



# why do we baptize children?

**Question:** *Should infants, too, be baptized?*

**Answer.** *Yes. Infants as well as adults are in God's covenant and belong to God's people. They, no less than adults, are promised the forgiveness of sins through Christ's blood and the Holy Spirit who gives faith. Therefore, by baptism, the sign of the covenant, infants should be received into the Christian church and should be distinguished from the children of unbelievers. This was done in the Old Testament by circumcision, which was replaced in the New Testament by baptism.  
(from "The Heidelberg Catechism," Question 74)*

## why?

liberti church, together with most of the worldwide Christian family, baptizes the infants and children of the church community. Why do we do this? After all, babies and toddlers can't learn the Gospel, pray the Lord's Prayer, or become members of the church.

This a complex, and ancient, issue for God's family. The New Testament itself doesn't offer any explicit, detailed instructions on how to baptize someone, or at what age they should be baptized, and it neither commands nor forbids the baptism of children. Thus, liberti tries to model charity as they reflect on this sacrament. The following are several considerations as to why liberti, in keeping with the vast majority of the Church through the ages, baptizes our children...

## part of the family.

Before the time of Jesus, the children of God's people, from infancy, were considered members of the family of God- they were part of the "Old Testament church" and given the sign of their covenant relationship with God: circumcision. Romans 4.11-12 describes circumcision as a "sign and a seal;" the image of a "seal" is of a wax signet seal on a document, and authenticates that the signer will do what's promised inside. It pledges the signer to keep promises when the document's described conditions are met. This is how the "seal" of circumcision worked- God promised in a visual, tactile way, through circumcision, his faithfulness to his people.

And, from the beginnings of God's "signed and sealed" relationship to his people (Genesis 17.11-14), male Jewish infants were to be circumcised. In this way, God promised, "*my covenant shall be in your flesh*" (Gen. 17.13). This didn't mean that Jewish children weren't responsible to place their faith in God for themselves, to repent and believe in him, and to live according to his promises; it simply meant that they were responding to promises that God had already made to them!

## baptism is the new circumcision.

After the coming, dying, and rising of Jesus of Nazareth, baptism replaced circumcision as the "family mark" of God's people. St. Paul vividly depicts this in the book of

Colossians: *“In [Christ] you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, when God stripped you of your sinful nature in the circumcision of Christ, when you were buried together with him in baptism. In him you also were co-raised though faith in the working of God who raised Christ from the dead” (Colossians 2.11-12)*<sup>1</sup>

Baptism vividly portrays our union with Jesus- we’re united to his death and resurrection. The language Paul uses here depicts the baptism practice of the earliest generations of the church, in which people would strip off their clothes, be baptized in the nude(!), and be given a new robe, to symbolize putting off their old way of life, and putting on their new identity in Christ.

So, the question inevitably arises: before Christ, the children of God’s people were given the “family mark”- should they now be given the new “family mark”- baptism- or not? Put another way: children were admitted into the “Old Testament church”- should they now be excluded from the New Testament church?

Denying young children the new “family mark” of God’s people would seem to show that God was somehow becoming less gracious after the coming of Jesus! So, we have no historical record that, after Jesus, children weren’t permitted to receive the family sign; and, if this were the case, a sudden shift of that magnitude would have certainly made news. Yet, as one scholar puts it, “the silence is deafening.”

### **whole families were baptized in the New Testament church.**

In several places in the New Testament, entire families were baptized together; in the ancient world, the head of the family acted for the entire family. And it’s extremely difficult to make the case, given what we know of families in the ancient world, that *none* of them included *any* small children. Here are a few examples:

- *Lydia and her household (Acts 16.15)*
- *the Philippian jailor and his household (Acts 16.33)*
- *Cornelius and his household (Acts 11.14)*
- *Stephanus and his household (1 Corinthians 1.16)*

### **Jesus accepted and blessed children too young to respond.**

In Mark 10, families brought their infants and young children to Jesus, so that he could lay his hands on them and bless them. As some attempted to stop this, Jesus responded indignantly: *“Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs...’ And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.” (10.14, 16; see 10.13-16)*

In the biblical world, “blessing” isn’t simply a way of saying, “hope you have a great day!” It’s a gesture of covenant relationship. In baptism, the church does precisely this- bring our little ones to Jesus!

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<sup>1</sup> translation by Dr. James Brownson

## **infant baptism was the practice of the earliest Christians.**

From the days of the apostles, the first church leaders, through the initial periods of the Church's growth and expansion, we have record that they baptized infants and children. Here are two examples from some of the earliest post-Scriptural writings on record:

- *“First, you baptize the little ones. All who can speak for themselves should speak. But for those who cannot speak, their parents should speak, or another who belongs to their family.” (instructions on baptism from Hippolytus of Rome, 215 AD)<sup>2</sup>*
- *“The church received from the apostles the tradition of baptizing children too...” (Origin, born in 185 AD)<sup>3</sup>*

Numerous other early church leaders mention this practice, as well, including Justin Martyr (100-165 AD), Irenaeus of Lyon (130-202 AD), and Tertullian (160-225 AD).

## **infant baptism preaches the Gospel.**

One way that early church leaders, and later Reformers, described baptism was as “a visible promise.” Baptism dramatically acts out the promises of the Gospel: cleansing from sin, union with Christ, new identity, and firm hope. Just as a good sermon preaches the Gospel to our ears, baptism “preaches the Gospel” to our eyes! Baptism, together with the Eucharist, are “sacraments”- physical, tactile ways in which God communicates his grace in Christ to us.

Infant baptism dramatically acts out what God's accomplished for us in Christ. Biblical scholar Michael Green puts it this way: *“(infant baptism) points to the solid achievement of Christ crucified and risen, whether or not we respond to it. Baptism is the sacrament of our adoption, our acquittal, our justification. Not that we gain anything from it unless we do what it presupposes, namely, repent and believe. But it is the standing demonstration that our salvation does not depend on our own very fallible faith, it depends on what God has done for us. Infant baptism reminds us that we are not saved because of our faith, but through the gracious action of God on our behalf, which stands, come wind or high water.”<sup>4</sup>*

## **infant baptism emphasizes God's initiative and action.**

One basic question about Christianity is this: “is the Gospel primarily about what we do, or about what God does for us?” The resounding answer from the Bible is that the Gospel is the good news of what Christ has done on our behalf.

Baptism is the seal on the covenant between God's grace and our response. So, should it be attached primarily to our response, or to God's initiative? Those who would only baptize someone after they can “mean it” or articulate their own faith tie baptism to *our response*; it's about what *we do* – *our* faith and repentance. This is why, on the

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<sup>2</sup> from Hippolytus of Rome, “The Apostolic Tradition”

<sup>3</sup> Origin, from his commentary on Romans 6.5-7

<sup>4</sup> from Michael Green, “Baptism: Its Purpose, Promise, and Power”

other hand, most of the Church baptizes children- the good news of Christian faith is not primarily about what we do; it's about what God has done! Baptism witness to what God has done and promised through Christ! In the Scriptures, it's not primarily an action to *express* our repentance and faith; it *presents to us*, and marks us with, the promises of life in Christ— a new life toward which we must continually turn in repentance & faith.

Scripture links baptism and faith, but doesn't minimize either! The blessings Scripture speaks of as coming from faith also flow from baptism. Here are some examples:

- *Cleansing*- linked to baptism in Acts 2.38; 22.16; linked to faith in 1 Jn. 1.9
- *Justification*- linked to baptism in I Cor. 6.11; linked to faith in Rom 3-4
- *Union with Christ*- linked to baptism in Gal. 3.27; linked to faith in Eph. 3.17
- *Adoption*- linked to baptism in Gal. 3.26-27; linked to faith in Gal. 3:26; Jn. 1.12; Gal. 6.10
- *Membership in the Body of Christ*- linked to baptism in I Cor. 12.13; Gal 3.27; linked to faith in Gal 6.10
- *Giving of the Holy Spirit*- linked to baptism in Jn 3.5; Titus 3.5; linked to faith in Jn 1.12ff
- *Inheriting the Kingdom of God*- linked to baptism in Jn 3.5; linked to faith in Jn 3.14-17

The emphasis in Scripture is always *on what God does*. Thus, baptism doesn't so much express our faith, as it calls us to respond in faith. Without a life of growing faith, we experience none of the blessings promised in baptism. "Faith" is the opening of our life to receive the gifts God promises in baptism. Baptism doesn't primarily depict what we do; rather, it presents to us the new life to which we must continually turn.

### **so, does baptism save us?**

In a word: no, Jesus does! The Heidelberg Catechism, a teaching document written in 1563, and one of our church's statements of belief, expresses this well:

**“Question 72.** *Does the outward washing with water itself wash away sins? Answer:* *No, only the blood of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit cleanse us from all sins.*

**Question 73.** *Why then does the Holy Spirit call baptism the washing of rebirth and the washing away of sins? Answer:* *God has good reason for these words, intending to teach us that the blood and Spirit of Christ wash away our sins just as water washes away dirt from our bodies. But more important, God intends to assure us, by this divine pledge and sign, that the washing away of our sins spiritually is as real as physical washing with water.”<sup>5</sup>*

All of us are still responsible to respond for ourselves in repentance and faith to the grace of Christ that's depicted in baptism. But by baptizing a child in its first days of life, we celebrate that God is gracious to us, before we even know of him!

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<sup>5</sup> from "The Heidelberg Catechism"

## **conclusion.**

At liberti church, when we celebrate the baptism of a child, the minister scoops the child into their arms, looks the little one in the eyes, and declares:

*“For you Jesus Christ  
came into the world;  
for you he died and for you he conquered death;  
All this he did for you, little one,  
though you know nothing of it as yet.  
We love you because God first loved us!”<sup>6</sup>*

This is the good news we celebrate in baptism: God was loving us, before we knew it!<sup>7</sup>



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<sup>6</sup> taken from “The Order for the Sacrament of Baptism,” from the Reformed Church in America

<sup>7</sup> material in this primer adapted with permission from teaching notes by Rev. Dr. Scot Sherman, as well as Michael Green, “Baptism: Its Purpose, Practice, and Power,” and Dr. James Brownson, “The Promise of Baptism”