

## Appendix V – The Validity of Infant Baptism

For me personally it came down to answering the question, “Was Jesus present in my baptism at the age of three weeks?” I knew Christians who wouldn’t hesitate in saying “no.” A common justification for their position was: For baptism to have meaning a person has to have sufficient maturity to accept Jesus into his/her heart as personal Lord and Savior. The Apostle Paul said, “. . .if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Romans 10:9). An infant didn’t have the mental, nor the articulatory, ability to make such a confession.

The difficulty I have with that kind of reasoning is that it excludes not just infants from receiving the gift of the Spirit, but adults with profound mental retardation. In fact, if we want to take this passage at absolute face-value, someone who was mute couldn’t “confess with [his] lips,” and therefore couldn’t be saved either.

I am sure that no one reading this is worried about the exclusion of these brothers and sisters from God’s kingdom because of their respective challenges. Without a second thought we conclude that the Lord takes these special conditions into consideration. In the case of the mute man, for example, surely the Lord will “hear” his confession of faith via sign language or an augmentative communication device. In the case of the mentally retarded we instinctually believe that God, in His great love for these little ones, extends the grace of Christ to them without requiring “faith” in the same manner as He does from another. God is loving and just; He does not demand what someone is unable to give.

Another situation which we should consider is that of the child who dies before reaching the “age of reason.” Is such a child condemned to hell because he/she did not have the chance to “accept Jesus” the way an adult would? I think that even the most legalistic readers of the Bible make a compassionate leap of faith, believing that God has mercy upon the souls of these children. Knowing the great love of God, we believe that these little ones will not be condemned - seeing as how they do not possess the maturity to commit personal sins, they need only to be healed of the effects of original sin by an application of Christ’s grace. Again, God is expected to make a merciful exception on behalf of the child. What I find so interesting

is that many Christians who cannot accept God bestowing the second birth upon the soul of a *living* child, *can* accept Him doing so for the soul of a deceased child. *Why* the latter and not the former?

Is it true that the baptism of infants has no basis in Scripture? In my first reading of the New Testament I had not come across any outright mention of it. Taking a second look, however, and considering different biblical passages in light of one another has left me convinced that infants *can* respond to Christ's grace, and therefore should be considered worthy recipients of baptism.

There *is* a good biblical example of an infant receiving God's grace. When the angel Gabriel announced the birth of John the Baptist he told the child's father, "He will be filled with the Holy Spirit *even from his mother's womb*" (Luke 1:15; emphasis added). The filling of the Holy Spirit is an action which the rest of us experience as a consequence of our baptism - John received it before reaching the age of reason, *before even exiting his mother's womb!* If we look a little farther we find that John not only received grace in the womb, he acted on it as well; when his mother Elizabeth was visited by Mary, John "leaped for joy" while still in her womb (Luke 1:44).

There are other texts to consider as well. On the day of Pentecost, Peter was asked by the Jewish crowd what they must do to be saved. He replied:

Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you *and your children* and to all that are far off whom the Lord our God calls to him (Acts 2:38-39; emphasis added).

We cannot forget that up until this point in history God had always included infants in His covenant. To have revoked that privilege would have made the New Covenant inferior to the Old. The New Covenant was meant to open the Family of God wider, not limit it. When *Acts of the Apostles* tells us that whole families were baptized (Acts 16:15; 16:31-33; 18:8) it mentions no exclusion of infants.

Something that should be thought-provoking is the Apostle Paul's equating of circumcision in the Old Testament with baptism in the New:

In [Jesus] also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of flesh in *the circumcision of Christ; and you were buried with him in baptism*, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead (Colossians 2:11-12; emphasis added)

I am not offering a new interpretation of this passage; Martin Luther and John Calvin, as well as modern Protestant lights such as Francis Schaeffer, understood it the same way.<sup>314</sup>

This point is pertinent to the present discussion because circumcision was the Old Testament rite whereby male *infants* were brought into God's covenant with Abraham. The Lord had told Abraham:

I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you...This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your descendants after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. . .He that is *eight days old* among you shall be circumcised; every male throughout your generations. . .Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant (Genesis 17: 7, 10, 12, 14; emphasis added).

The inclusion of infants in His covenant people was a matter of utmost importance in God's eyes. This is amply illustrated by the example of Moses. When God's spokesman was lax in circumcising his son the Lord was so offended that He came to Moses with the intention of taking his life. The only thing that saved him was his quick-thinking, sure-handed wife and a piece of flint (Exodus 4:24-26). My contention on this point is: if the

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<sup>314</sup> The following citations were found in Stephen Ray's *Crossing the Tiber*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997), p.127.

John Calvin wrote, "Hence it is incontrovertible, that baptism has been substituted for circumcision, and performs the same office." *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2:531  
 Martin Luther said, "We now have baptism instead of circumcision." (*Luther's Works*, ed. Abdel R. Wentz [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959], 36:95,n.)

Francis Schaeffer wrote, "There is a flow between the circumcision of the Old Testament and the baptism of the New. The New Testament speaks of baptism as the Christian's circumcision. . .We could say it this way. . .'You are circumcised by Christian circumcision, being baptized'" (*The Complete Works of Francis Schaeffer* [Westchester, Ill: Crossway Books, 1982], 2:225).