

"Subjects of Baptism"

by

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Excerpt from Chapter 9 in
The Church in God's Program
(Moody Press, 1972)

Introduction by Ken Morgan

Historically, baptism was one of the most common dividing lines between denominations. Although the various denominations still retain their original position on baptism, it is far more significant today to distinguish denominations according to their stand on the nature of Scripture and divine revelation. The mainline denominations today, such as the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. and the United Methodist Church, are characterized not by their theological doctrines but by their wholesale capitulation to theological liberalism and their enthusiastic embrace of the most radical and antibiblical social movements, such as feminism and homosexuality.

Among conservative denominations, the doctrine of baptism still remains an important issue. I have heard the anecdote that C. I. Scofield was once asked what he held about baptism. His reply: "My tongue." So far this Web site has also held its "tongue" on the subject of baptism. However, the ordinances do represent a standard division of ecclesiology in Systematic Theology.

The New Testament has no specific directive or example for infant baptism, and there is no unambiguous reference to it in church history until the third century. Therefore, I would suggest that its defense derives from a prior theological position.

The Roman Catholic Church developed the doctrine of *ex opere operato* (Latin, "from the work done") by which all the Sacraments derived their efficacy from the action of the Sacrament itself. Thus faith was not necessary. In the case of baptism, by its very application, regeneration occurred. Therefore, infants certainly should be baptized because the act itself, properly performed by a priest of the Roman Catholic Church, washed away original sin. Luther moved very little from this concept and "did not regard the water in baptism as common water, but as water which had become, through the Word with its inherent divine power, a gracious water of life, a washing of regeneration" (Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 627).

In the case of Presbyterians, the validity of infant baptism depends almost entirely on a fully developed Reformed theology, or covenant theology, and its "covenant of grace." This is quite clear in Berkhof's discussion of "The Scriptural basis for infant baptism" (pp. 632-35). However, there is no "covenant of grace" mentioned anywhere in the Bible. Nevertheless, according to covenant theology, the "sign and seal" of the covenant of grace, as administered through the Abrahamic covenant, was circumcision (cf. Gen. 17:7-14). Then when Jesus inaugurated the new covenant (see Jer. 31:31-34; Luke 22:20) as the final administration of the covenant of grace, this sign was changed from circumcision to baptism. Therefore, since infants were circumcised under the Abrahamic covenant as "children of the covenant," infants should be baptized under the new covenant. Of course, there are numerous objections to this whole argument. One somewhat humorous question would be, how is it that we baptize women and girls? There are far more

weighty objections, not the least of which would be that no such "change" is ever mentioned, even where it would be most expected (in Acts 15 and the book of Galatians), nor is baptism ever called a "sign" of any covenant.

But I think the point has been made: the only way to defend infant baptism is on the basis of some previously formulated theological system. I think this comes out quite clearly in Dr. Saucy's discussion to follow, and thus we offer the following excerpt. I believe he argues his case very well.

"Subjects of Baptism"

One of the major areas of disagreement over baptism concerns the proper subjects. All agree that since baptism indicates that the recipient bears some relationship to Christ and His church, in the case of those capable of making a rational voluntary choice, only believers are candidates for baptism. Many, however, believe that the children of believers by virtue of their relationship to their parents also bear a certain relationship to the salvation promises of the gospel even without personal faith. They are, in the words of Berkhof, "children of the covenant, and are as such heirs of the all-comprehensive covenant-promises of God."¹ The promises are granted to them in an objective and formal sense and become real in their subjective experience later through acceptance by faith. On this basis, large segments of the church have throughout history practiced the baptism of infants of believing parents.² It is impossible, however, to find this practice in the New Testament church or in the earliest records of subsequent church history. Much evidence can be adduced to the contrary that baptism is for believers only.³

Command to baptize. In the Great Commission the Lord charged His disciples to "go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you" (Mt 28:19-20, NASB). Since becoming a disciple involves faith, baptism as a concomitant is for converts. The participle "teaching" bears the same relation to the imperative "make disciples" as does "baptizing." Those who are baptized are to be taught, for the basic connotation of a disciple is a learner. It is difficult to understand how infants could be included in this instruction.

It is sometimes adduced that Peter's exhortation to baptism on the day of Pentecost included children. After saying "Repent, and be baptized every one of you," he adds, "For the promise is unto you, and to your children" (Ac 2:38-39). But the prior command to repent surely excludes those incapable of faith. "Children" is a reference to their posterity, to whom the opportunity of salvation certainly belonged, but the avenue of obtaining it was through repentance, even as it was for their parents.

Biblical examples of baptism. The consistent pattern of New Testament practice was hearing,

1 L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 638.

2 For the position of infant baptism see G. W. Bromiley, *The Baptism of Infants*; Oscar Cullmann, *Baptism in the New Testament*; Joachim Jeremias, *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries*; John Murray, *Christian Baptism*; Dwight H. Small, *The Biblical Basis for Infant Baptism*; Pierre Marcel, *The Biblical Doctrine of Infant Baptism*; G. C. Berkouwer, *The Sacraments*.

3 For the position of believer's baptism, see Kurt Aland, *Did the Early Church Baptize Infants?* Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 4:4 (Fragment); Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*; Alexander Carson, *Baptism in Its Mode and Subjects*, 5th American ed.; Johannes Warns, *Baptism*; R.E.O. White, *The Biblical Doctrine of Initiation*.

believing, and being baptized. On Pentecost "they that gladly received his word were baptized" (Ac 2:41). When the Samaritans "believed Philip preaching the things concerning the kingdom of God, and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women" (Ac 8:12). It is significant that with the specific mention of "men and women" nothing is said of their children. Philip's reply to the eunuch's request for baptism is straightforward: "If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest" (Ac 8:36-37). The eunuch commanded the chariot to stop, and he was baptized (v. 38). Additional examples of believer's baptism in Acts include Paul (9:18), Cornelius and those with him (10:44-48), Lydia and her household (16:14-15), the Philippian jailer and his household (16:32-33), Crispus, his house, and many Corinthians (18:8), and the Ephesian believers (19:4-5).

The baptism of "households" has been taken as strong evidence for infant baptism, as this expression is taken to include all in the family. "Household" (*oikos*) is said to be a formula adopted from the Old Testament cultic language, especially that relating to circumcision, which includes small children as well as others.⁴ The conclusion of infant baptism on the basis of this theological use of an *oikos* formula is questionable on several counts.⁵ The alleged use of *oikos* in the Septuagint, in the sense of a ritualistic formula denoting especially little children, is relatively rare in respect to the total number of occurrences of *oikos*. Even if such a meaning were found in the Septuagint, which is debatable, it is not demonstrable that this usage is carried over to the New Testament. The overwhelming majority of the uses of *oikos* relative to a family contain no theological aura but are completely parallel to the secular Greek use since Homer, meaning simply "family" and "inhabitants of the house," with no emphasis on infants (cf. 2 Ti 1:16; 4:19). Nowhere in connection with an *oikos* passage in the New Testament is a child or an infant expressly named.

In the passages dealing with household baptism, not only are no infants mentioned, but in several there is clear evidence that those baptized were responsible believers. In the case of the Philippian jailer (Ac 16:31-33), Paul's instruction for salvation was, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house" (v. 31). Taken at face value, this statement could be construed to mean that the decision of the man would effect the salvation of his house. But the teaching of the Scriptures that faith must be personal precludes such an understanding. The implication is that the jailer and also those in his house must believe for salvation. This interpretation is validated by the following verse, which declares that the word was spoken not only to the head of the house but also "to all that were in his house" (v. 32). In response to the word, it is explicitly stated that the jailer "rejoiced, believing in God with all his house" (v. 34). In the parallel situation of Crispus it is similarly stated that he "believed on the Lord with all his house" (Ac 18:8). It thus appears conclusive that all who were baptized in the house of the jailer were believers.

The situation with the house of Cornelius is similar. The angel had informed Cornelius that Peter would come and tell him how he and his house could be saved (Ac 11:14). That only believers were involved in the group is evident from the report of the actual events. While Peter was speaking, the "Holy Ghost fell on all them which heard the word" (Ac 10:44). These same participants who had received the Spirit spoke in tongues and magnified God, an action which obviously eliminates infants. Apparently it was a group of adults, or at least those old enough to hear the Word, who gathered from several families for this occasion (cf. 10:27).

⁴ Jeremias, p. 21.

⁵ For the following refutation see Aland, pp. 87-94.

The nature of the participants in the baptism of Lydia's household is not explicitly stated (Ac 16:14-15). Nevertheless, the way in which Lydia is introduced would suggest that she is either unmarried or a widow; either case would render doubtful the presence of infants or small children. Not a word is said of a husband. Rather, she is introduced as carrying on a vocation, "a seller of purple, of the city of Thyatira." Her request for Paul and Silas to lodge in her house displays an independence hardly possible if a husband were in the background. Who the members of the household were is not stated, perhaps relatives or servants. But, at any rate, no mention is made of infants, and the account of baptism is best viewed as a compressed version of what took place in the longer reports of the Philippian jailer and Crispus.

The final mention of a household baptism is that of Stephanas (1 Co 1:16). Again there is no description given of those baptized, but the household of Stephanas is mentioned later in terms which can only refer to believers. They are called "the firstfruits of Achaia" who "have addicted themselves to the ministry of the saints" (1 Co 16:15). In other words, the household of Stephanas was serving the church. Furthermore, they were of such stature that, with reference to them, the apostle exhorts the Corinthian believers to "submit yourselves unto such, and to every one that helpeth with us, and laboureth" (v. 16). The strong implication is that they were adult believers.

The evidence of New Testament examples of baptisms, including those of households where indication is given of the occupants, shows a consistent pattern of hearing the Word, belief, and then baptism.

Significance of baptism. As already noted, baptism signifies both the response of faith on the part of the one baptized and the salvation act of God performed in response to faith. Both the human and divine acts symbolized are realities which cannot be true in those incapable of faith. The union of the sign and the thing signified in New Testament baptism would seem to make the baptism of infants long before their actual faith and experience of salvation meaningless.

The problem of the separation of baptism from faith is seen in the practice of confirmation which is maintained in one form or another by pedobaptists. Because of the recognition of the necessity of faith in the efficacy of baptism as opposed to the Roman doctrine of *ex opere operato* in which the power of the sacrament is said to be bound to the water, the evangelical pedobaptist is obligated to recognize the additional concept of confirmation as the event when profession of faith is made and the symbolism is made real. If confirmation is stressed, however, there is danger of establishing another sacrament for which there is no biblical authority. On the other hand, the minimizing of this confession of faith jeopardizes the principle of the necessity of faith for the efficacy of the sacrament. In the practice of confirmation it is evident that infant baptism is incomplete and must be consummated in a later act.

Baptism at its heart signifies the completed identification with Christ and His work in death and resurrection which can only correspond to faith. There is no other meaning in the New Testament which is applicable to infant baptism.⁶

6 The difficulty involved in trying to distinguish the efficacy of baptism as it applies to adults and infants is noted by Murray. His attempt to maintain the same significance for both in the following quotation appears to contradict the clear biblical principle of salvation by faith: "The possession of the grace signified by baptism does not presuppose in the case of infants the exercise of intelligent faith and repentance: they are not yet psychologically capable of such. And the church cannot require intelligent and credible profession on their part. The accompaniments of the grace signified by baptism and the prerequisites for its administration differ in the respective cases. But it is a mistake to think that the import or signification differs. Baptism signifies union with Christ and mem-

Witness of history. The earliest evidence from church history following the New Testament records points to believer baptism. Unambiguous testimony for the baptism of infants emerges only about the middle of the first half of the third century.⁷ The nature of the testimony indicates that infant baptism was practiced at least in some areas at the end of the second century.

The earliest witness is Tertullian (c. 160-220), who in an entire volume devoted to baptism opposed the baptism of infants and young children. His polemic is directed against something new, which suggests that a significant tendency toward this practice was emerging in North Africa during his time. The next evidence, now favoring infant baptism, appears in the early part of the third century in a synodal letter of Cyprian dated shortly after A.D. 250, and in the writings of Origen from between approximately A.D. 231 and 250. A third witness is the so-called *Church Order* of Hippolytus (A.D. 235). The claim of Origen that infant baptism was a custom reaching back to apostolic times is seized upon by its proponents to indicate that the practice was therefore older than the writing of Origen and, in fact, was continuous from the New Testament church, although earlier evidence is missing.⁸ It may be argued, however, that such an interpretation of the appeal of Origen to apostolic tradition "ignores the mentality and methods of Church Fathers engaged in controversy."⁹ The detailed polemic of Origen, which he takes up against his opponents, shows that there were strong elements in the church which did not accept the practice of infant baptism. Aland's interpretation, therefore, seems equally plausible "that Origen's statements can be explained only on the assumption that this 'custom of the Church' in Palestine (and elsewhere) is not yet very old. . . . A beginning of this 'custom of the Church' about the end of the second century leaves enough time before A.D. 230-250 for the formation of a firm ecclesiastical usage, and on the other hand it explains why the arguments against it have not yet been silenced."¹⁰

Prior to the end of the second century and the beginning of the third there is no evidence of infant baptism, although the subject of baptism occurs frequently. The *Didache* (c A.D. 100), the most ancient document outside of the New Testament, contains over seventy rules for baptism but nothing about infants. The requirement of instruction for baptismal candidates implies that only believers were involved. *The Shepherd of Hermas* and the *Letter of Barnabas*, both dated within the first half of the second century, likewise contain statements that presuppose believer baptism. The writing of Justin Martyr, Tatian, and lesser apologists have several references to baptism, but nothing which suggests the practice of infant baptism. In his *First Apology* (chap. 61), Justin Martyr gives a detailed description of baptism in which he instructs that only convinced Christians are to be baptized.

Examination of the works of Irenaeus (born c. A.D. 140-150) also yields no evidence for infant baptism. His statement in *Against Heresies* (2, 22, 4) that Christ "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" cannot be understood as a reference to infant baptism, as some contend, if the context is taken into consideration. Immediately prior to this statement, reference is made to the fact that Christ through His development to manhood did not despise any condition of

bership in His body. It means this for both adults and infants. And so, in respect of 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" (Murray, p. 90).

7 Aland, pp. 42-79.

8 Jeremias, pp. 66, 86.

9 Aland, p. 48.

10 Ibid., pp. 48-49.

humanity, thereby "sanctifying every age by that period corresponding to it which belonged to himself." This thought, along with the sentence immediately following the reference in question to the effect that Christ passed through every age from infancy to adulthood that He might sanctify all humanity, indicates that Irenaeus did not have baptism in mind, but simply the fact that Christ shared humanity completely and therefore was able to sanctify all.

Finally, Clement of Alexandria, who takes us up to about A.D. 200, leaves nothing concerning infant baptism although he does discuss both baptism and several passages of Scripture relating to "children" (e.g., Mt 21:16), which he regards as adult believers.¹¹

In summary, the historical evidence reveals a considerable time between the New Testament writings and the first reference to infant baptism, a gap which is difficult to account for if it was the established practice from apostolic times onward. The fact that many references to baptism occur during this period make it doubly hard to explain the absence of references to infant baptism.

If the baptism of infants was, in fact, a later innovation in the church, the question may be raised as to why it was begun. In reply it might be said that history teaches that in matters of ritual it has always been easier for the church to add something than to take it away. "It is quite as easy," as Jewett notes, "to suppose that infant baptism would gradually commend itself in post-apostolic times, as it is difficult to suppose that it fell into disrepute in many places after it had been established by apostolic authority."¹²

A very plausible theological motive for the emergence of infant baptism is seen in the changing understanding regarding an infant's involvement with sin. Much evidence indicates that the early Fathers of the church considered infants to be innocent of guilt. Since the rite of baptism was early given the unscriptural efficaciousness of washing away sins, as soon as children were thought to be born with the taint of original sin, sharing in its guilt, their immediate baptism was a logical procedure. The probability of such a development underlying the beginnings of infant baptism is supported by the appeal of Origen in support of baptizing infants to the fact of the participation of newborn children in the stain of sin.¹³

The covenantal relationship. For most advocates of pedobaptism the covenantal concept is decisive for the question of the recipients of baptism. Since the covenant established with Abraham in the Old Testament is fulfilled in Christ, all those in Christ are thus related to Abraham and consequently partakers of the covenant promises (Gal. 3:29). While certain administrations may change, the covenant upon which the promises of salvation in Christ are based is essentially the same in both the Old and New Testaments. Since the sign of the covenant in the Old Testament, namely, circumcision, was applicable not only to adults under the covenantal relationship but also to their children, it is argued that the same covenantal relationship applies to those born in the homes of New Testament believers. Moreover, the apostle Paul shows the fundamental identity in the concepts of circumcision and baptism when he compares the inner reality of baptism to circumcision made without hands (Col 2:11-13). Murray summarizes the view: "The basic premise of the argument for infant baptism is that the New Testament economy is the

11 Ibid., pp. 59-60.

12 Paul K. Jewett, "Baptism (Baptist View)" in *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, 1:523.

13 For the belief of the early church regarding the relation of sin to newborn children and its effect upon the practice of baptism, see Aland, pp. 100-11.

unfolding and fulfillment of the new covenant made with Abraham and that the necessary implication is the unity and continuity of the church."¹⁴

The fact of the all pervasiveness of the Abrahamic covenant as the foundation in which those in Christ participate cannot be disputed. Nor can it be denied that the symbolic significance of circumcision as the putting away of sinful flesh is analogous to baptism, even though this became a spiritual reality only in the later faith of the Israelite (cf. Deu 10:16; 30:6; Jer 4:4; 6:10; 9:25-26; Ro 6:4; Col 2:11-12). But the further conclusion drawn from these facts that the circumstances of circumcision apply exactly to baptism does not follow. It fails to reckon with the progressive development in the administration of the covenantal concept. In the Old Testament the covenant, while efficacious only to those of faith, nevertheless included all the physical seed of Abraham through Israel. One was of the seed of Abraham and so related to the covenant through physical birth. In the New Testament, however, the emphasis is upon the fact that one is of the seed of Abraham by faith: "Know ye therefore that they which are of faith, the same are the children of Abraham" (Gal 3:7; cf. 3:9, 29). Under the old administration during the Mosaic dispensation one entered the covenantal relationship by natural birth, but under the new covenant, which is but the fulfillment of the Abrahamic promises, one enters the covenantal relationship by spiritual rebirth. The Scriptures nowhere refer to a remnant of the faithful within the new covenant as there was within the old covenant with its physical hereditary relationships. All in the new covenant are believers. The baptism of John in anticipation of the Messiah provides the transition to the new entirely spiritual significance. As a "baptism of repentance for the remission of sins" (Mk 1:4b) it carried a purely moral meaning and was administered to Jews who had already been circumcised. There is no evidence of any children incapable of repentance being baptized by John.

Although circumcision and baptism are analogous in their underlying spiritual significance, the fact that baptism was not considered by the apostolic church as simply replacing circumcision is evident in the deliberations of the Jerusalem council (Ac 15). The knotty question of the necessity of circumcision might have easily been solved with the explanation that baptism has now taken its place.

The reference to children being sanctified by the presence of a believing parent in the household (1 Co 7:14) is sometimes said to point to the fact that such children are within the pale of the covenant. Whatever else this sanctification signifies, this interpretation goes too far, for the unbelieving husband or wife is also said to be sanctified by their believing partner. If sanctification means covenantal relationship, then the unbelieving spouses are in the covenant and should be baptized along with the children.

The kingdom and children. Jesus' words concerning little children and the kingdom are used by pedobaptists to support the contention that children are included in the benefits of the covenant community: "Suffer little children, and forbid them not to come unto me; for of such is the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 19:14). These children, however, do not appear to be newborn babes. The word used for children (*paidion*) sometimes refers to those capable of understanding and even of a child twelve years old (cf. Mt 18:2; Mk 5:39-42). The fact that the disciples forbade them from coming to Christ would seem to indicate that the baptism of infants was not practiced either by them or John; otherwise they could easily have thought that the children were coming for baptism. This reference to children is obviously designed simply to teach the childlike humility

¹⁴ Murray, p. 48; cf. also Bromiley, *The Baptism of Infants*, and "The Case for Infant Baptism," *Christianity Today* 9 (Oct. 9, 1964):7; John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* 4, xvi, 124.

and unpretentiousness necessary for all who would enter the kingdom, with no reference to baptism.