



Q. Should infants also be baptized?¹

A. Yes, Infants as well as adults are included in God's covenant and people, and they, no less than adults, are promised deliverance from sin through Christ's blood and the Holy Spirit who produces faith.

Therefore, by baptism, the sign of the covenant, they too should be incorporated into the Christian church and distinguished from the children of unbelievers. This was done in the Old Testament by circumcision, which was replaced in the New Testament by baptism.

It is the teaching of the Presbyterian Church in America and Missio Dei Church that children of believing parents are to be baptized by the sprinkling or pouring of or immersion in water. Though we will be charitable, respectful, and tolerant of different interpretations, it will be the teaching of this church that the promises of God extend to the children of believers and therefore they should bear the mark of his promise – which is baptism. It is the goal of this paper to survey what the Bible says about baptism and explore the interpretations of our church in comparison to others.

THE COMMAND TO BE BAPTIZED ...

Jesus' command is very simple – “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...” (Matthew 28:19). Peter took up this message in his very first sermon, at Pentecost, when he says, “Repent and be baptized” (Acts 2:38). And Paul links baptism with “putting on Christ” in his letter to the Galatians (Galatians 3:27). So it is not an overstatement to say that it is a clear command that Christians must be baptized. In fact, so adamant are the Scriptures that the doctrinal standards of Presbyterians churches teach that is a “great sin” to neglect it.²

¹ Heidelberg Catechism Question and Answer 74

² See the Westminster Confession of Faith: chapter 28, section 5

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WHAT BAPTISM DOES NOT DO...

Though baptism is unequivocally taught in the New Testament and is a direct command from God, baptism does not save. There are two reasons we believe this. First, there is evidence that at least one man went to heaven without baptism – the thief on the cross (Luke 23:39-43). The second, and more central reason baptism cannot save a person, is that it is an act of obedience and we are told throughout the New Testament that through no obedience of our own will we enter heaven. The only ground for our salvation is Jesus Christ and his grace extended to us. Any teacher who adds some extra work to ensure salvation is to be accursed for preaching a different gospel (Galatians 1:8-9).

WHAT BAPTISM DOES DO...

Baptism signifies union with Christ. It is a symbol of God's promise of salvation. As a sacrament, it can be understood as a visible representation of a heavenly reality. The New Testament teaches that the true, saving baptism is not one of water but one administered by Christ and He baptizes with the Holy Spirit (Luke 3:16; Acts 11:16). But the "visible" baptism signifies this "invisible" one. Baptism, as a sign and seal of union with Christ, also acts as a sign and seal of membership in the church, which is Christ's body.

Believer's Baptism and Infant Baptism are actually quite different. The two views do not simply spring from different interpretations of the same biblical texts, rather the two views spring from different systems of understanding the experience of the Christian. Believer's Baptism tends to focus attention on the moment of conversion and the decision to follow Christ. Infant Baptism, on the other hand, tends to focus attention towards the promise of God's sovereign hand to effect salvation in us. Neither proponent would ever claim that baptism saves; it simply marks or signifies something. Baptism, in the New Testament, signifies the covenant God has made with his people, just as circumcision signified it in the Old Testament. Therefore there is a direct link between circumcision and baptism – they both signify the very same promise.³

WHY WE BAPTIZE CHILDREN...

As just mentioned, our understanding is that baptism is a symbol of God's covenant. That covenant was not just made with the Old Testament believer; it was also extended "to you and your children" (Genesis 17:7; Isaiah 59:21). God made a covenant with Abraham and it was that covenant that Jesus Christ guaranteed on the cross.⁴ Now, if we are correct to

³ Colossians 2:11-12 makes the connection between circumcision and baptism.

⁴ Reformed theology is often called Covenant Theology because it sees continuity between the covenant made with Abraham and the grace we receive in Christ. In fact, that covenant with Abraham is rooted in the Covenant of Grace first extended to Adam after the fall. To put it very simply, we see two covenants in all of history, the Covenant of Works (Genesis 1:1-3:14) and the Covenant of Grace (Genesis 3:15-Revelation 22)! Jesus Christ and his grace stands behind all of the Old Testament and he fulfilled it all.

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suggest that it was that original covenant that Christ came to fulfill, then it seems rational to suggest that the sign of that covenant be administered in the same way... to the children of believers (Genesis 17:9-14).

And so it is the practice of our church, that when one or both parents are believers, we baptize their children as infants. Again, the reason for this is the Scriptural teaching that God's covenant extends to the children. This does not, of course, mean that the child will certainly go to heaven. Baptism, whether Infant or Believer's, cannot guarantee salvation – they are both mere signs of what we believe to be happening on the inside. This was the same for circumcision, too. We know that many circumcised Jews in the Old Testament did not have a true faith when they were grown (i.e. Ishmael, Esau, the rebels in the wilderness, those Kings who were awful, those who opposed Christ, and even Judas Iscariot). So, just like circumcision and just like Believer's Baptism, Infant Baptism does not have any power to save and is completely worthless without the work of the Holy Spirit.

One of the important objections to Infant Baptism is that there seems to be no evidence of Infant Baptism in the New Testament. It is true that there is no direct evidence of an infant being baptized, but there are some things that we must consider. First, the book of Acts specifically documents the spread of the gospel to the unbelieving world, so it should be no surprise that Acts records mostly "believers" baptisms. If I led an unchurched person to Christ I would baptize him upon his profession of faith (which is what happened most often in Acts). And second, there is some evidence that it was an entire family that was baptized in Acts. There are two instances where a parent or head of a household came to Christ and the whole household was baptized (Acts 16:15, 33; 1 Corinthians 1:16).⁵ This would seem to be a reflection of the covenant as expressed in Genesis 17:9-14.

In short, there would be no disagreement if Paul had mentioned when Timothy was baptized! He was one of the few people in the New Testament who was actually brought up in the faith (2 Timothy 3:15). Was Timothy baptized as an infant because he had a believing mother (2 Timothy 1:5)? Or was he baptized when he made a profession of faith? The Bible simply does not say and so we must allow there to be mystery where the Bible leaves mystery.

SUMMARY...

First, we baptize infants because of our understanding of Christ's relationship to the Old Testament, and our subsequent desire to teach a consistent, biblical understanding of salvation. And second, Infant Baptism can often be mistaken for the Roman Catholic belief

⁵ These are the direct references to household baptisms. There are other passages where there is a reference to the promise of salvation being extended to the household without the explicit mention of baptism (Acts 2:38-39; 11:14; 16:31; 18:8).

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that baptism has the power to save. This is not a position we espouse and consider that to be contrary to the gospel as offered in Jesus Christ.

A BALANCED PERSPECTIVE...

Though it is the teaching of the Presbyterian Church in America to baptize infants and since all of our church officers hold to that view, we will never baptize children against the will of the parents. If parents want to wait until their children confess Christ before we baptize them, then we will wait.⁶ The reason for this is that we do not demand that church members subscribe to all the doctrines of the Presbyterian Church in America. There will certainly be adherents of believer's baptism in heaven and we do not want the doors of our church to be any narrower than the gates of heaven.

⁶ However, a traditional dedication will not be offered as an option.