

# WHAT ABOUT INFANT BAPTISM?

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We do not believe that infant baptism is the same thing as biblical, believer's baptism. That is why we ask people who have been baptized as infants to consider being baptized as a believer. We do not see it as one's re-baptism, but rather as one's first baptism - first biblical one at least. This excellent chapter explains why we see it like this.

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An excerpt from 'Baptism and you' by Rob Warner

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## Chapter 7 - What about young children?

### Jesus blessed children

New parents love to show off their children. New grand-parents take much pleasure in debating which side of the family contributed the nose or smile. For a few years at least, children often become the centre of their parents' attention. Jesus decided to ask Jesus to hold their children in his arms (Mark 10:13-16). They were looking for more than an affectionate caress - they were seeking God's blessing.

The disciples reacted in their usual manner: wrongly. Their intentions were to protect Jesus, and they tried to do so by rebuking the parents. Presumably, in ruling out this parental audience, they explained that Jesus was too busy or too important to be bothered with young children. Immediately, Jesus rebuked his followers and made space for the children. Throughout his ministry, he emphasized the value of children and the lessons we can learn from them, especially about living faith.

In some churches children always seem to be an intrusion. They have to sit still, keep quiet and switch off, with nothing to contribute and no moment in the service which makes much sense to them. The church has all too often slipped into the disciples' prejudice and assumed that God and true religion have no time for children. Jesus rejected out of hand the notion that God is only for grown-ups.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus affirmed children. He wanted little children welcomed in his name (Mark 9:37). He taught that we need to receive the good news like a child, with simplicity and trust (Mark 10:15). To be great in the kingdom of heaven we need to learn to become humble like little children (Matthew 18:4). Unlike those who wanted a style of religion that

was for adults only, Jesus took delight in children's praise (Matthew 21:15-16).

Once his disciples had been put in their place and the children had been brought to him, Jesus took them in his arms, which gives some indication of the maximum age, or at least size, of the young children in this scene. Then he laid hands upon them and blessed them, just as their parents had requested. It is crucial to recognize that Jesus walked a middle path in expressing God's favour. He flatly refused to exclude the children, as if the kingdom of God were a child-free zone. And then he blessed them, *but he did not baptize them*. In the Gospels, as in Acts, baptism is reserved for those old enough to respond to the message that was preached - repent and believe. Jesus took great delight in affirming and blessing children, but during his ministry children were never baptised.

### The baptism divide

At the time of the Reformation, the newly emerging Protestant churches had to decide what to do about baptism. The state church Protestants decided to retain the Roman Catholic practice of infant baptism. Four main arguments were offered: the tradition of the church, which had practised infant baptism for many centuries; the household baptisms of the New Testament; the covenant parallel between circumcision and infant baptism; and the symbolism of prevenient grace - that is, the grace of God which reaches out to us long before we respond to faith.

The independent Protestants rediscovered the practice of believers' baptism, and as a result experienced persecution by Roman Catholics and state church Protestants alike. The most extreme penalty they faced was death by drowning, based on the perverse notion that since they were so keen on water they might as well be treated to a lot more of it. In those days, therefore, to be baptised as a believer was extremely dangerous. You were only baptized as a believer if you were absolutely convinced that it was the right thing to do. These baptists rejected each of the state church arguments as fatally flawed: tradition has no authority when it contradicts the plain teaching of Scripture; there is no evidence that the household baptisms included young children; the parallel between circumcision and infant baptism is not found in the New Testament, but was developed later to justify a later and unbiblical church tradition; and the prevenient grace of God is expressed supremely and definitively at the cross of Christ rather than in a sacramental act unknown to the first Christians.

Far from pointing people towards saving faith, baptists saw infant baptism saw infant baptism as profoundly misleading, whether in its Roman Catholic or state church Protestant form. Right across Europe, people assumed that they were Christian individuals who were living in Christian countries. They placed their hope not in personal, saving faith in Christ, but in the works righteousness of infant baptism: 'I was baptized as a baby in church, so I am obviously a Christian, by birth and by baptism.'

## The circumcision debate

The first Christians were Jewish, and when Gentiles began to join the church, there was a great debate. Some Jewish believers said that the Gentiles should be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses. Others, including the apostle Paul, thought that all the Gentiles had to do was believe in Christ. He was convinced that far from helping Gentile Christians, the circumcision party were distracting them from the glorious gospel of salvation by the grace of God alone rather than by human effort.

This debate is a continuing undercurrent in the New Testament. It takes centre stage in Acts 15, when the Jerusalem Council agrees a policy on Gentile converts, and in Paul's letter to the Galatians, when Paul tackles the impact upon a young Gentile church of some visiting Jewish preachers who were insisting that circumcision was a requirement for every male convert. In Acts 15 the Judaizers speak first, and make their case succinctly: 'The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses' (Acts 15:5).

Peter, Paul and James all contribute to the debate that follows. They all develop the same theme, which Peter sums up in these words: 'We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are' (Acts 15:11).

If the first Christians had practised infant baptism, they could have disposed of the case for circumcision with a simple argument. The Jews, they could have said, practise circumcision, but among us Christians it has been replaced by infant baptism. Game, set and match. The fact that this line of argument is never used, either in Acts or in the New Testament letters, can only lead us to one reasonable conclusion. The covenant parallel between circumcision and infant baptism was never mentioned in the New Testament because the first Christians did not develop such a parallel. The first Christians did not practice infant baptism and saw no need for a direct, sacramental replacement for circumcision.

The key contrast in Acts 15 is not between two outward acts, but rather between the outward act of circumcision and the inward response of saving faith. In a similar way, when Paul speaks of a new circumcision, he contrasts the Jewish practice - 'circumcision done by the hands of men' - with the inward transformation of Christian - [the circumcision done by Christ'. This 'Christian circumcision', Paul explains, is the putting off of the sinful nature; (Colossians 2:11). The contrast is between the outward act of conformity in the Old Covenant and the inward reality of transformation which depends upon personal, saving faith in Christ. Baptism in the New Testament is not the new circumcision. When the first Christian believers were baptized, it was a public sign of an inward reality: they had already entered into the new, inward and spiritual relationship with Christ, by putting their trust in him as Saviour and Lord. Those who have been circumcised inwardly, by faith in Christ, are then eligible for the outward act of baptism as a believer.

When Paul wrote 1 Corinthians, there was a great deal of confusion at Corinth about mixed marriages where only one partner had been converted. Some wondered whether they should divorce their non-Christian partner. Paul said that they should stay with them unless the unbeliever took the initiative and demanded a divorce. Others were concerned about how God saw their children. Paul assured them that their children were 'holy' (1 Corinthians 7:14). Paul doesn't go into any detail, but he seems to be indicating that where one of the parents is a believer, their children are included within the covenant of love until such a time as they are able to make up their own minds about whether to live as a believing Christian.

The striking thing, once again, is the complete absence of any reference to infant baptism. If it had been the normal practice of the first Christians, Paul would surely have mentioned it in this debate. He could have said to the worried parent: 'You can be sure that God looks upon your children favourably, because the church was willing to baptize them.' The complete absence of any mention of infant baptism in the New Testament, especially in moments of great debate and controversy over circumcision and the status of children, can only lead to one logical conclusion. The first Christians never mentioned infant baptism because they never practised it. The only baptism they knew and encouraged was the baptism of believers.

### **Household baptisms**

Defenders of infant baptism often refer to the occasions when we are told that a household was baptized. There are several household baptisms in the New Testament, including the following:

- Stephanas (1 Corinthians 1:16; 16:15);
- Cornelius (Acts 10-11)
- Lydia (Acts 16)
- the Philippian jailer (Acts 16);
- Crispus (Acts 18).

In three of these cases we are explicitly told that each member of the household was converted. Paul describes the household of Stephanas as 'the first converts in Achaia' (1 Corinthians 16:15). Baptism was not something imposed upon everyone else when Stephanas, the head of the household, became a Christian. They were all baptized because they were all converted. Similarly, we are told that Crispus and his entire household believed in the Lord. Luke reinforces the New Testament pattern by adding that many Corinthians subsequently became believers and were then baptized (Acts 18:8).

The baptism of Cornelius' household concluded a remarkable sequence of events. First he had been promised that Peter's message would make a wonderful impact: 'you and all your household will be saved' (Acts 11:14). Second, while Peter was still preaching, the household members were converted. Third, they were filled with the Spirit and began to speak in tongues and praise God. Fourth, Peter gave the instruction that they should

be baptized with water, since God had already baptized them with the Holy Spirit. Baptism of the household followed on from conversion and Spirit baptism.

Two Philippian households were baptized: Lydia's and the jailer's. In Lydia's case we are told nothing about the other members of her household. The fact that she was a businesswoman makes it extremely likely, according to the customs of the day, that she was either single or widowed. She certainly offers hospitality to Paul and his team without any mention of a husband.

In the jailer's case, there is a violent earthquake around midnight which throws open the doors of the jail. Fearing that his prisoners must have escaped, the jailer is on the brink of killing himself when Paul calls out to reassure him that they have not run off. This leads to Paul preaching in the middle of the night to the jailer and 'to all the others in his house' (Acts 16:32). When Paul has finished, the jailer washes their wounds. And then the jailer and his family are baptized. There are spiritual and practical preconditions for these baptisms. In spiritual terms, the jailer's family must hear the gospel and respond in faith before water baptism becomes a relevant option. In practical terms, the family members are not capable of hearing and believing for themselves, but do so in the middle of the night, and are awake enough to be baptized in the small hours.

We should be careful to recognize some important details in these incidents. First, we are not told even once that a young child was present in any of these households. To establish the practice of infant baptism on an argument from silence is very rocky ground indeed. Second, in every instance where we are given details about the household members, everyone who is baptized has already come to faith. Third, most if not all these households would have contained servants. If every household member was baptized automatically when the head of the house converted, then baptism would have been imposed not only upon any children who were present but also upon every slave, irrespective of their age. Elderly relatives would presumably have been treated in the same way.

There are three fundamental problems with attempts to interpret household baptisms as a justification for infant baptism. First, it is an argument from silence, since we are never once told of young children being baptized in the New Testament. Second, if it proves anything, it proves too much, since if the first Christians did baptize the entire household automatically upon the conversion of the head of the house, not only young children but also slaves and elderly dependants would have had baptism thrust upon them, irrespective of their own religious convictions. What Luke reports, where there are several conversions in a home, is that every member of the household who comes to faith in Christ is then entitled to be baptized as a believer, and it is only natural for them to be baptized together. Third, such an interpretation flies in the face of the unambiguous teaching and practice of the New Testament Christians, since all the direct evidence we have points exclusively to the practice of believers' baptism. To build a case for infant baptism upon silence and speculation is to build upon sand. Infant

baptism simply cannot be found in the pages of the New Testament. It is, in the view of believer-baptizing Christians, a lamentable misrepresentation of the biblical data. Only the familiarity of later church practice has made infant baptism seem plausible. The case just cannot be made from the New Testament. If infant baptism was practised and important among the first Christians, they would have told us so. As it is, the custom lacks biblical credibility. It is a classic instance of human tradition overriding the clear teaching and practice of the Bible. And the tragic result is generations of people who have been convinced that they are fully paid-up Christians, by birthright and infant baptism, without any need for personal, saving faith and a life of discipleship.

### **Including children**

Christian adults have an awesome responsibility towards children. Jesus warned us in the gravest possible terms not to treat them badly. If we cause them to stumble, God's severe judgement is upon us (Matthew 18:6). Whatever our convictions about infant baptism, all Christians need to learn how to affirm and include children as part of today's church. We find it so easy to bore children out of the church, so we must make it an urgent priority to make church a boredom free zone and genuinely user friendly for children and teenagers.

This responsibility to protect children from stumbling rests on parents first, and then on the whole church. On Sunday mornings our children hear about love, forgiveness and faith. But do they hear a different story during Sunday lunch? Love can be usurped by gossip, forgiveness by criticism, and faith by cynicism and unbelief. Children can quickly learn that Jesus taught the positive way of love, but Christians often prefer the negative way of legalistic religion. We teach our children more by who we are than by what we say. Sadly, by the time they reach teenage years many children have become professional critics, well-schooled in the destructive art of finding fault with everyone.

Being around Jesus was immensely inspiring, but also hugely enjoyable for much of the time. The disciples may not have known what he was going to do next, but they were confident that he loved them and wanted the best for them. We need to cultivate that kind of experience for children, both at church and in the Christian home. Christian parents who are too busy to spend time with their children are just too busy. Buying them presents is no substitute for the best gifts of all: giving them your availability, support and love. Don't let you children down.

As to baptisms, I like to see children not just present but in the best seats, sitting around the baptistry for a close-up view. As they hear the testimonies, see the immersions and recognize the deep joy expressed by those being baptized, it helps them to grow into a personal faith and prepare for the great day of celebration when they will be baptized. By avoiding infant baptism, we protect children so that they can enter into the

full, New Testament privilege of believers' baptism at the right time in their lives.

Children cannot be made regenerate through prayers of thanksgiving and dedication. Nor can they be obliged to become Christians later as a result of promises that adults made on their behalf in their infancy. Salvation is by faith, not works. And every individual's free will must be respected at all times - true conversion simply cannot be imposed upon anyone.

What, then, is appropriate for babies? We give thanks to God for the gift of new life. We pray for God's blessing upon their lives and for God's protection in a world that can sometimes become difficult and dangerous. We pray for the parents, that they will grow into the astonishing responsibilities of parenthood. We also pray that the parents, supported by the church, will bring up their children in the knowledge of God and his ways. And we pray, above all, that the child will grow into a personal, saving faith, trusting in Jesus Christ as their Saviour and Lord. That's a wonderful and rich combination of prayer for any child. It's a great privilege to honour and bless children in such thoroughly biblical ways. We will not baptize children, but we will bless them gladly - just as Jesus did.

### **What if my parents disapprove?**

The Bible instructs us to obey our parents in childhood and then to give them lifelong respect. The answer to this question partly depends on the age of the person faced with parental disapproval. If you are under 16, my advice is to wait until you are older. If you are 16 or older, I would encourage you to raise the issue with your parents and explain your thinking, being careful not to get into an argument if they react negatively.

Clara's parents were devout Anglicans. She was worried that her baptism as a believer might seem to them to be a rejection of her upbringing. She kept putting off the conversation, but eventually she felt she could wait no longer and had to talk it through with them. To her surprise, they were absolutely delighted. 'The most important thing to us is that you are living as a committed Christian,' they explained. 'If a different denominational setting is helpful to you, that's no problem to us at all.'

Charles' parents were more hostile. They needed reassurance that this was his settled decision, and not something forced upon him by some kind of cult. A visit from a couple of church leaders was enough to put them at their ease, and so we were able to go ahead with the baptism without any legacy of ill-feeling in the family.

For Amanda, the problem was not her parents, but her own insecurity. She had always been a very vulnerable person, having struggled with eating disorders for many years, and was deeply fearful of rejection by her parents. We therefore decided that it would be unwise to take forward the possibility of her being baptized until she was feeling much stronger in

herself. Because of her particular personal needs, the most important thing for Amanda was not a quick baptism, but a long exposure to a loving and supportive fellowship.

Megan's father showed no flexibility at all. Stubbornness was probably a family trait. Megan was definite that she wanted to be baptized. Her father was just as definite that such behaviour was appalling. His denomination was the only true church, and he would certainly not attend his daughter's baptism. Megan was in her 20's and more than old enough to know her own mind. She made the choice to be baptized despite her father's objections, convinced that she was obeying Christ by being baptized. Given the choice she was determined to put Christ first. However, going against her father's wishes did not mean that she had to reject him, so she made a special effort to be gracious and loving, patient and appreciate towards her father. As an adult, she demonstrated her affection for her father not through unthinking and unconditional obedience, but by continued demonstrations of loving respect and appreciation, even when he didn't make it easy.