactly the same context as Peter's words – covenant inauguration (the start of a new covenant). Peter, the Jew, speaks to the crowd of the fulfilment of the Abrahamic covenant. And uses the language that they would know well from reading Genesis. In the same way the covenant with Abraham would capture up the children of Abraham, so too this new covenant would not only capture up those present but would also impact their children.

As in the past, so now in the present and future, God deals with families.

I hasten to say that this doesn't mean children of believers will live their lives always assured they are forgiven simply because they are born to believers. Over time they must evidence the genuineness of covenant membership by their mature expression of repentance and faith (as all those who are baptised must). But still, in those early years, they are part of the covenant community. They are to be raised as those who enjoy forgiveness and urged to continue in the faith every day.

In this way, the children of believers are very different from pagans, and the choices they make as they mature are also very different.

Let me explain.

For a pagan to become a Christian, they must choose to enter *into* the covenant community by their decision to put their faith in Christ. They were outside of his people and now they step in. Baptism of course functioned in the NT as a sign of this covenant entry.

But a child raised in the home of believers has a very different choice to make. His or her choice will be to *stay in* or *depart from* the covenant community as they grow. They are in that community of faith by virtue of their birth into a family who themselves are in the covenant community. As seen earlier 1 Cor 7 gives clear biblical expression to this truth. The children of a believing parent are "holy" (v14). Our common practice of child rearing also confirms we believe this since we all treat our young children as small Christians who need to mature rather than pagans who need conversion.

As stated earlier this is confirmed by passages such as Eph 6:1 (cf 1:1) where Paul speaks to children of believers as saints, as those who are to render obedience to their parents "in the Lord". This command would be meaningless if Paul did not recognize that these children were in some sense 'in Christ' already.

Now both pagan and infant have choices to make. But they are very different. And baptising infants of believers affirms this different choice. We mark them as in the covenant community and encourage them as they grow to remain in and keep choosing to walk with Christ.

All the above demonstrates at the very least (I believe!) that the early church wasn't opposed to infants being baptised. But is there any compelling reason why we ought to practice it now?

I believe there is.

It grows out of the theology of baptism itself. But to see this requires a fuller explanation of baptism.

There are at least two principles inherent in baptism.

Baptism firstly expresses the response of a convert. It expresses his or her decision to identify with Christ and his people. 1 Peter 3:21 expresses this idea when it speaks of baptism as a pledge to God. When a person gets baptised they are saying something. They are making a pledge to God to trust him, identify with Christ and his people. In this sense, baptism is simply an external tangible expression of an inner attitude of faith in Christ. This explains why the apostles could seem to make baptism a condition of forgiveness. Peter says repent and be baptised for the forgiveness of your sins. Theologically we understand that he didn't mean that the act of baptism is necessary to receive baptism. But the words taken on their own certainly *seem* to say that! What is going on? I take it that because baptism is so closely associated with a pledge of faith in God that it can be used interchangeably. We would say a person needs to repent and put their faith in Christ for the forgiveness of sins. Peter says the same thing by saying 'repent and be baptised'. Baptism was and is an external tangible expression of the inner attitude of faith toward God.

But there is another side to baptism. It is also a sign to us of God's grace and mercy. It signifies to us something that God is doing and has done. It says to me that God has committed himself to me – to be gracious to me a sinner. I take it this is why baptism is done to me rather than me doing it to myself.

Effectively baptism is like a wedding service. I express my readiness to unite myself to Christ (and his people). And he (through the person doing the baptism) expresses his acceptance of me into his family and his commitment to me to cover me, forgive me, hold me and love me forever. Baptism signs me as united to Christ (Romans 6).

Pushing this illustration further, baptism is like a wedding ring. It is given to me by my marriage partner to sign and seal me as his possession and a member of his family. I take it this is why Paul reminds the Romans of their baptism in chapter 6. It is like pointing a person to their wedding ring as a reminder of the union they have entered and the need therefore to be faithful to it (this is why it ought be immediately upon conversion because (ideally) it is intimately part of the conversion experience.)

There are two sides to baptism. One is an expression of human response to God. The other is an expression of God's grace to us. I am now marked as one who is united to Christ and is a member of his covenant community.

Seeing that there are these two sides to baptism makes it possible to understand better the conflict over the different views of baptism. In some ways it boils down to a difference over which truth is pre-eminent and needs to be protected by our practice of baptism.

That is, the adult Baptist says that we must protect the first truth – that salvation is dependant upon an individual responding to God in repentance and faith. This is paramount and so our practice of baptism must reflect this truth. In this light therefore, baptising infants can be seen as undermining this truth since they haven't repented and don't have faith. Historically this is where the practice of believer's baptism came from. Seeing the horrors of a state church where every member of that state was baptised – whether or not they professed faith, drove many 16th Century Christians to insist on rebaptising those who expressed repentance and faith and therefore differentiating true believers from cultural. This of course was an admirable aim but I believe it set about to cure a real and terrible problem (institutional Christianity) with the wrong solution.

On the other side of the coin the reformed infant baptist – who is also opposed to institutional Christianity and supports passionately the need for a personal response to Christ – insists that there is an even more important principle in salvation than the need for my response. That principle is the fact that we only come to Christ by the sovereign electing purposes of God which preceded my response of faith. In other words, the key to my salvation is God’s faithfulness to his covenant, not my response. This is the more important principle which baptism celebrates and so **we baptise infants of believers to show that they are beneficiaries of grace** (and note, it is not any infants but only infant of believers, because it is these infants that are beneficiaries of grace). But more than this: we baptise infants of believers to show that they are truly members of the community who share the gracious promises of God.

My position

Given the biblical witness of the early church, given the theological principles that apply to the purpose of baptism, given the pastoral advantages and helps that follow from appropriately applied infant baptism and given the difficulties associated with believer’s baptism I am strongly inclined to the reformed position. I believe that it is most agreeable to the institution of Christ.

I say this aware that infant baptism also creates some potential difficulties. But as I have suggested previously, it creates no more problems than believer’s baptism – just different ones! In the end we may have to choose which difficulties we can live with.

I think, when sensitively practised, infant baptism minimises the problems and affirms the most important truths of the way of salvation – God’s gracious initiative to us in his sovereign electing purposes – and it affirms God’s commitment to us and our families (Acts 2).

I am passionately committed to the clear biblical idea that salvation is for those who personally respond to the gospel. I want very much to guard this truth. But I believe even more passionately in the truth that **salvation is first and foremost a response to the initiative of a promise making God**. A pattern of baptism that declares that truth I think is critical and I’m afraid that the typical Baptist pattern of waiting until a child reaches a certain age (13, 14, ...) not only lacks any direct command of Scripture but is different to the biblical pattern of baptism we do see (since conversion is very much separated from baptism), and creates an unhelpful emphasis upon human response as the critical condition for salvation. It very easily leads kids who grow up in Christian homes to put their faith in their faith rather than in the gracious initiative of God.²

However, if we baptise infants we can, from the beginning, treat them as members of our church family. We are affirmed in our desire to raise them as Christians, not as pagans who need to be converted at a later date. They don’t need to live with the mixed messages from the parents – pray like a Christian, live like a Christian but you’re not really a Christian yet because you haven’t made a decision at the age of 13 and been baptised.

Infant baptism (sensitively practised) also avoids falling into the error of changing the biblical meaning of baptism from a sign of my entry into the covenant community to something never seen in the Bible – baptism as a public profession of mature faith.

By sensitively practising infant baptism we say to our children, “we marked you as a member of the community of Christ’s people as a sign that God’s grace comes before your response to him. He has died for you before you were born. He has graciously put you in the family of believers. He has given you his word and a church community to point you to Christ. In a sense he has given himself to you in marriage before you were even conscious of it. You are therefore married to him. Grow now to love the one who has given himself to you. Everyday choose to *stay in* the community of faith by growing in faith yourself.”

I take it this was exactly the intention of the old and new testaments in their emphasis upon family solidarity.

² I would humbly suggest this tends to create an understanding of salvation that is Arminian. See for instance very early Baptist theology (the confession of faith of 1689) which was strongly Calvinistic but which is now very often Arminian in character. This is of course a generalization and dependant on my own experiences of Baptist thinking but it is broad enough in scope to beg the question “why the shift?” One cause suggests itself and that is an uncritical commitment to believer’s baptism. As a church majors on the concern to emphasis human responsibility in salvation by insisting that the only biblical form of baptism is believer’s baptism it cannot help but create a pressure towards an Arminian understanding of the gospel. This can only be countered by strong pressure in the other direction. Where that is absent, Arminian theology must soon take root.

Acting like this means that we begin with confidence in our God for our children rather than in fear and doubt about them. We accept their current profession and urge them to grow in it, rather than casting suspicion on it until they reach a certain age.

This I believe best reflects the NT practice, is consistent with the theology of baptism, and is most pastorally sensitive.

Andrew Heard Dec 2005