

## **A Pastor's Case for Infant Baptism**

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Why do Presbyterians baptize infants? We must confess that some bring their children for this sacrament because of the sweetness of the ceremony, or because of the expectation of family and church, or even with the misguided expectation that the “holy water” will magically protect the child from hell. However, neither sentiment nor tradition nor superstition is sufficient reason for informed believers to bring their children to be baptized. And, thankfully, such reasons are not the basis of our church’s practice. We baptize infants because we believe the Bible teaches us to do so.

Mine is the happy task of explaining the scriptural foundation for infant baptism from a pastoral perspective. In fulfillment of that task, I will first present the biblical support for infant baptism as I have in new members’ and church officer training classes over the last twenty-five years. Then, I will conclude by including words of explanation that I have often used as a pastor during the administration of the ordinance. My goals are to help explain why we should baptize the infants of believing parents, and also to help pastors know how to administer the sacrament in ways that are meaningful and helpful to their churches. Thus, I plan to present this material in terms that are accessible to lay persons and to leave the technical discussions for the able scholars elsewhere in this book.

One further word of preparation relates to my own journey regarding infant baptism. I did not always accept the practice of infant baptism. I was raised among dedicated, faithful and well-instructed Baptists who believe that the Bible only regards those able to decide to follow Christ as proper candidates for baptism. I well understand and respect those who have questions about the legitimacy of a practice that they feel has no biblical warrant. I also do not want to do anything that the Bible will not support. Thus, the paragraphs that follow are more than the recitation of a party line; they are the reflection of the thought process that led me to believe that Scripture teaches God wants believing parents to present their children to him in baptism.

The biblical explanation will flow as follows:

I. The Biblical Background of Infant Baptism

Salvation is through the *covenant of faith* in the Old and New Testament;

The faithful receive a *covenant sign* in the Old Testament;

The *covenant continues* in the New Testament;

The *covenant sign changes* to reflect New Testament blessings.

II. The Biblical Basis for Infant Baptism

The absence of a counter command

The presence of household examples

III. The Biblical Benefits of Infant Baptism

The devotion of the parents

The blessing of the child

## I. The Biblical Background of Infant Baptism

### A. The Covenant of Faith

Many of the children in our churches enjoy singing the song, "Father Abraham Had Many Sons." In addition to the easy melody and body motions that our children enjoy, the song contains a vital New Testament truth: "Father Abraham had many sons-I am one of them and so are you." When they sing these words our children are not merely echoing a statement of faith that a Jewish child in the Old Testament could make. The truth of these words still applies.

A key concept of the New Testament is that all of God's people (Jew or Gentile-past or present) are blessed in accord with the covenant that God made with Abraham. The Lord promised in this "everlasting covenant" that Abraham and his descendants would know God's blessings on the basis of faith in God's provision (Genesis 15:1-6 and Genesis 17:1-8). No one was to receive God's blessings on the basis of personal merit or on the basis of some ceremony. Out of his mercy alone-and before they could qualify for it in any way-the Lord covenanted to be the God of Abraham and his descendants (Genesis 17:7). The people would know and claim the blessings of this covenant by expressing faith in God's provision as Abraham had (Genesis 15:6). Thus, God promised to bless Abraham and his descendants by grace through faith (cf. Ephesians 2:8-9).

But what does a covenant with a Jewish patriarch have to do with people in God's church today? The Apostle Paul reminds us that God said to Abraham, "All of the nations of the earth will be blessed through you" (cf. Genesis 12:3 and Galatians 3:8). The "everlasting covenant" that God made with Abraham continues to be in effect and continues to cover us. Paul says, "So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith" (Galatians 3:9).

This means that we who have faith in Christ as God's provision for our salvation are blessed in accord with Abraham's covenant. We are Abraham's spiritual descendants and are still covered by the covenant that God first made with him. Paul writes, "Consider Abraham: >He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.' Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham" (Galatians 3:6-7). Whether or not we are biological descendants of Abraham, believers today are his spiritual children through the everlasting covenant God provided.

There is no other way to be a child of God than to be included in Abraham's covenant. There is no other covenant of salvation, and unless we are part of Abraham's covenant we are not part of God's people. As the apostle says, "He [Christ] redeemed us in order that the blessings given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:14). Those who have faith in Jesus Christ as their Savior receive the covenant promises of Abraham and are his spiritual children regardless of their time or place of birth (cf. Galatians 3:29).

## B. The Covenant Sign

After God made the covenant with Abraham to bless him and his descendents by grace through faith, God provided a covenant sign to both mark those who were recipients of his promise and to signify his pledge to provide for those who had faith in him. It is important to remember that the sign was given *after* the covenant was made and was neither a pre-condition of the covenant nor a means of conferring it. Faith was and is the sole condition of knowing the blessings of God's covenant.

### *The sign of circumcision*

The covenant sign that God gave the Old Testament people was circumcision. The removal of the foreskin from the male reproductive organ both signified the removal of spiritual uncleanness from God's people of faith, and communicated that God's provision for blessing was being passed to all the children of Abraham from generation to generation (cf. Genesis 17:10-14; Deuteronomy 10:16; Jeremiah 4:4; Colossian 2:13). Circumcision marked God's people as being separated and consecrated unto him and, consequently, as being in union with him and with each other in covenant family and community relationships (Exodus 12:48; Deuteronomy 30:6; Jeremiah 4:4; 9:26). The rite of circumcision necessarily involved the shedding of blood, and was one of numerous Old Testament signs that prefigured what would be required of Christ in order for our sins to be removed (cf. Hebrews 9:22).

### *The extent of the sign*

Because God's promises extended to Abraham's house, he was *to devote all that he had to the Lord by use of the covenant sign*. This meant that all who were part of Abraham's household in that ancient society were to be devoted to God by circumcision—sons, dependent relatives and servants (Genesis 17:23; cf. Exodus 12:43-48). In contemporary culture we are not accustomed to thinking of the head of a household as spiritually representing of all its dependent members. Still, the representative role of heads of households has great scriptural precedent and rich implications in both the Old and New Testament (cf. Ephesians 5:25-27; Hebrews 11:7).

The representative principle helps explain why Abraham devoted all in his house to God through the use of the Old Testament covenant sign even though not all would have yet expressed his faith. Abraham recognized his need as the head of a household to honor the Lord's promise to be the God of him and his family. The representative principle also explains why, in the New Testament, the Apostle Paul could still say that

children of a believing parent—even one who is married to a non-believer—are “holy” before God (1 Corinthians 7:14). Few verses in Scripture more forcefully indicate that God communicates his grace to children while in the household of a covenant parent. Scripture does not contend that an adult who has turned from his parent’s faith can presume to receive the eternal salvation promised through Abraham’s covenant but, while children remain under the authority of a believing parent, they are represented covenantally by that parent’s faith.

Head of house representation also explains why the practice of circumcision was not an indication that women were excluded from the covenant. Both through the act of procreation and through the representative principle implied by circumcision, the rite showed that the covenant promises were extended to all in the house regardless of biology or gender. An adopted child of either gender or, even, a dependent servant had equal spiritual standing with a biological son through the representative principle circumcision signified. The ancient people were slow to realize these spiritual implications but the New Testament drives home the meaning: “You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus... There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ. If you belong to Christ then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Galatians 3:28-29).

Still we must answer the question why the covenant sign was administered to those who had not yet expressed faith in God’s provision. Since the covenant was made to express God’s blessings to those who placed their faith in him, and since the covenant could only be experienced through faith, then why did God tell Abraham to circumcise all in his household even before they knew of God’s covenant of faith. Even if all of Abraham’s house could have heard of God’s provision and placed their faith in him, no one would expect all of Abraham’s descendants to put their faith in God by the time they were eight days old and required to be circumcised (Genesis 17:12). Why then was the covenant sign commanded for all?

#### *The relationship of sign and seal*

The answer to why those saved through faith alone throughout Scripture were still allowed to be circumcised as children (i.e., prior to their ability to express their faith) has important implications for administering the covenant sign to infants today. Does the requirement of faith for salvation preclude the possibility of administering a covenant sign to the children of believers? It did not in the Old Testament practice of circumcision, and the New Testament tells us why. The Apostle Paul says in the book of Romans that circumcision was a “seal” as well as a “sign” of the righteousness Abraham had by faith (Romans 4:11). Both terms have important significance for our understanding of the application of covenant sacraments.

We easily understand how circumcision was a “sign” of righteousness provided through God’s covenant. The significance of putting off uncleanness by the shedding of blood, and marking the faithful as God’s special people resonates with many familiar New Testament concepts. However, the concept of a “seal” is less familiar to us in today’s culture.

The image the apostle calls to mind with his “seal” terminology is of the wax affixed to a letter or document that was marked with a signet ring (or other instrument) to authenticate the source and validity of the contents of the document. The seal acted as a visible pledge of the author of the letter to honor what he had covenanted to do in the document when the conditions it described were met. Circumcision was God’s way of marking his people as his visible pledge to honor his covenant for those who expressed faith in him. Just as a “seal” is the pledge of its author that he will uphold his promises when described conditions are met, circumcision was God’s pledge to provide all the blessings of his covenant when the condition of faith was met in his people. Our faith does not actuate or cause God’s covenant to extend to us—he chose us in him before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4)—but expressed faith claims (and lives out) the covenant blessings God provides by his grace and pledges with his seal.

The validity of a seal is not dependent upon the time that the conditions of the covenant accompanying it are met. Like the seal of a document, the seal of circumcision could be applied long before recipients of promised and signified blessings met the conditions of the covenant. The seal was simply *the visible pledge of God that when the conditions of his covenant were met, the blessings he promised would apply* (cf. Rom. 4:11). For this reason God did not require that covenant parents wait until a child could express faith before commanding them to administer the covenant sign and seal of circumcision.

### C. The Covenant Continuation

The New Testament apostles and writers take much care to let us know that the covenant of faith principles remains in effect for us. When Peter preaches on the day of Pentecost, he says to his thousands of Jewish listeners, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven... 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 2:28-39). Peter frames his call to salvation in Christ in covenantal terms by speaking of a promise that applies to his listeners and to their children as well as to others who are yet far off. The apostle presumes that God continues to relate to us as individuals and as families—that the covenant principles are still in effect. Individuals (even in covenant families) are still responsible to express their personal faith, but God continues to work out his gracious promises in families as well as extending the covenant to others.

The Apostle Paul is more explicit about the continuation of the Abrahamic covenant and proclaims, “Those who believe are the children of Abraham” (Galatians 3:7). He goes on to say that the law of Moses “does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise.... If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Galatians 3:17 & 29).

God’s promise to Abraham to save those who have faith in heaven’s provision remains in effect. Never do any come to God based upon their merit or because they have passed through some ritual. Both *the Old and the New Testament affirm God’s continuing covenant promise to Abraham to bless people by divine grace through faith.*

#### D. The Covenant Sign Change

While the covenant continues, its sign changes to reflect what God has done to maintain his promises. The bloody sign of circumcision that prefigured the shedding of Christ's blood no longer remains appropriate after the Lamb of God has shed his blood once for all in order to remove our sin (cf. Hebrews 10:10; 1 Peter 1:18). Therefore, New Testament believers receive a new sign for the covenant that indicates what Christ has accomplished for them. Baptism with water is the sign of the washing away of our sin (cf. Acts 22:16; 1 Corinthians 6:11; Hebrews 9:14).

Those who continue to require circumcision as a requirement of God's covenant are condemned by the apostle who says, "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself in love" (Galatians 5:6). Circumcision no longer remains a requirement for those who desire to obey God (1 Corinthians 7:18-19). However, baptism is now required of all those who desire to obey Christ and express their faith in him—men and women, Jew and Gentile (cf. Acts 2:38; 8:12; 10:47-48).

While the sign of the covenant changes, the features of the covenant of faith do not. God continues to express his love to those who have faith in him, and as a result all believers share in the covenant God prepared for Israel through Abraham (Ephesians 3:6). The promises continue to be extended through parents to their children (Acts 2:38-39)—with the ordinary condition remaining that these children must ultimately express their own faith in Christ in order to reap the full blessings of the covenant.

Emphasizing the continuity of the covenant as well as the changed nature of the sign that accompanies it, the Apostle Paul writes to the Colossian believers, "In him [Christ] 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, have been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead" (Colossians 2:11-12). These words remind us that salvation that comes through faith, and also that *the rite of circumcision that once signified the benefits of Abraham's covenant has been replaced by baptism.*

Since the covenant remains but the sign changes, New Testament believers would naturally expect to apply the new sign of the covenant to themselves and their children as they had the old. Since the old sign was applied to children prior to their ability to express personal faith, there would be no barrier to applying the new sign prior to a child's personal profession of faith in Christ. Baptism would function both as a sign and a seal of the household's faith in Christ. As a seal, baptism would indicate the visible pledge of God that when the conditions of his covenant were met, the promised blessings would apply.



## II. The Biblical Basis for Infant Baptism

What evidence is there in the Bible that New Testament parents applied the sacrament of baptism to their children with the understanding that the covenant with Abraham remained in effect with a changed sign? Biblically minded Christians rightly want to see scriptural confirmation of their churches' practices. Thus, we who believe in infant baptism must confess that we feel keenly the significance of not reading of a single, named child being baptized in the New Testament. Lack of this specific piece of evidence is a strong counterweight to our position. Conscientious Christians who object to infant baptism are not necessarily being superficial, ignorant or mean-spirited. However, the Church would not have argued the issues surrounding infant baptism for centuries were answers always obvious. What Presbyterians hope believers will see in the absence of a named infant being baptized is how strong the other biblical evidences must be to have kept this covenant practice dominant in the worldwide Christian church since the earliest centuries.

## **The absence of a counter command**

Just as advocates of infant baptism must deal with the absence of an identified infant being baptized in the New Testament, opponents must face the absence of a command to deny children the covenant sign and seal. As has already been noted, the apostles took great care to emphasize the continuation of the Abrahamic covenant for New Testament believers. Throughout the 2000-year history of this covenant prior to the beginning of the apostolic church, the people of God had administered the covenant sign to their children. If the apostles truly wanted to change this practice it seems highly improbable that they would not have stated (i.e., commanded) the changes-especially since they were all Jewish Christians.

The removal of any sign of the covenant from believers' children would have been an immense change in practice and concept for Jewish families. It is unthinkable after 2000 years of covenant family practice (established since Genesis), that a believing Jewish parent would have known how to interpret a continuing Abrahamic covenant that excluded administering the sign of the covenant to children. As will soon be discussed, the apostles frequently record households being baptized after the head of the home believes in Christ. Consider how such a household head would have reacted when others in the household (including servants and resident relatives) were baptized on the basis of his faith while that man's own children were denied the covenant sign.

The absence of a command to prohibit administering the sign of the covenant to children after 2000 years of such practice weighs significantly against arguments that the apostles only wanted those able to profess their faith to be baptized.

### **B. The presence of household examples**

Further undermining the contention that only those who professed their faith were to be baptized are the examples of apostles expecting that entire households would be baptized once the head of the home accepted the Gospel. Those who oppose infant baptism fairly ask for an example of an infant being baptized in the New Testament. Already we have acknowledged that the mention of a specific infant's baptism does not occur. But fairness requires that another question also be asked: "Are there any examples of households being baptized because of the faith of the head of the household?" Over and over again the answer to this question is yes.

In fact, when we read the New Testament accounts of baptism, *every person identified as having a household present at his or her conversion also had the household baptized*. These accounts include every baptism of persons described in detail after the appointment of Christ's apostles (including Paul) was complete.

### *Household membership*

Before listing these household baptisms, we should ask who were considered to be members of one's household in the ancient world. Returning to the Old Testament passages in which the covenant sign was first administered in households, we find that households were considered to include all one's resident dependents: spouse (if living), children (if present), resident relatives and dependent servants not earning regular wages (e.g. Genesis 14:14-16; 17:23; and, Exodus 12:3-4). This understanding of households governed Jewish thought and practice for 2000 years, and there is little reason to believe that the Scripture writers would have had any other perspective. There is no evidence that the New Testament writers used the "Ahousehold" concept in a manner inconsistent with the preceding centuries of common understanding. No attempt was made by the New Testament writers to indicate that children were suddenly *not* included in households-an exclusion that even today would be alien to our thought.

What is foreign to our thought today is the representative principle of biblical headship. Our lack of familiarity with this principle is one of the reasons that our present individualistic culture struggles to accept the covenant family principles and practices of Scripture. But, as has been discussed earlier, the presumption that the faith of the head of the home created obligations for the rest of the family was historic for God's people. Thus, when the Philippian jailer asks Paul, "What must I do to be saved?" it is natural and scriptural for the apostle to reply, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved, you and your household" (Acts 16:31). Paul's words do not mean that the rest of the household would automatically come to faith in Christ, but his presumption was that the faith of the head of the household would ultimately govern the commitments of the rest of the man's family. As a result, the jailer's entire household was baptized that night (Acts 16:33).

### *Household accounts*

The account of the baptism of the Philippian jailer's household is particularly instructive because of the precise description supplied by Luke, the writer of Acts. Luke says that *all* of the jailer's household was baptized (Acts 16:33) but, then, the writer uses a *singular* verb to describe who rejoiced and believed in God that night (Acts 16:34). The jailer himself believed (singular verb) but his whole house was baptized. Sadly this important distinction in the account is not reflected in some of our modern translations [see the *English Standard Version* for an excellent translation]. As a result, some assume that the reason entire households were baptized in the New Testament is that everyone in the household immediately believed the Gospel. While this is not impossible, it imposes a modern presumption on the biblical text that households must have only been comprised of those old enough to make an intelligent faith commitment. Further, the presumption that all in the household made a faith commitment does not take notice of the careful distinction Luke makes in the account of who actually believed.

The other household baptisms recorded in the New Testament are well known: Cornelius and his household (Acts 10:38); Lydia and her household (Acts 16:15); and, the household of Stephanus (1 Corinthians 1:16). Crispus and his household probably should also be included in the list when one considers together Act 18:8 and 1 Corinthians 1:14.

The purpose for listing these household accounts is *not* to contend that no baptism in the New Testament was of individual adult believers. Clearly there were baptisms of individuals who apparently did not have households such as Paul, the Ethiopian eunuch, and Simon the Sorcerer (cf. Acts 8 & 9). Others were baptized during their pilgrimages or when household members apparently were not present (Acts 2:41; 19:5). There may have also been times when household members objected to being baptized. We do not know all of the circumstances of the men and women Scripture says were baptized (cf. Acts 8:12). What we do know is that when men and women believed in Christ, they were baptized. Further, whenever an individual baptism is described in detail in the New Testament, the household, if it was present, also received the covenant sign of baptism.

### *Household resistance*

The commonness of the household baptism accounts demonstrates that it was normal and consistent with the ancient practice of the continuing Abrahamic covenant for household heads to see that the covenant sign and seal was applied to all in their home. No evidence indicates that children were excluded from these households. Rather, 2000 years of covenant practice combined with the absence of any command to exclude children, indicates that household baptisms included infants.

Modern resistance to infant baptism in North American culture typically resides in:

Not knowing of the continuation of the covenant of faith made with Abraham, and its application to all believers today;

Not being informed of the representative nature of covenant headship;

Not understanding the “seal” nature of a covenant sign (i.e., Since baptism acts as a visible pledge that covenant promises will apply when the conditions of faith are met, the sign does not have to be tied to the moment that a child believes in Christ);

Not knowing the biblical background indicating that children would have been included as members of households that were baptized; and,

Not being able to conceive of “Adunking” a baby, if one’s only experience with baptism involves immersing a person under water.

Only the issue of “Adunking” babies has not been covered thus far in this chapter. Sadly, there is not space here to deal with the whole question of the proper mode of baptism. Thus, I will leave it to the reader to note that there are churches in the world that do immerse babies (quickly, I might add) in their practice of infant baptism. However, most of the churches that practice infant baptism teach that baptism is a ceremonial sign of Christ’s cleansing and union with him, and that the amount of water used is *not* the key issue.

Various amounts of water are used in the ceremonial cleansings that Scripture describes in “Abaptism” language. In addition to examining the Gospel narratives of Christ’s baptism, we can discern the variety of ways that the Bible teaches baptism can be administered by looking at texts such as Mark 7:2-4, Luke 11:38 and Hebrews 9:10-22. English readers will be aided by knowing that the word often translated “Awashings” in these verses is a form of the Greek word for baptism. These various ceremonial cleanings involve differing rites of pouring, dipping and sprinkling. The Hebrews passage even refers to an event where thousands of people were sprinkled at once (as well as their place of worship) with “Abaptism” language (cf. Exodus 24:6-8). I am not contending here that sprinkling is the only mode of baptism described in Scripture. Other scriptures relate baptism to the pouring out of God’s Spirit (cf., Luke 3:16; Acts 1:5; 2:17, 18; Titus 3:5-6). My point is only that *in a ceremonial cleansing the amount of fluid may vary in a manner appropriate for the occasion*. A child can still be truly baptized with the baptismal practice of sprinkling or pouring. Moms and dads do not have to worry about drowning their newborns in order to honor God’s covenant.

### III. The Biblical Benefits of Infant Baptism

Should we baptize infants because the sacrament will make children Christians or guarantee that they will become believers? The answer is, no, because no sacrament causes or communicates the grace of salvation. The Apostle Paul reminded the Corinthian Christians that although the ancient Israelites were all "baptized" by passing through the Red Sea under the cloud of God, they were idolaters that displeased God and experienced his wrath (1 Corinthians 10:1-11). No ritual will make anyone a Christian.

But if baptism will not make our children Christians, then why should we administer the covenant sign and seal to them? The most important answer is that we baptize because God makes promises to believers and their children. In baptism we honor God by marking out and acting on the promises that reflect his grace both in blessing parents who act in devotion to God and in blessing the child being devoted to him in covenantal faith.

#### A. The devotion of parents

Parents who are in love with the Lord Jesus desire to devote all that they have to him. As Abraham devoted all he had to God in the covenant of faith, so parents who trust in Christ want to demonstrate that their most precious gifts, their children, are his. In the sacrament of baptism *we as parents demonstrate our commitment to be faithful stewards of the precious gift of a child's soul that God grants us to nurture for a season of life.*

Through the devotion that is demonstrated in baptism, parents begin to reap the blessings of obedience that come from building the foundations of a home on the promises of God. The baptism of an infant is the first public testimony of parents that they will trust and follow God in the raising of their child. As an act of devotion the baptism sets the family on the path of blessing that God promises to those who walk in his ways.

The church witnessing the baptism is also blessed by the parents' testimony of devotion and trust. Not only does the church have the encouraging example of the parent's obedience, fellow worshippers are reminded by the water of baptism that God's grace alone will wash away the sin of this child and fit him for heaven. In the truths signified by the water of baptism the parents humbly acknowledge that they are dependent upon God's grace not only to raise the child according to Scripture, but also to do what they cannot to make the child holy before God.

As a public act of devotion, baptism also makes the parents accountable to the church before which they take vows to raise their child in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. Accountability is not simply a willingness to accept advice and correction from others when things go wrong, but a humble and joyful desire to receive the spiritual resources of the church that will help a child grow in Christ-likeness. In baptism parents link the spiritual livelihood of their child to the spiritual life of the church. They promise to intertwine their life of faith with the life of the church so that they and the child will hear wise counsel from others (including more experienced parents), encounter the reality of God's presence in worship, and learn from the example of mature saints how God's grace forms the beauty of the soul in circumstances both good and difficult.

It is important to remember however, that baptism is not merely a sign of God's grace-it is also a seal. Baptism does not simply signify what Christ has done, nor does it only demonstrate the parents' devotion. Baptism is God's own continuing, visible pledge to his church that he will fulfill his covenant promises to those who place their faith in him. God is present in the sacrament as though the doors of heaven have opened to have him declare anew to his church, "By the marks of this sacrament I promise that anyone who trusts in my mercy through the blood Christ will have his sins washed away and will be as pure before me as the water that flows from this font so that we will be in holy union forever." With this promise indicated by the seal of baptism God reaches from heaven to embrace the parents and the child with the assurance of his grace based upon his mercy not their merit. In our moments of great pride in our children, and in our moments of great shame for our failings, *God's pledge of merciful grace evident in baptism is always ours by faith to claim* for ourselves and for our children.

#### B. The blessing of the child

The devotion of the parents who present their children for baptism places each child in a privileged position both to hear and understand the truths of the Gospel. The child first has the example of parental devotion demonstrated in their very willingness to devote their most precious possession to God. Beyond this initial example the child lives in a home that through the child's baptism has promised to provide Christian nurture and to seek the resources of the church to make that nurture truly biblical in character. The parents publicly promise in the sacrament of baptism to pray with and for their child so that early in life he might know the realities of God's saving grace in Christ.

The child also has the promise of the church to support the parents in his spiritual nurture and admonition. In the public sacrament of baptism the people of the church vow to pray for the parents and the child, and to provide godly examples for them.

Unquestionably some repeat these vows out of courtesy and convention, but nevertheless, as the church repeats its own testimony year after year, the whole body of Christ learns of its obligation and power to influence the eternity of her children. When

the church is truly one in this effort, a child is surrounded and embraced by the testimony of Christ at every turn in life. Thus, the church becomes God's instrument of presenting the reality of himself to the mind and heart of the child. A child with such an experience fostered at his baptism and nourished throughout his life by a mature body of believers breathes the truths of grace as naturally and unconsciously as he breathes air.

In this atmosphere, faith naturally germinates and matures so that *it is possible, even common, for the children of Christian parents never to know a day that they do not believe that Jesus is their Savior and Lord.* Such covenantal growth of a child is, in fact, the normal Christian life that God intends for his people, and is one of the most striking, but infrequently mentioned, reasons that baptism is rightly administered to infants.

Just as children are raised to know the color blue through all about them repeatedly and readily attesting the character of the hue, so children raised in an environment of faith ordinarily mature with an understanding of their Savior. Of course, there are exceptions. True faith remains a supernatural gift, but natural human instruments fulfilling their covenant obligations most frequently communicate it. Thus, as a covenant child grows in natural understanding of his world, it is most common for him to mature with a parallel level of spiritual understanding. This means that it is no more likely that children nurtured in a consistently Christian home can specifically mark when they understood that Jesus was their Savior than they can mark when they knew blue was blue.

So when would be the proper time to baptize such children? Since Genesis, the proper time that God declared for marking children with the covenant sign was from their infancy in the covenant community. The early application of the sign indicated that there was not necessarily a definitive moment when a child made a life-altering decision to follow the Lord. Instead children in believing homes were always to be growing in spiritual maturity and understanding as the covenant community embraced and instructed them. In a similar manner the sacrament of baptism is rightly administered to infants to indicate that their whole life is to be one of continually growing in Christ through the family that devotes them to God in faithfulness to the covenant they enter at birth.



#### IV. A Pastoral Explanation of Infant Baptism

How should pastors explain the concept of infant baptism when administering the sacrament? The truths that underlie the practice are dear, but require an understanding of the scope of Scripture that many in our congregations lack today. As a result many of the words of institution that are repeated during infant baptisms refer generally to God's love for his children, or to Christ's willingness to allow children to approach him (e.g. Matthew 19:14; Luke 18:16). While such references accurately communicate the compassion of God, I have found them unconvincing as the reason we should baptize infants.

Those who disagree with infant baptism agree that Jesus said, "Suffer little children to come unto me, and forbid them not," but we are all aware that Jesus did *not* baptize the children who then approached him. Making Gospel accounts of Christ's blessing children the chief emphasis of an explanation of infant baptism seems rather to prove that such ceremonies come more from sentiment and tradition than from any demonstrable biblical principle.

A number of very fine books contain forms that will help pastors to frame credible words of explanation prior to an infant baptism. In addition, I have found the following words, though imperfect, to be useful in my ministry:

Will baptism save this child? No, salvation comes through trusting in Jesus Christ as one's Savior and Lord. Then why do we baptize this child? Not for sentiment, though he/she is sweet. Not for tradition, though it is dear. We baptize this child because we believe the Bible commands us to do so.

Throughout biblical history, God has promised to bless through a covenant relationship with his people. He said to Abraham, "I will be a God to you and to your children after you." Abraham believed God's covenant promise and devoted all that he had to the Lord, including the members of his household. In obedience to God, Abraham showed his devotion through practicing the rite of circumcision in his household. This rite demonstrated that God's covenant would pass to future generations but would necessitate the shedding of blood for sin.

The shed blood did not create the covenant but rather acted as a seal, a pledge given by God, that he would honor his promise to all who, like Abraham, put their faith in him.

In the New Testament the Apostle Peter, preaching on the day of Pentecost, assured all that covenant promises of God would continue for the children of believers. He said, "Repent and be baptized every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven... The promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off-for all whom the Lord our God will call."

The promise to bless through faith in God's grace continued, but the Apostle Paul told Colossian believers that the sign of this covenant has changed. No longer foreshadowing the shedding of Christ's blood, the New Testament sacrament of baptism is a sign of what Christ's blood accomplishes, the washing away of sin and, thus, our union with him.

This water does not itself wash away sin but rather, according to the Apostle Paul, this sacrament acts as a seal-a visible pledge of God given to the church-whereby Heaven assures us that when such children as this one express faith in Christ, all the promises of his covenant of grace will apply to them.

The Bible gives us good reason to express our covenant privileges through such a baptism. In the New Testament accounts of baptism, every person identified as having a household present at his or her conversion also had the household baptized.

Yes, it is sweet to savor God's goodness to this family, but sentiment is not what leads this church or these parents to this holy ordinance. We baptize this child in obedience to biblical teaching, in keeping with the precedent of centuries of faithful families, and in expectation of God's presence and blessing. God now uses this sacrament to pledge to us his faithfulness as we, in faith, devote this child of the covenant to him.