



## I N F A N T   B A P T I S M

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I remember the confusion I felt in college when I first realized that the church I had been attending—an evangelical church with strong support for missions here and abroad—was also a church that baptized infants. As I watched the baby being baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, I was puzzled and found all of my then-baptistic arguments swirling about in my head. The child doesn't believe, so why baptize him? If baptism is a symbol of our repentance, then how can it be administered to one who does not yet believe? What was going on here?

As I began to listen, though, I began to realize I was witnessing a practice far more ancient than I had realized, and I later became convinced it was in fact the biblical practice.

### **The New Testament's context: American Individualism vs.**

#### ***Pater Familias***

Before I could come to such a conclusion, though, I first had to get outside of my own culture, my own biases, my own assumptions about people and families and sacraments. I had to get inside the world of the first century, when Jesus himself instructed the church to "go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the

Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." When Christ instructed his church to baptize, baptism already had currency among his hearers. The specifics had changed—it would now be the introductory rite of the church, be infused with new meaning, carry with it God's promises, and be done in the name of the Trinity. But baptism itself was not new. Jews had been baptizing converts for centuries before Christ.

Historians like Joachim Jeremias have observed how the baptism of the infants of Gentile converts to Judaism was already an established practice before Jesus or John the Baptist began baptizing. In the first century before Christ, the families of Gentile converts to Judaism were routinely baptized for the remission of sins before the males were circumcised. Similarly, the mystery cults that proliferated throughout the Roman world—often mimicking aspects of Judaism—routinely baptized the infants of converts.

A first century hearer would have assumed that infants were to be baptized; such was the established practice, not only with circumcision, but also with pre-Christian baptism. Behind this assumption lies another assumption that the ancients held that would make them hear Christ's words differently than we hear them. I am an American. I tend to assume that the basic unit of society is the individual. Families are groups of individuals.

The Greco-Roman world, however, was characterized by the concept of *pater familias*. The family—not the individual—was the basic unit of society. What was true of the father was also true of the son, because he was of the family of his father. If the father rebelled against the governor, the family was in rebellion against the governor. A father could choose to have his child killed without penalty because the father was the head of the household. The head of the household ruled, and what was true of the father was true of the family. If the head of the household believed, the family would have been baptized—including children, and perhaps even including servants.

With this ancient assumption of *pater familias* in mind, I then open the pages of Scripture and see things in a slightly different light. I read, for example, of the apostle's response to Lydia's conversion in Acts:

One of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. "If you consider me a believer in the Lord," she said, "come and stay at my house." And she persuaded us. (Acts 16:14-15)

Lydia believed, and so the members of her household were baptized. Think *pater familias*; American individualism is not the proper context in which to read the account. There are others. Lydia's account is followed by the account of the Philippian jailor's midnight conversion.

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everybody's chains came loose.

The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he

thought the prisoners had escaped. But Paul shouted, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!" The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. He then brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household." Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized. The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole family. (Acts 16:25-34)

Notice the pattern. The jailor's household was baptized because the family had believed. In this instance, the text states that the whole family had come to believe, so some will question whether it helps the case for infant baptism. Yet, given the assumption of *pater familias*, we should hesitate to read the text as if it were saying, "Every single individual came to believe, and so every single individual was baptized personally." That would be a foreign reading within that cultural milieu. Within their world, families could be said to believe in God even if every individual within the family had not yet come to personal faith in Christ. What was true of the head of the family was true of all of the family.

In 1 Corinthians 1:16, Paul speaks of how he tried not to do baptisms, lest someone identify their faith too closely with him rather than with Christ. Still, he acknowledges some baptisms: "Yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I don't remember if I baptized anyone else." That's yet another household baptism.

A pervasive assumption of *pater familias* raises questions about how early readers would have understood many biblical accounts. For example, some commentators suggest that Mark's account of Jesus' laying hands on the children for blessing in Mark 10:13-16, warning no one to "forbid, hinder, or prevent" (κωλύειν) children from coming to

him, could only have been interpreted by Mark's first readers in Rome as indicating that children within the believing community were to be baptized.

### **The Covenant Family: Children Holy to God**

Yet the classical notion of *pater familias* cannot in itself explain the household baptisms in the New Testament. There is something bigger than an ancient cultural milieu at play here. *Pater familias* fits the context, but there is a theology involved as well. The New Testament breathes covenantal air, with a biblical theology of the family that converges with the culture's concept of *pater familias*.

In 1 Corinthians 7, for example, Paul addresses the issue of a family in which only one parent believes. He counsels against divorce, unless the unbeliever deserts the believing spouse, explaining that one believing parent sanctifies the whole family—including the children. "Otherwise," he adds to reinforce his point, "Otherwise, your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy" (1 Corinthians 7:14). Notice how he says the child of a believer is holy—*ἅγια*—literally *holy* or a *saint*.

There seems to be an assumption in Paul's argument about the nature of the Christian family—not so much a cultural assumption like *pater familias*, but a theological assumption direct from God. In the "otherwise" part of his argument, Paul states that most infants are spiritually "unclean" in God's eyes. This may seem shocking at first.

We American Christians are accustomed to hearing that all children are clean in God's eyes up until some presumed age of accountability (nowhere mentioned in Scripture, but usually stated to be around age 12, at which time the child becomes unholy and must believe to be holy before God.) Given 1 Corinthians 7, that theory would seem to be urban legend.

Instead, Paul operates with an assumption very different from the idea that children are all holy until an age of accountability. Paul

says that all children are *unclean* except the children of a believing parent. If you are a Christian, God is saying your infant is holy in his sight on account of his covenantal status, just as you are holy in God's sight through faith in Christ.

For this reason, I often prefer to speak of family baptism rather than infant baptism. I would not baptize an infant of unbelieving parents; but I would baptize a 6-year-old adopted by believing parents. The reason is because the child's spiritual status as a covenant child—not his or her being an infant—is what sets the child apart from others as holy in God's eyes.

This concept of the covenant family goes back to the beginnings of redemption, to God's covenant with Abraham. When God justified Abraham through faith, Abraham's children were included in the covenant, and his sons received the sign and seal of the covenant even before they were able to believe on their own:

Then God said to Abraham, "As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come. This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised.

"You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised, including those born in your household or bought with money from a foreigner—those who are not your offspring. Whether born in your household or bought with your money, they must be circumcised.

"My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant." (Genesis 17:9-14)

The whole family—even servants and others who were not ethnic Jews, but who were bought from Gentiles—were to be

circumcised into the covenant. This is the covenant family at work, the spiritual status of the parents being applied to the children by grace even before they came to faith. While circumcision itself could never insure the heart would believe, God could still say that those lacking the sign of the covenant were in violation of the covenant.

As I consider how zealous God is for the souls of covenant children, I'm reminded of the passage where God set out to kill Moses for not circumcising his son, thus denying the boy the benefits of the covenant family.

At a lodging place on the way, the LORD met Moses and was about to kill him. But Zipporah took a flint knife, cut off her son's foreskin and touched Moses' feet with it. "Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me," she said. So the LORD let him alone. (At that time she said "bridegroom of blood," referring to circumcision.) (Exodus 4:24-26)

God would go to great lengths to insure the covenant was transmitted from one generation to the next, and in this case it was a believing wife who administered the rite of circumcision to the child after the father had failed to fulfill his responsibility.

While circumcision and baptism are not identical—the apostles had all been circumcised as infants and were later baptized by Christ—there does appear to be a parallel between the Old Testament sacrament and New Testament baptism. Paul writes:

In [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, having 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)

Baptism is pictured here as a spiritual circumcision, a seal of covenant union that functions under Christ in the same way that circumcision functioned under Moses. Both functioned as initiatory rites by which one entered the covenant community. Both

nevertheless demanded of the recipient faith and consecration to God. Both were outward means of grace that carried God's promise to his people in physical, sacramental form.

## The Witness of the Early Church

The earliest Christian records outside the New Testament confirm a practice of infant baptism. In his *Commentary on Romans*, Origen (born and baptized about 180 AD) writes:

No one is free from defilement, not even a day-old child. That is why there is in the Church a tradition, received from the apostles, in accordance with which baptism is conferred on little children.

It's worth noting that Origen was not trying to persuade his readers of infant baptism. He was actually trying to persuade his readers that even newborns have a sinful nature; Origen's chief argument from experience is the fact that Christians have always baptized them. The typical early Christian was not likely to have his own copy of the Scriptures, but he did witness baptisms, so Origen was able to argue his case from that point of reference. Origen repeats this point of history on four different occasions, stating as evidence for the sinfulness of babies an evidently agreed upon fact that infant baptism was the ancient practice, not only in Origen's own Egypt, but throughout the Christian world since the earliest days.

There are very few surviving records of Christian practice in the century after the death of the apostle John in 100 AD, but there is a small handful. About the year 180 AD in Roman Gaul, for example, Irenaeus of Lyon (who spoke of baptism as "regeneration into God") could only have had baptism in mind when he spoke of "all who are born again in God, the infants, and the small children... and the mature."

Similarly, Hippolytus' *Apostolic Tradition*, a manual on church order written down about 215 AD but containing information that was older, instructed that children should be baptized before adults: "First you should baptize the little ones." All who could speak

at their baptism should do so, the text continues, “but for those who cannot speak, their parents should speak or another who belongs to their family.”

About 250 AD, in replying to a question from Fidus, a pastor, about whether baptism should wait until the eighth day after birth, following the pattern for circumcision under the Mosaic Law, Cyprian answered that under the new covenant baptism ought not be delayed eight days, but be administered as quickly as possible after birth.

The 66 bishops at the North African council at Carthage in 254 AD agreed: “We ought not hinder any person from Baptism and the grace of God... especially infants ... those newly born.”

Of the church fathers, only the Montanist Tertullian argued against infant baptism, and he acknowledged that he did so in an effort to overturn what was the established practice of the early church. For Tertullian, whose increasingly bizarre theology held little room for forgiveness of sins committed after baptism, there was a theological reason to delay baptism as late as possible. Tertullian was a perfectionist and rigorist, and he felt it unwise to baptize anyone if they might later sin. Even then, however, Tertullian did not embrace believer’s baptism—a perspective not recorded in history until the early modern era. Tertullian counseled *deathbed* baptism so as to insure that all one’s sins were in fact covered by baptism.

No one in antiquity ever argued for the baptistic concept of believer’s baptism. And had it been an ancient practice that was later reversed (as baptistic arguments presume), then surely there would be some historical record of the controversy. But there is none.

We aren’t without physical evidence of infant baptism in the earliest Christian centuries. Burial markers in the catacombs and in Roman and African cemeteries identify babies as having been baptized before their deaths—months-old infants that were identified in their epitaphs as “believers from believers” (πιστο εκ πιστων).

## What Does It Do?

In this essay, I have argued that the New Testament was written and first read in a cultural context that ate, drank, and breathed *pater familias*. Within this context, the biblical history appears to present a practice of family baptism. I have further argued that this cultural context fit well with a preexisting theological concept of the covenant family, a practice seen in Old Testament circumcision and in Paul’s statement that a family and its children are holy if even one parent believes. I have then given evidence of how infant baptism developed in history, noting the compelling and nearly universal record of family and infant baptism that can be traced back to the earliest Christian writings outside the New Testament.

I have not yet sought to explain what baptism does, either for an adult convert or for a covenant child baptized in infancy. Chrysostom in the fourth century believed that infants were baptized “so that they may be given the further gifts of sanctification, justice, filial adoption, and inheritance, that they may be brothers and members of Christ, and become dwelling places of the Spirit” (*Baptismal Instruction* 3.6). A century and a half earlier, Cyprian understood infant baptism to be a washing of the guilt of Adam’s sin (*Letters* 64.5), as had Origen. Infant baptism was always the practice of the church, but the rite never had a uniform theological interpretation.

While all the major Protestant reformers maintained the practice of family baptism, they also tried to tie their theology of baptism more carefully to the biblical text. The 1647 *Westminster Confession of Faith*, for example, states:

Baptism is a sacrament of the new testament, ordained by Jesus Christ, not only for the solemn admission of the party baptized into the visible Church; but also to be unto him a sign and seal of the covenant of grace, of his ingrafting into Christ, of regeneration, of remission of sins, and of his giving up unto God, through Jesus Christ, to walk in newness of life...

Not only those that do actually profess faith in and obedience unto Christ, but also the infants of one, or both, believing parents, are to be baptized. (WCF 28.1, 4)

Notice that baptism is understood principally to signify God's promise, not our promise. Our promise is involved, but is secondary. Notice also that it is more than a signifier.

Within this Calvinistic system, the sacrament of baptism is understood to work, not in a magical way, but in a spiritual way, much like the workings of Scripture. Like Scripture, baptism carries the promise of God to his people, a promise that is made effective by the working of the Holy Spirit in the heart of the recipient, a working that manifests itself in faith and serves more and more to conform the Christian into the image of Christ. Like the power of Scripture, the promise of baptism is more than a bare symbol, "being not only offered, but really exhibited and conferred by the Holy Ghost to such, whether of age or infants, as that grace belongeth unto, according to the counsel of God's own will, in his appointed time" (WCF 28.6).

In the Reformed understanding, sacraments are more than bare memorials. They are symbols, but as Calvin stated, "That which is represented in the sacraments is also presented in the sacraments." Baptism not only symbolizes Christ and his good news; it

also presents to us Christ and his good news. Thus Peter can speak of "baptism that now saves you" (1 Peter 3:21), as if the water itself effected a change in us, but continue by saying that it is God's working through the sacrament which actually changes us—"not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ" (v.22).

Further, while condemning those who neglect baptism, the Westminster Confession asserts (against many of the church fathers) that regeneration and salvation are possible to those dying without baptism.

The main "new" development with the Westminster Confession is the possibility of a disjunction in time between the efficacy of baptism and the time of its administration. An elect child may be baptized into Christ, but not actually come to faith for many, many years. Baptism in this perspective does not immediately regenerate the child, but does nevertheless seal the blessings of God's covenant to the child, setting him or her apart to Christ and his blessings.

*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 2:39)*