

## Why We Baptize Babies (The Case for Infant Baptism) *By Dr. Richard P. Bucher*

Should we baptize babies? The Christian Church continues to be sharply divided over this important question. Those who answer "yes" (Lutherans, Catholics, Episcopalians, Methodists, etc.) claim Biblical support for their position. Those who answer "no" (Baptists, Seventh Day Adventists, many "Bible" or "evangelical," or "non-denominational" churches) say the Bible is on their side. The pro-infant baptism churches assert that Christ commanded infant baptism. The opposing side asserts that nowhere is such a thing commanded. They hold that at best it is useless and at worst harmful. It is their practice to rebaptize adults who were baptized as babies.

The Lutheran Church has always taught that baptism is for everyone, including infants. We believe that Jesus wants babies to be baptized. We do so for the following reasons.

### **I - Christ Has Commanded Us**

Many raise the objection: "There is not a single example of infant baptism in the New Testament, nor is there any command to do so. Therefore Christians should not baptize babies."

But Jesus has commanded infant baptism. In Matthew 28:19 He says, "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit . . ." Before He ascended, the Lord of the Church commanded us to baptize "all nations," a phrase the Church has always understood to mean "everyone." Matthew 25:31-32 also uses the phrase "all nations" in this way. All nations are to be baptized, regardless of race, color, sex, age, class, or education. Jesus makes no exceptions. He doesn't say, "Baptize all nations except . . ." Everyone is to be baptized, including infants. If we say that babies are not to be included in Christ's Great Commission, then where will it stop? What other people will we exclude?

It is true that there is no example in Scripture of a baby being baptized. However, to conclude from this that babies are not to be baptized is absurd. Neither are there any specific examples of the elderly being baptized, or teenagers, or little children. Instead we read about men (Acts 2:41; 8:35) women (Acts 16:14-15), and entire households being baptized (Acts 10:24,47-48; 16:14-15; 16:30-33; 1 Co. 1:16). The authors of the New Testament documents didn't feel compelled to give examples of every age group or category being baptized. Why should they have? Certainly they understood that "all nations" is all-inclusive.

### **II - Babies Need Forgiveness**

The Bible teaches that infants are born sinful and are in need of forgiveness. Scripture says nothing about an "Age of Accountability" that begins at the age of reason. Its message is that accountability begins at conception. David confesses in Psalm 51:5, "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me." The Bible teaches original sin, that the corruption and guilt of Adam's sin is passed on to every human being at conception. Jesus affirms this teaching when He says, "Flesh gives birth to flesh" (John 3:5). Paul takes it up in Romans 5:18: "So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men."

Furthermore, Jesus said, "He who believes and is baptized shall be saved; he who believes not shall be damned" (Mark 16:16). According to Jesus, ANYONE who does not believe in Him will be damned. Jesus makes no exception for infants. Babies will not be saved without faith in Jesus. Parents who think they are placing their children under God's grace by "dedicating" them are deceiving themselves. The only dedication that the New Testament knows of is the "dedication" that take place via baptism. That is why infants should be baptized. Like everyone else, they desperately need forgiveness. If infants die before they believe in Jesus, they will be eternally condemned. They, like everyone else, need to be baptized so that they can be born again. Jesus said, "unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (John 3:5). We believe that baptism is God's special means of grace for children by which He causes them to be born again. To keep them from baptism is to keep them from forgiveness and to endanger them with damnation.

### **III - Baptism Replaces Circumcision**

God's covenant with Abraham (Genesis 17:10-14) demanded that every male child was to be circumcised when eight days old. By circumcision, the baby entered into a covenant relationship with the true God.

St. Paul teaches us that in the New Testament baptism has replaced circumcision. "In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, buried with Him in baptism . . ." (Col. 2:11-12).

Given this fact, it would have been natural for first century Jewish believers to baptize infants, since they were accustomed to circumcise their male children at eight days old. It is also logical that if God regarded eight day old male babies as members of His covenant people through circumcision, He will also regard newborn babies to be members of His kingdom through baptism, the "circumcision made without hands."

#### **IV - Infants Can Believe**

The most frequent objection to infant baptism is that babies cannot believe. They do not, says the objection, have the intellect necessary to repent and believe in Jesus.

If this is your opinion, Jesus disagrees with you. Luke 18 tells us that certain parents were bringing infants (Greek - brephe) to Jesus, that He might bless them. The disciples rebuked those who brought the babies. Jesus' response is well known: "Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of God. Assuredly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will by no means enter it" (Luke 18:15-17). Some have objected that it is "little children" and not infants that Jesus speaks of here. Yet the very little children that the disciples were forbidding were infants. The infants are the focus of the passage. Clearly on this occasion Jesus had babies in mind when He said what He did!

Does this passage speak of infant baptism? No, not directly. It does show that Jesus did not raise the objection that so many do today about babies not being able to believe. According to Jesus, these babies had what it took to be members of the kingdom of God, feeble intellect and all! "Do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of God."

Now Jesus does not contradict Himself. The central message of His ministry (the Gospel) was that there was only way to enter God's kingdom. There was only one way to be saved. "He who believes and is baptized shall be saved" (Mark 16:16). Repeatedly Christ taught that faith in Him was the one way to become a member of God's kingdom (cf. John 3:16-18). Therefore, when He says about babies, "for of such is the kingdom of God," He is telling us that babies can believe (for how else could they enter the kingdom?!).

So if Jesus maintained that babies can believe (though their faith is very simple), who are we to deny it? And who are we to deny baptism to those who can believe? For those still stumbling over infant faith, remember: it is purely by God's grace that any person, adult or child, can believe. Faith is a gift of the Holy Spirit as much for the adult as for the child (see John 6:44; 1 Cor. 12:3; Eph. 2:1-4). When the adult believes in Christ it is only because the Holy Spirit, working through the Gospel, has worked the miracle of faith in his heart. So with the infant. If faith, then, is always a miracle, why can we not believe that God would work such miraculous faith in a baby?

Someone might ask, "If babies can believe then why do they need baptism?" Answer: it is through baptism that faith is created in the infant's heart. Baptism, far from being the empty symbolism that many imagine it to be, is the visible Gospel, a powerful means of grace. According to Scripture, baptism "washes away sin" (Acts 22:16), "saves" (1 Peter 3:21; Mark 16:16), causes one to "die to sin, to be buried, and raised up with Christ" (Romans 6:3-4) causes one to be "clothed with Christ" (Galatians 3:27), and to be a member of the body of Christ: "for by one Spirit, were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit" (1 Cor. 12:13). It bears repeating: baptism is a special means of God's grace by which He gives faith, forgiveness, and salvation to the infant.

#### **V - The Practice of the Early Church**

Those who deny infant baptism have a problem. They must explain why the fathers of the Church's first centuries speak of infant baptism as a universal custom. The Fathers is what we now call Pastors who led the Church after the death of the apostles. When we examine the writings of Irenaeus (d. 202), Tertullian (d. 240), Origen (d. 254), Cyprian (d. 258), and Augustine (d. 430), we see that they all spoke of infant baptism as accepted custom (though Tertullian disagreed with it).

Irenaeus remarks, "For He came to save all through means of Himself all, I say, who through Him are born again to God, infants, and children, and boys, and youths, and old men" (Against Heresies, Book 1, Ch. 22.4).

In his commentary on Romans, Origin writes, "The Church has received from the apostles the custom of administering baptism even to infants. For those who have been entrusted with the secrets of divine mysteries, knew very well that all are tainted with the stain of original sin, which must be washed off by water and spirit" (Romans Commentary, 5.9).

Cyprian writes, "In respect of the case of infants, which you say ought not to be baptized within the second or third day after birth, and that the law of ancient circumcision should be regarded, so that you think that one who is just born should not be baptized and sanctified within the eighth day, we all thought very differently in our council. For in this course which you thought was to be taken, no one agreed; but we all rather judge that the mercy and grace of God is not to be refused to any one born of man... Spiritual circumcision ought not to be hindered by carnal circumcision... we ought to shrink from hindering an infant, who, being lately born, has not sinned, except in that, being born after the flesh according to Adam, he has contracted the contagion of the ancient death at its earliest birth, who approaches the more easily on this very account to the reception of the forgiveness of sins - that to him are remitted, not his own sins, but the sins of another" (Letter 58 to Fidus).

And in his Enchiridion, Augustine declares, "For from the infant newly born to the old man bent with age, as there is none shut out from baptism, so there is none who in baptism does not die to sin" (Enchiridion; ch. 43).

### **Conclusion**

For completeness sake, I have listed five reasons why Christians should baptize infants. The first reason should have been enough. Jesus has commanded His Church to "make disciples of all nations baptizing them . . ." Christ made no exceptions. Infants are part of all nations, as are every other age group. We do not have to prove this. The burden of proof is on those who deny that infants are to be included in "all nations." To deny the blessing of infant baptism because you can't find the words "infant baptism" in the Bible makes as much sense as rejecting the teaching of the Trinity because you can't find the words "Trinity" or "triune" in the Bible.

As to babies not being of the age of reason and therefore not able to believe, I have shown that Christ disagrees. So in a sense, the teaching of infant baptism reveals who your Lord is. Lord Jesus Christ has commanded us to baptize all nations, has declared that everyone who dies without faith is damned, and has taught us that infants can believe by God's grace working through baptism. Lord Reason says, "I don't understand how a baby can believe, therefore I reject infant baptism. It makes more sense to me to do it my way." Which Lord will you obey? Will you obey Christ and baptize "all nations," including infants, even though you don't understand it? Or will you obey Reason and reject infant baptism because you don't understand how babies can believe? Which Lord will you obey?