

Infant Baptism

Should I baptise my child?

What is Baptism?

Baptism is a symbolic act with a promise attached. Over the years, this symbolic act has been understood in many ways. Our purpose here is to examine what the bible says about Christian Baptism and to consider the question, "Why should I baptise my child?"

Christians are usually comfortable with the idea of Believer's Baptism- a symbolic act which a Christian chooses for themselves as a public expression of their own trust in and commitment to Jesus Christ, often following soon after conversion. As I write, I will assume that you are a Christian and have committed yourself to Jesus Christ as your personal Saviour and Lord, and have expressed that through either Believer's Baptism or Confirmation. Given this, now that you have a child, why should you have him or her baptised?

The short answer to this question is simply that the child of Christian Parents is already a Christian, and so baptism is apt, as with any new believer. Just as God has promised to be your God, he has promised to be the God of your children, and will relate to them on the same terms as he does with you. This promise is embedded in both the Old and New Testaments (Gen 17:7; Acts 2:38) and highlights God's love for us and our families.

God's covenant relationship with your child

God has bound himself to you and your children by way of a covenant, which is a committed relationship of mutual faithfulness. In the bible we see God initiating a covenant with Abraham-- he promises to bless Abraham, to be with him and to be his God (Gen 12:2; 15:8; 17:1, 10; 22:17-18; 26:4-5). This blessing reached all the way to eternal life with God forever; and not just for Abraham, but also for his offspring, his children (Gen 17:8; cf. Gen 26:3, 28; 31:3, Gal 3:6-29). And since Abraham's children were embraced by the covenant, they too were to be taught how to respond to God in the same faithful covenant obedience required of Abraham (Gen 18:19).

After God had made this covenant with Abraham, he gave the sign of circumcision to Abraham and his offspring. This sign demonstrated that Abraham's children were born into the same covenant relationship with God and, as such, it became like a 'membership badge' for Israel (Gen 17:10-14; Ex 4:24-26; 12:48; Jsh 5:2-7).

Although Christians are members of the new covenant, and not members of old covenant Israel, the promises of God still belong to us and to our children. That is why the New Testament continues to describe believers as children of Abraham (Gal 3:29; Rom 4:1-16) and children of promise (Gal 4:28). This continuity is also seen in the way that the New Testament talks about the children of believers-- they are holy (1 Cor 7:14), and addressed as being among 'the saints' (Eph 6:1, cf. 1:1) and 'in Christ' (Col 3:20). So you can be sure that if you are a Christian, then your infant children are also Christians, because they are in covenant relationship with God just as you are.

When Jesus inaugurated the new covenant, there was also a degree of discontinuity with the old covenant. For one thing, the outward forms and signs of the covenant changed (Heb 8:6-13; 9:15). One of these changes was that baptism superseded circumcision as an entry marker and 'membership badge' for new Christians (Matt 28:19; Col 2:11-12).

Consequently, Infant Baptism is simply an expression of your child's inclusion in God's covenant family and your promise to nurture them in that relationship with God. Your job as parents is to raise your children, like Abraham did his, in the knowledge of God which expresses itself in faith in Him. Although infants are unable to exercise faith in God, their salvation does not depend upon that ability but upon God's promises to save them through the life and death of Jesus Christ.

Is baptism some kind of insurance policy?

Does this therefore mean that every child with at least one Christian parent is assuredly going to heaven? Does baptism somehow act as an insurance policy in this regard? The answer to both questions

is 'no'. We began by saying that baptism is a symbolic act. The sprinkling of your child with water is an external sign that points to an inner reality. Just as putting a wedding ring on a person's finger does not make them married; neither does baptism change the child's status before God. Instead, we are recognizing what is already true-- this child is already a Christian of whom it is right to signify:

1. Spiritual New Birth / rebirth following 'judgment' (Jn 3:5-8; Mk 10:38)
2. Cleansing from sin (Acts 2:38-39).
3. Union with Christ (Rom 6:3-5)
4. Discipleship (Mat 28:19)

Your infant child is now a full covenant member of God's family, but it is possible that in the future he or she may decide to renounce that relationship. Of course, as Christian parents, we pray that our children will continue faithfully in their relationship with God to the very end—but baptism does not guarantee that.

OK, take a deep breath, because we are about to get into deep water here. At issue here is the possibility of Christians falling away and losing their salvation. This classic Christian conundrum is really the product of apparently ambiguous language in the bible. Sometimes the bible seems to say that a Christian cannot lose their salvation (Jn 10:27-28; Php 1:6; 1 Jn 2:19 etc), and in other places it seems to say the opposite (Jn 15:6; Rom 11:17-24; 2 Pet 2:20-22). God is not confused, nor is the bible at war with itself. Instead we need to learn to think God's thoughts after him, instead of bringing our own agendas to the table.

The bible uses language which views people from two different perspectives. First there is the human or covenantal view, and second there is God's perspective that includes his sovereign choices, foreknowledge and decrees. In his wisdom, God's full perspective on human beings remains hidden from us. We can tell who confesses Jesus as Lord with their lips, but God alone knows the heart (Rom 10:9-10). Only God knows those whom he has chosen (2 Tim 2:19). But there are some people who appear to be genuine Christians, perhaps with good intentions and sound theology, yet their inner reality does not match their outer profession (Rom 2:28-29). Although they identify themselves with God's people, and are outwardly members of that community, God has not brought them to new life (Jn 3:1-8; Rom 9:4-7; 1 Sam 16:7). Such a person, from a human and covenantal perspective, is a Christian but they will eventually 'fall away', even though from God's perspective they were never a Christian in the first place.

Judas Iscariot is a salutary example of this kind of person. From the perspective of the covenant (the outer perspective), as a member of Jesus' disciples he was an inheritor of eternal life. From this perspective Jesus was able to describe Judas as one who would sit with the other apostles on thrones in glory (Mat 19:28). Yet from the perspective of God's decrees (the internal perspective) he was a traitor not destined for eternal life (Jn 17:12). The other disciples had no idea until after the event (Jn 13:21-22; cf. 13:26; Acts 1:25). Using the language of covenant, it was possible for Jesus to say that Judas' name was written in heaven (Luke 10:20), yet with Jesus' unique knowledge of God's secret decrees he could also refer to Judas as 'the son of perdition' (Jn 13:11; 17:12; Lk 22:22). Jesus' apparently contradictory ways of describing Judas are really just two perspectives: God's perspective and our perspective that is embedded in the language of covenant which God has given us in the bible. From the external perspective of the covenant, it is possible for a Christian (even your child who is baptised) to fall away, but from the perspective of God's decrees it is impossible.

So here's the rub. The bible teaches us to consider everyone who is a covenant member to be a Christian because it uses the language of salvation to describe everybody who is in covenant relationship to God. (Ex 6:4-7; Jer 31:31-34; Heb 9:15 etc) When we baptise an infant, we are using the language and signs of the covenant, which the bible teaches us to use.

Grace, Faith and Choice

If you're still with me, you may be wondering how the New Testament teaching of salvation by grace alone through faith alone (eg Eph 2:8-9, Gal 5:6) fits with all this talk about covenant inclusion into the people of God. What is the relationship between grace, intentional faith and infant baptism?

Baptism is sometimes said to be something "done to" the child without their consent or any prior internal spiritual reality. Yet it is the external nature of infant baptism that so clearly illustrates the nature of grace: it is free, undeserved, not asked for, and initiated by another-- namely God. We are almost offended by God's graciousness to an infant who seems incapable of trusting God with an

informed will-- but God initiates his saving work in the life of every believer long before they are able to respond to it in faith.

But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions--it is by grace you have been saved. (Eph 2: 4-5, cf. Rom 5: 10).

Infant baptism goes to the heart of the question of how we are saved. Wherever it is held that personal salvation begins with a free choice of the will to accept Christ, infant baptism will always seem doubtful. However, infant baptism stands firmly on the affirmation that our personal salvation begins entirely outside the human will with God's electing love, his irresistible call of grace, and the renewing work of the Holy Spirit, all prior to our willful response of repentance and faith (Rom 8:28-30; 1 Cor 1:26-30; Eph 1:4, 11; 1Th 1:4-5; 2Th 2:13; 2 Tim 1:9; Jn 1:12-13).

Earlier I said that baptism is a symbolic act with a promise attached. Infant baptism expresses the parent's faith in God's promise to save on the basis of his election of both the parent and the child to covenant relationship with God. Both the parent and the child are saved by grace; the parent is able to willingly respond to this with repentance and faith in Christ while the child rests on the promise of faith.

Baptism and the New Testament Church

When Peter first preached the good news of this salvation after Pentecost he said these words:

"Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off--for all whom the Lord our God will call." (Acts 2: 38-39).

We see here from the beginning of the Christian Church that the promise of forgiveness of sins, signified by baptism, was extended to the children of believers, and not just believers themselves. And so the practice of baptising whole families-- parents and their children-- was performed by the Apostles and the early church. That's why later on in Acts it records the following:

Then the Philippian jailer brought Paul and Silas out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved--you and your household." Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptised. (Acts 16: 30-33).

So following the practice of the Apostles and the early church, it is entirely appropriate that the children of Christian parents be baptized. As we do, we also pray that the child will continue on to a mature and personal trust in God's promise of salvation when he or she is able. Infant baptism looks forward to that time when the child takes upon themselves the promises made on their behalf by their parents and godparents.

So, why should my child be baptized?

1. Because the bible teaches us that the child of a Christian is also a Christian, and therefore baptism is appropriate as with any new believer.
2. Because you want the Church to welcome and recognise your child as a new member of the covenant community.
3. Because you want to publicly promise to bring your child up within this relationship with God.

Why should my child NOT be baptized?

1. You do not trust Jesus Christ's death and resurrection as your only means of salvation OR you do not seek to live with Jesus Christ as your life's master and Lord.
2. You think that in being baptized, your child will be made into a Christian with a guaranteed 'ticket to heaven'.

3. External Pressure: Because its the 'done thing'; this is something that happens to all kids; because the grandparents want it; because it might help my child get into a good school later on.... etc.

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