

God's Covenant – Baptism and Infant Baptism

Case 1: Biblical Theology of Infant Baptism

Step 1:
Circumcision was
a sign of faith and
the blessings of
salvation

Romans 4:11 - "Abraham received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness he had by faith". Just as we are sinners saved by grace through believing, Abraham was as well. Does circumcision *save* the individual? NO! It is a sign of faith and salvation. *What did the circumcision accomplish then?* It brought the recipient into a "covenant community". Abraham believed in Genesis 15, but in Genesis 17 God makes with him a "covenant" (v. 7). Salvation cannot be lost, but a covenant is something Abraham must "keep" (Gen. 19:9: "You must keep by covenant...every male in your house must be circumcised"). A covenant is a *legal accountability relationship*. To be in a covenant is to have God's name placed on you. ("You shall be my people". It binds you to obey the word of God and worship and work with the people of God, those also in covenant with God.

And it was a sign put not only of believers, but on the children in their household. (Genesis 17:12; Gen. 19:11 - "every male in your house who is eight days old must be circumcised"). Why would the sign of faith and salvation be applied to an infant who had not yet believed? Because circumcision does not save, but it does accomplish this—it brings the children into the covenant. When Abraham placed it on his children, he was binding himself and them to have them brought up obeying God's law and worshipping and working with God's people. They had to some day be "circumcised in heart" as he was—they had to get saving faith as well. But the sign of faith and salvation upon them, bringing them into the covenant, was their continual prod and witness to them of their responsibility to grasp God by faith.

Summary of
Step #1

What did circumcision signify? *It was the sign of faith and salvation.* What did circumcision actually accomplish? *It brought the recipient into a covenant community.* Who received circumcision? *Believers (who had faith and thus were brought into the covenant) and their children (who came into the covenant first and were led to the faith circumcision pointed to).*

Step 2: Baptism is
the sign of faith
and salvation in the
New
Testament

Baptism is the outward sign of inward faith and the blessings of salvation (I Peter 3:21; I Cor. 12:13; Rom. 6:1-4). Does baptism save us? NO! In Romans 4 Paul refutes the idea that the sign of salvation can save us. It is a sign of faith and salvation. *What does baptism accomplish then?* It brings us into a covenant with God—for we are baptized "into the name" of Christ. Baptism binds us to the church; it is not merely a personal inward testimony, but a commitment to holy living and work with the church. See Acts 2:41 - to be "baptized" was to be "added to their number". To be baptized is to commit to a holy life (Gal. 3:27). It brought into a legal accountability relationship. It bound you to a) obey the word and b) worship and work with God's people

Summary of
Step #2

And it was a sign put not only of believers, but on the children in their household. Acts

16:15; 33-34, I Cor. 1:16, we see that when a head of household believed in Christ, not only was he (or she) baptized, but also the “whole household”. Now the word “household” in Greek included children. It would have been a bias bordering on prejudice to assume that every one of the households mentioned in the Bible as being baptized were childless households. Such would have been very abnormal. When a householder placed baptism on children, he was binding himself and them to have them brought up obeying God's law and worshipping and working with God's people. They had to some day be “baptized in the Spirit” as he was —they had to get saving faith as well. But the sign of faith and salvation upon them, bringing them into the covenant, was their continual prod and witness to them of their responsibility to grasp God by faith. What does baptism signify? *It is the sign of faith and salvation.* What does baptism actually accomplish? *It brings the recipient into a covenant community.* Who receives baptism? *Believers who have faith and thus are brought into the covenant and their children who come into the covenant first and are led to the faith baptism signifies.*

Step 3:
Circumcision is fulfilled by baptism

That circumcision and baptism both represented the same thing is clear from Col. 2:10-12. There we see that just as baptism represents the death of Christ which brings us our salvation, circumcision also represented the death of Christ which brings us our salvation. *Circumcision is fulfilled by baptism.*

Case 2: Principles of Interpretation

1. All Christians admit to the “unique position” of the children of believers.

We hold them accountable to pray and obey the Word and worship in ways we would not hold unbelievers, yet we urge them to believe and may know they are not yet born again. Presbyterians have no trouble understanding their position. They are “covenant children”, accountable by being brought into the covenant, with the covenant sign upon them. We have the Old Testament people of God as an example of this approach. Others basically do the same thing, but without any Biblical or theological framework to account for it.

2. Old Testament principles are binding on the New Testament, unless repealed.

Example: the tithe. The NT does not explicitly command the tithe, yet there are places it appears to assume it (Luke 11:42). Many Christians will argue that, since the tithe is not commanded in the NT, we are not bound to it. Others will argue that, since it is repealed we are still bound to it. Every NT teaching has its roots in the OT. This is a difficult issue of Biblical interpretation, and where you “come down” on it will determine your approach to infant baptism. If God would have us cease applying the sign of salvation to our children, as a way of expressing their unique place in the covenant community, why did he not plainly command us in the NT to stop it? After all, it is no small matter—if the fundamental pattern of 1700 years was to be laid aside we would expect a word from him. However, there is no such word. Indeed, we see in Acts “households” baptized upon the profession of the head of the household, just as we saw in the OT.

Case 3: Historical Argument

We know that in the early church, infants were baptized. Iraneus was a “Spiritual grandchild” of St. John the apostle. That is, Iraneus was discipled by Polycarp, who was discipled by the apostle. Iraneus baptized infants. Now it is unlikely that in such a short time period the church would have changed such an

important practice in the apostolic church? And if there was a change from the earliest practice to the latter practice, why would there be no evidence of a dispute? Why no tracts or papers or letters? Clearly the ancient church assumed that baptism of infants was normal. It is virtually impossible to believe that the NT church did not baptize infants when the “grandchildren” of the apostles did!