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"Those Who Accepted His Message Were Baptized"

- Ac 2:41

The Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Presbyterian, Lutheran and Anglican churches all practice infant baptism. Is this a valid practice?

Without exception, every recorded baptism in the NT was of someone who was old enough to comprehend the concept of justification by grace through faith in Christ, and who also professed to believe this message of salvation. Clearly, the NT pattern is to baptize people after they believe, not in the hope that they one day might come to faith. Further, in Mt 28:19 Jesus commanded the baptism of those who had already been made "disciples."

Most illuminating are the contents of a tract entitled, "What the Bible Says About Infant Baptism"-its interior is blank! As the pedobaptist B.B. Warfield admitted, "there is no express command to baptize infants in the NT, no express record of the baptism of infants and no passages so stringently implying it that we must infer from them that infants were baptized" (quoted in *Searching Together*, Vol. 13:4, 17). The pedobaptist Zwingli wrote, "Nothing grieves me more than that at the present I have to baptize children, for I know it ought not be done . . . I find it nowhere written that infant baptism is to be practiced" (19). Even Luther concluded that "There is not sufficient evidence from Scripture that one might justify the introduction of infant baptism at the time of the early Christians after the apostolic period" (19).

Some have looked to the household (*oikos*) baptisms of Acts to justify infant baptism, believing that the use of the Greek word *oikos* strongly suggests the presence of infants. When the Philippian jailer believed, "he and all his family" were baptized (16:33). However, Luke went on to record that "the whole family was filled with joy, because they had come to believe in God" (16:34). It was not uncommon in apostolic days for entire families to believe. Whatever the age of any children, they were at least old enough "to believe." The nobleman of Capernaum believed, "he and his whole family" (16:34); Crispus and "his entire household believed in the Lord" (18:8); Cornelius "and all his family were devout and God-fearing" (10:2); the "household" of Stephanas was the "first converts in Achaia" and "devoted themselves to the service of the saints" (1 Co 16:15). As regards the business woman Lydia, it should be noted that no mention is made of a husband or children; her "household" was baptized with her, and after Paul and Silas returned from prison they met with "brothers" at Lydia's house (Ac 16:15, 40). Evidently these "brothers" were some of those baptized with her. How probable is it that this unmarried career woman who managed her own estate had infant children? At best the case for infant baptism is an argument from silence.

Another defense of infant baptism lies in its parallel with the Jewish custom of circumcision. In the Abrahamic Covenant (Ge 17), God commanded that all of Abraham's male descendants be circumcised eight days after birth. One of this covenant's promises serves historically as the prophetic foundation of the New Covenant (Ge 12:3b; Ga 3:6-9). Given the close association

between these two covenants, proponents of infant baptism use such passages as Col 2:9-12 (which draws an analogy between circumcision and baptism) to validate baptizing infants. They reason that since the Jews were already accustomed to performing a religious ritual on their children (circumcision), the Jewish Christians naturally assumed the practice of baptizing their infant offspring.

A theology of infant baptism drawn from a parallel with the Abrahamic Covenant fails to account for the distinct differences between the two covenants. Though the New Covenant truly is a fulfillment of one aspect of the Abrahamic Covenant (Ge 12:3b), the New Covenant is nevertheless a free-standing, separate covenant. The New Covenant is a "new deal" and like new wine is not suited for old wineskins. The physical offspring of Abraham were automatically made parties of the Abrahamic Covenant through physical circumcision (Ge 17:12-14); the spiritual offspring of Abraham are made parties of the New Covenant through spiritual circumcision (i.e., regeneration by the Holy Spirit; see Col 2:9-12). Since the circumcision of Col 2:9-12 is clearly a spiritual one, so also the baptism of Col 2:9-12 refers to baptism in the Spirit (not a literal baptism into water). Physical circumcision actually placed people into the Abrahamic Covenant. Since only spiritual circumcision (and spiritual baptism) places people into the New Covenant, water baptism has nothing to do with effecting it. Physical ancestry was critical to involvement with the Abrahamic Covenant, but under the New Covenant one's ancestors are irrelevant (Mt 3:8-9). This is the whole point of Heb 8:7-13. Under the Old Covenant one could be unregenerate and still be considered part of God's people; under the New Covenant "no longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest." Baptism is to be based on the prior repentance and faith of the one being baptized (and not on the basis that his parents are believers).

Whereas the Abrahamic Covenant is a national covenant made with all circumcised Israelis, the New Covenant is an individual covenant made with individuals from every tribe, language, people and nation (Re 5:9). Ancestry is again irrelevant. A person is not automatically part of the covenant just because he was baptized as an infant. Furthermore, whereas the "sign" of the Abrahamic Covenant was circumcision (Ge 17:11), the sign of the New Covenant is the Lord's Supper (1 Co 11:23-26), not water baptism.

Finally, Jewish converts to Christianity were still free to perform circumcision on their infants (Ac 21:20-25), thus satisfying any desire to include their offspring in the Jewish community of God's people. When the Jerusalem Council discussed the question of whether Gentile converts ought to be circumcised they decided in the negative, but not on the basis that water baptism had replaced circumcision (Ac 15)! As J.L. Dagg wrote, "we ought never to confound things so distinct; but this is done by the doctrine of infant church-membership" (*Manual of Church Order*, 176).

Another support for infant baptism are the writings of the apostolic fathers of the second century which reveal that infant baptism was being practiced in the church at an early date (*Tabletalk*, April 92, 35). Was this merely a continuation of the apostolic tradition of the NT? The church historian, Neander, reported that "in the last years of the second century, Tertullian appears as a zealous opponent of infant baptism: a proof that the practice had not as yet come to be regarded as an apostolical institution; for, otherwise, he would hardly have ventured to express himself so strongly against it" (Dagg, *Church Order*, 201). Even the pedobaptist R.L. Dabney wrote that "the many other corruptions of doctrine and government which were at the same time spread in the Church, prove the [patristic] fathers to be wretched examples of the NT religion." (*Lectures in Systematic Theology*, 775). Along with Dagg we say, "it is a happy privilege which we enjoy, to leave the muddy streams

of tradition, and drink at the pure fountain of revelation" (*Church Order*, 199).

Historically, those opposed to infant baptism were horribly persecuted by Catholic and Protestant churches alike. Membership in any Anabaptist group was punishable by death. It seems that politics has played more of a role in church history than has exegesis concerning infant baptism. With the merger of church and state after Constantine, infant baptism eventually became a civil ceremony that held society together as a homogeneous unit. This age-old requirement of religious uniformity was seen as a guarantee of public peace and order (Walker, *History of the Christian Church*, 327-28). The Anabaptists held that the primitive church of the apostles had lost its purity and ceased to be the church about the time of the union of church and state under Constantine, and one dire consequence of this was the Edict of Innocent I (AD 407) which made infant baptism compulsory (Estep, *The Anabaptist Story*, 183). A serious side effect of infant baptism is that it dilutes the character of the church as a fellowship of the saved. Sadly, many baptistic churches today have replaced infant baptism with the almost sacred ceremony of dedicating babies to the Lord (another practice not mentioned anywhere in the NT).

Let us lay aside the traditions of man and live out the reformation begun in the 1500's. We must commit ourselves to the authority of Scripture in both our theology proper and our church practice.

- S.A.

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