

Infant Baptism:

Why do we baptize our infant children in the church? The simplicity behind why Presbyterians baptize infants of believers is profound. Furthermore, the point of disagreement between Presbyterians and Baptists is very specific.

Major Premise: Baptism should be given to all members of the visible church. Minor Premise: Children of one or more believing parents are members of the visible church. Conclusion: Therefore, those children should be baptized.

Since the major premise is not an issue of disagreement between Baptists and Presbyterians, the point of struggle is over the minor premise. What is the status of our children? Should they have membership?

In Gen. 17 God said to Abraham that the covenant included him and his children, requiring all the males in the covenant household to be circumcised. The NT continues that covenant. The first verse of the first chapter of the first book of the NT says, "The record of the genealogy of Jesus... the son of Abraham...." Jesus establishes the continuation of including children in the covenant when he said, "the kingdom of God belongs to such as these" (Mk. 10:14). Therefore, Peter preached the sermon at Pentecost saying, "Repent, each of you and be baptized.... For the promise is for you and your children... (Acts 2:38, 39). From there on it was the standard missionary practice to baptize all the members of an entire household based on the conversion of

the head of the home (Acts 16:31; 1 Cor. 1:16). Over twenty years after Jesus established the NT church (and in conformity with the covenant practice of antiquity) it was assumed that the children of even just one believer were included in the holy covenant (1 Cor. 7:14).

There have been three primary movements of opposition to infant baptism over the course of church history. The first came in the third century when a man named Tertullian proposed that sins committed after baptism were particularly heinous. Therefore, baptism was postponed until after adolescence, or even until the death bed. Then, in the fifteenth century a small sect called the Petrobrusians objected to infant baptism because of a works-based doctrine of salvation. They reasoned that since infants cannot work out their salvation they should not be baptized. Finally, in the sixteenth century a group called the Anabaptists (also called the Radical Reformers, in distinction from the Protestant Reformers) opposed infant baptism in an effort to purify the church of so many Roman Catholic minded non-Christians. The legacy of the Anabaptists continues to dominate American Evangelical resistance to infant baptism (Samuel Miller, *Infant Baptism Scriptural and Reasonable*, 21-32).

The Anabaptists reasoned that since the NT makes no explicit mention of infant baptism, it should not be practiced. The Protestant Reformers responded by pointing to the practice of infant circumcision in the OT as setting the precedent for the way children should be treated in the NT

church. The Anabaptists answered by emphasizing that the OT simply is not the NT. The Protestant Reformers, however, insisted that both Testaments are part of the single Abrahamic Covenant (Gal. 3:16). Two traditions of Bible interpretation formed out of this debate, one which emphasized the covenantal unity of the OT and NT, and one that emphasized disunity.

Several other factors contributed to the present fragmented understanding of the Bible. The first is theological neglect. As a result of cross-denominational efforts at evangelism and in fighting theological liberalism, conservatives reduced their theology to a bare minimum of miscellaneous points, finding the lowest common doctrinal denominator. This perpetuated an understanding of Scripture which resembled an umbrella with spokes, but no fabric. Christians just did not know how the Bible fit together.

Secondly, there developed a deliberate, systematic approach to Testamental disunity called Dispensationalism. This interpretation of Scripture proposes that God has two distinct people, the Jews and the NT church.

While other factors might be included, most Evangelicals today are influenced by this pervasive atmosphere of Biblical disunity created by Anabaptists, interdenominationalism (or nondenominationalism), and Dispensationalism.

But Presbyterians believe in one covenant, one Bible, and one people of God. If you believe in this connection

between the OT and NT, then your responsibility to baptize covenant children should penetrate the oddities of the present climate in the church.

The question often arises: How can we baptize infants who cannot exercise saving faith?

The Bible teaches that Abraham was justified by faith (Rom. 4:3), but he was still required to circumcise his male children (Gen. 17:10). If the doctrine of justification by faith did not prevent circumcising children in the OT church, it should not prevent them from being baptized now.

The Bible teaches that adults who convert to Christianity must first show evidence of saving faith before receiving the covenant sign ("repent and be baptized"). But it does not require this of children born to believers. Rather, the Biblical pattern is just the opposite. The covenant sign, in the case of children, must precede evidence of saving faith.

Why don't we circumcise anymore? Because, baptism has replaced circumcision. Baptism is the NT sign of the Abrahamic Covenant. In Gen. 17 God instituted circumcision, and said it's fulfillment would be marked by the covenant inclusion of all the nations. In Mt. 28 Jesus established baptism as the covenant sign to be given to all the nations now included. So, Circumcision marked the promise of the covenant, and baptism marks its fulfillment. One has replaced the other.

This was confirmed by the assembly in Acts 15. When

deliberating the continuation of circumcision, they said that the internationalizing effect of the baptism of the Holy Spirit (symbolized in water baptism) intruded upon and abrogated the old nationalizing sacrament of circumcision.

-Pastor Ferry