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## Questions of Faith

### What is the truth about Baptism?

First of all, one must understand that when God acts in Scripture through symbols He always also has a real presence within that symbol. Just a few examples would be: burning bush (Exodus 3:1-8); pillar of fire at night and cloud during the day (Exodus 13:18, 21-22, 14:19-24); column of smoke from the tent of meeting (Exodus 40:34-38); the prophets acting as God's visible presence (Hosea 3:1-5); Jesus' birth and His Name Immanuel 'God with us' (Matthew 1:18-23); the real presence of Jesus in, with and under the bread and wine in the Lord's Supper (Matthew 26:26-29; I Corinthians 11:29).

The Biblical viewpoint is 'incarnational' (God's purpose done through earthly things, such as a Jewish nation or in the person of Jesus) and 'sacramental' (God's saving work, as promised, borne through earthly things, such as Jesus Himself, and what He said would bear His presence). Sacraments are not about the ritual ceremony itself. The power and new life are in the promise and fulfillment of Christ's presence. The miracle starts in that promise, not in the bread or wine or the water. Sacraments work because the promise is believed. You practice the ritual because you trust God and God's promises, due to the Spirit's work in you that gives you faith to grow that trust.

Faith, Holy Communion, substitutionary atonement, forgiveness, and Baptism are all God's work, not ours. The Bible teaches that Baptism is an act of God, the work of the Holy Spirit, a washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit (Titus 3; Acts 2:36-39, 22:12-16; Romans 6:3-5; Colossians 2:9-12; I Peter 3:18-22). Note that in each set of verses Baptism is never the confessing action of a human being; it is the Holy Spirit's life cleansing, sin forgiving work of God. It is His divine action.

In all of these passages the Bible equates the blessings that come through faith—forgiveness of sins and eternal life—with Baptism. This is because in Baptism we have the Gospel which is the power of God for the salvation of those who believe. In Baptism the Word comes to us, and the Bible tells us that "*faith comes from hearing the message of the Word.*" The power of Baptism is not found in the water, but in the Word of promise God attaches to the water.

Perhaps it would be helpful to note that Scripture places the emphasis not on faith (which some wrongly see as something we decide to do) and places it clearly on what Christ does. Christ is the One who saves us through the Gospel message. This message is found in the Word of God, as well as in Baptism and the Lord's Supper. In all of these, God does that same thing—He assures us our sins are forgiven—but in different ways. In the Word of God, He speaks it to us. In the Sacraments, He gives us what we could call the "visible Word." He gives us this assurance in a form we can see and take and feel and eat.

Centuries ago, church councils debated about the effectiveness of Sacraments. If a person of ill repute gave Communion, would the Sacrament be invalid? Christians answered with a resounding no. God was working. We don't foul up His giving of gifts just because of a personality flaw. The same principle applies to Baptism. If a person rejects Jesus, it doesn't mean that their Baptism was ineffective. It means that they have decided to push the Holy Spirit away.

A related issue that surfaces is: 'What if a person totally ignores their life in Christ?' Will they go to heaven just because they got a free ticket in Baptism? This question points to a

key reason why Reformed theologians got away from the practice of infant Baptism during the Reformation era. They were disillusioned by the abuses in the Church, especially the belief that a person can go through motions in worship or in Sacraments, get the benefit, but live any way they pleased (*ex opere operato*). People were making grace very cheap. Reformed theologians reacted to this by emphasizing the apprehension of Christ through reason and understanding.

The Bible addresses this fear as it teaches about Baptism and the will of God for our lives. When Jesus gave the Great Commission He told His followers how to make disciples: Baptizing and discipling. After Paul was baptized, he went immediately into Arabia for three years to study and learn what God wanted to teach him. He was disciplined!

Over and over again the Bible urges us to grow in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ and to grow in lives that are conformed to His image. Baptism is not a free ticket to heaven in the sense that once you get that stamp of approval you can do anything you want and still hold on to your heavenly guarantee. But it is a free ticket in the sense that the fullness of the God-grace is poured into your life through Baptism. You have the certainty of the life and salvation that the Holy Spirit gives. The calling that remains is to live in your Baptism, not apart from it.

Scriptural support for the intent that infants are to be baptized is wide and deep. First we look at how Jesus treated little children. Christ loved little children and scolded His disciples when they rebuked the children who were trying to come to Him. Instead He asked that the children be brought to Him and said that unless one had the faith of a little child, that they would not get into heaven—see Mark 10:13-16 and Matthew 18:3. This faith that a little child has shows that a little child is capable of having faith. Further, since faith is the work of God alone, this faith must therefore be the work of God and does not depend upon the capabilities of the child to understand or intellectualize it (Psalm 71:5-6; 22:9; 8:2). Indeed, if Baptism is the work of God, and not of man, then who are we to put limits upon how God works what He says He does?

This would seem enough to show that Scripture supports infant Baptism, but let us explore further. Christ also said that anyone who receives one little child in His Name receives Christ Himself (Matthew 18:1-6, 10)—the same type of standard that He uses at the last Judgment to identify the believer (Matthew 25:31-40). Then He issues a stern warning to anyone who causes a little one who believes in Christ to sin (Matthew 18:6; Mark 9:42). This becomes even stronger when one considers that in Luke 18:15-17, a parallel account of Mark 10:13-16, Christ uses the Greek word *brephos* (NT:1025; of uncertain affinity; an infant, properly, unborn, literally or figuratively) referring to the children that belong to kingdom of God. This same word is used in Luke 1:41, 44 for an unborn child and later in Luke 2:12, 16 to refer to the infant Jesus.

Likewise, John the Baptist leapt in faith in his mother's womb upon the entrance of Mary pregnant with the infant Jesus (Luke 1:15, 41). So John, as a yet unborn child still in his mother's womb, was able to have faith. That should not surprise those familiar with what constitutes faith. Faith does not contain knowledge nor is there any necessity to have knowledge to have faith, but rather is a gift of God. If it were not so, then those who are in a coma, have Alzheimer's disease, are developmental disabled or even those not so challenged but while asleep would not have faith. In Mark 10:15 we are even warned not to let reason get in the way of faith (see also II Timothy 3:7).

So, Baptism is God's means of extending grace to children [and others] who are incapable of understanding otherwise what the Word of God says and thus come to faith by hearing (Titus 3:5; John 3:5; I Peter 3:21). This, then, gives fresh meaning to the concept that we become children of God through faith (Galatians 3:26-27).

To summarize, we are under a command to baptize "all nations" which does not limit age (Matthew 28:19-20). All are conceived in sin and in need of salvation through faith in Christ (Psalm 51:5). Children are specifically included as recipients of the benefits of Baptism (Acts 2:38-39). [The word "children" in this passage in Greek is *teknon* NT 5043 from the base of GSN5098; a child (as produced). It always means children and does not mean generations except as a secondary figurative understanding.] Therefore when we baptize infants, we baptize them also into Christ's death and thus His promise of salvation (Romans 6:3).

It is to be done as one Baptism of water (Ephesians 4:5) through which the infant receives the promised Spirit in all fullness (Acts 2:38-39) which washes in rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit (Titus 3:5). This Baptism is by one Spirit given to drink into one body in Christ (I Corinthians 12:13). All of the blessings that Baptism offers to the adult are then also offered to our children (Acts 2:38-39), so even babies can, through the washing of water and Spirit, have faith created in their hearts to receive those blessings (John 3:5) and free them from the condemnation of their sinful nature (since death is always the result of sin and sin always results in death—if infants can die they are therefore sinners).