

Biblical Bases for Baptizing Babies

Our 'G.P.S.' for raising children within God's visible covenant community.

Grace, Pledge, Sign

The Bible is our ultimate authority. I think one of the considerations underlying differences on whether or not to baptize babies rests on biblical theology. Those who advocate for baptizing babies emphasize continuity between the Old and New Testaments. I simply want to highlight some biblical reasons why we baptize babies based on continuity throughout the Bible.

Baptizing babies of professing Christian parents has been the majority practice of the historic church over the centuries. One biblical basis for this practice relates to the family unit within the larger covenant community of Believers. In the Old Testament, children born into families under God's covenant with Abraham were already members of the visible covenant community. This community of people was special; because, God chose them to be recipients of blessings He promised to them. Circumcision specifically identified male children as members of God's People of Promise. Later, in the New Testament, baptism replaced circumcision. It appears in the early Church that entire households were given the sign of the covenant when the head of the house believed in God's promises. This is why **Acts 16:25-34** was read this morning. This would be a continuation of the Old Testament practice of circumcision for boys but now it is baptism for girls and boys, Jews and non-Jews. The child would grow up within God's community participating in all covenant renewals and feasts prescribed by Him. Additionally, babies and children within God's community received the covenantal blessings and cursings at His hand along with all the other members.

Children's place within the community would continue throughout adulthood unless: 1.) he/she *either* denied the privilege they had received or

2.) lived in a manner contrary to God's expectation for His People. Denying their privilege as God's People and living in a way that dishonored God are both the result of NOT truly believing God's Word spoken to them. They demonstrate they are NOT members of God's visible covenant community; because, they do NOT trust in God's promises to them. At the most basic level, it reveals their refusal of God's gift given to them through their parents within the covenant community.

God's unearned gift toward a fallen undeserving people is continuous throughout the Bible. God took the initiative to save a people from the evil oppression of this fallen world. To these People, God chose to reveal Himself in a special way through His Word with His promises. God's promises were for His People and for the entire world. God's People, in response to His initiating gift of deliverance, are called to live in a righteous manner according to His Word. This is summarized in loving God with all our being and loving our neighbor as ourselves. This is what characterizes God's Chosen People from other people in the world. God's unearned gift of salvation and deliverance toward a chosen people is called "grace." God's expected response of those people who receive His grace is the overriding framework for our biblical considerations.

Grace:

First, none of us chose to be physically born into this world. Yet, for most people (and rightly so), this is considered a blessing; the gift of life we received without having earned or worked for it ourselves. We had no personal choice of the households and biological families into which we were born. Some are more inclined to physical, emotional, and intellectual growth than others. Some are simply abusive and harmful. Advantages of being born into certain families are independent of the child's choice.

Secondly, as these children mature, they must internalize their identity as one of God's People. This ultimately occurs by the Spirit of God through His Word, the Bible, taught within and proclaimed throughout His covenant community. These children will need a true heart-desire for the blessings their covenant membership entail. That deep desire in the heart is the greater spiritual reality to which the observable covenant sign of circumcision, then, and baptism, now, are to point. This is the inner conversion resulting in the essential *desire* to be more than just a visible outward member of God's People. It is a God-given desire to genuinely live in hope and trust in God as a partaker of the covenant He placed you in by His grace. A covenantal child must grow into an adult trusting in God's promises for His People. This child must find strength by looking back to God's past faithfulness with thanksgiving and praise. This is the reality represented by baptism. The greater spiritual reality is a heart-based faith in God's Word. God has sovereignly arranged that His Word be revealed to, in, and through His Chosen People; His visible covenant community. Ultimately, God's Word became a man in the Person of Jesus Who fully reveals the will of God the Father. What a gracious blessing to be a part of this community. What an unearned gift it is to grow up being nurtured by God's life-giving Word and Spirit!

Thirdly, baptizing the babies of Believers demonstrates this gracious act of God on behalf of undeserving sinners. As parents, we make decisions for the good of our children all the time. We do not consult with our children nor wait for their ability to choose before including them at the dinner table, feeding them healthy food, educating them, or taking them to the physician for medical care. We know what is best for them, and we make decisions for them on their behalf for their good out of love. How much more should this be the case for the spiritual nourishment of our children!? With all things, our children must appropriate what we teach and do for them. With earthly things concerning physical, mental and emotional well-being, we pray that our

children will grow to adopt our views. But, as members of God's covenant community, receiving the sign of God's favor **before** having a choice in the matter is a great assurance for the one in whom God works; because, when God begins a good work in His elect saints, He will complete it. God guarantees to spiritually accomplish, in His children, what we can only wish to do as parents concerning their physical and intellectual development. Believing parents who baptize their children demonstrate, very concretely, their trust in God and their understanding that they are just earthly guardians of the children the Lord gives them. This is the blessing parents receive for baptizing their children. However, the great blessing is on the child's side. Baptizing babies, like circumcision, demonstrates a good gift given to one who is unable to seek out and obtain such a gift themselves. This is the heart of salvation; being raised from the deadness of our sin and made alive in Christ. We can no more choose to birth ourselves spiritually as we can physically. We can no more physically raise ourselves from the dead than we can desire to trust in God's promises and live according to His Holy righteousness. This is demonstrated in baptizing a baby who could no more cleanse him or herself from filth with purifying water. Baptizing a baby is a free gift for them to accept according to God's will as they are raised as genuine members of His covenant community; the Church.

Pledge:

Let us now look at Lord's Day 27 of "The Heidelberg Catechism" Q. & A.'s 72-74.

72 – Does this outward washing with water itself wash away sin? No, only Jesus Christ's blood and the Holy Spirit cleanse us from all sins. 73 – Why then does the Holy Spirit call baptism the washing of rebirth and the washing away of sins? He wants to teach us that the blood and Spirit of Christ wash away our sins just as water washes away dirt from our bodies. But more important, He wants to assure us, by this divine *pledge*

and *sign*, that the washing away of our sins spiritually is as real as physical washing with water. 74 – Should infants, too, be baptized? Yes. Infants as well as adults are in God’s covenant and are His people. They, no less than adults, are promised the forgiveness of sin through Christ’s blood and the Holy Spirit who produces faith. Therefore, by baptism, the mark of the covenant, infants should be received into the Christian church and should be distinguished from the children of unbelievers. This was done in the Old Testament by circumcision, which was replaced in the New Testament by baptism.

Notice the words “pledge” and “sign” in Answer 73 of the version of the Catechism just read? These words will help us, very briefly, understand baptism as a sacrament in relation to babies.

The pledge God makes in the visible seal of baptism is this: Those who eventually and genuinely trust in God’s promise of the cleansing and forgiveness of sins through the shed Blood of Christ on the Cross will receive the benefits of eternal life in communion with God. This spiritual reality is as sure as the water washes away dirt in the rite of baptism. God pledges this to those who believe in what the waters of baptism demonstrate physically and visibly. Baptism is God’s visible assurance of the greater spiritual reality that the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit comes through Christ’s sacrifice on the Cross for our sins. By Christ’s Blood, we are made clean and acceptable in the Father’s sight. God pledges this to us visibly in baptism. Baptism seals God’s oath to those who believe in His Word and trust in His promise. Those who have faith in the reality pledged in the waters of baptism receive the forgiveness of sins and eternal life as a free gift. God promises this.

Sign:

Baptism, like circumcision before it, is an outward visible sign (representation or token) of the greater spiritual reality of saving faith in the forgiveness of sins through the shed Blood of Christ. This outward sign marks out God's People from the rest of the world. However, the same Holy Spirit Who converts and renews the individual heart through the Blood of Christ signified in baptism also indwells and empowers the Believer to live as God calls His redeemed People to live within this fallen world. Therefore, while one may possess the visible sign of baptism, their beliefs and behavior will, ultimately, reveal their true inner spiritual reality. Those who truly possess saving faith in the forgiveness of sins through Christ crucified die to the reign of sin in their lives. This is represented, or signified, in baptism; as we die to sin in the waters of cleansing, we rise to a new life of righteousness in Christ by His Spirit. This dying to self and being raised to new life represented in baptism will be evident in the life of true Christians. Such genuine disciples of Christ will bear the fruit of the Holy Spirit and progressively fulfill the law of love. Those who become adults yet fail to demonstrate the spiritual reality signified in their baptism are to be excluded from the covenant community with the hope of repentance and genuine faith; with hope that the spiritual reality of that which was signified in their baptism becomes an eternal living reality for them.

Therefore, baptism is a sign of new birth. It truly is an entrance into the life of God's household on earth which is the Church; God's visible New Covenant community today. But, unless the baptized child is graciously enlivened by the Holy Spirit with saving faith as an adult, this visible sign of new birth proves itself to be a spiritual stillbirth. An adult baptized as a child yet without saving faith in Christ crucified for them remains dead in his/her sin. They do not receive entrance into God's eternal Kingdom through the

shed blood of Jesus. This is important for us in understanding our baptism of babies.

Kevin DeYoung (p. 131) helpfully states, “We do not believe that there is anything magical about the water we apply to the child. The water does not wash away original sin or save the child. We do not presume that this child is regenerate [converted]... We baptize infants not out of superstition or tradition... We baptize infants because they are covenant children and receive the sign of the covenant. ...this deeply spiritual sign was given to Ishmael as well as Isaac, even though Isaac was the continuation of the promise. The spiritual sign was not just for those who already embraced the spiritual reality [of saving faith in God’s promises; of trusting in the pledge God makes in relation to the sign]. It was to be administered to Abraham and his sons. It didn’t automatically mean the recipient of the sign was in possession of the thing it signified [faith in the promises pledged with the resulting blessings]. Circumcision, like baptism, also pointed to belonging, discipleship, covenant obligations, and allowed for future faith that would take hold of the realities symbolized. Just as there were some in Paul’s day who were circumcised but not really circumcised (Rom. 2:25-29), some children of Abraham who were not truly children of Abraham, so in our day there are some who are baptized who are not truly baptized. Children should be marked as belonging to the covenant, but unless they exercise saving faith, they will not grab hold of the covenant blessings.” May we pray this child baptized here today lay hold of all God’s promises which find their ‘yes’ and ‘amen’ in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Resources:

Why Do We Baptize Infants: “Basics of the Faith” by Bryan Chapell

The Good News We Almost Forgot by Kevin DeYoung

The Anglican Doctrine of Baptism by Lee Gatiss at the following link:

<http://www.affinity.org.uk/foundations-issues/issue-63-article-4---the-anglican-doctrine-of-baptism>

Concise Theology: A Guide to Historic Christian Beliefs by J. I. Packer