

## CHAPTER 7

### SUBJECTS OF BAPTISM

WCF 28:4, 7, WLC 166, WSC 95

Robert R. Booth, *Children of Promise: The Biblical Case for Infant Baptism* (1995); Dwight Hervey Small, *The Biblical Basis for Infant Baptism: Children in God's Covenant Promises* (1959); Joachim Jeremias, *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries* (1958; ET 1960); Lewis Bevens Schenck, *The Presbyterian Doctrine of Children in the Covenant: An Historical Study of the Significance of Infant Baptism in the Presbyterian Church* (1940)

#### Historical survey of infant baptism

Nearly all Christian denominations practice infant baptism, including the Roman Catholic Church, the Eastern Orthodox churches, and most Protestant denominations.

In recent church history, the first churches to practice only adult baptism were the Anabaptist churches in the 16th century. We know of no large segment of the church prior to the 16th century that practiced only adult baptism.

Most of the controversy centers around the practice of the apostolic church. The earliest church fathers, while mentioning and describing baptism, give no specific information of infant baptisms, nor do they deny their practice. This is the reason that the practice of the early church must be found in the biblical evidence.

#### Early church fathers

##### ***Tertullian***

The earliest specific references concerning infant baptism come from Tertullian (ca. A.D. 200), *On Baptism*, ch. 18 (ANF 3:677-78).

“But they whose office it is to baptize, know that baptism is not rashly to be administered. . . . And so, according to the circumstances and disposition, and even age, of each individual, the delay of baptism is preferable; principally, however, in the case of little children. For why is it necessary—if baptism itself is not so indispensably necessary—that the sponsors likewise should be thrust into danger . . . ? The Lord does indeed say, ‘Forbid them not to come unto me.’ Let them ‘come,’ then, while they are growing up; . . . let them become Christians when they have become able to know Christ. Why does the innocent period of life hasten to the ‘remission of sins’? More caution will be exercised in worldly matters, so that one who is not trusted with earthly substance is trusted with divine! . . . For no less cause must the unwedded also be deferred—in whom the ground of temptation is prepared. . . . If any understand the weighty import of baptism, they will fear its reception more than its delay; sound faith is secure of salvation.”

While Tertullian himself taught that baptism should be deferred (as well as marriage), he recognized the practice of infant baptism as customary in his time. We should note that other Christian writers, such as Irenaeus and Hippolytus, who lived at the same time as Tertullian, did not list infant baptism among the various “heresies” they sought to combat.

### **Catacombs**

Many of the inscriptions in the catacombs of Rome, dating from the same time (beginning of the 3rd century) indicate that small children were “believers,” etc.

E.g., a one year old “servant of God”

Several twelve year olds, “believers from their birth”

These inscriptions are consistent with infant baptism and the belief that baptism cleansed from sin.

### **Cyprian**

In his letter to bishop Fidus (Letter #58, parag. 2, 6; *ANF* 5:353-54; ca. A.D. 250), Cyprian answers the bishop’s question concerning the proper time of baptism: should the child be baptized at eight days of age, or immediately after birth?

“But in respect of the case of infants, which you say ought not to be baptized within the second or third day after their birth, and that the law of ancient circumcision should be regarded, so that you think that one who is just born should not be baptized and sanctified within the eighth day, we all thought very differently in our council. . .

. And therefore, dearest brother, this was our opinion in council, that by us no one ought to be hindered from baptism and from the grace of God, who is merciful and kind and loving to all. Which, since it is to be observed and maintained in respect of all, we think is to be even more observed in respect of infants and newly-born persons, who on this very account deserve more from our help and from the divine mercy, that immediately, on the very beginning of their birth, lamenting and weeping, they do nothing else but entreat.”

This quotation proves that the popular mind in the church accepted infant baptism without question—the only issue being the number of days to wait. It also shows the linkage of baptism to circumcision in the mind of the church in Cyprian’s day.

### ***Conclusion from the church fathers***

The earliest references in church history to show either infant baptism’s practice or its prohibition come at least 150 years after Christ died and 100 years after the end of the apostolic age. These quotations show the widespread use of infant baptism by the third century (cf. introduction to Cyprian’s letter #58, p. 353).

Prior to the third century, either one of two things happened:

- 1) The church introduced infant baptism, against the practice of the apostolic church (there is no record of any such conflict), or
- 2) The church continued the apostolic practice of infant baptism.

This course believes that the second alternative is correct. But the ultimate evidence in this matter should come from Scripture itself.

### **Direct NT evidence concerning infant baptism**

The NT records eleven Christian baptisms. In no case is there a specific mention of infants being baptized, and in no case are they explicitly excluded when assumed to be present.

#### ***No children present (2 cases)***

Acts 8:38, Ethiopian eunuch

Acts 9:9, 18; 22:16, baptism of Saul

### ***Children perhaps present (6 cases)***

Acts 2:41, 3000 “souls” at Pentecost (men emphasized, vv. 5, 22, 29 [ἄνδρες *andres*, “men” in these verses]; women not mentioned; promise made to children, v. 39)

Acts 8:12-13, Philip in Samaria (men and women mentioned; children not specified)

Acts 10:47-48, Cornelius, relatives, friends (v. 24; same ones who heard the message, v. 43)

Acts 18:8, Crispus and all his house (believed) and many of the Corinthians (believed and were baptized)

Acts 19:5, twelve men of Ephesus (cf. v. 7; could include families)

1 Cor 1:14, Crispus and Gaius

### ***“Household” baptisms (3 cases; perhaps 4 cases)***

Lydia and her household

Acts 16:15, “When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. ‘If you consider me a believer in the Lord,’ she said, ‘come and stay at my house.’ And she persuaded us.”

Philippian jailer and his household (“he having believed”)

Acts 16:33-34, “At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized. The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole family.”

Perhaps household of Crispus

Acts 18:8, “Crispus and all his house (believed) and many of the Corinthians (believed and were baptized)”

Household of Stephanus

1 Cor 1:16, “(Yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I don’t remember if I baptized anyone else.)”

## **Conclusion from direct NT evidence**

It seems from these cases that the apostles never went out of their way to avoid giving the covenant sign to infants, while the significant number of household baptisms makes infant baptism quite feasible.

## **Infant baptism and covenant theology**

The strongest arguments for infant baptism stem from its significance, as the covenant initiatory rite.

The traditional Reformed argument for infant baptism emphasizes the unity of the covenant of grace and of the visible church in the two dispensations of the OT and the NT:

- The “church” is one.
- The “seed of Abraham” is one (esp. Rom 4, 9; Gal 3).
- The promises are the same.
- Circumcision and baptism share the same significance (cf. this syllabus, ch. 6).

Therefore, unless new revelation is given, baptism should continue to be administered to infants in the covenant.

Reformed theology also has found in the terms of the Abrahamic covenant itself justification for including infants in the covenant community, as recipients of many covenant blessings, and as entitled to the covenant sign:

- 1) The Abrahamic covenant is a covenant of grace as well as of law, Rom 4:13, 16.

Rom 4:13, 16, “It was not through law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith. . . . Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham’s offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all.”

- 2) This covenant is an everlasting covenant, Gen 17:7 (עוֹלָם עוֹלָם *b'erit 'ôlām*); still in effect, Gal 3:7, 16-18, 29.

Gal 3:7, “Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham.”

Gal 3:16-18, “The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. The Scripture does not say ‘and to seeds,’ meaning many people, but ‘and to your seed,’ meaning one person, who is Christ. What I mean is this: The law, introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise. For if the inheritance depends on the law, then it no longer depends on a promise; but God in his grace gave it to Abraham through a promise.”

Gal 3:29, “If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.”

- 3) This covenant is spiritual, as well as physical, the outworking of the covenant of grace, Gen 12:2-3; 17:7, etc.; Gal 3, as above.
- 4) This covenant is directed to parents and their children, Gen 17:7-14; Acts 2:39; 3:25-26.

Acts 2:39, “The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.”

Acts 3:25-26, “And you are heirs of the prophets and of the covenant God made with your fathers. He said to Abraham, ‘Through your offspring all peoples on earth will be blessed.’ When God raised up his servant, he sent him first to you to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways.”

- 5) First circumcision, then baptism, were the signs and seals of this covenant (cf. Pierre Marcel, *Baptism, Sacrament of the Covenant of Grace*, pp. 151-59).
- 6) While baptism was enlarged, to include females, there is no evidence or command that it was restricted, to exclude infants.
- 7) When considered in the covenant context, the “argument from silence” supports the view that infants continued to receive the covenant sign. The “burden of proof” lies with those who would deny baptism to the infants of believers.

## **Responsibility of Christian parents**

### ***Abraham’s responsibilities***

God established the Abrahamic covenant to be between himself and Abraham and his posterity. The promise made to Abraham was that God would be the God of him and of his

seed after him (Gen 17:7). The sign and seal of this covenant was to be circumcision, administered to Abraham and to his male children and household members (Gen 17:9-14).

However, the covenant was not guaranteed to all his seed automatically (Rom 9). Abraham and his seed were expected to live the life of faith, and to properly train their children (Gen 18:19; 26:3-5).

### ***Children blessed through parents in the OT***

Throughout the OT dispensation, the promise was maintained that God would continue to bless children through the faith and obedience of their parents:

- 1) Example of Job, sacrificing for his children, Job 1:5
- 2) Abraham's blessings passed down through his natural children, Isaac (Gen 26:2-4) and Jacob (Gen 28:12-14)
- 3) Blessings of Davidic covenant, passed down to his natural children, many of whom were personally undeserving (e.g., 1 Kgs 11:12-13, 32; 15:4; 2 Kgs 8:19; 19:34; 2 Chr 21:7)
- 4) Second commandment: while the curse extends to the third and fourth generation, the promise and blessing may well extend to thousands of generations (as in NIV newer ed.); cf. Deut 7:9; Ps 103:17-18; WLC 110

Deut 7:9, "Know therefore that the LORD your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commands."

Ps 103:17-18

"But from everlasting to everlasting  
the LORD's love is with those who fear him,  
and his righteousness with their children's children—  
with those who keep his covenant  
and remember to obey his precepts.

WLC 110, ". . . accounting the breakers of this commandment such as hate him, and threatening to punish them unto divers generations; and esteeming the observers of it such as love him and keep his commandments, and promising mercy to them unto many generations."

- 5) The Mosaic covenant specifically mentions the blessings which flow to the children of covenant-keepers, Deut 4:37-38; 7:7-8

Deut 4:37-38, “Because he loved your forefathers and chose their descendants after them, he brought you out of Egypt by his Presence and his great strength, to drive out before you nations greater and stronger than you and to bring you into their land to give it to you for your inheritance, as it is today.”

Deut 7:7-8, “The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt.”

### ***Parental responsibilities in the OT***

This blessing on the children entailed the responsibility of parents to rear their children in the fear of the Lord. This rearing of children included the elements of applying the covenant sign, praying for them, teaching them, being an example before them, and properly disciplining and training them.

- 1) Parents were commanded to apply the covenant sign to their children, Gen 17:9-14; Exod 4:24-26; etc.
- 2) Parents were to train their children, and teach the covenant terms to them, Gen 18:19; Deut 5:29; 6:6-9, 20-25; Ps 78:1-8.
- 3) Parents were to discipline their children properly, Prov 13:24; 19:18 (cf. Eli); 22:6, 15; 23:13-14; 29:15, 17.
- 4) Parents were to protect their children from unbelief and apostasy; cf. the radical actions required in Neh 13:23-27.

### ***Children under the Abrahamic covenant in the NT***

The NT affirms the continuing relevance of the Abrahamic covenant to believers and their children. NT believers are, by their faith, tied directly into the Abrahamic covenant (Gal 3:6-9, 16-18, 26-29).

The conditions and promises given to parents in this dispensation are the same as those given to Abraham; only now the covenant sign and seal is baptism (see “Baptism’s



Underlying Significance” in ch. 6 above). If this understanding of the significance of baptism is correct, then baptism should be administered to those within the covenant (the visible church), including the children.

In the NT, the children of believers, even Gentile believers, are considered as in covenant relation to God:

- 1) Jesus blessed the infants (Luke, βρέφος *brephos*) of his followers, saying that the kingdom was for them as well as for their parents, Matt 19:13-15 = Mark 10:13-16 = Luke 18:15-17.
- 2) Peter affirmed that the Jews in Jerusalem after Pentecost were included in the Abrahamic covenant by virtue of natural descent, which therefore placed them in a favored position concerning the gospel offer of salvation, Acts 3:25-26.
- 3) Peter earlier said to virtually the same group, that the covenant promises would continue to their natural children, if they would repent and receive Christ, Acts 2:39.
- 4) Paul, speaking to the Gentile jailer in Philippi, said that if the jailer would believe in Christ, he would bring salvation to himself and to his household as well. Note the Greek of Acts 16:31, “Believe (sg.) on the Lord Jesus, and you (sg.) will be saved, you (sg.) and your house.” This emphasis in the Greek exactly parallels the situation seen in the OT. It is assumed that the natural seed will be saved; but the responsibility still lies with the parents to train their children, and with the children to accept the Lord for themselves.
- 5) Note that in #3 and #4 above, the covenant sign of baptism was administered immediately after these words were given. We assume that baptism was also administered after #2 as well (cf. Acts 4:4).
- 6) In 1 Cor 7:14, where Paul is addressing Gentile Christians, he teaches that, by virtue of the faith of even one parent, children are automatically in a special relationship to God—“holy, set apart,” ἅγιος *hagios*—and are not “unclean” (ἀκάθαρτος *akathartos*), as are children outside the covenant people of God.

1 Cor 7:14, “For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.”

### ***Parental responsibilities in the NT***

The NT, as well as the OT, places on the parents the responsibility of properly rearing their children, so that their children might personally share the blessings of the covenant.

Parents are to place the covenant sign on their children; cf. the household baptisms with the arguments of this section. Note that the Great Commission in Matt 28:19 in the Greek uses two participles in the instrumental use to explain how the disciples should “make disciples” of all nations: “baptizing them and teaching them.” In the total biblical context, the Great Commission emphasizes God’s covenant relation to families, and the church’s responsibility to her own children.

Matt 28:19, “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

In Eph 6:4 (cf. Col 3:21) Paul instructs parents to copy the OT pattern in child-rearing, not oppressing them, but rearing them in the παιδεία *paideia* (nurture, discipline, training) and the νοουθεσία *nouthesia* (admonition, instruction, warning) of the Lord. This pattern is amply expanded in Deuteronomy and Proverbs.

Eph 6:4, “Fathers, do not exasperate (παροργίζω *parorgizo*) your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.”

Col 3:21, “Fathers, do not embitter (ἐρεθίζω *erethizo*) your children, or they will become discouraged (ἀθυμέω *athumeo*).”

This kind of child-rearing continues to bear fruit in the NT dispensation. Cf. examples of Timothy (2 Tim 1:5; 3:14-15) and the children of the elect lady (2 John 1, 4).

## **Additional light from the treaties**

Vassals were to insure their subjects’ loyalty to the suzerain. These obligations were imposed by the suzerain, and were not left up to the choice of the vassal or his subjects.

If circumcision and baptism are the signs of the covenant sanctions, following the pattern of the ancient treaties, they pledge their recipients to keep the covenant, but they do not necessarily guarantee the obedience of those recipients.

The doctrine of infant baptism is confirmed by this comparison in two ways:

- 1) The authority of parents over their children is analogous to that of vassals over their subjects, under the authority of God as the suzerain.
- 2) With this understanding of baptism’s significance, Reformed theology does not have to prove that grace always accompanies baptism; it is sufficient to show that

baptism places the child into the covenant people of God, the same relation sustained by circumcised Jewish children in the OT.

## **Common objections against infant baptism**

Here are the most common arguments which are used to oppose giving the covenant sign to children. Brief lines of thought are given to answer these objections. The detailed refutation is found in the whole positive line of argument presented in this chapter.

- 1) The NT says “believe and be baptized.” How can an infant believe?

Ans. This command was given to two groups of people: Gentiles, who were outside the covenant and were old enough to believe; and Jews who were alive during the transition from the OT dispensation to the NT dispensation (cf. Acts 2:38; 8:12; 10:47). They were commanded to be baptized to show their acceptance of Jesus as the Messiah. This same principle was observed in the OT. The first group was represented by the Jewish proselytes, who were circumcised as adults. The second group was represented by Abraham and his family, who received circumcision as adults even though they were believers already, because God at that time introduced a new dispensation. In both dispensations the children receive the covenant sign along with their parents.

- 2) Paedobaptists disregard the distinction between the two dispensations.

Ans. This argument cuts both ways. Opponents to infant baptism can be said to disregard the unity of the church under the covenant of grace. Actually, paedobaptists do recognize dispensational distinctions; but these distinctions must be explicit, or at least implicit, in Scripture. There is no Scriptural evidence excluding the children of believers from the Abrahamic covenant.

- 3) There is no specific Scriptural command to baptize infants.

Ans. This is an argument from silence; neither is there any Scriptural command to refrain from baptizing infants. While this argument is true on the surface, it ignores the explicit command to circumcise children and the continuing implications of that command. One also should think about the wording of the Great Commission, and its fulfillment in the several household baptisms of the NT.

- 4) Infant baptism developed in the Roman Catholic church.

Ans. All historical evidence points to the universal practice of infant baptism in orthodox churches by the third century. Before that time the present historical evidence neither affirms nor denies its practice. Most Protestant church historians date the beginning of the Roman Catholic church with Pope Gregory I, ca. A.D. 600, long after. We should note also that the arguments for infant baptism come from the Scripture, not from church tradition.

- 5) Infant baptism minimizes the importance of conversion, and gives carnal security to unbelievers.

Ans. This same argument could be used against circumcision in the OT; many Jews found carnal security in their circumcision; yet still God commanded that sign to be given. Actually, if the meaning of circumcision and baptism be understood, the person who has been circumcised or baptized would be all the more anxious to be truly converted, so that he would not be a covenant-breaker and receive the sanctions for rebellion, but would rather receive the sanctions for faith and obedience. He would also be drawn more readily to Christ, whose sufferings are portrayed in the covenant sign.

- 6) If infants are to admitted to baptism, why are they not admitted to the Lord's Supper? In the OT, circumcised children participated in the Passover feast.

Ans. This is perhaps the most cogent argument against infant baptism. First, it should be said that not all Reformed theologians would exclude small children from the Lord's Supper. But assuming the traditional Reformed attitude that only those who are of age to examine themselves should participate (WLC 177), the principle mentioned in #2 above applies: there can be a change from one dispensation to another. This change regarding the covenant meal is specified in 1 Cor 11:28, "A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup."

On the same basis, the covenant sign is changed in the NT by specific commands: baptism replaces circumcision, and females receive the sign along with males. On the other hand, there is no indication that infants are no longer to receive the covenant sign.