

Should infants be baptised

Should infants be baptised?

There is a great deal of confusion today on the subject of baptism, and there are many questions that people have. One particular area about which there is confusion is in the matter of who should be baptised. Should infants be baptised, or should baptism be reserved for those who can make their own confession of faith? This booklet attempts to provide an answer to this question from the Bible.

Many people bring their newly born babies to be baptised. Some think that by doing so they will impart salvation to their children, so that they will grow up as Christians. Others do so in the hope that their children will later on embrace Christ as their Saviour and experience him personally in their lives. Is this a right practice? Let us see what the Bible teaches.

We first encounter baptism in the Bible when John the Baptist started his work of preaching and baptising. We read in Matthew's Gospel, that "In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the desert of Judea and saying, 'Repent, for the Kingdom of God is near' " (Matthew 3.1 – 2). A few verses later we read, "People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptised by him in the Jordan River." (verses 5 – 6). John was preaching to people in the desert. They went out to him to listen to him there. Those who accepted his message repented of (turned from) their sins and confessed them to others. As a sign of their repentance they were baptised. Baptism followed faith and repentance.

We learn from John's Gospel that Jesus also baptised as part of his ministry. In John 3.22 – 23 we read: "After this, Jesus and his disciples went out into the Judean countryside, where he spent some time with them, and baptised. Now John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because there was plenty of water, and people were constantly coming to be baptised." Some mischievous people tried to stir up a rivalry between John and Jesus over the numbers of

people they were baptising. "The Pharisees heard that Jesus was gaining and baptising more disciples than John" (John 4.1). However, rather than being offended by Jesus' success, John was delighted with it. (John 3.27 – 36). For our purposes the point to notice is this: both John and Jesus baptised those who had accepted their message and become disciples. There is absolutely no indication that they baptised babies, or those who did not personally accept their message.

When Jesus had died on the Cross and been raised from the dead, just before he returned to his Father, he gathered his disciples to him and said to them: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." (Matthew 28.18 – 20). This is the mandate for Christian baptism. John's baptism was a fore-runner for Christian baptism, but was different, because it was baptism for repentance, to prepare people for the coming of the Kingdom of God. With the death and resurrection of Christ, however, the Kingdom of God has now started. Salvation from sins has now been fully made known. Now people are to be baptised, not in anticipation of the salvation which was going to be made known, but as a sign that they have received that salvation. This baptism is to be "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." But notice who is to be baptised: it is those who have been "made" into disciples through hearing the Gospel, (the good news) of the Lord Jesus Christ. The apostles, and believers after them, are not told to baptise those who might become disciples, or the children of disciples, but those who have already become disciples. Then they are to go on to teach them all that Christ had taught them.

What Jesus told his apostles to do, they immediately put into practice ten days later when the Holy Spirit was outpoured on the day of Pentecost. When the Holy Spirit came upon the believers there was a great sound and the believers started to speak in different languages. A large crowd gathered to find out what was going on. Peter explained to them that what had happened was the fulfilment of the Old Testament prophecy. God had promised that he would pour out the Holy Spirit, and now he had done so. The fact that he had given the Holy Spirit was proof that the Jesus whom this same crowd had called out to be crucified was in fact the promised Messiah. He concluded, "Therefore let

all Israel be assured of this: God made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ." (Acts 2.36). The account goes on to say that when they people heard this they were "cut to the heart" and asked "what shall we do?" Peter's reply was, "Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins" (verse 38). A few verses later we read, "Those who accepted his message were baptised, and about three thousand were added to their number that day" (verse 41). So we see very clearly that baptism was expected as a way of showing that the person repented and believed the message. We see also that the practice was that those who accepted the message were baptised. Again, there is absolutely no indication that those who did not accept the message, or who were unable to accept the message through being too young, were baptised.

We see the same thing repeated when the Gospel spread to Samaria. This came about because persecution came upon the church in Jerusalem, and so the believers were scattered, and preached the Good News wherever they went. One of those who did this was Philip who went to a city in Samaria. Some people had been following a sorcerer named Simon, "but when they believed Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptised, both men and women." (Acts 8.12). Notice, when they believed they were baptised.

After this an angel told Philip to go into the desert, and there he met an Ethiopian man who was sitting in his chariot reading from the prophet Isaiah. Philip went over to him and asked if he understood what he was reading (he was reading a passage which foretold the suffering of Christ). The man said, "How can I, unless someone explains it to me" (Acts 8.31). So, starting at that point, Philip told him the good news about Jesus. Then we read, "As they travelled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptised?" And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptised him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing" (verses 8.36 – 39). What had happened? Clearly, the Ethiopian had come to believe Philip's message, and wanted to express this through being baptised.

In next chapter of the book of Acts we have a record of the conversion of Saul,

who became Paul. Saul had been filled with an insane hatred of believers, and had obtained permission to go to Damascus and hunt some down and bring them to Jerusalem to be tried. But on the way the Lord Jesus appeared to him and he was struck with blindness. Christ then told Ananias to go to where Saul was staying and to pray for him. Then the account says,

Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, 'Brother Saul, the Lord - Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here - has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.' Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptised, immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. (Acts 9.17 - 18)

We see once more that baptism follows faith.

In the next chapter we have an account of the Gospel first going to Gentiles. God appeared in a dream to Peter to tell him that he should be willing to go with messengers who were about to arrive from a Gentile man. Peter went with the messengers and told Cornelius and the members of his household about Christ. As he was speaking, the Holy Spirit came upon those who were listening. At this Peter said, "Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have." (Acts 10.47). So they were baptised then and there. See again the pattern: baptism follows hearing the Gospel and faith.

At this point, it may be worth dealing with arguments that are commonly put forward in favour of infant baptism. There are a number of arguments that are put forward in support of infant baptism:

"Whole households were baptised in New Testament times"

This argument goes as follows. There are accounts of whole households being baptised in the New Testament. The account of Cornelius' household being baptised, which we have just considered, is one example. So it is argued, this means that if the head of the household was converted, all the members of his household, including infants, were baptised as well.

There are a number of things to be said in answer to this argument. First of

all, when the New Testament uses the word “household” it means those who live under the roof of the individual. This could include wider family as well as servants and slaves. For example, Luke 8:3 mentions “Joanna the wife of Cuza, the manager of Herod's household”. Joanna was a high ranking servant in the “household” of Herod, who managed the other servants.

Secondly, there is no indication in any of the examples mentioned that infants were part of the households.

Thirdly, and most importantly, in three of the instances of household conversions, the accounts clearly indicate that the Word of God was preached to the whole household, and that the whole household believed and was saved. This was the case with Cornelius and his household, as we saw above. Cornelius had previously been told in a vision “He [Peter] will bring you a message through which *you and your household will be saved*” (Acts 11.14). Peter preached the Gospel *to the whole household*. The Holy Spirit then came upon them all. They were then all baptised, because they had all come to believe the message, and had visibly received the Holy Spirit.

We see the same thing in the account of the conversion and baptism of the jailor at Philippi. Paul and Silas had been wrongly accused and had been thrown into prison. They sang praises to God in their cell. At midnight there was an earthquake and the doors of the prison flew open. The jailor, thinking that the prisoners had escaped and that he would pay for the escape with his life, was about to commit suicide. But Paul called out to him to stop, because the prisoners were all still inside. Then we read:

He then brought them out and asked, ‘Sirs, what must I do to be saved?’ They replied, ‘Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved — you and your household.’ Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptised. 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.” (Acts 16.30 – 34).

Notice, Paul promised, “believe on the Lord Jesus and you will be saved – you and your household.” Then Paul “spoke the word of the Lord to him and to *all the others in his house*.” After the word had been spoken to the household,

the whole household was baptised. Following this there was joy because he had “come to believe in God – he and his whole family”. The clear inference to draw from this passage is that the whole household was baptised because the whole household had heard God’s word and the whole household had believed the word.

We see the same thing with the conversion of the household of Crispus, the synagogue ruler at Corinth. We read in Acts 18.8, “Crispus, the synagogue ruler, and his entire household believed in the Lord.” We can safely assume that Crispus and his household were baptised, but they were so because they had all believed, not just because Crispus had believed.

Far from disproving the need for personal faith prior to baptism, the accounts of household baptisms strengthen the case for personal faith prior to baptism.

“Baptism is the equivalent of circumcision”

A second argument in favour of infant baptism goes like this: There essentially one “covenant of grace” which God has made with those people who will be saved. In the Old Testament time this was revealed under the Old Covenant, and in the New Testament times it is revealed in the New Covenant, but these two covenants are really different dispensations of the same “covenant of grace”. Therefore there is a fundamental unity between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant. Principles which apply to the Old Covenant apply to the New. Under the Old Covenant God gave his blessing to Abraham and his descendants, on account of Abraham’s faith. So, it is argued, under the New Covenant God gives his blessing to the believer and his children. The sign of the Old Covenant was circumcision, which was to be carried out on all the male members of the believer’s household. The New Covenant equivalent of circumcision is baptism, which, like circumcision, should be carried out on the believer and the members of his household.

In answer to this argument, a number of points need to be made.

Firstly, the Scriptures speak about not one single covenant of grace in different dispensations, but rather “*covenants* (plural) of the promise”, looking forward to the New Covenant which was to come. For example, in Ephesians 2.12 the apostle Paul says to Gentiles about their life prior to conversion, “Remember

that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the *covenants of the promise*, without hope and without God in the world."

Secondly, the Scriptures speak about the Old Covenant being done away with and having become obsolete. The writer to the Hebrews says, "For if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another. But God found fault with the people." He then quotes from Jeremiah 31:31 – 34, and says, "By calling this covenant "new," he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear" (Hebrews 8:7 – 8, 13).

Thirdly, whilst it is true that the covenant that God made with Abraham was with him and his offspring or "seed", (Genesis 17:1 – 14), when God promised the New Covenant he explicitly said that it would operate on a different principle. Rather than people being affected by the decisions of their parents, people would be directly responsible to God for their own lives. "In those days people will no longer say, 'The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge.' Instead, everyone will die for his own sin; whoever eats sour grapes — his own teeth will be set on edge" (Jeremiah 31:29 - 30). The passage goes on to describe the features of the New Covenant that God will make with his people, contrasting it with the Old Covenant:

"The time is coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares the LORD. "This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbour, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the LORD. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more." (Jeremiah 31:31 – 34)

God promised that under the New Covenant he would write his law on his people's hearts. He would make them want to obey him. He would give them a new nature. This is a clear reference to gift of the Holy Spirit and the rebirth, which God has made widely available following the death of Christ, his

resurrection, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. Under the New Covenant, all God's people have a personal relationship with him, and all know the forgiveness of their sins.

Fourthly, the New Testament counterpart for circumcision is not baptism but this rebirth that is spoken of in Jeremiah 31 and other places. This is made plain in Paul's letter to the Colossians: "In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ" (Colossians 2:11). Circumcision was a "type" looking forward to the "anti-type" which is the rebirth. Now that the reality of the rebirth has come, whether or not a person has been physically circumcised is irrelevant. "Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation." (Galatians 6:15). Baptism an entirely new ordinance, to mark an entirely new situation where God's people have been circumcised in the heart, through the rebirth. It is the outward sign of the rebirth. It demonstrates that the believer has been united spiritually with Christ in his death and resurrection (Romans 6:1 - 4). There is therefore a link between circumcision and baptism, but it is an indirect link not a direct one. Circumcision looked forward to the rebirth, and the rebirth is outwardly shown by the believer being baptised. Just as all the beneficiaries of the Old Covenant were circumcised, so all the beneficiaries of the New Covenant are born again. God has given an ordinance to mark that the rebirth has happened, namely baptism.

For those wishing to consider further the "covenantal" argument for infant baptism and a response from Scripture, I would recommend "A String of Pearls Unstrung: A Theological Journey into Believers' Baptism" by Fred A. Malone, which is available on-line at http://wwwFOUNDERS.org/library/malone1/malone_text.html ^[1]. Malone has also written a fuller defence of believer's baptism "The Baptism of Disciples Alone", published by Founders Press and distributed in the UK by Evangelical Press. There is also an excellent book by David Kingdon, "The Children of Abraham", which was published by Carey Publications but is sadly out of print at the present time but is available at the Evangelical Library, 78 Chiltern Street, London.

"Peter promised blessing for the believer and his children"

A third argument in favour of infant baptism is that on the day of Pentecost Peter said that the promise of God is to “you and your children”. So, it is argued, the Peter was endorsing the principle of the Old Covenant that the family of a believer is included in God’s covenant, and was encouraging the baptism of believers.

A careful reading of what Peter actually said, and the context in which he said it, will, however, show that this argument for infant baptism will not stand up.

The actual words of Peter are

Repent and be baptized, 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 and for all who are far off — for all whom the Lord our God will call. (Acts 2.38 – 39)

As we noted above, these words were said in the context of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. Peter had proved from the Scriptures that the one that the Jews had so recently crucified was both Christ and Lord. They were “cut to the heart” and asked “what must we do.” In this context he said to them these words. By saying “The promise is to you and to your children and for all who are far off” what he was saying was that now, under the New Covenant, the gift salvation and of Holy Spirit is not restricted to a select few, but is promised to who come to Christ, to “all whom the Lord our God will call.” In other words, he is using an argument to encourage his hearers, and others after them, to repent and believe, by promising them that all who do so will be saved will experience the Holy Spirit, even if previously they have been far away. Far from supporting the case for infant baptism, this verse, read in context, does the exact opposite. It greatly strengthens the case for that we should believe first and then be baptised afterwards.

“Jesus said ‘Let the little children come unto me’ ”

A fourth argument that is used in favour of infant baptism goes as follows: Jesus said “Let the little children come unto me and do not hinder them for the Kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.” If Jesus encouraged children to come to him, the argument goes, who are we to turn them away from Christ and from baptism?

Again, it will be helpful for us to consider exactly what Jesus said, and the context in which he said it, and what he actually did for those children who did come to him. The account of this incident is in Matthew 19.13 – 15:

Then little children were brought to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them. But the disciples rebuked those who brought them. Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." When he had placed his hands on them, he went on from there.

We see from this passage that while Jesus was teaching the crowds, some people (presumably parents) brought their little children to Jesus. Notice what they wanted Jesus to do for their children: to place his hands on them. If infant baptism had been practiced by Christ, this would have been the perfect opportunity for it to be requested and practiced. But it was neither sought nor offered.

The disciples rebuked those who brought the children to Jesus. Presumably they thought that Jesus was far too important to be bothered with mere children. So they would have gladly sent the parents with their children away. But Jesus rebuked them and said that the little children should be allowed to come to him, and should not be hindered from so doing. The reason he gives is that the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these. Note, he did not say that the kingdom of heaven belongs to children, as though children are pure and innocent and therefore "worthy" of the kingdom of God. He said that the kingdom of heaven belongs to those are like children. In what way should we be like children to be part of the kingdom of God? By being believing like children. As Jesus said earlier "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18.3)

After this rebuke of the disciples, Jesus placed his hands on the children, as had been asked, and then went on. He did not baptise them.

So here, to be sure, is a strong encouragement for Christian parents to seek to introduce their children to Christ from an early age. We should teach them the Scriptures. We should bring them to meetings of the church. We should bring them to Jesus in prayer and seek his blessing upon them. And, my own view (although not all Baptists would agree with me) is that a child who truly

believes on Christ as saviour, and shows evidence of saving faith, can and should be baptised. But the baptism of a child who believes is a far cry from the baptism of an infant who is incapable of hearing the Gospel or expressing faith. Infant baptism is neither taught nor supported by this passage.

“Infant baptism is a tradition going back to the earliest days of the church, and supported by numerous church authorities

Another argument that is put forward in favour of infant baptism is that it is a long established tradition in the church, and that it is supported by many worthy teachers in the history of Christianity.

As regards how long infant baptism has been practiced, there is no record of infant baptism prior to the middle of the third century AD. See J M Cramp, “Baptist History: From the foundation of the Christian Church to the close of the Eighteenth Century”, Section 1, Chapter 3, which is available on-line at

<http://www.reformedreader.org/history/cramp/s01ch03.htm> [2].

As regards the support that infant baptism has had from different church councils, theologians, and popes, certainly from the fourth century onwards many supporters for infant baptism can be found. But so also can many supporters for other unbiblical practices be found from this period onwards. By the fourth century the church was departing in many respects from its Biblical roots, and unbiblical practices such as praying to Mary, invoking the saints, wearing vestments, paying homage to the papacy, regarding the Lord’s Supper as a “mass” were starting to come in. Church authorities can be mistaken, and often contradict each other. The only infallible and sure guide to church practice is the Scripture. “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3.16 – 17). Jesus condemned the Pharisees for placing their human traditions above the Word of God, saying “you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition.” (Matthew 15:6). It is by the Scriptures that we must be governed, not by human traditions.

“Infant baptism is a harmless activity which could do good”

The final argument for infant baptism that we shall mention here is a pragmatic one. Someone might say, "You may well be right on biblical grounds to say that baptism is for believers alone. But infant baptism is a useful means of making contact with people who do not usually come to church. We can have baptism classes with them. We have known people to be converted who were first contacted through baptism preparation classes for their children."

Any true believer will rejoice to hear of people being converted. But the "end does not justify the means", if the "means" involves tampering with what the Lord Jesus Christ has ordained. We are speaking here not about some peripheral aspect of church life about which the Scriptures say nothing, such as the details of how to run a business meeting for church members. This is an ordinance given by none other than the Lord Jesus Christ. We are not at liberty to tamper with what he has commanded us to do in this ordinance, any more than we are liberty to tamper with what he has told us to do as regards the Lord's Supper.

One indication of the importance of baptism is seen by the way in which the early modern Baptists were persecuted by church authorities. If baptism is so peripheral, why did the Roman Catholic Church, and sadly also some Protestant Churches, hound so many early modern Baptists to their death? Were the early modern Baptists mistaken to lay down their lives for the principle of believer's baptism, or had they in fact, through reading the Scriptures, rediscovered a principle of vital importance to healthy church life and practice, upon which they knew they could make no compromise? For an account of persecution of Baptists in the Netherlands in the sixteenth century, see the work by J M Cramp cited above, in the Section "The Reformation Period", Chapter 5, which is available on-line at

<http://www.reformedreader.org/history/cramp/s05ch05.htm> [3]

Far from being a "harmless" practice, arguably infant baptism has caused untold harm by leading many people who were "baptised" as babies to think that they are Christians. It has also led to mixed churches, where people who have been "baptised" as babies have been regarded as members of the churches, even though there is no sign of the rebirth in their life. This has in turn greatly weakened the witness of these churches.

We conclude, then, that, according to Scripture, baptism should only be carried out on those who have been born again by the Spirit of God, and who, as a result of the rebirth have repented of their sin and trusted Christ as their Saviour. To baptise anyone else, whether an infant, or an adult who has not truly been born again, is a misuse of the practice, and should not be done. Nor should we participate in the baptism of infants, by being present at a baptism service for an infant, or by being a “godparent”. If we do so we are joining in a practice which is contrary to Scripture, and which is potentially very harmful and dishonouring to God.

If you have not been born again, or you are not sure if you have been, I would urge you to ask God to do the miracle in your life. “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.” (Matthew 7.8)

If you believe you *have* been born again, and you do trust in Christ as your Saviour, then the teaching we have considered in this booklet shows that you *should* get baptised, to express outwardly what has already happened inwardly. Make a point of speaking with a pastor of the church you are meeting with and asking to be baptised.

. Unless otherwise stated, Scripture quotations are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission, International Bible Society.

This typed up sermon is copyright © Henry Dixon 2008, Poplar Baptist Church, 2 Zetland Street, London E14 6RB, United Kingdom. It may be reproduced without permission, provided:

It is reproduced in full,

The author is stated and this copyright notice is reproduced exactly

No charge is made for copies.

All other reproduction can only be with permission of the copyright holder.

1. http://wwwFOUNDERS.org/library/malone1/malone_text.html
2. <http://www.reformedreader.org/history/cramp/s01ch03.htm>
3. <http://www.reformedreader.org/history/cramp/s05ch05.htm>