

WHY DO WE BAPTIZE CHILDREN AND WHAT DOES BAPTISM MEAN?¹

It is the regular practice at GTCC to baptize two groups of people. The first group consists of men, women, and children who demonstrate both a genuine faith in Jesus Christ and a desire to join the Greentree church family (i.e., “believer’s baptism”). The second group consists of the infants and children of our church members. Perhaps one of the most common questions asked is, “Why do you baptize infants and children who have not yet made a public profession of faith in Christ?” The simple answer to this question is that (1) while we firmly believe this is *not* an issue over which Christians should divide, yet (2) we are convinced that both the Bible and early church history support the practice of household baptism, which includes infants and young children. We fully realize that many of you come from different backgrounds and will find this teaching initially distasteful. We would reiterate that belief in infant baptism is not an essential of our faith, nor is it required for church membership, but we would also ask you to patiently read through the following reasons for this belief as well as the Scripture references that support it.

BIBLICAL RATIONALE

It is the belief of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC) and of GTCC that God’s covenant of grace (His promise to be our God and have us as His people), in a mysterious way that we cannot quite grasp, extends to the children, “offspring,” or “seed” of believers (Genesis 17:7-8, Acts 2:39). Such children, we believe, therefore have a right to the covenant sign, which in the New Testament is baptism (in the Old Testament the sign was circumcision). In order to understand the practice of infant baptism, it is necessary to see the Bible as a unified whole, that is with the Old Testament informing the New and the New fulfilling the Old. In this regard, we see from texts like Romans 4:1-12 (and many, many others) that we are children of Abraham, and so children of God’s promise to Abraham. If this is the case, then we are clearly connected to the saints in the Old Testament. Abraham was saved by faith and so are we. Thus, God’s promise was to Abraham’s children and that promise remains for us (Acts 2:39). Following is a brief reasoning of why we, at the request of those who share our beliefs on this matter, will baptize infants, as well as other children in a believing household who have not yet made a profession of faith.

In the New Testament, baptism replaces circumcision as the sign of the covenant.

- Colossians 2:11-12 teaches that baptism is the full expression of circumcision. The covenant of circumcision required that the infant male be circumcised as a newborn infant (Genesis 17:12), and this covenant was to be an *everlasting* covenant (Genesis 17:13). Physical circumcision is clearly no longer in effect (Galatians 6:11-18), but the covenant it represents *is* still operative (Romans 2:29). The new outward sign of this “everlasting” covenant with believers and their children is baptism (Colossians 2:11-12). Therefore, we believe it follows, then, that baptism is to be administered to the children of believing parents.
- Acts 2:38-39 describes baptism with virtually the same language and terms with which Genesis 17:9-14 describes circumcision. The promise connected with baptism in Acts 2:38-39 explicitly includes the children of believers, as did the promise connected with circumcision in Genesis 17:9-14. No mention of a required age or profession of faith is made with respect to such children.

¹ This is a combined work with Rev. Scott Sauls formerly of Riverside Church (riversidestl.org), now Redeemer Presbyterian Church (www.redeemer.com).

- As circumcision was a requirement for the Old Testament household (Genesis 17:10, 12-13), so, we believe, was baptism for the New Testament household (Acts 16:15, 31-33; 1 Corinthians 1:16). Never once are children said to be excluded from a household baptism, except in the case of the Ethiopian eunuch, who obviously had no children.
- For 2000 years, the Jews placed the sign of the Covenant on their male children (circumcision), so to reverse 2000 years of history and practice, God would have had to give a specific command to disregard their heritage and Scripture, but there is no biblical command given for believers to cease the application of the covenant sign with their children. Since no command exists to cease, it stands to reason that it must continue. The reason then that we find no specific command to baptize our babies in the New Testament is that it was already assumed from their current practice (based on Scripture). Since God's people had always given their children the sign of the covenant (over 2000 years at the time of Christ), the burden of proof is on those who would deny baptism from children to prove that God has somewhere commanded otherwise.
- The New Covenant is more inclusive than the Old. Whereas only males could receive circumcision, now females and males can receive baptism. Whereas the Old Covenant was made more specifically with Israel, the New Covenant is with all nations. Thus, it is unlikely that the New Covenant would somehow become less inclusive and less broad by removing children from God's Covenant promises.
- Finally, we must notice that any criticism of infant baptism could be just as easily leveled at infant circumcision.

In the Scriptures, believers' children were regarded as members of the covenant community.

- In Psalm 22:9-10, the Psalmist sings, "You [God] are He who took me from the womb, who made me to trust in you at my mother's breast. On You I was cast from my birth, and from my mother's womb you have been my God." Again in Psalm 71 we hear, "For you, O Lord, are my hope, my trust, O LORD, from my youth. Upon you I have leaned from before my birth; you are he who took me from my mother's womb. My praise is continually of you." Throughout the Psalms, covenant children are seen as a heritage from the Lord. In these examples, we hear the amazing truth that God has not waited until a child was 8 or 13 or so to begin the journey of faith; it begins from the *womb!* The children were always seen as part of God's family.
- In Luke 18:15-17, Jesus said that God's Kingdom belongs to little children (from the Greek *brephe*, which literally means "baby" or "infant").
- In Ephesians 6:1-4 and Colossians 3:20-21 Paul addresses children (from the Greek *tekna*, meaning "child") as believers in Christ. He speaks to them as he would any saint, regardless of age.
- In 1 Corinthians 7:14 Paul refers to the children (*tekna*) of believers as "holy" (meaning set apart for God). The word translated "holy" (*hagia*) is the exact same word used elsewhere by the apostles in reference to believers (translated "saints" – see I Cor. 1:1 or Ephesians 1:1, for example). The New Testament assumption, then, is that children of believers should be *regarded and treated* as believers unless or until they prove themselves to be covenant breakers.
- In 2 Timothy 3:15, Timothy is said to have known the Scriptures from infancy (*brephe*).
- In Luke 1:15, John the Baptist is said to have been filled with the Spirit, "even from his mother's womb".
- There is infant baptism in the New Testament! I Corinthians 10:1-4 explains that when the Israelites passed through the Red Sea during the Exodus, they experienced the same baptism

that we do. Unless we are prepared to argue that 600,000 men left their children on the other bank to be killed by the Egyptians, we must admit that they too were baptized.

- The New Testament suggests nowhere that the sign of the covenant (previously circumcision, now baptism) is to be withheld from the children of believers until they make an informed profession of faith in Christ. In fact, the command in Acts to repent, believe, and be baptized is given to adults and does not mention children in any way, but when adults become believers, their entire households are baptized.

HISTORICAL RATIONALE

It is a well-attested fact that household / infant baptism was the universal practice of the early church. No reputable biblical historian or scholar, whether Presbyterian or Baptist or otherwise, will dispute this fact.

- Irenaeus (a disciple of Polycarp, who was a disciple of the apostle John) speaks of infant baptism as a universal practice in the early church.
- Tertullian (end of 2nd century) acknowledged the universal practice of infant baptism.
- Origen (2nd and 3rd centuries) spoke of infant baptism as the common practice of the early church.
- These things being the case, were household (and consequently infant) baptism *not* the New Testament church practice, then the conclusion must be made that a full reversal of the early church's practice occurred immediately following the death of the last apostle. Because there is neither biblical nor extra-biblical evidence indicating so much as a debate about this issue in the first or second centuries, such a reversal is extremely unlikely. We conclude this in large part because there is a wealth of documentation about virtually every other theological debate and/or alleged "heresy" in the early church.

OUR ATTITUDE ABOUT HOUSEHOLD BAPTISM

We encourage household baptism at Greentree, but *do not require it* of those who cannot accept it. To us the biblical and supporting historical teaching seems clear, so we do strongly encourage Greentree parents to have their children baptized. However, parents who are not convinced of our position are *not* required to have their children baptized in order to be fully active and fully received church members, and will not in any way be pressured to do so. This is an issue about which we are happy to disagree without it being any hindrance at all to full Christian fellowship. We will under no circumstance make this "non-essential" issue an essential one.

THE MEANING AND BENEFIT OF BAPTISM

Often we think about baptism as something we say to God, sort of a thank you to Him as well as a public profession of our faith. However, baptism focuses much stronger on what God has to say to us (this idea also makes infant baptism more understandable). The sign of the Old Covenant (circumcision) was a marker of God's promise to us: He promises to be God to us and our children and He promises to have us as His people. Baptism, as the sign of the New Covenant, also communicates God's promise to be a God to us and our children (Acts 2:39). In baptism, God shows forth His promise that there is washing and cleansing from sin, freedom, new identity in Christ, and resurrection life for all those who believe that Jesus is Lord. Thus, baptism is a picture form of communication from God to us of His grace and promises. In baptism, we see a clear

demonstration of God's washing us clean with water and bringing us into the family of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

- **Union with Christ**—Galatians 3:27 says that “for as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.” Baptism seals us into our union with Jesus, and publicly symbolizes the marriage of Christ to the person being baptized. Like a piece of clothing to be seen by all, baptism puts the name of Christ on His children. This is why baptism is done *into* the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—God brings believers into the fellowship of the Godhead as the bride of the Son and the children of the Father. This union is further expressed in Romans 6 where those baptized are with Christ in His death and resurrection. So, baptism outwardly shows our death to sin and our resurrection to new life by the Spirit (6:3-5).
- **Regeneration and cleansing**—Titus 3:5 says that Baptism demonstrates the “washing of regeneration.” This is one reason we use water to baptize because it symbolizes water’s cleansing effect and so God’s cleansing believers of their sins. In Acts 22:16, Paul is commanded to “rise and be baptized and wash away your sins.” God’s water was always associated with cleansing, and that meaning remains in baptism. The applied water represents the power of Jesus’ blood to wash the foulest sinner clean.
- **New Identity**—Remember above that Gal. 3:27 said that in baptism we “put on Christ.” Verse 28 follows with application: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” These were all the most serious of identity markers in the ancient world. One’s social status depended on his nationality, wealth, and gender. But Paul says that those markers have all been superseded by baptism. Those baptized into Christ are defined now by His work, His love, His status which is given to us. Our gender, wealth, and nationality are no longer important. What is important is that we are washed by Christ and have been brought into His eternal family where the greatest riches abound like sand on the seashore.
- **Admission into the church family**—I Corinthians 12:13 says that we are baptized into one body, the church. This means that baptism is the entry point into the covenant family and the public sign that all the benefits of the church community are for the one being baptized.
- **Baptism demonstrates the Gospel of unconditional grace**—God’s grace and mercy are given to us apart from our works (Thank goodness!). When infants are baptized we see God marking and offering His Gospel to the most fragile and helpless of our society. We see his grace coming to them in spite of their massive inability to do anything to receive it (such as a profession of faith). So, infant baptism is a beautiful picture of the Gospel which comes to us in spite of our own helplessness (Eph. 2:1-10).
- **Baptism and Salvation**—Some traditions have, we think incorrectly, taught that baptism works automatically to remove original sin or to produce regeneration. While God clearly works through baptism and while baptism is a powerful sign of salvation, we must always maintain a distinction between the SIGN (baptism) and the thing being SIGNIFIED (salvation). For example, my wedding ring MEANS that I’m married but it does not EQUAL marriage. The ring reminds me of my vows, my wife’s love for me, the unbroken circle of trust between us, etc. but it is not, itself my marriage. There is a difference between the sign (ring) and the thing signified (marriage). Similarly, baptism is a powerful means of God’s grace and it points us to His sovereign grace poured out in the person and work of Jesus Christ, but it is not the guarantee of final perseverance.

Finally, we should seek to maintain a “baptismal identity.” Following Romans 6:1-15, we know that baptism calls us out as those united to Christ by dying to our sins and being raised to walk in new life. In baptism, we are the children of God, those washed by His blood, a people admitted into the Trinitarian family and walking with and before the church family; in baptism, we are married to Jesus. How then can we be adulterers in our marriage to Christ? How can we be unfaithful to our self-sacrificing, self-giving husband? How can we deny the washing of our sins? How can we deny our family name? If we are baptized into Christ, then we must live in a corresponding way. This is why the great reformer Martin Luther when tempted or when finding himself in sin would say, “Martin, remember you are a baptized man!” May your baptism be formative in your walk with Christ. He truly understood that baptism and all it represents fully demonstrated his calling and walk in Christ, and we would do well to follow his example.