

*Infant Baptism
or
Believer's Baptism?*

Joel James

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by

Joel James

Joel James is a graduate of The Master's Seminary in Los Angeles, California and serves as the Pastor-teacher of Grace Fellowship Pretoria.

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Word of the Cross
PO Box 39263
Garsfontein East
0060
South Africa
orders@gracefellowship.co.za

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Introduction

At Grace Fellowship we practice believer's baptism. Since this is contrary to the practice of many churches in our country, some who come to Grace Fellowship have questions about baptism. As we see it, the primary questions in the debate between infant baptism and believer's baptism are as follows:

- Do the New Testament passages that speak of water baptism reveal that the Apostles practised infant baptism or believer's baptism?
- Does the New Testament teach that baptism has replaced circumcision, justifying the practice of infant baptism?
- Are infants of church members participants in the covenant, therefore, justifying their baptism as "children of the covenant"?
- Is it possible for infants to have faith at their baptism, justifying their baptism?
- Is infant baptism valid if it is practised as merely a parent or child dedication?

The Pattern of New Testament Baptism

John the Baptist

The first mention of baptism in the New Testament is in Matthew 3, Matthew's record of John the Baptist's ministry. This of course, was before the church began at Pentecost, but there can be little doubt that John's practise of baptism influenced the Apostles. After all, some of them had been followers of John before they became followers of Jesus (John 1:35-40).

Now in those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" ... Then Jerusalem was going out to him, and all Judea and all the district around the Jordan; and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, as they confessed their sins.

(Matthew 3:1-2, 5-6)

John preached repentance and baptised those who confessed their sins and sought God's forgiveness. In fact, John rejected the Pharisees and Saducees who came to him to be baptised (vv. 7-8) because he did not believe their repentance was genuine—evidenced by their lack of fruit. These religious leaders had the right family background—"We have Abraham for our father" (v. 10)—but John was unimpressed. Baptism was not based on who your parents were, but on personal repentance from sin.

Jesus' Instruction: Matthew 28:19-20

Although John 4:1-2 tells us that Jesus' disciples also baptised as John had, the Gospels say nothing specific about Jesus' practice of baptism until the Great Commission of Matthew 28.

Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you.

(Matt 28:19-20)

This instruction tells us something important about whom the Apostles were to baptise. The Greek word for *disciple* in the command, "Make disciples," was the word, *mathetes*. A *mathetes* was a learner, a follower of a specific teacher, someone who adhered to a teacher's instruction in a devoted manner. The uses of *mathetes* in the Gospel of Matthew reveal that a disciple of Christ was one...

- who eagerly learned Christ's teaching (5:1; 13:36)
- who confessed Christ before men (10:24-33)
- who placed his relationship with Christ above his family relationships (12:49)

- who denied himself (i.e., his goals, desires, and expectations) to follow Christ's goals, desires, and expectations (16:24)
- who would do anything for Christ, even face persecution or death (16:24)
- who obeyed Christ's commands (16:24).

It was such committed followers of Christ that the Apostles were to baptise. The widely respected commentator William Hendriksen (himself a practicer of infant baptism) accurately summarised the teaching of Matthew 28:19-20 when he wrote, "The context makes very clear that Jesus is here speaking about those who are old enough to be considered the objects of preaching. He is not here speaking about infants."¹

Peter's precedent: Acts 2

John and Jesus' pattern was the practice adopted by the Apostles' in the book of Acts. The first example of this is Peter's reference to baptism in his sermon on the day of Pentecost.

Now when they heard this, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the Apostles, "Brethren, what shall we do?" And Peter said to them, "Repent, and let each of you be baptized 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 for you and your children, and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God shall call to Himself."

(Acts 2:37-39)

With the words, "Repent and be baptised," Peter established a precedent that the Apostles adhered to throughout the book of Acts: *personal repentance from sin had to precede water baptism*. The Apostles' practice was the same as John the Baptist's had been. Repentance, not who your parents were, was the prerequisite for being baptised.

Which promise is for your children?

The words of Acts 2:39 ("the promise is for you and your children") are sometimes used to support infant baptism. Some believe this statement means parents *and* their infant children are to be baptised; however, a careful reading of the text eliminates this interpretation. First, the promise Peter referred to was not *baptism*; the context proves that conclusively. The promise was the reception of the Holy Spirit at salvation.

One of the immediate purposes of Peter's sermon was to prove that the Apostles' tongues speaking (2:4-13) was not the ramblings of drunkards, but evidence that the Messiah, Jesus Christ, had sent the Holy Spirit upon His followers.

¹ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, in the New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973), p. 1000.

For these men are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only the third hour of the day, but this is what was spoken of through the prophet Joel: "And it shall be in the last days," God says, "that I will pour forth of My Spirit on all mankind."

(Acts 2:15-17)

At the end of his sermon, Peter again asserted that the events of that morning were a fulfilment of God's promise to give the Spirit in the Messianic age.

Therefore, having been exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father *the promise of the Holy Spirit*, He has poured forth *this which you both see and hear*.

(Acts 2:33, emphasis added)

What Peter meant by "the promise" in verse 39 is clear from the context: the reception of the Holy Spirit. Peter was assuring his listeners that the promised Holy Spirit was available to *all* who would follow Christ, not just himself and the other Apostles.

Repent and be baptized...and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise [reception of the Holy Spirit] is for you and your children, and for all who are far off.

(Acts 2:38-39)

Peter promised three categories of people—adults, their children, and Gentiles (those "far off")—the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise was extended to all three groups on the same basis: personal repentance. The children or descendants of those listening to Peter were welcome to participate in the same blessing as their parents, if they too repented. This verse says nothing about infant baptism. Instead, it was Peter's assurance that the Holy Spirit was available to all who repent.

Based on his statement in verse 38, Peter would not have baptised infants on the day of Pentecost. No infant is capable of the personal, intelligent mental activity required for biblical repentance. And Peter's order of events was clear: "Repent and be baptised."

What God wants to do?

But isn't infant baptism a sign of what God wants to do in the life of an infant? While it sounds theological to speak of infant baptism as an "anticipatory sign" of a child's hoped-for repentance, this view of baptism is never taught in the New Testament. Peter did not speak of baptism as a sign of something yet to come (i.e., future repentance). He spoke of baptism as a sign of what *had* happened, and that is how the Apostles practised it.

So then, those *who had received his word* were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls.

(Act 2:41, emphasis added)

Peter made it clear in Acts 2:38 that children would be eligible for reception of the Spirit and water baptism on the same basis as their parents: *if they repented*. Baptism as an anticipation of salvation was not mentioned. No other New Testament passage teaches or implies such a view of baptism either.

Rather than supporting infant baptism, Acts 2:38-39 established a requirement for baptism that excluded the possibility that infant baptism was practised by the Apostles. Peter said that for parents *and their children* personal repentance must precede baptism. Did the Apostles follow the pattern of baptism Peter outlined in Acts 2:38-39? Let's consider the rest of the book of Acts and see.

Acts 8:12

The next mention of baptism in Acts came in Luke's account of Philip's ministry in Samaria.

But when they believed Philip preaching the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were being baptized, men and women alike.

(Acts 8:12)

Luke emphasised the sequence of events in Samaria: after they believed Philip's preaching, they were baptised.² Their belief in Jesus Christ was acknowledged by their subsequent baptism.

Luke also said Philip baptised "men and women alike"; infants are notable only in their absence. If baptising infants was a New Testament practice, this would have been the place for Luke to say Philip baptised "men, women, *and infants*."³ However, when one considers the apostolic requirement of repentance established by Peter in Acts 2, the absence of infants is no surprise.

This same sequence (belief and *then* baptism) was followed in the other baptisms of Acts: the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:35-38), Paul (Acts 22:12-16), and the disciples of John the Baptist in Ephesus (Acts 19:1-7). Peter's precedent—repentance must precede baptism—was carefully observed by the early church throughout the book of Acts.

The Household Baptisms

Traditionally the "household baptisms" of the book of Acts and 1 Corinthians have been considered a stronghold by many who practice infant baptism. However, a closer inspection shows that those accounts don't support the practice of infant baptism. Surprisingly, they actually

² The belief of 8:12 and the repentance of 2:38 are merely two different ways of describing the same response to the gospel. Compare Mark 1:15 where they were used synonymously by Jesus.

³ Some argue that the book of Acts was a "missionary situation" in which concern was only with adult baptism. However, it doesn't follow that converts to Christ would have had no concern for baptising their infants, especially if baptism was seen as the replacement of circumcision. The *first* thing they would have done was baptise their infants. But there is no record of such a practice.

contribute to its rejection. In four of the five household baptisms in the New Testament, the possibility that infants were baptised is actually excluded by a careful reading of the text.

Cornelius' household

Peter's sermon to the household of Cornelius concluded this way:

Of Him all the prophets bear witness that through His name every one who believes in Him has received forgiveness of sins." While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the message. And all the circumcised believers who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out upon the Gentiles also. For they were hearing them speaking with tongues and exalting God. Then Peter answered, "Surely no one can refuse the water for these to be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we did, can he?" And he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

(Acts 10:43-48)

Based on the outward evidence of their conversion (speaking in tongues and exalting God), Peter concluded that those present should be baptised. It is important to note that Luke said the Spirit fell on "all those who were listening" (v. 44). Later, the Jerusalem church described what occurred in Cornelius' household as the "repentance that leads to life" (Acts 11:18).

If there were infants present, they *listened* to the message, *repented*, were *given* the gift of the Holy Spirit just as the Apostles had been, *spoke* in tongues, and *exalted* God. The text says that "all" present participated in those life-changing events (v. 44). In other words, Luke's report excludes the possibility that infants were baptised in Acts 10.

The Philippian jailer's household

Acts 16 records the conversion of the Philippian jailer and his family.

And after he brought them out, he said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" And they said, Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you shall be saved, you and your household." And they spoke the word of the Lord to him together with all who were in his house. And he took them that very hour of the night and washed their wounds, and immediately he was baptized, he and all his household. And he brought them into his house and set food before them, and rejoiced greatly, having believed in God with his whole household.

(Acts 16:30-34)

Luke says Paul preached Christ, speaking "the word of the Lord to him together with *all*/who were in the house [emphasis added]" (v. 32). Verse 33 adds that everyone in the house was baptised. But care must be taken not to overlook verse 34: The jailer "believed in God *with his whole*

household[emphasis added]." Everyone in the household expressed saving belief, therefore, they were baptised in water according to apostolic practice.

Crispus' household

And Crispus, the leader of the synagogue, believed in the Lord with all his household, and many of the Corinthians when they heard were believing and being baptized.

(Acts 18:8)

This account highlights the standard operating procedure of New Testament baptism. Crispus, his household, and many of the Corinthians heard Paul's gospel preaching and professed saving faith; only then they were baptised. Everyone in Crispus' household was baptised because everyone believed the preaching. In other words, there were no infants present.

Stephanas' household

I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, that no man should say you were baptized in my name. Now I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized any other. For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel.

(1 Cor 1:16-17)

While correcting divisions in the Corinthian church, Paul noted that he baptised Stephanas' household. Left there, those who support infant baptism might be able to speculate regarding the presence of infants. However, this is not the only mention of Stephanas' household in 1 Corinthians.

You know the household of Stephanas, that they were the first fruits of Achaia, and that they have devoted themselves for the ministry to the saints.

(1 Cor 16:15)

Paul said the household of Stephanas "appointed" or "devoted" themselves to the ministry of the saints. The word *diakonia* meant to serve, and is never used in the New Testament with any of the infant/child words of the Greek language. The word for "first fruits" was a salvation term (cf., James 1:18). Stephanas' household savingly believed and diligently served, actions beyond an infant's capabilities.

In summary, some have argued for infant baptism based on the "silence" of the household accounts, speculating that infants must have been present. However, examining these four household accounts, we find that they are not silent regarding the presence of infants. Actually, each of these texts contains statements which exclude the possibility that infants were present and baptised.

Lydia's household

The final household baptism to consider is Lydia's in Acts 16.

And on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to a riverside, where we were supposing that there would be a place of prayer; and we sat down and began speaking to the women who had assembled. And a certain woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple fabrics, a worshiper of God was listening; and the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul. And when she and her household had been baptized, she urged us, saying "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come into my house and stay. And she prevailed upon us.

(Acts 16:13-15)

Of the five household baptisms in the New Testament, this is the only one which does not immediately exclude the presence of infants. It is the only account incomplete enough to allow speculation that an infant *might* have been baptised.

Actually, the details Luke did include make it is unlikely that Lydia had infants who were baptised with her. The manner in which Luke introduced Lydia suggests she was either single, widowed, or divorced. No husband was mentioned. The fact that she invited the men to stay in her home without seeking her husband's approval suggests that she was not under a husband's authority. It seems likely that Lydia was an unmarried woman with her own business and was accompanied to the place of prayer by her household servants.

To draw infant baptism from this account, one must speculate regarding Lydia's marital status. One must speculate that she and her assumed husband had produced a child within a year of this account, and that this child was present at the prayer meeting. But this is imagination not Bible interpretation, and proves nothing. The truth is, to teach infant baptism from this text, it must first be *assumed* and then *inserted* into the text.

Summary

Based on this overview of the New Testament commands and examples of baptism, we can conclude the following with Louis Berkhof:

It must be said at the outset that there is no explicit command in the Bible to baptise children, and that there is not a single instance in which we are plainly told that children were baptised.⁴

This is a surprisingly candid analysis from a respected theologian who himself practised infant baptism. However, it is the only conclusion fair to the Scripture: infant baptism is not commanded

⁴Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939, 41, reprinted 1991), p. 632.

or exemplified in the New Testament. Peter's Pentecost precedent—repentance must precede baptism—was strictly observed by the New Testament church

Other verses used to support infant baptism

Due to the total absence of evidence for infant baptism in passages specifically speaking of baptism, other New Testament texts are occasionally cited in an attempt to justify infant baptism. However, an examination of these texts shows that they also do not teach infant baptism.

Mark 10:14-16

In this passage and its parallels, Jesus rebuked the disciples for forbidding parents to bring children to Him for blessing. Jesus' compassion for these children is sometimes said to support infant baptism. However, the passage explicitly says that Jesus only laid His hands on the children; baptism is notable only in its absence. While clearly expressing Jesus' love and compassion for children, these verses teach nothing about baptism.

1 Corinthians 7:14

For the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her believing husband; for otherwise your children are unclean, but now they are holy.

This verse is sometimes cited by infant baptisers as proof that God sanctifies infants through baptism. In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul was dealing with Christians who believed that sexual relations within marriage were evil and that marriage itself was defiling. In fact, after they became Christians, new converts were being told it was necessary to divorce their unbelieving spouses in order to be holy.

In contrast, Paul said that an existing marriage between a new convert and an unbeliever should be maintained if the unbelieving spouse was willing (vv. 12-13). God did not view that marriage as unholy or defiling. In the same way, children born to such a union were not "unclean" as the Corinthians supposed, but were "holy": "For the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her believing husband; for otherwise your children are unclean, but now they are holy" (v. 14).

Does this text support infant baptism? Actually, it doesn't even mention baptism. In fact, it strongly suggests that there was no such practice in Corinth. If infants were baptised and, thus, consecrated to the Lord, then this question of unclean children would never have arisen. If infants were baptised, then why didn't Paul merely say, "Don't worry, unequally yoked spouse, your child is consecrated through his or her baptism"? The fact that Paul had to address this issue, and the fact

that he did not point to the children's baptism as a solution, both lead to the conclusion that infant baptism was not practised in the Corinthian church.

Summary

Occasionally other verses besides Mark 10:14-16 and 1 Corinthians 7:14 are cited in support of infant baptism. However, the evaluation is the same in every case. The verses do not teach infant baptism. In fact, they have nothing to do with baptism at all.

A survey of the passages that refer to baptism conclusively shows that the New Testament neither teaches nor exemplifies infant baptism. Believer's baptism, on the other hand, is both taught and exemplified throughout the New Testament. Therefore, unless other convincing evidence can be brought to bear, we must conclude that infant baptism is an unbiblical substitute for the New Testament practise of believer's baptism.

Baptism and Circumcision

Since infant baptism is neither taught nor exemplified in the New Testament, infant baptisers rely heavily on *theological* arguments to defend their practice. One of these is the argument that baptism has replaced circumcision as a sign of God's covenant. And since male infants were circumcised in the Old Testament (Gen 17:10, etc.), then children born to Christian parents should also be baptised. Though much is said regarding baptism as the replacement of circumcision, the only passage that is cited by infant baptisers supporting this is Colossians 2:11-12.

In Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ; having been buried with Him in baptism.

The words *baptism* and *circumcision* are used in this text. That alone, of course, proves nothing. The question is this: does Colossians 2:11-12 say that water baptism has *replaced* physical circumcision? Replacement is the key. If, in fact, Colossians 2:11-12 doesn't teach replacement, then infant baptisers can cite no verse which teaches that water baptism replaced circumcision.

Analysis of Colossians 2:11-12

Paul wrote this letter to counter false teachers who were infiltrating the Colossian church with a strange mixture of Jewish ritualism and Greek mysticism. Not surprisingly, the false teachers elevated the ritual of circumcision to a central place in salvation. Paul had dealt with this before. In this case, he countered the false teachers' doctrine by reminding the Colossians that they had a circumcision superior to the one being advocated by the legalists. The Colossians had a circumcision "made without hands," Christ's heart surgery at salvation. This "circumcision of Christ" was spiritual, internal rather than external.

And in Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ. Col 2:11

Is there any mention of physical circumcision in this verse? No. Paul said that the Colossians had undergone an internal, spiritual transformation which could be described by the Old Testament terminology, heart circumcision (Deut 10:16; Jer 4:4). In other words, the only text cited by infant baptisers to prove that baptism replaces circumcision does not even speak of physical circumcision. How can a verse be used to prove that water baptism replaces physical circumcision, when the verse doesn't mention physical circumcision?

Besides the fact that physical circumcision isn't mentioned, there is also no word about replacement in Colossian 2:11-12. Far from saying water baptism replaced physical circumcision,

Paul said the Colossians had experienced *both* heart circumcision *and* baptism "through faith."⁵ The replacement of physical circumcision by water baptism—the one thing infant baptisers require the text to say to sustain their view—is simply not dealt with.

Infant baptisers appeal to Colossians 2:11-12 because it is the only text in the New Testament in which the words *baptism* and *circumcision* appear in the same verse. However, the verse does not teach replacement as their view requires.

The argument that was never used

Paul continually battled Judaizers who wanted to require Gentiles to be circumcised in order to be saved. This, you recall, was the issue at the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15.

But certain ones of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed, stood up, saying, "It is necessary to circumcise them."

(Acts 15:5-6)

How easy it would have been to settle this issue if infant baptism had been the practice of the New Testament church. No debate would have been necessary. All the Apostles would have needed to say was, "Baptism has replaced circumcision as the covenant sign, therefore, it is not necessary to circumcise Gentiles." Simple. End of argument. Council over.

Although that is an obvious answer to the circumcision issue, Paul and the other Apostles never used it. Why? It wasn't true. The symbolism of baptism was not exactly the same as that of circumcision. Circumcision symbolised a relationship with God that didn't necessarily include personal repentance and forgiveness. In contrast, baptism represented nothing less than that (Acts 2:38). Since they represented two (potentially) different kinds of relationship with God, the Apostles did not teach that baptism had replaced circumcision.

⁵ The internal focus here suggests Paul may not have had water baptism in mind either. Spirit baptism would be the appropriate parallel to heart circumcision, not water baptism. The false teachers focused on external ritual; Paul turned the Colossians' attention to the internal working of God.

Infants and the New Covenant

In the Old Testament, male infants were circumcised shortly after birth to testify that they were part of the covenant community of Israel. Infant baptisers argue that infants born to church members today should, in turn, be baptised to show their entrance into the new covenant community, the church. Should infants of church members to be baptised as “children of the covenant”? The Heidelberg Catechism says this:

Since they [children], as well as adults, are included in the covenant and the Church of God, and since both redemption from sin and the Holy Spirit... are... promised to them no less than to adults, they must also by baptism, as a sign of the covenant, be ingrafted into the Christian Church.⁶

Unfortunately, this view of infants and the covenant is based on a seriously deficient understanding of the new covenant. In the Old Testament, entrance into national Israel (and, thus, the covenant) was through physical birth. This is not true of the new covenant. The requirement for inclusion in the new covenant is not physical birth, but *spiritual* rebirth.

In Israel, one participated in the covenant merely by being born to Israelite parents. Abraham even circumcised foreign slaves purchased into his household to show they were, by association, under the covenant (Gen 17:12-13). The circumcision of Jewish boys and family slaves did not represent a saving, forgiven, personal-knowledge-of-God relationship with Yahweh. This meant that, in the Old Testament, there was a remnant: a group of truly believing people within the broader, unsaved covenant community of Israel (1 Kings 19:14, 18; Rom 9:27). In other words, in the Old Testament, one could be part of the covenant people without ever having personally turned from sin to God.

However, the new covenant implemented by Christ is different. In fact, the very first thing emphasised about the new covenant is that it is different:

"Behold, days are coming," declares the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt."
(Jeremiah 31:31-32)

How would this new covenant differ from the way Israel had related to God during the time of the patriarchs and the Mosaic covenant? Under the new covenant, there would be no one who was "in the covenant" but who had not repented from sin. Under the old system there was a remnant who

⁶ *Heidelberg Catechism*, answer 74.

truly believed; under the new system, *only* those who repented and believed would be part of the covenant.

God made this clear when He detailed the characteristics of the new covenant in Jeremiah 31.

I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it...They will not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them...for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.

(Jeremiah 31:33-34)

Participation in the new covenant was not based on physical birth. Instead, according to Jeremiah 31, it was based on the following three things:

1. Internal transformation: "I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it."
2. Personal knowledge of God: "They will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them."
3. Personal forgiveness of sins: "For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more."

Peter's words in Acts 2:38 now make sense: "Repent and be baptised." As the external sign of the new covenant, baptism could be extended only to those who had repented. Why? Personal, forgiven relationship with God was the heart of the new covenant. In the new covenant, God narrowed the funnel of relationship with Him to include *only* the remnant—those who have repented and personally know Him.

Children of the covenant?

In Galatians, Paul made it evident that personal faith in Christ is the means of entrance into the new covenant, not birth to certain parents. As with John the Baptist, Paul did not consider having Abraham (or anyone else) as your physical father to be of benefit in entering the new covenant.

Therefore, be sure that it is those who are of faith that are sons of Abraham.

(Galatians 3:7)

Paul argued emphatically that, in the New Testament, sonship in the covenant community comes only through faith, not physical birth or outward ritual. In other words, the only ones who can be called children of the covenant in the New Testament era are those who have the same kind of *saving* faith as Abraham.

So then those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer.

(Galatians 3:9)

For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus.

(Galatians 3:26)

Summary

Infant baptisers believe the infants of church members should be baptised to show that they are part of the new covenant community, the church. This, however, reveals a basic misunderstanding of the new covenant. While entrance into Israel was by physical birth, entrance into the new covenant is only by spiritual *rebirth*. This is the reason Peter's requirement was "Repent and be baptised." Baptism, a sign of the new covenant, was extended only to those who were actually participants in the new covenant: those who have a personal knowledge of God and forgiveness of sin (Jeremiah 31).

Infant Baptism and Faith

Some who practice infant baptism acknowledge what we discovered in the last chapter. Baptism is a sign of the new covenant, and the new covenant is limited to those who are "sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:26). They manoeuvre around this by arguing that infants, at their baptism do, in fact, have faith (either personally or through their parents), and this qualifies them as participants in the new covenant. Is it biblical to say that infants have faith *in Jesus Christ*, and therefore, should be baptised?

Protestants who practice infant baptism agree how adults are saved. Salvation is by grace through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and the forgiveness accomplished by His death and resurrection (1 Cor 15:1-3). In fact, theologians from infant baptising traditions are very precise when it comes to defining this faith. Faith, they say, consists of three key components: emotion, intellect, and choice; and they are right.⁷ This is easily proven from Scripture. There are, for example, many passages which speak of the role of the intellect or knowledge in faith:

Whoever will call upon the name of the Lord will be saved. How then shall they call upon Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him whom they have not *heard*?

(Rom 10:13-14, emphasis added)

In Him, you also, after *listening to the message of truth*, the gospel of your salvation—having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise.

(Eph 1:13, emphasis added)

(see also John 14:6; Col 1:3-6)

Charles Hodge summarised the indispensable role of knowledge in saving faith this way in his three-volume systematic theology.

What Protestants maintain is that knowledge...is essential to faith; and, consequently, that faith is limited by knowledge. We can believe only what we know, i.e., what we intelligently apprehend.⁸

⁷ Berkhof, pp. 503-506.

⁸ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols., (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, reprinted 1977), vol. 3, p. 84.

Infant baptisers also recognise the importance of a choice in saving faith. There is also abundant biblical evidence for this:

And for this reason we also constantly thank God that when you *received* from us the word of God's message, you *accepted* it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God.

(1 Thess 2:13, emphasis added)

He came to His own, and those who were His own did not *receive* Him. But as many as *received* Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name.

(John 1:11-12, emphasis added)

(see also Gen 15:6; James 2:20, 22; 2 Tim 1:12, etc.)

Louis Berkhof states the place of a God-motivated choice in saving faith with these words:

This [i.e., volition or choice] is the crowning element of faith. Faith is not merely a matter of the intellect, nor of the intellect and the emotions combined; it is also a matter of the will...an act of the soul going out towards its object and appropriating this...And in saving faith it is a matter of life and death that the object be appropriated.⁹

In summary we can quote both Hodge and Berkhof:

What, therefore, the Scriptures mean by faith,... the faith which is required for salvation, is an act of the whole soul, of the understanding, of the heart, and of the will.¹⁰

In both Testaments faith is the same radical self-commitment to God.¹¹

These definitions of faith place infant baptisers in a quandary. In what way does an infant have biblical faith at his baptism? In what way does he make a knowledge-based choice to believe in the person and work of Jesus Christ? By any normal, biblical definition of faith, it is impossible for an infant to have faith at his baptism. Realising this, some infant baptisers say that infants have a *different* kind of faith at their baptism than adults have. In fact, they create three special categories of faith that apply only to infants of church members.

Delayed faith

The first way infant baptisers try to get around the problem of an infant's inability to know and choose is by creating a novel category of faith that we can call *delayed* faith. They say that, at his

⁹ Berkhof, p. 505.

¹⁰ Hodge, vol. 3, p. 91.

¹¹ Berkhof, p. 498.

baptism, an infant is regenerated (made alive spiritually), thus, becoming a participant in the new covenant. Actual belief only comes later. In other words, an infant is implanted with the seed of new life by the Holy Spirit at his baptism, but believing in Christ and His work on the cross does not come until years later. This *regeneration-now, faith-later* idea was created by infant baptisers to defend their practice. However, it rests on three wrong conceptions about regeneration: its timing, its effects, and its means.

1. *Its timing*: The Scripture uses the terms regeneration, belief, faith, and conversion interchangeably to describe one event: salvation. To separate regeneration (being made alive spiritually) from faith by years or even decades has no biblical support. Biblically, regeneration and faith are concurrent events.
2. *Its effects*: Since, the recipient of this "regeneration" may not be aware of the fact until years or even decades later, this view of regeneration makes the washing and renewing of the Holy Spirit (Titus 3:5) an event without discernible effect. But in Scripture (as the very image of new life suggests), regeneration is a life-changing event, not one which takes fifteen years to have a discernible impact.
3. *Its means*: The seed which produces regeneration is the word of God, the gospel, not infant baptism: "You have been born again [regenerated] not of a seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and enduring word of God" (1 Peter 1:23). Biblically, regeneration comes by hearing and believing the word of God (Rom 10:13-14), not through or at infant baptism.

Vicarious faith

Besides delayed faith, there is a second way that some infant baptisers try to escape the quandary of an infant's inability to believe the saving content of the gospel at his baptism. They say that, at its baptism, the faith *of the parents* serves as a substitute for the non-existent faith of the child. This view can perhaps best be described as *vicarious* faith—faith exercised on behalf of another. Since a child can't exercise informed, saving faith, the parents do so as his substitutes. But does the Bible teach this concept of vicarious faith?

A biblical evaluation of *vicarious* faith

When one attempts to analyse the *biblical* arguments supporting vicarious faith, the problem quickly comes into focus: there are no biblical texts that teach vicarious faith. In fact, such an idea is completely alien to the Scriptures. The statement we quoted earlier from Louis Berkhof is a spear through the heart of the vicarious faith view: "In both Testaments faith is the same radical *self*-commitment to God [emphasis added]."¹²

¹² Berkhof, p. 498.

One text infant baptisers wrongly use to prove this amazing doctrine of vicarious faith is Joshua 24:15. In this familiar verse, Joshua declared that his household would not participate in idolatrous worship: "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." Joshua, as the leader of his household, could ban idols and externally enforce Yahweh worship on his family and servants. However, could he actually *believe* for them? This text says nothing about that.¹³ Faith is a personal coming to God, and is always presented that way in Scripture (Rom 10:9, 13-14, 17; Gal 3:2, 22; 1 Thess 2:13). Hebrews 11, says it this way:

And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for *he who comes to God* must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.

(Heb 11:6, emphasis added)

Non-rejection faith?

Besides delayed faith and vicarious faith, there is also a third novel view of faith that some infant baptisers have created to sustain their practice—another view which contradicts their normal definition of faith as a knowledge-based choice to follow Christ. We'll call this third novel view of faith, *non-rejection* faith. This view says that since an infant can't actively believe in Christ, his non-rejection of Christ is sufficient to serve as faith. Therefore, the infant does have faith at his baptism.

Charles Hodge writes, "[Baptism] assures them of salvation *if they do not renounce* their baptismal covenant [emphasis added]."¹⁴ Berkhof summarises his view this way: "They are assumed to be regenerated until the contrary appears from their lives."¹⁵ In other words, baptised infants of church members are assumed to be saved in infancy, childhood, and adulthood, as long as they do not actively renounce Christ. This is not salvation by actively believing in Christ and His work; it is salvation merely by *not rejecting* Christ.

Along the same lines, the theologian, John Murray, argues that although infants of church members are not capable of intelligent faith and repentance, their baptism represents the *same* reality as an adult convert's baptism.

Baptism signifies union with Christ and membership in His body. It means this for both adults and infants. And so, in respect to efficacy, baptism is for infants precisely what it is for adults, namely, the divine testimony to their union with Christ and the divine certification and authentication of this great truth.¹⁶

¹³ This is an example of invalid proof texting—citing a passage that does not say what you require it to say to "prove" your position.

¹⁴ Hodge, vol. 3, p. 590.

¹⁵ Berkhof, p. 627.

¹⁶ John Murray, *Infant Baptism*, p. 90, as quoted in Robert Saucy, *The Church in God's Program*, (Chicago: Moody, 1972), p. 203.

Murray says that a baptised infant is united with Christ, terminology reserved in the Scripture for one who is saved (Rom 6:5ff; Col 3:1, 3; Eph 2:5-6). Murray believes this union with Christ is complete at an infant's baptism.¹⁷ Hodge agrees:

Those who are baptized, in all cases, *if unresisting*, experience the remission of sins and the renewing of the Holy Ghost [emphasis added].¹⁸

[Baptism] assures them of salvation if they do not renounce their baptismal covenant.¹⁹

In other words, the infant is baptised and assured of salvation on the basis of his *non-rejection* faith. This "faith" does not include a conscious, personal acknowledgement of his sinfulness before a holy God. It includes no personal repentance from sin, no seeking of forgiveness. It includes no personal knowledge of Christ's death and resurrection, no submission to Christ. Salvation is assured, not by believing in Christ, but by supposedly being *neutral* toward Christ.

Evaluation of *non-rejection* faith

This is truly a novel view of faith; it is also unbiblical. Salvation based on a faith that involves no repentance, no conscious, active embracing of Christ is not salvation at all. No passage of Scripture teaches such a view of faith, in fact, Scripture always teaches the opposite.

Whoever will call upon the name of the Lord will be saved.

(Rom 10:13)

And for this reason we also constantly thank God that when you *received* from us the word of God's message, you *accepted* it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who *believe*.

(1 Thess 2:13, emphasis added)

He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him. But as many as *received* Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who *believe in His name*.

(John 1:11-12, emphasis added)

(see also, John 3:16, 36; 6:40; Acts 16:31; Eph 1:13, and so on)

¹⁷ Murray says this in his classic commentary on Romans in his notes on chp. 6. Murray and most other non-Catholic infant baptisers do not say that *every* baptised infant is or will be saved. Some will reject Christ later, proving they were not regenerated by God at their baptism. This, as they see it, allows them to avoid the accusation of baptismal salvation. However, the confusion generated by statements such as those quoted above is understandable.

¹⁸ Hodge, vol. 3, p. 582.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 590.

The non-rejecting "faith" that some infant baptisers use as a basis for arguing that infants have faith at their baptism is a faith that does not exist in Scripture. Biblically, a person has either *actively* and *savingly* believed the message of the gospel, or they have not. There is no "non-rejecting" middle ground.

Although, when addressing *adult* salvation, many of the infant baptising traditions are very biblical in their definitions of regeneration and faith, when they come to *infants*, they suddenly—and without biblical support—alter those definitions. They contradict themselves by saying that regeneration has no immediate effects, faith is something someone else does for you, and faith is not active belief in Christ.

There is a progression that is important to note. Infant baptisers start with a practice not taught or exemplified in Scripture. Then, to defend that practice, they are forced to create theological definitions of regeneration and faith that are not taught in Scripture either. The process is wrong at every step.

A note on conversion

There is a deadly consequence of believing that, for infants of church members, faith consists merely of not rejecting Christ: the removal of *conversion* from salvation. Berkhof, for example, argues that conversion (a conscious turning *from* sin and self *to* God), while essential for adults, is unnecessary for baptised infants.²⁰ Significantly, he cites no biblical texts to support his view, he simply asserts it. That's not surprising: no text of Scripture teaches that; in fact, many texts teach the opposite. For example, Jesus said to the disciples that if they did not consciously convert, they would not be saved.

Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven.

(Matthew 18:3)

Conversion (a humbled, conscious turning from sin to God) is required for salvation, even if, like the disciples, you had been born to parents who were part of the covenant. Besides these words of Christ in Matthew 18, the rest of the Scripture also confirms that under both the old and new covenants conversion—active faith and a conscious turning to God—is salvation:

Seek the Lord while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked *forsake* his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him *return* to the Lord and He will ... abundantly pardon.

(Isaiah 55:6-7, emphasis added)

²⁰ Ibid., p. 490-91.

The Apostle Paul's gospel message always included conversion. Jesus told Paul on the road to Damascus that He was sending Paul to "open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God, in order that they might receive forgiveness of sins" (Acts 26:18). Therefore, Paul's gospel message was the same for Jews and Gentiles:

But [I] kept declaring both to those of Damascus first, and also at Jerusalem and then throughout all the region of Judea, and even to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds appropriate to repentance.

(Acts 26:20)

The Scripture does not teach a separate process of salvation for children of believers (i.e., one excluding conversion). In the Old Testament and New Testament alike, for all people alike, conversion is salvation. Even if you were born into the home of covenant parents like the Twelve, conversion—an active turning—was necessary for salvation.

Summary

Most infant baptisers recognise the implicit relationship in the New Testament between baptism and faith. This, however, leaves them in a quandary. They realise that they can not argue that, at his baptism, an infant exercises faith according to any normal, biblical definition of the word. Faith involves knowledge and choice, both of which a new-born infant is incapable. To circumvent this problem, infant baptisers have created special definitions of regeneration and faith for infants of church members. Unfortunately, those definitions have no biblical basis. In fact, they directly contradict what the Bible does teach about regeneration, faith, and conversion.

The Dedication View of Infant Baptism

Some who practice infant baptism do not hold the views of baptism discussed in the previous chapters. They practice infant baptism merely as an infant or parent dedication. The distinction is in the *effect* of the baptism. The traditional view holds that through baptism (or the divine activity it represents), a real change is made in the infant's standing before God, a change that distinguishes it from unbaptised infants. In contrast, the dedication view sees infant baptism as a commitment by the parents to raise their child in the ways of the Lord, nothing more. No actual change in the child's status occurs in the eyes of God because of the baptism.

More than meets the eye

It must be noted that some who believe they practice the dedication view of infant baptism actually do not. The pivotal issue is this: if an infant is considered to become part of the church (i.e., part of the new covenant) because of his baptism, then the baptism was not merely a dedication. A real effect has been attributed to the baptism. Whenever a distinction is made between the spiritual status of a baptised infant and an unbaptised infant, then, whatever is claimed, the dedication view of baptism is not being practised.

Evaluation of the dedication view

Some do view infant baptism as nothing more than a ceremonial declaration of the parents' desire to raise their child in the ways of the Lord. While the desire to raise one's children in God's ways is certainly commendable and might be acknowledged by means of a ceremony, why involve water and call it a baptism? To use the word *baptism* in that way is a serious misuse of a technical New Testament word. *Baptism* is the Bible's word for a Christ-appointed ordinance representing the internal cleansing of sin at salvation; an infant or parent dedication is nothing of the sort.

Ultimately this non-baptism that is called a baptism keeps those who grow up in the church from being baptised as Christ commanded it and as the Apostles practised it. Believing their dedication was enough, such people never obey Christ by being baptised as a believer. The dedication view of infant baptism must be rejected because it is an—perhaps unintentional, but still—unbiblical replacement of the Christ-appointed ordinance that the Apostles practised.

Conclusion

While the arguments for infant baptism can be made to sound very theological, we believe they are not biblical. On one hand, infant baptisers can only appeal to the silence of the New Testament about infant baptism to prove their view—hardly a convincing argument that the Apostles practised it, especially when one considers the flood of references to believer's baptism. On the other hand, their impressive theological arguments, when examined, are found to lack biblical support. That includes everything from circumcision and the covenant to infant regeneration and their novel views of infant "faith."

We practice believer's baptism at Grace Fellowship because we believe what God's word *does* say about baptism is God's definitive instruction on baptism. We can not replace the believer's baptism of the New Testament with a practice neither commanded nor exemplified in the Scripture. Therefore, we baptise those who have personally repented from sin and professed saving faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. We also encourage those Christians who have been "baptised" as infants to be baptised as a believer, according to the New Testament pattern.