

BAPTISM V

Review:

(a) **Baptism is a ceremonial washing, the cleansing of sin.**

Acts 22:16

Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins.

(b) **Since baptism is ceremonial washing, the actual amount of water is unimportant.**

Ezekiel 36:25

I will sprinkle clean water on you and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses.

(1) The argument for infant baptism is really a certain way of reading Scripture.

(The issue of *continuity* and *discontinuity* between the Old and New Testaments)

Old Testament

New Testament

Galatians 3:8

And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "In you shall all the nations be blessed."

(2) Final argument for infant baptism – CHURCH HISTORY

Principle of interpreting church practices where Scripture seems unclear: look at the early church.

An example: The Christian Sabbath is Sunday not Saturday

- there is no Bible verse that states the Sabbath is to be changed from Saturday to Sunday
- this was not challenged until late in church history by Seventh Day Adventists

The early church universally practiced infant baptism:

Hippolytus (AD 170 – 236)

Baptize first the children, and if they can speak for themselves let them do so. Otherwise, let their parents or other relatives speak for them.

– *The Apostolic Tradition*

Origen (AD 185 – 251)

The Church received from the apostles the tradition of giving baptism even to infants. The apostles, to whom were committed the secrets of the divine sacraments, knew there are in everyone innate strains of sin, which must be washed away through water and the Spirit.

– *Commentary on Romans*

Cyprian (AD 200 – 258)

In respect of the case of the infants, which you say ought not to be baptized within the second or third day after their birth, and that the law of ancient circumcision should be regarded, so that you think that one who is just born should not be baptized and sanctified within the eighth day, we all thought very differently in our council. For in this course which you thought was to be taken, no one agreed; but we all rather judge that the mercy and grace of God is not to be refused to any one born of man.

– *On Infant Baptism*

Augustine (AD 354 – 430)

The custom of Mother Church in baptizing infants is certainly not to be scorned, nor is it to be regarded in any way as superfluous, nor is it to be believed that its tradition is anything except apostolic.

– *The Literal Interpretation of Genesis*

Infant baptism was universally practiced by all early branches of Christianity:

Greek Orthodox Church

Roman Catholic Church

Syriac Church

Armenian Church

Coptic Church

The practice of infant baptism was first challenged by the Anabaptists (“The Re-baptizers”).

The Anabaptists were a sect during the Protestant Reformation in the 1500s.

They rejected the validity of infant baptism and required all adults to be re-baptized.

The first major group to reject infant baptism were the Baptists during the English Reformation (1600s).

Notes:

Review:

(a) Baptism is a ceremonial washing, the cleansing of sin.

Baptism draws from a rich background of Old Testament ceremonial washings. The picture is of someone who is unclean (a sinner), washes (salvation), and becomes clean (righteous).

(b) Since baptism is ceremonial washing, the actual amount of water is unimportant.

The washing away of sin is symbolic, thus you don't actually have to remove all the dirt. You don't have to jump into a bath, lather up with soap and scrub hard. It's a symbolic ceremony. Thus the actual amount of water is insignificant. Even a small amount of water (as in sprinkling) will suffice – as can be seen with Ezekiel 36:25. In fact, the dominant mode of cleansing in the Old Testament is sprinkling, not immersion.

(1) The argument for infant baptism is really a certain way of reading Scripture.

(The issue of *continuity* and *discontinuity* between the Old and New Testaments)

Infant baptism is really a consequence of reading the Bible through a certain paradigm. That paradigm sees the Old and New Testament as essentially continuous – a single unified story. The story of Israel is the story of the church in the Old Testament. The various stories of the Old Testament is essentially the gospel story. This paradigm is called “Covenant Theology.” The name comes from the fact that in both the Old and New Testaments, there is one “Covenant of Grace”. Both NT Christians and Abraham are saved by grace in Christ received through faith. OT figures look forward to what Christ will do. NT believers look back at what Christ has done. The relationship between OT and NT is promise-fulfillment or shadow-reality.

The other major paradigm of reading the Bible is called “Dispensationalism.” Dispensationalists see essentially discontinuity between the Old and New Testaments. The story of Israel is separate from the story of the church. God relates to the Jews in a different way than he does with NT Christians.

The issue of infant baptism is really an outworking of these two paradigms. If you see essential continuity between the testaments, even though there is no explicit verse dictating that children of believers are to be baptized, you know infants were circumcised and so the same principles carry over. You understand baptism in light of what you know about circumcision.

If you see essentially discontinuity, then you see circumcision as only relevant to Israel and unrelated to the NT church. Circumcision and baptism are different signs for different groups. And therefore, if infants are to be baptized, you need to see a specific verse that spells this out.

(2) Final argument for infant baptism – CHURCH HISTORY

Principle of interpreting church practices where Scripture seems unclear: look at the early church.

We have to remember that the New Testament is a document for its time. In other words, it answers questions that were urgent at the time – not necessarily our modern questions. This does not mean Scripture is culturally bound or irrelevant to the modern person! The core doctrines of the Bible transcend time and place. But certain modern controversies were simply not controversies in New Testament times.

A good example of this is the issue of the Christian Sabbath. Today, it is a relatively minor controversy. What day should the Christian Sabbath be? We have relatively little Scriptural guidance – mostly inferences. But church history is unmistakably clear. The early church universally moved their observance from Saturday to Sunday. Only in recent modern times has this been challenged.

A solid principle of interpretation is the following. If something is ambiguous in Scripture (it seems it could go either way), and church history is uniformly in one direction, then go with church history.

The early church universally practiced infant baptism:

My own story. When I was first introduced to the biblical argument for infant baptism, I was skeptical. The argument didn't make sense to me. But then later I looked at church history. This was very compelling for me. And it made me revisit the biblical arguments and try to understand them afresh.

Church history does not trump Scripture. Scripture is the ultimate authority. But church history should make us pause and consider. Especially when it comes to a practice in the church. These things do not change lightly. People tend to follow tradition – the way things have always been done. Only with extremely strenuous arguments and momentous events does church practices change, and then only slowly and with great controversy.

If you look at the history behind infant baptism, we see that it was universally practiced in the early church. There is no evidence at all that infants were excluded from baptism.

If you look at the quotes from antiquity, what's interesting is that they claim they received the practice from the apostles themselves. Remember the ancient church fathers are only a generation or two away from the original apostles.

Secondly, the argument for infant baptism then was exactly the same as it is today – it is a continuation of the practice of circumcision. In other words, modern theologians did not make this up. This is received tradition.

Thirdly, what controversy there was has to do with how early infants should be baptized. If you look at the Cyprian quote, some made the argument that infants should not be baptized before the eighth day (in accordance with the Old Testament instruction to circumcise on the eighth day). Others argued it was okay to baptize before the eighth day. What's fascinating is that the link between circumcision and baptism was taken so seriously that even the age of the infant was taken into account.

Infant baptism was universally practiced by all early branches of Christianity:

These five branches of early Christianity survive to this day. They all universally practice infant baptism.

The only time when infant baptism was challenged was in the modern period, 1,500 years after the death of Christ. Which leads me to...

The practice of infant baptism was first challenged by the Anabaptists (“The Re-baptizers”).

The Anabaptists were the very first group to not baptize infants. The very first group. 1,500 years after the church had been doing it for centuries upon centuries. Part of what allowed the Anabaptists to challenge established church tradition is that they were a radical group that had living prophets who could add to Scripture – even contradict Scripture.

One might argue that the Protestant Reformation in Luther and Calvin challenged 1,500 years of church doctrine. But one of the central arguments made by Luther and Calvin is that they were recovering doctrines that were lost by the medieval church. If you look at the early church fathers, particularly St. Augustine, you see the very same teachings of justification by faith alone.

The Anabaptists were not making that kind of argument. They were not drawing on the recovered teachings of early church fathers. They acknowledged they were doing a new thing. But they had prophets – so doing a new thing was okay.

The first major group to reject infant baptism were the Baptists during the English Reformation (1600s).

It isn't until we get to the English Baptists that we have a respectable group advocate Believer's Baptism against Infant Baptism. This was over 1,600 years after the time of Christ. Baptists and baptistic denominations now represent the largest segment of Christians in America.