

Baptism and Infant Baptism

There are a number of good reasons why Christians have historically, believed in infant baptism as well as adult baptism. Here is a short summary of some of the reasons.

Case 1: Biblical Theology- How God progressively worked in history

Step 1: Understanding Baptism and it's relation to circumcision: In the New Testament, we are taught that baptism has replaced the Old Testament rite of circumcision, but that they both represent the same spiritual reality: being made spiritually alive (regeneration) and cleansed from our sin (justification).

Colossians 2:11-14 "In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross."

Step 2: Understanding Circumcision: a sign of faith and the blessings of salvation

The New Testament clarifies the purpose of circumcision in the Old Testament: it was meant to signify justification and regeneration; the same things baptism now signifies.

Romans 4:11 "Abraham received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness he had by faith."

Let us look systematically at what happened in the case of Abraham and circumcision:

Abraham's circumcision. Abraham was circumcised AFTER he put his faith in God. It was, as it were, a seal, a proof, of his faith. It *sealed* - made certain - his standing of being righteous in God's eyes by faith. This would be equivalent to a person, today, who is an adult, believing in Jesus and being baptized after they converted.

Abraham's children. (Gen. 19:11 – "every male in your house who is eight days old must be circumcised".) Abraham's children were circumcised BEFORE they put their faith in God. Why would the sign of faith and salvation be applied to an infant who has not yet believed? Because circumcision does not save, but it does accomplish this – it brings the children into the covenant. When Abraham placed it on his children, he was binding himself and them to have them brought up obeying God's law and worshipping and working with God's people. They had to some day be "circumcised in heart" as he was – they had to get saving faith as well. But the sign of faith and salvation upon them, bringing them into the covenant, was their continual prod and witness to them of their responsibility to grasp God by faith.

Implications: Circumcision clearly signified salvation. But it was given *both* to adult converts like Abraham, and children of adult converts. Why? Because God wanted a *visible community that bore the sign of His pleasure and salvation*. He wanted a people who visibly signified a covenant relationship with Him.

Summary of Step 2

- What did circumcision signify? *It was the sign of faith and salvation.*
- What did circumcision actually accomplish? *It brought the recipient into a covenant community.*

- Who received circumcision? *Believers (who had faith and thus were brought into the covenant) and their children (who came into the covenant first and were led to the faith circumcision pointed to).*

Step 3: A closer look at Baptism: a sign of faith, salvation, new life and justification.

Baptism is the outward sign of inward faith and the blessings of salvation (1 Peter 3:21; 1 Cor. 12:13; Rom. 6:1-4). Does baptism save us? NO! In Romans 4, Paul refutes the idea that the sign of salvation can save us. It is a sign of faith and salvation. *What does baptism accomplish then?* It brings us into a covenant with God – for we are baptized “into the name” of Christ. Baptism binds us to the church; it is not merely a personal inward testimony, but a commitment to holy living and work with the church. See Acts 2:41 – to be “baptized” was to be “added to their number”. To be baptized is to commit to a holy life (Gal. 3:27). It brought in a legal accountability relationship. It bound you to (a) obey the word and (b) worship and work with God’s people.

And it was a sign put not only of believers, but also on the children in their household. (Acts 16:15, 33-34; 1 Cor. 1:16) We see that when a head of household believed in Christ, not only was he (or she) baptized, but also the “whole household”.

Now the word “household” in Greek included children. It would have been a bias bordering on prejudice to assume that every one of the households mentioned in the bible as being baptized were childless households. Such would have been very abnormal. When a householder placed baptism on children, he was binding himself and them to have them brought up obeying God’s law and worshipping and working with God’s people. They had to some day be “baptized in the Spirit” as he was – they had to get saving faith as well. But the sign of faith and salvation upon them, bringing them into the covenant, was their continual prod and witness to them of their responsibility to grasp God by faith.

Summary of Step 3

- What does baptism signify? *It is the sign of faith and salvation.*
- What does baptism actually accomplish? *It brings the recipient into a covenant community.*
- Who receives baptism? *Believers (who have faith and thus are brought into the covenant) and their children (who come into the covenant first and are led to the faith baptism signifies).*

Case 2: Principles of Interpretation

1. **All Christians admit to the “unique position” of the children of believers.**
We hold them accountable to pray and obey the Word and worship in ways we would not hold unbelievers, yet we urge them to believe and may know they are not yet born again. Presbyterians have no trouble understanding their position. They are “covenant children”, accountable by being brought into the covenant, with the covenant sign upon them. We have the Old Testament people of God as an example of this approach. Baptists essentially do the same thing, but without any biblical or theological framework to account for it.
2. **Old Testament principles are binding on the New Testament, unless repealed.**
Example: the tithe. The NT does not explicitly command the tithe, yet there are places it appears to assume it (Luke 11:42). Many Christians will argue that, since the tithe is not commanded in the NT, we are not bound by it. Others will argue that, since it is not repealed we are still bound to it. Every NT teaching has its roots in the OT. This is a difficult issue of biblical interpretation, and where you “come down” on it will determine your approach to infant baptism. If God would have us cease applying the sign of salvation to our children as a way of expressing their unique place in the covenant

community, why did he not plainly command us in the NT to stop it? After all, it is no small matter – if the fundamental pattern of 1,700 years was to be laid aside, we would expect a word from him. However, there is no such word. Indeed, we in Acts “households” baptized upon the profession of the head of the household, just as we saw in the OT.

Case 3: Historical Argument

We know that in the early church, infants were baptized. Iraneus was a “spiritual grandchild” of St. John the apostle. That is, Iraneus was discipled by Polycarp, who was discipled by the apostle. Iraneus baptized infants. Now, it is unlikely that in such a short time period, the church would have changed such an important practice in the apostolic church. And if there was a change from the earliest practice to the latter practice, why would there be no evidence of a dispute? Why no tracts or papers or letters? Clearly, the ancient church assumed that baptism of infants was normal. It is virtually impossible to believe that the NT church did not baptize infants when the “grandchildren” of the apostle did!