

Should Babies be Baptised?

David Feddes: The Back to God Hour

He and all his family were baptised. Acts 16:33

Should babies be baptised or not? It can be dangerous to ask that question. One danger is that Christians might be divided against each other. Christians don't all agree about infant baptism, so if they focus more on this area of disagreement than on their unity in Jesus Christ, it can cause division. A second, related danger is that if Christians disagree openly with each other, it can become an excuse for non-Christians to ignore Jesus and the Bible. Why pay attention to Christianity if Christians can't agree among themselves what to believe?

Recognising these dangers, I don't want to say anything that sets Christians against each other or that repels people who don't yet know Jesus as their Saviour. I love my fellow Christians and want to encourage deeper unity in Christ. I also love people who don't follow Christ, and I want each of you to enter a joyous, life-giving relationship with him. Above all, I love Jesus, and I want to honour him and draw people to him. So before I say whether babies should be baptised, a matter on which Christians don't all agree, I first want to emphasise common ground and highlight things on which all true Christians agree.

All true Christians believe the Bible as the Word of God. All true Christians believe in God the Father as Creator of the universe and Father of his people. All true Christians believe in Jesus as the Son of God and the Saviour of all who trust in him. All true Christians believe in the Holy Spirit as the third Person of the Trinity, who connects us with Christ, produces faith, and gives eternal life. All true Christians believe that each person added to the Lord's church should be baptised in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

All true Christians see baptism as a sign of sins being washed away and of being united with Christ's death and resurrection. All true Christians see baptism as a seal of God's grace for sinners, not of our own goodness. All true Christians see baptism as a mark by which God claims a person and

requires faith, love, and obedience. All true Christians believe that an unbaptised person who has grown up outside a Christian setting, without faith in Christ, must turn to Jesus in repentance and personal faith before being baptised.

Not all Christians agree on whether babies born to believing parents should be baptised, but Christians do agree that it's a huge privilege and responsibility when a child is born into a Christian family. Even many who don't support infant baptism still have ceremonies of dedication in which they celebrate God's goodness and promise to lead their little one in God's ways.

Not all Christians agree on whether a personal, public commitment to Christ is necessary before a child from a Christian family is baptised, but Christians do agree that such a personal, public commitment is necessary at some point. Even those who support infant baptism still insist that those who are baptised as babies must later respond with a public profession of personal faith in Christ as Lord and Saviour, and must live for him.

Christians may have differences, but let's never forget the common ground and the unity that Christians share. Keeping this in mind, let's address the question, "Should babies be baptised?"

Clearing Away Clutter

Let's begin by clearing away some clutter that confuses the issue. What do I mean by clutter? I mean mistaken ideas and flawed reasons that have piled up on both sides of this matter.

Some supporters of infant baptism believe that baptism has almost magical power to save and that a baby who dies unbaptised cannot go to heaven. They think the water itself washes away the original sin a baby is born with and causes a baby to be born again into new life. This view, called baptismal regeneration, is not biblical. If you support infant baptism because you believe in baptismal regeneration, you need a sounder basis than that.

By the same token, if you oppose infant baptism because you oppose the idea of baptismal regeneration, you need a better reason for opposing it. After all, millions of Christians believe in infant baptism without believing in baptismal regeneration at all. They don't believe God's saving power is

bound to the water or to a church official applying the water. They have a better, more biblical case for baptising babies, and you must consider that stronger case before you decide against infant baptism. Baptismal regeneration is one piece of clutter that needs to be cleared away in order to get at the real meaning of baptism and decide whether it should ever be applied to babies.

Here's a second piece of clutter: using Jesus' baptism as an adult as proof that baptism isn't for babies. Jesus was baptised at age 30 (Luke 3:21-23), and some folks claim that this disproves infant baptism. Sound convincing? Well, if Jesus' baptism at age 30 proves that babies shouldn't be baptised, it also proves that teenagers shouldn't be baptised, that twenty-somethings shouldn't be baptised, that anyone under 30 shouldn't be baptised. Even opponents of infant baptism know it can't mean that. They baptise committed Christian youth many years before they reach the age at which Jesus was baptised. In their view, baptism must be applied as soon as an individual makes a personal commitment to the Lord, and not before then. But they would never say Jesus waited till age 30 because he was not committed to his heavenly Father before that point. As Bible-believing Christians, they know there was not a moment of Jesus' life when he was not God's Son, fully committed to his Father.

The baptism Jesus received from John the Baptist in the Jordan River at age 30 was John's kind of baptism. That was different from the kind of baptism Jesus established. The Bible makes this clear. Therefore, the timing of Jesus' adult baptism by John has nothing to do with the timing of Christian baptism in the era after Jesus ascended to heaven and poured out his Holy Spirit. To say otherwise is confusing clutter.

A third kind of clutter is reasoning from silence, trying to score points on the basis of what the Bible doesn't say. If you oppose infant baptism, you might point out, "Nowhere does the Bible command infant baptism, and nowhere does the Bible mention a particular baby being baptised." That may sound convincing at first, but it's just as true to say, "Nowhere does the Bible command us not to baptise babies, and nowhere in the Bible is there a record of someone who grew up in a Christian family being baptised as a teenager rather than as an infant." Reasoning from silence doesn't prove much either way.

Suppose we were asking not about whether babies should be baptised but about whether Christian women should take part in the Lord's Supper. Nowhere does the Bible command, "Women shall eat the bread and drink the wine." But that doesn't matter. Christians know full well that women belong at the Lord's table. Why? Because of what the Bible says about the status of women who trust Jesus Christ. They are saved through his body and blood; therefore, they belong at the Lord's table.

It would be clutter to point out that the Bible doesn't speak of women at the Lord's Supper. The real issue is what the Bible says about the status of Christian women and how their status relates to what the Bible says about the Supper. Likewise, it's clutter to point out that the Bible doesn't command that babies be baptised (or not baptised). The real issue is what the Bible says about the status of babies born to godly parents, and how that status relates to what the Bible says about baptism.

Children of Believers

Baptism is a sign and seal of entering the community of Christ, the community bought with Jesus' blood and given life by his Holy Spirit. What's the status of babies born to Christian families? Do they belong to that covenant community? Do they have a place in God's family? Are they citizens of God's kingdom?

The Bible tells of people "bringing babies to Jesus" (Luke 18:15). The Lord's inner circle of disciples rebuked the parents for bringing the little ones. But what did Jesus do?

When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these..." And he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and bless them. (Mark 10:14,16).

This story doesn't mention baptism, but it does say a great deal about the status of believer's babies. Jesus embraces and blesses babies of believing parents and says his kingdom belongs to such as these. How, then, can the church refuse them the sign of citizenship in God's kingdom and membership in his family?

God's covenant has always included not only believers but their children as well. Two thousand years before Christ, God told Abraham, "I will

establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you" (Genesis 17:7). God's covenant included not only Abraham but his household and his descendants.

The Bible uses the word covenant more than 270 times, so it's obviously important. What does God mean when he speaks of a covenant? A covenant is a relationship grounded in promises and confirmed by a sign. For example, a marriage covenant is a relationship grounded in wedding vows and confirmed by rings. God's covenant with Abraham was grounded in God's promise to be Abraham's God and the God of his offspring, and this was confirmed by the sign of circumcision.

God told Abraham, "You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. For the generations to come every male who is eight days old must be circumcised" (Genesis 17:11-12). Abraham came to faith as an adult and was circumcised as an adult, as "a seal of the righteousness he had by faith" (Romans 4:11). His son Isaac and future children in their line were circumcised as infants and marked as members of the community of faith, even before they could consciously exercise faith of their own. That was the pattern God established for his people.

Circumcision was not just a physical ritual for a certain ethnic group. It had spiritual meaning, and it could include people who were not born Israelites. If a man grew up as a foreigner to the covenant community and wished to join it and serve the Lord, he was circumcised as an adult, and all males in his household were also circumcised (Exodus 12:48). From then on, any male born into that covenant family was circumcised as an infant, marking him as a member of the covenant.

God's covenant with Abraham was "an everlasting covenant," not a temporary one. That everlasting covenant remains in effect to this day. God doesn't change. The Lord who made promises to Abraham is the same Lord Jesus who embraced babies brought by believing parents, and still today this same Lord promises to be the God of believers and their children.

From Circumcision to Baptism

God doesn't just decide one day to dump his covenant and come up with something entirely different. He remains faithful to the same covenant. But he has brought that covenant into a new and better era, and he seals it with a new and better sign. In the old era, God promised a Saviour. In the new era, the promise has been fulfilled. Jesus' perfect life and bloody death and glorious resurrection fulfil everything necessary for salvation by faith. God "announced the gospel in advance to Abraham" (Galatians 3:8), but now that Christ has come, the gospel is clearer than it was in Abraham's day, and the blessings are poured out more abundantly.

In this new and better covenant era, God gives a new and better covenant sign. Now that Jesus has suffered and poured out his blood, God no longer calls for the bloody, painful sign of circumcision. Instead he gives the sign of baptism. This better sign of baptism is without blood or pain. This better sign of baptism is not limited to males (as circumcision was) but is applied to females as well.

The new covenant era and the new covenant sign are better than the old, so it would be a shocking letdown if the God who included children of believers in the old era excluded them in the new era. How could babies from covenant families, circumcised in the old era, not be baptised in the new era?

The Bible links the meaning of circumcision with baptism in Colossians 2:11-12. There Scripture speaks of "the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead." Circumcision pictured "the putting off of the sinful nature" (Colossians 2:11); so does baptism. Circumcision was the sign of becoming part of God's covenant community; so is baptism. Circumcision called for a heart in tune with God (Deuteronomy 10:16; 30:6); so does baptism. The spiritual meaning of circumcision is fulfilled in the new covenant sign of baptism.

Family Baptism

On the day of Pentecost, the Lord poured out his Holy Spirit to launch the new covenant era. The apostle Peter told the people, "Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children" (Acts 2:38-39). Those words of Peter echoed

God's promise to Abraham, to be a faithful God to him and his children. About 3,000 people were baptised that day.

After Pentecost, the Holy Spirit kept adding to the church, and not just one individual at a time. The Spirit added whole families. Entire households were baptised. When the Lord opened the heart of a woman named Lydia, the result was not just an individual baptism. "She and the members of her household were baptised" (Acts 16:15). When a suicidal jailer asked the apostle Paul, "What must I do to be saved?" he was told, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved--you and your household." The man believed, his despair turned to joy, and "he and all his family were baptised" (Acts 16:31,33). A synagogue ruler named Crispus "and his entire household" came to Christ and were baptised (Acts 18:8). In one of Paul's letters, he wrote, "I also baptised the household of Stephanas" (1 Corinthians 1:14).

Did any of these family baptisms include babies? Probably so, but there's no way to prove it--and there's no need to prove it. Whether there were babies or not, the principle of family solidarity is clear. When an adult was baptised, whether a father or mother, so were the children in the household. When lost sheep went into God's fold, their lambs went with them.

The gospel addresses households, and it's biblical to respond as households. Biblical faith declares, "As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord" (Joshua 24:15). In the Old Testament, when the head of a household was circumcised, his boys were also circumcised. In the New Testament, when the head of a household was baptised, the rest of the household was also baptised. Today, too, churches should baptise individual converts and the children under their care.

Marbles or Branches?

A gospel that speaks only of a personal relationship to God but not a family relationship to God is missing something. The Bible teaches both family solidarity and personal responsibility, not either/or. Our culture is extremely individualistic, and that makes it harder for us to see how babies too young to think for themselves could be included in God's covenant. So let's ask ourselves: are we marbles or branches?

The Bible speaks of Christ and his church as a grapevine. One way God's vine gets more branches is to grow them. Another way is for branches to be grafted in from outside. Either way, whether a branch grows from the vine or is grafted into it, any twigs on the branch are included as well. When a child is born to someone who is already part of the church, the child is part of the church. When parents from outside the church of Christ become part of it, their children become part of it too. And baptism is the sign of belonging.

In our individualistic culture, says author Douglas Wilson, we'd rather be marbles than branches. We picture Christ not as a vine but as a marble box where individual marbles are placed one by one for safekeeping. No marble is connected to any other marble. Each is on its own. But has Jesus ever said, "I am the box; you are the marbles"? No, Jesus says, "I am the vine; you are the branches" (John 15:5). If a branch is connected to the vine, so are any twigs that are connected to the branch.

This does not automatically mean that every branch or twig that's connected to the vine is truly alive and bearing fruit. Some baptised persons are part of the church and attached to the vine outwardly, but they turn out to be dead wood, without the life of Christ or the fruit of faith. Jesus says, "My Father ... cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit" (John 15:1-2).

Some Christians oppose infant baptism largely because some people baptised as babies turn out faithless and fruitless. That's an important concern. But there are also people baptised as youth or adults who turn out faithless and fruitless. Lifeless, nominal Christianity is a serious danger, but that doesn't mean that no babies should be baptised. It means churches must be sure to baptise not just any child but only covenant children, children of active, professing believers. It also means that church discipline must be applied when it becomes evident that a branch is dead. If a baptised person rejects Christ and lives in sin, that person must be warned of God's judgment and no longer be regarded as part of the church.

But let's not get stuck on what happens to dead branches. These are tragic exceptions, not the rule. The joyful expectation of baptism is that branches joined to the vine will flourish and bear fruit.

When a new baby is born, do parents wait for years to see whether the baby chooses to be part of the family before they treat him as part of the family? No, they treat the little one as part of the family right away. Do they wait for years to give the child a name and just say "Hey, you!" until he can choose a name for himself? No, they give the baby a name as soon as he's born. Now, it's conceivable that when a child grows up, he could dis- own his family and change his name, but that's not the expectation. The expectation is that the child will always be in the family.

In God's family, the church, should we wait for a baby to grow up before treating him as a member of God's family? Should we wait to see how he turns out before we give him a name, an identity? No, a baby of Christian parents should be treated from the start as part of God's family. He should have the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit placed on him in baptism.

To be born into a Christian family and be baptised as a baby is no substitute for personal faith; it makes the call for personal faith all the more powerful and urgent. That's why churches that baptise babies of believers also insist that when those children reach a point where they're able to make up their own minds, they must make a personal, public profession of faith in Christ. Let me say again: God's covenant involves family solidarity and personal responsibility, not either/or.

God uses baptism to strengthen faith and increase joy. If you trust in Jesus and see your baptism as the sign of sins forgiven and union with Christ, your baptism is a personal comfort. If you bring babies to Christ for his blessing and baptism, if you do all in your power to instruct them in the Christian faith and to lead them by your example to be Christ's disciples, if you make your home a place where Christ is loved and obeyed, then baptism is a seal of joy and confidence for your family's future.

A relationship with God is always deeply personal but never merely private. God does not just deal with individuals one at a time. God's covenant embraces believers, their families, and future generations. "He is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commands" (Deuteronomy 7:9). What glorious good news!

Further Reading:

Robert R. Booth, *Children of the Promise*, P&R Publishing, 1995.

Douglas Wilson, *To a Thousand Generations*, Canon Press, 1996

Michael Green, *Baptism*, IVP

Gregg Strawbridge (ed.), *The Case for Covenantal Baptism*, P&R Publishing, 2003

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