17. Infant baptism

Often heard: "Babies can't believe or repent. Show me one infant baptized in the Bible."
Also heard: "Infants were circumcised into the old covenant. Why would the new covenant shut them out?"

Believer's baptism, after repentance and faith

HELD BY Baptist

Baptism is for those who have repented and believed ("believer's baptism"). The New Testament pattern is always faith first, then baptism; infants cannot make a profession; and no verse explicitly records an infant being baptized.

VERSES CITED

Matt 28:19 (make disciples, then baptize); Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38, 41 ("they that gladly received his word were baptized"); 8:12, 36–37; 18:8; Rom 6:3–4; Col 2:12 ("through the faith").

WHERE THE IDEA COMES FROM

Tertullian (c. 200) advised delaying the baptism of small children, though he did not call it invalid. The Petrobrusians (12th century) rejected it. The first organized movement to reject it was the Anabaptists in Zurich (Conrad Grebel baptized George Blaurock on January 21, 1525). English Baptists followed through Smyth (1609) and the 1644 London Confession.

Infants are to be baptized

HELD BY Catholic · Orthodox with chrismation, Communion · Lutheran · Reformed as covenant children · Anglican · Methodist

Baptism is first God's work of grace, not a human achievement, so infants can receive it just as Israel's infants received circumcision, the sign of the covenant, at eight days old. Peter promised the gift "to you and to your children"; whole households were baptized; Jesus told the disciples not to keep infants from Him; and infants share humanity's fallen condition. They are baptized in the faith of the Church, with parents and godparents answering for them, as the paralytic was carried to Jesus by the faith of his friends.

VERSES CITED

Acts 2:38–39; 16:15, 33; 1 Cor 1:16; Col 2:11–12; Gen 17:12; Luke 18:15–16 (*brephē*, "infants"); Matt 19:14; Mark 10:14; 1 Cor 7:14; Mark 2:3–5; Ps 51:5; Rom 5:12.

EARLY CHURCH AND HISTORY

Irenaeus (c. 180, *Against Heresies* 2.22.4): Christ came to save all who are reborn through Him to God, "infants, and children, and boys, and youths, and old men." Polycarp said at his martyrdom (c. 155) that he had served Christ 86 years, often read as baptism in infancy. Quotes from Hippolytus, Origen, Cyprian, Ambrose, Chrysostom and Augustine are below. The Council of Carthage (418) condemned those who denied that newborns should be baptized. No early writer objects to infant baptism as an innovation.

CATECHISM AND COUNCILS

CCC 403, 1250–1252, 1253–1255 (faith of the Church, parents and godparents), 1282; Trent, Session 5 (original sin) and Session 7, canons on Baptism 12–13.

THE FATHERS ON INFANT BAPTISM

Hippolytus of Rome

c. AD 215

"First baptize the children… if not, their parents or relatives shall speak for them."

Apostolic Tradition 21.4

Origen

c. AD 244–246

"The Church received from the apostles the tradition of giving baptism even to infants."

Commentary on Romans 5.9

Cyprian of Carthage

AD 253

"We all judge that the mercy and grace of God ought to be denied to no man born."

Letter 64.2 (Epistle 58.2 to Fidus in the Ante-Nicene Fathers numbering; council of 252 or 253)

Ambrose of Milan

AD 387

"No one is excepted, not the infant."

On Abraham 2.11

John Chrysostom

c. AD 390

"It is on this account that we baptize even infants."

Baptismal Instructions 3.6. Context: the same passage says infants have no personal sins and are baptized to receive holiness, adoption and the other gifts; Baptists sometimes cite this.

Augustine of Hippo

c. AD 401–415

"The custom of Mother Church in baptizing infants… is not to be believed to be anything except apostolic."

Literal Meaning of Genesis 10.23.39

Wording follows common English translations, which vary slightly.

Across the traditions

How each major tradition answers this question, in its own words and from its own documents.

Catholic

Because baptism is first God's work of grace, infants, who share humanity's fallen condition, may receive it as Israel's infants received circumcision; they are baptized in the faith of the Church, with parents and godparents answering for them. The full case is set out above.

Sources: Catechism of the Catholic Church 403, 1250-1255, 1282; Council of Trent, Session 5 (original sin); Session 7, canons on Baptism 12-13.

Orthodox

Infants are baptized for the faith of their parents and sponsors, who stand surety for them and must teach them the faith when they can learn it, and because baptism replaced circumcision, which infants received (Col 2:11-12). The Confession of Dositheus calls baptism necessary even for infants, since they share in original sin, and points to the households baptized in Acts. The infant is chrismated with the baptism and receives Holy Communion at once, as an adult does.

Sources: Longer Catechism of St Philaret, Q 292-295; Confession of Dositheus (1672), Decree 16; Orthodox Church in America, The Orthodox Faith, vol. 2, "Chrismation" (oca.org).

Lutheran

The Augsburg Confession teaches that children are to be baptized and through baptism are received into God's grace, and it condemns the Anabaptists who reject this. Luther's Large Catechism rests infant baptism on God's command rather than on the child's faith: we

Reformed

The infants of one or both believing parents are to be baptized, because they as well as adults belong to God's covenant and people; baptism has replaced circumcision as the covenant sign that marks them off from the children of unbelievers. The Belgic Confession says

bring the child hoping it believes, but baptize it solely because God commands, and the baptism is valid even where faith is lacking. He points to many baptized as infants to whom God plainly gave the Holy Spirit.

Sources: Augsburg Confession, art. IX; Luther, Large Catechism, Part IV (Baptism), paras. 47-57 (esp. 49-50, 52-53, 57).

believers' children should be sealed with the sign of the covenant as children were circumcised in Israel, and rejects the Anabaptist refusal. Baptism's efficacy is not tied to the moment it is given.

Sources: Westminster Confession 28.4, 28.6; Heidelberg Catechism Q 74; Belgic Confession, art. 34.

Anglican

Article XXVII says the baptism of young children is in any wise to be retained as most agreeable with Christ's institution. In the 1662 service sponsors answer for the child, who is then declared regenerate, and a closing rubric states that baptized children dying before they commit actual sin are undoubtedly saved. The 1662 revisers added an office for those of riper years, instructed beforehand, because of the growth of Anabaptism and for converts overseas.

Sources: Thirty-Nine Articles, art. XXVII; Book of Common Prayer (1662), Preface; Publick Baptism of Infants (declaration and final rubric); Baptism of Such as Are of Riper Years (opening rubrics).

Methodist

Article XVII directs that the baptism of young children be retained in the Church. Wesley argued that infants are proper subjects because they need washing from original sin, can be brought into covenant, are bidden to come to Christ, and were baptized by the apostles and by the general practice of the Church. By Water and the Spirit treats infant baptism as God's act in the faith of the church, which the child must later claim as his or her own in confirmation.

Sources: Methodist Articles of Religion, art. XVII; John Wesley, A Treatise on Baptism (1756), IV.2-9; United Methodist Church, By Water and the Spirit (1996).

Baptist

Baptism is for those who have repented and believed: the New Testament pattern is faith first, then baptism; infants cannot make a profession; and no verse explicitly records an infant being baptized. The full case is set out above.

Sources: Baptist Faith and Message (2000), art. VII; Second London Baptist Confession (1677/1689), 29.2.

Where it gets contested: The household texts don't say whether infants were present. Tertullian's counsel to delay and the scholarly debate between Joachim Jeremias (infant baptism is apostolic) and

> Kurt Aland (it came later) are the best historical cards for believer's baptism, as is the debated date and authorship of the *Apostolic Tradition*. Defenders of infant baptism (Catholics, Orthodox, Lutherans, Reformed, Anglicans and Methodists) reply that Tertullian's objection proves the practice already existed and that no one in the early church called it new.

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