



## Considering the Baptism of Children

What is baptism? And should children get baptised? We are going to have a brief look at baptism in the Bible and what, if anything, it has to say about children being baptised.

### 1. How to arrive at this teaching

Some Bible-believing Christians believe children should be baptised, while other Bible-believing Christians believe that baptism is only for adults. Yet this is not a teaching to divide over, as it is not a salvation issue. It is worth stating that Bible-believing Christians who believe children of Christian parents should be baptised, don't believe baptism saves the child.

Part of the difficulty forming this teaching is that there are not many direct verses dealing with baptism of children or what should happen to children of Christian parents. Much of the New Testament (NT) is written to first generation Christians and people being saved from non-Christian backgrounds.<sup>1</sup> There are not as many direct verses dealing with children of believers (i.e. 2<sup>nd</sup> generation believers). It is true that there is no verse that commands children to be baptised. Yet it also true that nowhere in the NT does God tell us to wait until a certain age, for us to baptise someone.<sup>2</sup> Therefore to come to a conclusion of whether to baptise children or not, we will need to see what other passages say about baptism and connected teachings. Because of the limited verses in the Bible on this topic, we will need to be humble about our conclusion.

### 2. What is baptism?

What we understand baptism to be affects whether we think children should be baptised. If we understand baptism to be *only our* pledge or promise towards God, some Christians then find it hard to baptise children. How a young child can have trust in God? It is said that the child should wait until they can express their faith (which we discuss below). The Bible indicates baptism does involve our promise to God, yet it also symbolises *God's* promise to us.

#### God's promise to us

- There seems to be a connection of *God's* covenant shown by circumcision (OT) and baptism (NT). In the OT, circumcision is both God's promise to his people and his people's promises to God. In Genesis 17, God promises to make Abraham into a great nation (v4) and give him a land (v8). This is *his covenant to Abraham*. V4 - "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations'. So Abraham was to keep *God's covenant to them* by circumcising:  
 Gen 17:9 Then God said to Abraham, "As for you, *you must keep my covenant*, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come. 10 *This is my covenant* with you and your descendants after you, *the covenant you are to keep*: Every male among you shall be circumcised. Circumcision was both *God's* promise to them and *their* promise to God. As verse 11 says, it was 'the sign of the covenant between me and you'.
- In the NT, circumcision is no longer carried out for those in the new covenant. Rather it is baptism that symbolises the new covenant as Jesus commands in Matthew 28. See also Colossians 2:11-12. Outward water baptism is a symbol of this spiritual baptism (united with Christ in his death and resurrection).<sup>3</sup>
- Like circumcision, baptism is a sign of *God's promise to us*. In Acts 2, Peter tells the gospel of Jesus dying, rising and now ruling. Listeners ask what to do and Peter replies

<sup>1</sup> Like Acts 2:38-39 is written to adult Jews who ask what they must do to be saved. It is no addressing children of Christian parents.

<sup>2</sup> It is noteworthy that all baptisms in the NT happens straight away when someone is saved. This is different to waiting till a child reaches a certain age. Again this is because the NT is usually dealing with new converts.

<sup>3</sup> Since baptism somewhat parallels OT circumcision, circumcision also identified those who joined God's people (a non-Israelite foreigner would need to get circumcised to be part of God's people in order to celebrate the Passover – Exodus 12:48).

Acts 2:38-39. Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, 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* [i.e. from God] is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.”

Note that the promise (v39) is from God. It’s for forgiveness of sins and the Holy Spirit (as the Pentecost event of this chapter demonstrates). The response is to repent and be baptised. And Peter tells of the response required by people *and* of the promise of God to save us.

- The image of baptism as what Christ has done *for us* is seen in Romans 6. To be sure, Romans 6, is not about water baptism, rather it is about Christ’s death and resurrection and how we have been baptised into his death and resurrection by being united to Christ and so, we are dead to sin. Romans 6 is not about *water* baptism, but *water baptism* is a picture of Romans 6: going down and up with Christ, and now being dead to the old life.  
In one way baptism is like a wedding ring. The wedding ring doesn’t make me married. However, it is a symbol of my promise to that person and be united to that person. And it also symbolises being a member of that family.

### Our promise to God

- Baptism is also our promise to God. We pledge or promise to God, as 1 Peter 3:21 says. We are promising to identify with Christ and the salvation that Jesus’ death and resurrection has given us. The baptism that ‘saves us’ is not that water itself saves us, but it’s like our baptism being an expression of our trust in God. We’d most likely say a person needs to ‘repent and trust in Christ’. Peter so identifies our trust with baptism, that he says ‘be baptised’.<sup>4</sup> Baptism is an external expression of our inner attitude of trust in Christ.

To sum up: baptism is God’s pledge to us and our pledge to God, and so we become part of God’s people. I am now a member of God’s covenant community (like in the OT with circumcision).

### Dedication?

Some adult only baptizers believe that doing a ‘dedication’ as best for children of Christian parents. Yet this does not have biblical evidence. Yes Samuel in the OT was dedicated. Yet this was a very specific situation. He was dedicated in the temple in the OT, as a prophet who would live in the temple and would bring the word of God directly from God. This is unlikely to be a model of dedication of children living this side of Jesus coming, in a new covenant.

### 3. Whole households

The view that baptism is an expression of the new covenant of God (like circumcision in the OT) is strengthened with the inclusion of whole households being baptised. In the OT whole households were circumcised (Genesis 17:9-10). In the NT, whole households are baptised.

- Acts 2:39 – the promise was for you and your children.
- Acts 11:14 – Cornelius’ whole household would be saved. And 10:47-48 says they (i.e. the household who heard the message) were baptised.
- Acts 16:14-15 – ‘she (Lydia) and the members of her household were baptised’.
- 1 Corinthians 10:1-2. Spiritual baptism of the OT of all of Israel (this covenant included the children who went through the dead sea in the Exodus).

It is possible the households did not have children, but it is not very unlikely. Moreover Acts 2:39 says this promise *is for your children*. God worked with whole households.

### 4. Children of Christian parent(s)

This covenant view of baptism, understands that there is a difference of children of Christian parents to those of unbelieving parents.

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<sup>4</sup> Compare with Acts 2:28 response Peter commands: ‘repent and be baptised’.

- 1 Corinthians 7:14 says they are holy.<sup>5</sup>
- Children of Christian parents are seen as part of the covenant people of God and should be treated as believers. In Ephesians 6 Paul is commanding fathers to bring their children up as Christians – in training and instructions of Lord (v2). This is not something Paul commands of unbelievers.
- In addition, Paul commands children to obey parents, by quoting the OT 10 commandments (6:1). This is significant because the 10 commandments were addressing *God's people*. This shows Paul views children of Christian parents are to be addressed as Christians.

##### 5. Having faith/trust before being able to articulate it.

Sometimes those who think only adults should be baptised say that baptism should be done when someone can express what they are doing. Helpfully, this is trying to guard against those who 'just got baptised' out of tradition.<sup>6</sup>

However, being able to express that you trust in Christ, doesn't guarantee someone will continue to the end. This in part is a desire of some who believe in adult only baptism, as they want to see who is truly saved, and not just doing it, as the 'done thing'. However, many teenage and adults who have been baptised, have walked away from Christ. Expressing a trust in Christ at a particular point in time doesn't guarantee perseverance.

Moreover, the bible never tells someone to wait until they can explain their faith, or evidence their faith. Baptism is always done straight away (again noting that the NT deals with first generation believers who have just been saved, not those brought up in families). To ask a child to wait till they can explain their faith does not have biblical evidence.

When considering children, it is important to distinguish between faith/trust and the ability to articulate our faith/trust. A person can have faith/trust *before* they can explain what their faith or trust is. For example, when a 2 year-old child sees a ferocious dog, they start running *towards* mum and dad, because they trust their parents. The young child can trust mum and dad even though they wouldn't be able to explain what they are doing. A child of Christian parents can trust Jesus even before they can explain it clearly, and will be able to explain it more and more as they get continue to mature in age.

Even though this is not from the Bible, we do experience many children who have grown up in Christian households, 'never knowing a time when they haven't believed'. They always trusted Jesus and evidenced that in their age appropriate way in explanation and the way they lived.

This point is also important when considering people with disabilities who cannot speak, and so cannot 'explain their faith' but could still trust in Christ (unless one wishes to exclude everyone who cannot articulate their faith).

As a result, we contend that a child of Christian parent(s) faces a different kind of decision. They can decide to 'step *out* of The Faith' or to 'stay in The Faith'. This is in contrast to a child of non-believers who will need to 'step *into* The Faith', who would then get baptised.

This also leads to the conclusion that we can have confidence in our children knowing Christ even in their young years. We accept their young profession of trusting Jesus, and encourage them to grow in it, rather than treating it with suspicion until they reach a certain age.

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<sup>5</sup> The context of 1 Cor 6:12-18 is that a Christian should not join sexually with a prostitute. The question could arise if one is married to an unbeliever – should I stay with *them* since they will make me unholy (in sex, as we join bodies – compare with chapter 6:15-20). And if I am married to an unbelieving spouse, won't my children be unholy(7:12-14). The answer is no. The unbelieving spouse and child are holy, i.e. not unclean (v14).

<sup>6</sup> Seeing the horrors of a state church where every member of that state was baptised, whether or not they professed faith, drove many 16<sup>th</sup> Century Christians insisted on rebaptising those who expressed repentance and faith and therefore differentiating true believers from cultural.