

Just what is Paedobaptism based on the Word of God? (Infant Baptism)

In a missionary situation the first subjects of baptism are always converts. But throughout Christian history, attested as early as Irenaeus and Origen with a reference back to the apostles, **it has also been given to the children of professing believers.** This has not been solely on grounds of tradition, or in consequence of a perversion, but for what have been regarded as scriptural reasons.

To be sure, there is no direct command to baptize infants. But there is also no prohibition. Again, if we have no clear-cut example of an infant baptism in the New Testament, there may well have been such in the **household baptisms of Acts**, and there is also **no instance of the child of Christians being baptized on profession of faith. In other words, no decisive guidance is given by direct precept or precedent.**

Yet there are two lines of biblical study which are thought to give convincing reasons for the practice. **The first** is a consideration of detailed passages or statements from the Old Testament and New Testament. **The second** is a consideration of the whole underlying theology of baptism as it comes before us in the Bible.

To begin with the detailed passages, we naturally turn first to the **types** of baptism found in the Old Testament. **All these favor the view that God deals with families rather than individuals.** When Noah is saved from the flood, his whole family is received with him into the ark (**I Peter 3:20-21**):

20 ...when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built - In it only a few people, **eight in all**, were saved through water, **21** and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—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,

When Abraham is given the covenant sign of circumcision, he is commanded to administer it to all the male members of his house (**Genesis**

17; cf. Colossians 2:11-12 for the connection between baptism and circumcision):

11 *In him 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, 12 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.*

At the Red Sea it is all Israel (men, women, and children) which passes through the waters in the great act of redemption that **foreshadows** not only the sign of baptism but the work of God behind it (**I Corinthians 10:1-2**):

1 *for I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers, that our forefathers were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. 2* They were all **baptized into Moses** in the cloud and in the sea

In the New Testament the ministry of our Lord is particularly rich in relevant statements. He himself becomes a child, and as such is conceived of the Holy Spirit. John the Baptist (as he is called today), too, is filled with the Spirit from his mother's womb, so that he might have been a fit subject for baptism no less than circumcision very early in life. Later, Christ receives and **blesses** the little ones (**Matthew 19:13-14**):

13 *Then little children were brought to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them. But the disciples rebuked those who brought them. 14* Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven **BELONGS** to such as these."

Jesus is angry when his disciples rebuff them (**Mark 10:13-14**):

13 *People were bringing little children to Jesus to have him touch them, but the disciples rebuked them. 14* When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God **BELONGS** to such as these. **15** *I tell you the truth; anyone who*

*will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.” **16** And he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them.*

He says that the things of God **are revealed to babes** rather than the wise and prudent (**Luke 10:21**):

21 *At that time Jesus, full of joy through the Holy Spirit, said, “I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and **revealed them to little children**. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure:*

He takes up the statement of **Psalm 8:2** about the praise of sucklings (**Matthew 21:15-16**):

Psalm 8:2 *from the lips of children and infants you **have ordained praise***

Matthew 21:15 *when the chief priests and the teachers of the law saw the wonderful things he did and the children shouting in the temple area, “Hosanna to the Son of David,” they were indignant. **16** “Do you **hear what these children are saying?**” they asked him. “Yes,” replied Jesus, “have you never read, “From the lips of children and infants you **have ordained praise**’ ?*

He warns against the danger of offending against little ones that believe in him (**Matthew 18:1-6**), and in the same context says that to be Christians **we have not to become adults but to become as children**.

The Greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven in **Matthew 18:1-6** *at that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” 2 He called a little child and had him stand among them. 3 And he said: “I tell you the truth, **unless you change and become like little children**, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. 4 Therefore, **whoever***

humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. 5*"And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me. 6 but if anyone causes one of these **LITTLE ONES WHO BELIEVE IN ME** to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.*

In the first preaching in **Acts 2:39** it is noticeable that Peter confirms the covenant procedure of the Old Testament with the words: "**The promise is unto you, and to your children.**" In the light of Old Testament background and the similar procedure in proselyte baptisms, **there is little reason to doubt that the household baptisms would include any children who might belong to the families concerned.**

Acts 2:39-41 *The **promise is for you and your children** and for all who are far off—**for all whom the Lord our God will call.**"* 40 *With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation."* 41 *Those who **accepted his message were baptized**, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.*

In the epistles **children are particularly addressed** in **Ephesians, Colossians**, and probably **I John**. We also have the important statement in **1 Corinthians 7:14** in which Paul speaks of the children of marriages that **have become "mixed"** by conversion as "*holy.*" This cannot refer to their civil status, but can only mean that they **belong to the covenant people, and therefore will obviously have a right to the covenant sign.**

I Corinthians 7:14 *or the **unbelieving husband has been sanctified through** his wife, and the **unbelieving wife has been sanctified** through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, **but as it is, they are holy.***

It will be noted that in different ways all these statements bring before us the covenant membership of the children of

professing believers. They thus introduce us directly to the biblical understanding of baptism that provides the second line of support for baptizing infants.

As the Bible sees it, baptism is not primarily a sign of repentance and faith on the part of the baptized. It is not a sign of anything that we do at all. It is a **covenant sign** (like circumcision, but without blood-shedding), and therefore a sign of the **work of God on our behalf which precedes and makes possible our own responsive movement.**

It is a sign of the gracious election of the Father who plans and establishes the covenant. It is therefore a sign of **God's calling.** Abraham no less than his descendants was **first chosen and called** by God (**Genesis 12:1**):

The Call of Abram in **Genesis 12:1** *The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you.*

Israel was **separated to the Lord** because he himself had said "I will be **your God**, and ye shall be **my people**" (**Jeremiah 7:23**). Of all disciples it must be said: "Ye have not chosen me, **but I have chosen you**" (**John 15:16**). **The elective will of God in Christ extends to those who are far off as well as nigh, and the sign of it may be extended not only to those who have responded, but to their children growing up in the sphere of the divine choice and calling.**

But baptism is also a sign of the substitutionary work of the Son in which the covenant is fulfilled. **As a witness of death and resurrection, it attests the death and resurrection of the One for the many without whose vicarious action no work even of repentance and faith can be of any avail.** It preaches Christ himself as the One who is **already** dead and risen, so that **all** are dead and risen in him (**2 Corinthians 5:14; Colossians 3:1**) even before the **movements of repentance and faith** which they are summoned to make in identification with him:

2 Corinthians 5:14 *For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that **one died for all, and therefore all died.***

*Rules for Holy Living in **Colossians 3:1** Since, then, **you have been raised with Christ**, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God.*

This substitutionary work is not merely for those who have already believed. It may and must be preached to all, and the sign and seal given both to those who **accept** it and to the children who will be **brought up** with knowledge of what God **has already done** for them once for all and all-sufficiently in Christ.

Finally, baptism is **a sign of the regenerative work of the Holy Spirit** by which individuals are brought into the covenant in the responsive movement of repentance and faith. But the Holy Spirit is sovereign (**John 3:8**):

8 The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

He works **how and when and in** whom he pleases. God does not concern himself with human impossibilities (**Luke 1:34-38**):

34 "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" **35** The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you so the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. **36** Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. **37** For **nothing is impossible** with God." **38** "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "**May it be to me as you have said.**" Then the angel left her.

He is **often present** before his ministry is perceived, and his operation is not necessarily coextensive with our apprehension of it. He does not disdain the minds of the undeveloped as fit subjects for the beginning, or if he so disposes the completion, of his work. So long as there is prayer to the Spirit, and a readiness to preach the evangelical word when the opportunity comes, **infants may be regarded as within the sphere**

of this life-giving work which it is the office of baptism to sign and seal.

Where infant baptism, or *paedobaptism*, as it is sometimes called, is practiced, **it is right and necessary that those who grow to maturity should make their own confession of faith.** But they do so with the clear witness that it is not this which saves them, **but the work of God already done for them before they believed.** The possibility arises, of course, that they will not make this confession, or do so formally. But this cannot be avoided by a different mode of administration. It is a problem of preaching and teaching. **And even if they do not believe, or do so nominally, their prior baptism as a sign of the work of God is a constant witness to call or finally to condemn them.**

On the mission field adult baptism will naturally continue. In days of apostasy it can and will be common even in evangelized lands. Indeed, as a witness to the fact that **our response is really demanded** it is good for the church that there should always be a baptism section within it. But once the gospel has gained an entry into a family or community, there is good scriptural and theological ground that infant baptism should be the normal practice.

Evangelical Dictionary of Theology; Edited by Walter A. Elwell

By G.W. Bromiley, Article "Baptism: Infant", *Pages 116-117*

Baker Books – Thirteenth Printing, September 1997