



# THE CHURCH OF THE INCARNATION

## UNDERSTANDING INFANT BAPTISM

Members of the Church of the Incarnation aren't required to agree to the practice of infant baptism. But we do think it's important that our members understand that the practice is based on our reading of the Scriptures, and our understanding of the practices of Christians throughout church history. Here's a brief explanation for why we baptize infants and children in the Church of the Incarnation.

### HISTORY

A quick survey of church history will show that the practice of infant baptism is undeniable from the third century onward. The evidence is *slightly* less certain during the first two centuries AD; however, the most likely reading of this evidence is that infant baptism was practiced from the beginning of the church. The Christian faith was passed directly from the Apostle John to Polycarp, then to Irenaeus, then to Hippolytus, who baptized infants in AD 215. If Hippolytus' baptismal practices were innovative, there should be some evidence of it in the historical record, but there is none. If infant baptism was the standard practice of Christians at least from AD 215, if not from the beginning, then what did they understand it to mean? After all, baptism today symbolizes different things to different people. For some, it is a kind of "stamp of salvation," guaranteeing a person's eternal security. For others, it is a kind of public testimony, a way of declaring one's commitment to Christianity. Over the centuries, these and many other varied and conflicting meanings have developed.

### SCRIPTURE

From what we can tell from the Scriptures and other historical evidence, baptism in the New Testament era was an outward sign of inclusion into the Christian community. For example, see Acts 2:41, in which baptism signified being counted among the Christians. In other words, baptism demonstrated *membership*. It signified among Christians what circumcision did among Jews: inclusion among God's people (Cf. Colossians 2:11-12).

In the Old Testament, circumcision was for infants and children as well as adults. Abraham was circumcised, and his children, and all Hebrew children after that (Genesis 17:12; 19:11). When Christians began practicing baptism as their symbol of inclusion, it is reasonable to assume that they followed the Hebrew tradition, as they did in so many other things, and baptized the infants and children of believing Christian parents. The New Testament never teaches otherwise. Of the ten baptisms mentioned in the New Testament, five are of individual converts to Christianity, and five include families, or "households." We are never told the ages of those in the household, but it is highly unlikely that all five ancient families contained only children over the age of, say, twelve years old.

Sadly, sometimes people within the Christian community reject the Christian faith, whether in word or by deed. This was true also of Jews in the Old Testament. The command to "circumcise your hearts"

was repeated by the prophets (Deuteronomy 10:16, 30:6, Jeremiah 4:4) as a way of exhorting the Jews to make their inward spiritual life consistent with the outward sign. As with the Israelites, so also today there are those in the church who have the sign of baptism but lack an inward reality of Christian faith.

At different times throughout the history of the church, there have been various attempts to resolve this problem. At one point, in the early church it became common to delay baptism until one's deathbed, so that there was no time for post-baptismal backsliding. In the latter half of the sixteenth century, some Protestants began to delay baptism until such time as a person is able to make a 'mature' profession of faith, subject to the prevailing definition of maturity.

But delaying baptism tends to cause more problems than it solves. There are still those who abandon the faith after adult baptism. Meanwhile, the people of God misunderstand the meaning of baptism as a corporate sign in the New Testament. This leads to increasing individualism and undermines Christian community.

## **AT INCARNATION**

At the Church of the Incarnation, we believe it important that our families raise their children in such a way that they never know a day apart from Christ. This means that we teach them to pray, worship, study, sacrifice, serve, and witness as Christians from birth. We treat them as real Christians, and expect them to live as such.

We baptize children upon the profession of faith of their parents, a promise that they will be raised in the fear and knowledge of the Lord. Likewise, we admit them to the Lord's table. We do not send them off to camp at 12, to hear ghost stories about being left behind in order to scare them into "true faith." We instead teach them repentance and faith at every age.

All of us know the difficulty of objectifying true conversion. The reason is because we are becoming more converted all the time. The same goes for Christian children. A believer at age five has a much more robust faith than a believer at age two. Likewise, a believer at age ten in comparison with a five year old. Likewise a thirty something in comparison to a teenager. If this is the case for all of us for the rest of our lives, is there any good reason why should we delay baptism for those among us who are growing in Christ day by day?