

# Infant Baptism: How My Mind Has Changed <sup>1</sup>

By Dennis E. Johnson

Professor of Practical Theology  
Westminster Seminary in California

In 1994 one of our daughters, while away from home attending college, asked me to explain the rationale I saw in God's Word for baptizing the infant children of believers. Since I was a minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church when she and her siblings were born, they had all been baptized as infants; but now she was interacting with Christian brothers and sisters from other traditions through campus Christian ministry and other friendships, and many of them believed that the baptism of infants is not Christian baptism as it is established by Christ in the New Testament. In a slightly revised form, this is what I wrote to her:

Here at last is my long-overdue letter to explain why I believe it's consistent with the Bible to baptize the infants and children of believers. I want to let you know what biblical evidence changed my mind from holding a "believers' baptism" position to the conviction that both those who are converted as adults and the infants and children of believers should be baptized.

You know, of course, that I don't consider this issue one on which our trust-relationship with Jesus depends. Nor should differences on this issue disrupt our fellowship with brothers and sisters in Christ who see things differently. On the other hand, since we all want to show our gratitude for God's grace by living our lives to please him, and since we learn what pleases him in his Word, we all want to get as clear a picture as we can of what the Word teaches.

The difference of views on infant baptism unfortunately does affect Christians' ability to demonstrate in practice our unity as the Body of Christ. "Infant baptizers" can and do recognize the baptism received by "believer baptizers" as genuine Christian baptism (although we may think that it's administered later than it should be in the case of children of Christian parents).

---

<sup>1</sup> © 1998 Dennis E. Johnson. Corrected 2003. This is not a polished, published document yet, but I reserve the right to turn it into one in the future. It is circulated for the benefit and discussion of students at Westminster Theological Seminary in California and, with permission, to other Christians who may be helped by it. To contact the author, see regular and e-mail addresses at the end.

Dr. Johnson is Professor of Practical Theology at Westminster Seminary in California and has taught at the seminary since 1982. He received his B.A. from Westmont College; M.Div. and Th.M. from Westminster Theological Seminary; and Ph.D. from Fuller Theological Seminary. After teaching New Testament for 16 years, he now teaches primarily preaching and ministry courses, in which he applies his background in biblical studies to the issues of ministry, the church, and the culture.

He is an ordained minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and is presently an Associate Pastor of New Life Presbyterian Church in Escondido, California.

He is the author of *Triumph of the Lamb: A Commentary on Revelation*; *Let's Study Acts*; *The Message of Acts in the History of Redemption*; and *Him We Proclaim: Preaching Christ from All the Scriptures*, as well as articles and reviews in *Westminster Theological Journal*, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, *Journal of the Evangelical Homiletical Society*, and *Ligonier Ministries' Tabletalk*. He has contributed essays to volumes such as *The New Testament Student and Theology*; *Theonomy: A Reformed Critique*; *The Pattern of Sound Doctrine*; and *Covenant, Justification, and Pastoral Ministry: Essays by the Faculty of Westminster Seminary California*. He is a contributor to the *Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible* and the *English Standard Version Study Bible*.

But “believer baptizers” cannot acknowledge that believers who were baptized as infants have been baptized at all. So if “believer baptizers” are right—if people who have received infant baptism have not received biblical baptism at all—then there have been hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of Christian believers who have never obeyed the Lord's command to be baptized in his Name, believers such as Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, J. Gresham Machen, J. I. Packer, John Stott, R. C. Sproul, etc. On the other hand, if “infant baptizers” are right, then it's sad that the convictions of “believer baptizers” prevent them from recognizing the baptism of so many other members of the Body of Christ. So our difference of understanding on this issue does hinder our putting into practice the unity of the church.

Although this question is not a matter of salvation, it is certainly worth our investing time and thought and study, to see whether we can come to unity as brothers and sisters in Christ.

### I Changed My Mind

First a little autobiography (I may have told you this before): It was a major change of mind for me to come to accept infant baptism. I was baptized as an infant in First Covenant Church of Los Angeles, but by the time I was an early adolescent we had a different pastor (in the same congregation!), and our new pastor didn't believe that infant baptism was valid. My parents had not really studied this question or taught me whether there was a biblical basis for infant baptism, so I had no reason to question what my pastor said when he taught that my baptism as an infant wasn't genuine Christian baptism. Therefore, after a time of instruction in Bible doctrine (in effect, a catechism class), I publicly confessed my faith in Christ and “joined the church,” being baptized by immersion on the basis of my personal profession of faith.<sup>2</sup> (This means that, whichever view of baptism is right, I personally am covered!) I went through high school and Westmont College assuming that only people old enough to believe and testify to their faith should be baptized.

This was my view even as I started my seminary studies at Westminster, although I was puzzled that my seminary professors, who understood the Bible so much better than I in so many areas, seemed to have missed the obvious point that in the New Testament people are called to believe, and then they are baptized. I suppose I concluded that they believed in infant baptism because that was what they were accustomed to. (That explanation, however, didn't fit everyone: Dr. Strimple had remained a Baptist throughout college and his studies at Westminster, and had taught at a Baptist Bible college in Canada for many years before he became convinced that infant baptism is biblical.) “I'm accustomed to this” is not a good reason for believing or doing something as a Christian, but sometimes what we're used to

---

<sup>2</sup> My pastor also believed that immersion (Romans 6:4) is the only right mode by which to apply the water of baptism. He would not recognize sprinkling (Hebrews 9:13-14; 1 Peter 1:2; Ezekiel 36:25) or pouring (Acts 1:5; 2:17-18, 33: “You will be baptized with Spirit” = “I will pour out my Spirit”; see Titus 3:5-6), even though these methods of applying cleansing liquid (water/blood) are used repeatedly in Scripture, and sometimes tied directly to the language of baptism (as in Acts 1-2). The verses above suggest that baptism symbolizes not only death, burial, and resurrection with Christ, but also cleansing from sin's uncleanness (sprinkling) and the gift of the Spirit (pouring). Therefore it seems that any of these modes is appropriate, since each mode points to some aspect of the spiritual reality of which baptism is a sign.

does influence our faith and our conduct. In any case, at Westminster I had to face the possibility that I was the one operating on the basis of what I was accustomed to, dismissing infant baptism because of assumptions I had picked up as a teenager and had reinforced through college. In particular Westminster forced me to examine my assumptions about how to search the Bible for the answer to a theological question like this.<sup>3</sup>

### **How Should We Expect the Bible to Answer the Infant Baptism Question?**

I had to face the question, how should I expect the Bible to answer my question, "Should the babies of Christians be baptized?" I was expecting the Bible to answer the question with an explicit statement in one or more verses. I read verses like Acts 2:38 ("Repent and be baptized . . . in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.") or Acts 16:31-34 ("Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved--you and your household . . . Immediately he and all his family were baptized . . . he had come to believe in God--he and his whole family."). The order of things seemed so clear: first repentance/belief, then baptism. What could be plainer and simpler?

### **Everybody Agrees that Adult Converts from Judaism and Paganism Must Be Baptized.**

But then someone pointed out something to me: Throughout the Book of Acts we read about the conversion of people who were not Christians, nor had they grown up as the children of (New Covenant) Christians, before the Apostles preached to them--either Jews or Gentiles. The preaching and examples of conversions in Acts all have to do with missionary situations, in which the Gospel is entering the lives of individuals and families and communities for the first time. Everyone, "believer baptist" and "infant baptist" alike, agrees that in circumstances like these, when people have not grown up in Christian families and the "covenant community" of the Church, those converted as adults need to receive baptism when they confess their faith in Jesus.

### **But Acts Is Silent About Children Born to Christian Parents.**

Acts never explicitly describes a situation that would make crystal clear how the apostles handled the situation of children born to Christian parents. (Obviously, if Acts had spoken directly and clearly on this point, the discussion between "believer baptist" and "infant baptist" would have been settled long ago.) In particular:

---

<sup>3</sup> Over Labor Day weekend I was preaching in Portland, OR, and spent the afternoon with a couple in the church there. We were talking about infant baptism and I learned that the husband had come to faith in a Baptist church and had then come to believe that infant baptism is biblical while he was studying at Western Conservative Baptist Seminary. I asked him what had changed his mind, and he mentioned especially coming to see that circumcision in the Old Testament was a sign of "the righteousness of faith" (Romans 4:11), and yet Abraham was commanded to circumcise infants who were too young to demonstrate faith. If that was so in the Old Testament, he concluded, it could also be true of baptism in the New. I'll pick up this idea below, but I thought you would be interested to learn of this brother's experience of coming to believe in the appropriateness of infant baptism not in an "infant baptist" seminary like Westminster but in a "believer baptist" seminary like Western.

(1) Acts never tells us about an adolescent or young adult who had been raised from infancy by parents who believed in Jesus, and who then received baptism only after he or she personally expressed his/her faith in Christ.<sup>4</sup>

(2) Although Acts records the baptism of whole households, it never explicitly states whether or not there were infants or young children in any of these homes, or whether infants in the household were excluded from receiving baptism because they were too young to express personal faith in Christ.

(3) Acts and the rest of the New Testament never record any statement by Jesus or the Apostles that the infants of believers are now to be treated differently in the New Covenant from the way that the infants of Israelite believers were in the Old: namely, that, whereas Israelite children were treated as part of the covenant community, the children of Christians are to be treated as outside the covenant community that is under Christ's Lordship. The other changes that occurred with the coming of Christ are clearly indicated in the New Testament: Circumcision is not to be required of Gentiles (Galatians), but both Jews and Gentiles who come to faith must be baptized (Acts). Animal sacrifices are done away with because of Jesus' final sacrifice (Hebrews 10). The kosher dietary laws no longer apply because Jesus cleanses people from all nationalities (Mark 7; Acts 10-11). The temple in Jerusalem is replaced by a "living temple" made up of people (1 Peter 2). But the New Testament never hints that the relationship of believers' children to the church community has changed: The New Testament never suggests that, although before Jesus' coming Israelite children were "inside" the covenant community and received the covenant sign of circumcision (the boys, that is), now since Jesus' coming the children of believers are "outside" the community and therefore excluded from the covenant sign of baptism.

We'll come back to this topic of the way the New Testament views the children of believers, but for now I simply wanted to show you how I came to recognize that there is no New Testament text that answers pointblank the question, "Should believers have their children baptized?"

### **Starting from Broader Themes Where the Bible Speaks Clearly**

So then, where do we go from here? We approach this question, like other, even more important questions (the Trinity, the mystery of the Person of Jesus as both fully God and fully man): We approach it from the perspective of broader, bigger questions that the Bible does answer clearly for us. Then, since God's Word is consistent from beginning to end, we carefully draw conclusions from what we know the Bible teaches.

---

<sup>4</sup> Timothy is the only individual whose "childhood history" we know much about, but it's likely that both he and his mother were, so to speak, "Old Testament believers" until Paul arrived in Lystra, bringing the news that God's Old Testament promises had been fulfilled in Jesus the Messiah (Acts 16:13; 2 Tim. 1:5; 3:10, 15). Since Timothy's mother taught him the Scriptures "from infancy," apparently she would have had him circumcised as an infant as the Law commanded, were it not for the fact that his Gentile father forbade it. Paul circumcised him as a young adult not because circumcision is a sacrament/sign still applied to believers under the New Covenant, but simply to remove a potential obstacle to the effectiveness of Timothy's ministry among Jews. Anyway, we don't ever read about when Timothy was baptized.

This is more complicated than simply pointing to a verse or two, but it's also safer than drawing our own conclusions from what a particular verse says or does not say. Suppose every Christian concluded that Jesus' words in Mark 10:21 are addressed literally to us all: "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor. . . . Then come, follow me." We all need to beware of being "owned" by our possessions, but if we all sold everything, could we also obey 1 Tim. 5:8 ("If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever")? Would there be anyone in the church for Timothy to instruct to use their wealth in doing good (1 Tim. 6:17-19)? We recognize that we have to understand Mark 10:21 in the context of Jesus' conversation with the rich young man, and in the context of the teaching of other passages of the Bible. We need to do the same with infant baptism.

### **Circumcision Was Administered to Infant Israelite Boys**

One clear place to start is with the fact that circumcision was administered to infant Israelite boys at the age of 8 days (Gen. 17:9-14). This sign of God's covenant was given to Abraham long before the Law was given to Moses in Mt. Sinai. Apparently all of those circumcised that day in response to God's command were older than infancy: Abraham was 99 and Ishmael was 13; other males (including servants) were no doubt of various ages (Gen. 17:23-27). But their age, and thus their mental/spiritual ability to respond to God's promise in faith, was irrelevant. All were circumcised because Abraham believed God.

### **Circumcision Was a Sign of Salvation Blessings that Are Received by Faith**

God calls circumcision a "sign" of his covenant, so we can ask what circumcision "signified," what it "pointed to" in terms of the relationship of Abraham and his family to the Lord.

**A Sign of Transformation of Heart (New Birth by the Spirit).** Later in the Old Testament God makes it clear that external circumcision of the flesh was a sign or symbol of a spiritual cleansing that God calls "circumcision" of the heart: "Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer" (Deut. 10:16). Moses prophesies that the Israelites will disobey God and receive the judgments they deserved (especially the Babylonian Exile). But after this God will regather them to the land (return under Ezra and Nehemiah), and "The Lord your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live" (Deut. 30:6). I believe God is referring to this promise when he says through Ezekiel: "I will gather you from all the countries. . . . I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean. . . . I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees. . . ." (Ezek. 36:24-27).

**But Outward Circumcision Did Not Guarantee Circumcision of Heart.** Now, receiving external circumcision did not guarantee that an Israelite boy had received spiritual circumcision, or would later receive spiritual circumcision. "The days are coming, declares the Lord, 'when I will punish all who are circumcised only in the flesh--Egypt, Judah, Edom, Ammon, Moab--and all who live in the desert in distant places. For all these nations are really uncircumcised, and even the whole house of Israel is uncircumcised in heart'" (Jer. 9:25-26). How shocking for an Israelite to hear these words, to be grouped among the uncircumcised,

unclean Gentiles! But only if they never understood that circumcision was a sign pointing to their hearts' need for cleansing by the gracious Spirit of God!

**A Sign of the Righteousness We Receive by Faith.** In the light of God's teaching in the Old Testament we can understand Paul's comments on circumcision in Romans. First Paul points out that the "circumcision" that counts is "circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit," and that without this spiritual cleansing the external surgery brings no blessing or favor from God (Romans 2:25-29, especially verses 28-29). Then he comments on God's first command to Abraham to circumcise his household: "[Abraham] received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised" (Rom. 4:11). So Paul says that Abraham is not only the spiritual father of uncircumcised Gentile believers (4:11b), but also of "the circumcised who not only are circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised" (4:12). Circumcision symbolized the righteousness that believers (like Abraham) receive by faith, just as it symbolized cleansing and renewal of heart by the Holy Spirit. Yet God commanded that it be administered to Israelite baby boys at 8 days old, before anyone could tell whether God had changed or would change their hearts by his Spirit, whether he would enable them to trust his promises!

**A Sign of Union with Christ in His Sacrificial Death.** Since the blessings of the New Birth and righteousness by faith came to Abraham and other Israelites (BC) and come to us (AD) only as a result of Jesus' sacrifice, we could even say that circumcision symbolized union with Christ in his death--his being "cut off from his people" for us (Gen. 17:14; see Isaiah 53:8), even though he didn't deserve the curse, since he was circumcised both in flesh (Luke 2:21) and in heart. In fact, Paul pretty much says just this in Colossians 2:11-12: "In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead." Christ was cut off for us, put to death for us; so his death for our sins is counted by God as our own death. Circumcision symbolizes this reality of Christ suffering as our substitute, and so does baptism.

### **Circumcision Was Applied Before Anyone Could Know Whether a Baby Had Received or Would Receive the Spiritual Blessings It Symbolized**

Before we move on to consider what baptism symbolizes, we need to reflect on the fact that circumcision in the Old Testament symbolized the blessings that come to believers (like Abraham) by faith in Christ: cleansing and transformation of heart, forgiveness of sins, right standing before God, all through the sacrifice of Jesus. This symbol was applied to adult Gentile converts when they abandoned their idolatry and confessed faith in the God of Israel; but it was applied to the children (well, just the sons) of Israel 8 days after they were born--before Mom or Dad or priest or rabbi could tell whether that baby would later receive, through his faith, the reality symbolized in circumcision.

### **Baptism Symbolizes Transformation of Heart (New Birth by the Spirit), the Righteousness of Faith, and Union with Christ in his Death**

Water baptism symbolizes the same spiritual blessings that circumcision symbolized: renewal and transformation of our hearts (Titus 3:5; Ephesians 5:23; etc.) by the power of the

Holy Spirit (Acts 1:5), who brings us into a community of faith, a Body (1 Cor. 12:13). Baptism speaks of being united to Christ, clothed with Christ, right with God by faith, Abraham's seed, and heirs of God's promises (Gal. 3:26-29). It speaks of being united with Christ in his death and resurrection, so that his death for us is counted as our death before the justice of God (Romans 6:3; Col. 2:11-12).

### **Water Baptism Doesn't Guarantee that the Person Receiving It Has Received or Will Receive the Spiritual Blessings It Symbolizes--Even When Adults Are Baptized after Confessing Faith!**

Just as the external act of circumcision could not guarantee that the recipient would prove to be a recipient of the spiritual reality it symbolized, so also the external act of water baptism does not guarantee that its recipient will prove to have received the spiritual reality it symbolizes. Simon of Samaria was baptized, but his later attitude toward the Holy Spirit showed that he was still "captive to sin" (Acts 8:12-13, 20-23). Peter emphasizes that the flood waters that "saved" Noah and his family were pointing ahead to baptism--not merely the "removal of dirt from the body" (external water baptism) but the inner spiritual reality it symbolizes: the pledge of a good conscience toward God (1 Pet. 3:21). Sadly, some churches have practiced infant baptism (and others have practiced adult "believer baptism") under the misunderstanding that the external ceremony automatically produces the New Birth it symbolizes, or guarantees that the New Birth is bound to follow eventually because of the outward ceremony. But the Bible shows that the purpose of the sacraments (circumcision, Passover and other animal sacrifices in the Old Testament; baptism and the Lord Supper in the New) is to show us our need for the spiritual blessings and to call us (as the Bible and preaching do) to receive these blessings by trusting in Christ himself.

### **Why Apply Circumcision/Baptism to Infants Before We "Know" Whether They Will Become Believers?**

When I was a "Baptist", my biggest problem with infant baptism was that baptism symbolized the spiritual benefits of union with Christ, which are received only by faith; and parents and pastors couldn't know whether or not an infant had or would have this saving faith. But then I began to see that circumcision in the Old Testament symbolized the same blessings of union with Christ, which Old Testament believers received by faith and which unbelievers in Israel did not receive. So we face the same question for both the Old Testament sign and the New Testament sign: "Why apply a symbol before we know whether or not the reality is there?" I see three main reasons:

(1) To emphasize God's gracious initiative to us in our helplessness. Circumcision and baptism are not events in which the recipient acts, but in which someone else acts (in God's name) on or for us. This is true, of course, when an adult is converted and comes for baptism: she doesn't baptize herself, but a pastor applies the water of baptism to her. The Apostles' instruction to adults is not "baptize yourselves" (reflexive) but "be baptized" (passive: receive baptism from someone else). But it's even more obvious, when infants are baptized, that baptism is "announcing" to us that God graciously gives a change of heart that we in our spiritual death could never produce in ourselves.

(2) To emphasize the mysterious role of the family in the communication of God's covenant grace down through the generations. This role really is mysterious. On the one hand, the Bible is so clear that being born into a believing family is no guarantee of salvation: every individual is accountable to respond to the Gospel in faith, or endure the consequences of rebellion. (And, by the same token, to be born into an unbelieving family doesn't condemn a person to a life of unbelief, rebellion, and condemnation. God's grace welcomes Gentiles [Pagans] and turns them to Jesus (Acts 14:27).

I was reading Ezekiel 18 in my devotions earlier this week, and was struck by how powerfully God makes the point that "family tree" doesn't guarantee an individual's salvation or his condemnation. On the other hand, God has set up the family as the context in which his Word is to be taught and lived before children as they grow up. In contrast to our American emphasis on individualism and democracy, God clearly viewed Abraham as the head of his household, with the authority to command even his servants to undergo the painful procedure of circumcision! "I have chosen [Abraham], so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just" (Genesis 18:19).

Apparently the ancient Israelites tended to look at themselves only from the standpoint of their family connection: those in the right family (Abraham's) were in (no matter what), and everyone else was out. In twentieth-century America we tend to look at ourselves only from the standpoint of our personal individualism: we think we stand as isolated individuals before God, and our parents' relationship to the Lord presumably has no influence on the benefits we have received from him or the responsibilities we bear toward him.

But God seems to view us both as members of a family, influenced (for good or ill) by our family context and identity, and as individuals, bearing responsibility for our own response to his Word of grace. This is God's perspective not only in the Old Testament, when virtually all the covenant people were of one physical family (Abraham's--although Gentiles such as Rahab, Ruth, Uriah, and Naaman were also included); but also in the New Testament, as the Gospel goes out to all the families of the earth (Acts 3:25). This is what I find striking about the baptism of Lydia and her household (Acts 16:14-15) and of the jailer and his household (Acts 16:31-34). There's no way to tell for sure whether or not there were babies or children in those households, so both sides in the infant baptism dialogue read these texts in light of their own presuppositions. But what we can agree on is that in these texts the Holy Spirit speaks of the persons involved not as disconnected individuals but as "households," as families (or perhaps even families with resident servants). Doesn't this suggest that in the New Testament God does not discard the family as a means for extending his gracious covenant-kingdom, but rather he spreads his grace to and through more families, to households not previously reached with his salvation?

Infant circumcision and infant baptism in themselves emphasize the balance: they are administered to infants not because we presume to know or predict the infant's spiritual state, but because the child is in the home of and under the authority of Christian parents (hence the sign belongs not only to "birth-children" but also to adopted children). Yet the fact that circumcision and baptism are administered to infants at all is a testimony to the fact that birth into a particular family is no guarantee of ultimate spiritual blessing, rather that something



more is needed, something that only God can do for us through the shedding of Christ's blood and through his resurrection, applied through the regenerating power of the Spirit, in order for us to become children of God.

(3) To emphasize the life-or-death consequences of our response to the Gospel of Christ. Earlier I showed the spiritual blessings that both circumcision and baptism symbolize, but that is not the whole story. Both circumcision and baptism are double-edged. They have a solemn side as well, because each in its own way "pictures" the judgment that our sin deserves, the judgment that will be received some day by those who do not trust Christ. Circumcision, which of course involved shedding of blood, symbolized the penalty of breaking God's covenant, being "cut off" from God's presence and God's people (Gen. 17:14). Baptism symbolizes not only cleansing, forgiveness, and the Spirit's transforming presence, but also judgment and death. The floodwaters that "saved" Noah were also God's instrument of judgment on those who refused to heed Noah's preaching (1 Pet. 3:19-21). Jesus spoke of his own death as a "baptism," a painful ordeal (Mark 10:38; Luke 12:50). So it's not surprising that Paul views both circumcision and baptism as symbols pointing to Christ's death (Col. 2:11-12). By symbolizing the deadly consequences of being unfaithful to God's covenant--the shedding of blood, being cut off, being overwhelmed by floodwaters--circumcision and baptism reinforce the message of the Word as we read it and hear it preached: the only place of safety for guilty rebels like us is close to Jesus, trusting in Jesus, who bore sin's guilt and penalty for those who believe in him. So I see circumcision in the Old Testament and baptism in the New as ongoing testimonies to children raised in Christian homes that there are severe, eternal consequences if they turn away from the grace offered in the Gospel. But of course these warnings are intended by the Lord to work along with the wonderful promises of his grace to encourage us to stick close to Jesus in living, intimate faith and love.

### **Circumcision and Baptism Mark the Boundaries of the Community that Is Under Christ's Lordship**

Now, the fact that circumcision and baptism both symbolize spiritual blessings that are received by faith in Christ and the fact that circumcision was administered to infants before they could give evidence of faith doesn't prove that now, in the New Testament, baptism should be administered to covenant children before they personally give evidence of their faith. It suggests to me, however, that the fact that an infant cannot express faith doesn't exclude her from receiving the sign that points to blessings that are received by faith.

If circumcision in the Old Testament and baptism in the New do not absolutely guarantee that the person receiving the sign has received or will receive the spiritual reality, what is the purpose of these covenant signs? They mark the boundaries of the community that acknowledges Christ's covenant Lordship and authority, the church. Since we can't infallibly read others' hearts, the church as we see it on a day-to-day basis may not correspond exactly to God's perfect knowledge of his chosen ones (2 Tim. 2:17-19). Even when an adult convert is baptized, we do it not because we have supernatural knowledge that he is born again but because he confesses to believe in Jesus, seems to understand what that means, and his life is beginning to bear fruit consistent with his confession of faith. Sometimes, however, church leaders are mistaken or misled, and a person who once seemed to be a believer will turn away

from the life of faith he had seemed to start (remember Simon of Samaria). So as an elder I have to admit my limitations: I can't read hearts to know for certain who is "born again" from the Spirit; all that I can do is to evaluate whether people acknowledge the Lordship of Jesus both in their words and in the general direction of their behavior.

### **In the New Testament, Are Believers' Children "Inside" This Community or "Outside"?**

I'm leading up to this important question: In the New Testament, if parents confess Jesus as Lord, are their children inside this community, the church, or are they outside? Clearly in the Old Testament the children were included in the community of God's covenant, receiving the mark of the covenant (circumcision), participating in the feasts of the covenant (for example, Passover, Exodus 12:25-27), being taught the Law as the guide for their grateful response to God's redemptive grace (Deut. 6:4-9, 20-25). But what about the New Testament? When Christ comes, is there a change in the composition of the community of God's covenant?

**The Trend in the New Testament Is to Include People Who Used to Be "Outside."** There are changes in the composition of the covenant people as we move from Old Testament to New, but they are not in the direction of excluding a category of people because of their age or mental immaturity. The most obvious change is that Gentiles, people from other physical families than Abraham's, are welcomed in droves. As we see in Matthew's mention of Rahab, Ruth, and others in the genealogy of Jesus (Matt. 1), even in the Old Testament God did welcome a handful of Gentiles into his community; but with the death and resurrection of Jesus and the baptism of the Spirit which he poured out on the church, the floodgates of grace are thrown wide open to Samaritans, Greek, Romans--even the Swedes and Scotch-Irish! Secondly, the sign of the New Covenant, baptism, is one that can be and is applied to females as well as males (Acts 8:12), in contrast to Old Covenant circumcision, which was only for males. Although the New Testament still speaks of a distinction in role between men and women in the family and the church, baptism makes clear what was implied in Genesis 1:26-28: in terms of creation in God's image, and now new creation in the image of Christ, and in terms of personal value and worth to God, women and men are equal (Gal. 3:28).

Hence women worship with men in Christian congregations, not in a separate courtyard as in the Jerusalem temple or behind a screen as in some Jewish synagogues. So now, with Gentiles welcomed in and women more fully included by receiving the covenant sign along with males, does God now take a very different stance toward the children of believers, excluding them from his covenant people as he is welcoming other groups in?

**Peter at Pentecost: The Promise to Jewish Converts, Their Children, and Gentiles "Far Off."** Probably the most direct answer to our question comes from Peter's lips on the day of Pentecost. Pentecost is the climactic turning point of the transition between Old Testament and New because on Pentecost the crucified, risen, ascended, enthroned Lord Jesus baptized the church with the Holy Spirit--as John the Baptist had prophesied (Acts 1:5). Peter's audience were Jews and Gentile converts to Judaism from throughout the Roman world, and some of them (despite their heritage as covenant people) had committed treason against God's Messiah, Jesus. When they realized what they had done, Peter told them to repent and

receive baptism in Jesus' name (Acts 2:38). Then he added: "The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off--for all whom the Lord our God will call" (2:39). "All who are far off" are the pagan Gentiles.<sup>5</sup> This is consistent with the expansion of the reach of God's gracious covenant that I mentioned above. But now notice this: the children of these people who are at the point of repentance, faith, and baptism are not bypassed as Christ's promise goes out to the pagans. The promise of forgiveness and renewal by the Spirit is spoken specifically to the children of Peter's listeners. As these children grow and understand the promise and the Promise Maker, they of course bear the responsibility to respond in personal trust (just as Peter's Pentecost audience do and the Gentiles "far off" will). But the point is: In expanding his community of grace to the Gentiles, God will not expel the children.

**Jesus: The Kingdom Belongs to Little, "Useless" Children.** This continuing inclusion of children in Christ's community is what we would expect when we reflect on the way Jesus rebuked his disciples' adult arrogance in trying to shield him from "insignificant" (in their minds) children (Luke 18:15-17). In fact, I'm convinced that it was precisely children's "insignificance" and "uselessness" that Jesus had in mind when he said, "Anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." When some people hear these words, they think romantically of the "innocence" or "simple trust" that they suppose children have. But Jesus knew children better than that. His point is: Unless you come to the kingdom without any claim that you deserve it, you will never enter it. Apparently by Pentecost Peter had absorbed the point that Jesus made that day: Jesus does not expel children from his community, for his kingdom belongs to them (those left outside are those who refuse to swallow their pride, who refuse to come as insignificant children, unworthy in themselves but dependent on the King).

**Paul Talks to Children in the Church, Calling Them to Obey "in the Lord" without Distinguishing Between "Insiders" (Who Have Confessed Faith and Been Baptized) and "Outsiders" (Too Young to Be Baptized as Believers).** This perspective--that children are not excluded from the community of the King with the coming of the New Testament--also explains why Paul can address children in his letters with instructions that presuppose Christ's authority over them: "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. 'Honor your father and mother' which is the first commandment with a promise 'that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth.'" (Eph. 6:1-3; Col. 3:20: "for this pleases the Lord.") Paul does not talk to two categories of children: (1) children who have confessed faith and been baptized; and (2) children who have not been baptized, and are presumed not to be believers. Rather, he speaks to all the children present in the congregation, and he implies that their identity "in the Lord," their trust in the promises of God, and their desire to do what "pleases the Lord" should motivate all these children to obey their parents. Of course, these congregations may include some children who are not born again, not believers; but Paul is not presuming to read individual hearts at long distance. He is simply treating the children, as a group, as members of the King's community, under the King's authority, and therefore responsible to the King for their response to their parents.

---

<sup>5</sup> The expression is from Isa. 57:19 and is applied to Gentiles in Acts 22:21; Eph. 2:13, 17.

## What About Infant Dedication as a Way of Symbolizing that the Children of Christian Parents Have a Special Place and Special Responsibilities?

Now, we could ask, couldn't a "dedication" ceremony such as that practiced at many Baptist churches serve the same purpose as infant baptism in recognizing that the children of believers do have some sort of special place in the community of Christ's covenant? Well, yes and no.

**Yes. Infant dedication in Baptist churches seems to reflect a sort of Spirit-prompted "instinct" that, even though (in such churches) they are treated as unbelievers and outsiders by being denied baptism, the children of believers actually do have some sort of a relation to Christ and his church.** It would be more consistent, it seems to me, for churches of "believer baptism" convictions not to replace infant baptism with dedication, but simply to wait and see what path kids choose (faith or rebellion) as they grow up. Typically the dedication services I have heard still imply that believing parents are doing something in relation to the Lord on behalf of their infant children. Wouldn't it be more consistent to wait until children are old enough to decide for themselves whether they want to be dedicated to God? And yet, frankly, I'm glad that Baptist churches are inconsistent enough to have infant dedication, and that Baptist parents bring their children to church and teach them the Gospel at home and sing "Jesus Loves Me, This I Know" with their kids. The way I see it, in all these ways they are acting as though their children have a place in the community of Christ, even though Baptist parents don't acknowledge that their children can receive the sign of inclusion in Christ's community, baptism. And since (in my view) the Bible teaches that believers' children have a place in the community of Christ (though that doesn't guarantee their salvation!), the more that Christians act in ways consistent with the Bible (even if our understanding of its teaching is unclear), the more the Lord is glorified.

**No. A Biblical Case for Infant Dedication in the New Testament Is Far Weaker than the Case for Infant Baptism.** If we are looking for a biblical justification for how we treat the infants of believers, it seems to me that it is far harder to make a case for dedication than for infant baptism. Consider the biblical examples of infant dedications: There was Samuel, whom his mother Hannah promised to return to the Lord for tabernacle service even before he was conceived (1 Sam. 1:11, 24-28). But Hannah's dedication of Samuel did not replace his circumcision, of course. Rather, it made him a "Nazirite," whose uncut hair signified his special consecration as a servant of God (1 Sam. 1:11; Numbers 6:1-21). Nor is it treated as an ongoing pattern for Israelite infants in the Old Testament, let alone for the children of believers in the New Testament. There were Samson and John the Baptist (also Nazirites from conception), whom God had promised to barren parents and set apart for his own special purposes even before their conception (Judges 13:3-5; Luke 1:13-17).

Then there is the presentation of Jesus in the temple (Luke 2:22-24) when he was about 41 days old. (He was circumcised at 8 days, and then 33 days later Mary could be "purified" following her son's birth, Lev. 12:37). But we should notice that this presentation fulfills the command that came from the Exodus from Egypt, and specifically the night when the Passover lamb died in the place of the Israelites' firstborn: "Every firstborn male shall be called holy to the Lord" (Exod. 13:2). Firstborn animals were to be sacrificed as holy to the

Lord (Exod. 13:12). Firstborn sons were to be redeemed (Exod. 13:15). It is hard for me to see how this Old Testament custom, which had to be observed carefully for Jesus since he came to fulfill every requirement of the Law of Moses, could be viewed as a model for Christians dedicating their children. Christian infant dedication services don't mention the ceremonial purification of the infant's mother after the birth; they are performed not only for firstborn sons but also for later children--of both genders! They do not involve offering sacrifices for the redemption of the child from death or the purification of the mother. In all these ways Christian infant dedication services today are very different from Jesus' presentation to the Lord at the age of a month and a half--and they should be! The Old Testament sacrificial system, which included the redemption of Israel's firstborn and the ceremonial cleansing of Israel's mothers, was fulfilled in the sacrifice of Christ on the cross.

Because I find no convincing biblical command or example that would provide a basis for infant dedication by Christian parents today, if we have to choose between infant dedication and infant baptism on the basis of biblical evidence, it seems clear that the weight of biblical evidence favors infant baptism, because of the continuity between circumcision and baptism as signs of entry into God's community.

**“Dedication” Focuses More on the Parents' Action Than on God's Promise of Grace through Faith.** Finally, infant dedication as a ceremony lacks an important element that infant baptism has: Infant baptism encourages us and our children to trust in Christ by symbolizing the promises of God, achieved for us by Christ and received by faith alone. Dedication tends to focus more on what we do than on what Christ has done. As parents look back on that day with their kids, they are saying, “We dedicated you to the Lord's service when you were a baby.” On the other hand, as “infant baptist” parents look back on the day of their child's baptism, they say to her, “On that day long ago, the Lord Jesus promised to you that if you trust him he will wash away your sins and give you a heart to love and serve him by the power of his Spirit. Just as the water 'cleansed' your baby skin, so the Holy Spirit will make your heart clean if you trust in Jesus, because Jesus died for the sins of everybody who trusts in him.” You can see the difference. Both sets of parents are calling their kids to respond in faith and both sets do so by teaching the Gospel about what Jesus did for us in his sacrifice on the cross, but children baptized as infants have received a sign/symbol that points directly to that gift of God's grace.

So I would say that infant dedication is better than nothing (since it is a way of recognizing that the children of believers have the privileges and responsibilities of being included in the Lord's community), but it seems to me that infant baptism has much stronger biblical support than does infant dedication in the New Testament church.

### **Fatherly Encouragement: Study the Scriptures. Pray. Think. Ask**

Since I've walked the road between “believer baptism” and “infant baptism,” I appreciate the fact that you want to re-examine childhood assumptions in the light of what God's Word teaches. Go to it! I also sympathize with you, since we both realize that this issue is not as “cut-and-dried” as whether Jehovah or Baal is God, or whether we are saved by faith in Jesus or by our own obedience to the Law. The biblical answers to those questions are plain and

clear. But sincere believers who love the Lord and want to follow his Word have drawn very different conclusions on this question of infant baptism. So I would just encourage you to study the Bible's teaching, not only in individual verses that contain the word "baptism" but also in passages that explain the symbolism of circumcision and baptism, that show how God treats children in the Old Testament in the New, that show us who belongs to the community of Christ on earth (both ancient Israel and the Church today), and that explain ideas like "covenant" and the role of the family/household in God's plan for his covenant people. I would encourage you to think and pray over what you have read. No doubt I haven't covered in this letter all the questions you may have, so please feel free to ask them and I'll do my best to give you answers that are faithful to God's Word.

Love,  
Dad