

Baptism - What the Bible Teaches

SUMMARY

#1—Baptism is like circumcision, except that it actually strips the body of its sinful nature and buries it with Christ. So, it is both a substitution and reflection of the Jewish circumcision rite that is the sign of the Old Testament Covenant with God to be His people and trust in Him (Colossians 2:11).

#2—Baptism forgives sins (Acts 2:38) because it washes them away (Acts 22:16), cleanses us and thus takes away our guilt (Mark 16:16; I Peter 3:21; Acts 2:38; Acts 22:16; I Corinthians 6:11; Ephesians 5:26; Titus 3:5; Hebrews 10:22), and then clothes us with the righteousness of Christ (Galatians 3:27).

#3—The authority of Baptism is from Christ, therefore it is a distribution of the full forgiveness of Christ, accomplished through His holy life and innocent death. We apprehend this substitutionary atonement through our Baptism because we are born again (John 3:5; Titus 3:5), the old Adam is crucified and buried, and we are raised up as a new creation of God (Romans 6:3-6; Colossians 2:11-12) as members of Christ's body (I Corinthians 12:13).

#4—In Baptism we are given the Holy Spirit in Baptism, by whom faith in Christ is worked in our hearts (Acts 2:38-39; I Corinthians 12:13; Titus 3:5-6).

#5—We baptize children of all ages because we are commanded 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* a child (as produced). It always means children and is not meant to mean generations, except as a rare figurative meaning.]

#6—The full benefits of Baptism are given to all, including infants (Acts 2:38-39), because they also are baptized into Christ's death and thus His promise of Salvation (Romans 6:3). 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.

#7—Baptism is to be done only once, with water (Ephesians 4:5), and by using Christ's own words (Matthew 28:19) through which the infant receives the promised Spirit in all fullness (Acts 2:38-39) and is washed 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).

FALSE TEACHINGS

False Teaching #1—Baptism is a just a symbol.

First of all, one must understand that God never acts anywhere in Scripture through symbols that He does not have a real presence in. 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 Name "God with us" (Matthew 1:18-23); the real presence of Jesus whenever two or three are gathered in His Name (Matthew 18:20); 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 Lutheran way of viewing the faith and the world is 'incarnational' (God's purpose is done through earthly stuff, such as a Jewish nation or a person Jesus) and 'sacramental' (God's saving work, as promised, is borne through earthly stuff, 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 Jesus'

presence. The miracle starts in the promise, not in the bread or wine or the water. Sacraments work because the promise is believed. You come to do it because you trust God and God's promises, due to the Spirit's work in you that gives you faith to grow that trust.

Secondly, 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, 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; 1 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 giving, 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 we have the Word 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.

The radical difference between the Reformed and Lutheran teaching about Baptism is upon whom can God choose to work. Reformed doctrine teaches that Baptism is an act of public confession on the part of a person who has already accepted Christ. In their view, Baptism is a rite of public commitment and profession of faith, and a symbol of the cleansing of the Holy Spirit that has already been accomplished through faith.

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.

False Teaching #2—Baptism is a confirmation of faith already chosen.

Lutherans call a public profession of faith confirmation. But Baptism is no symbolic demonstration of a believer. It is a means by which the Holy Spirit enters a life, hands filled with the merits of forgiveness that Jesus earned on the cross and through the grave. It is God's work. Therefore, Lutherans baptize adults and babies. The gift of the Spirit is poured into the lives of all people.

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.

False Teaching #3—Baptism is a guarantee of salvation.

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 (Matthew 28:18-20). After Paul was baptized, he went immediately into Arabia for three years to study and learn what God wanted to teach him (Galatians 1:15-18). He was discipled!

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 heaven guarantee.

But it is a free ticket in the sense that the fullness of the God grace is poured into your life in 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.

EXAMINATION OF SCRIPTURE

Original Sin—Man is Sinful by Nature

What does it mean to be striped of our sinful nature? Where does sin come from and why do people sin? These are great imponderables for those who do not have Scripture to turn to for answers, for there are only two possible explanations: 1) that it is learned behavior from the example of others or our environment; or 2) it is an innate condition that we are born with and that it is passed on from generation to generation. Scripture is emphatic as to where it stands on this issue and flatly states that human sin is the result of an innate sinful condition of the heart and has nothing to do with our environment (Jeremiah 17:9; Proverbs 14:12; Romans 7:14-21; I John 1:8-10; James 1:13-15).

Further, it attributes this origin of sin upon the world to one man, Adam (Romans 5:12), and states plainly that Adam’s sin is hereditary to us (John 3:6). Indeed, in Psalm 51:5 David understands that he was sinful (as are we) from the moment of conception. This means that we are born spiritually dead (Ephesians 2:1) and have lost the image of God that Adam had at Creation through that sin. If children are then born with sin then they must also be accountable for their sins as children (Romans 3:19) and indeed as children can sin, see Matthew 18:6. If children are born with sin, can sin as children and are accountable for their sins, then Scripture indicates that they too are under the sentence of death (Romans 6:23).

Children Are Born Sinful and in Need of Forgiveness

There are indeed many direct statements of Scripture that point to the universal sinfulness of man, such as: I Kings 8:46; Psalm 143:2; Proverbs 20:9; Ecclesiastes 7:20; Romans 3:1-12, 19-23; Galatians 3:22; James 3:2; I John 1:8, 10. In fact, one would have to be completely ignorant of Scriptural teachings and the plain evidence we see before us daily in the behavior of our own children and those of our neighbors not to understand and accept the doctrine of Original Sin. Some have even tried to raise children to be without sin by withholding the companionship of other children in an effort to insulate them from learning to sin through imitation. Needless to say, the result is always a failure, for their children sin without any prompting from either their environment or other children.

Several passages in Scripture also teach that sin is the heritage of man from the time of birth, and is therefore present in human nature so early that it cannot possibly be considered as the result of imitation (Psalm 51:5; Job 14:4; John 3:6). In Ephesians 2:3, Paul says of the Ephesians that they are by nature

children of wrath, just as are the non-believers. In this passage the term 'by nature' points to something inborn and original, in which all people participate, and which makes them guilty before God. Moreover, according to Scripture, death is visited even upon those who have never exercised a personal and conscious choice (Romans 5:12-14). This passage implies that sin exists even in the case of infants prior to moral consciousness.

Since infants die, and therefore the effect of sin is present in their case, it is natural, logical and reasonable to assume that the cause is also present. Scripture teaches that all men are under condemnation and therefore need the redemption which is in Christ Jesus. Children are never made an exception to this rule (e.g. John 3:3, 5; I John 5:12). Are all human beings affected by sin in the sense that they are inevitably involved in Adam and Eve's transgression? Scripture is clear. Paul writes that, "by the one man's offense many died" (Romans 5:15), "*by the one man's offense death reigned through the one*" (v. 17), "*through one man's offense judgment came to all men*" (v. 18), "*by one man's disobedience many were made sinners*" (v. 19) and for that one man's sin "*as in Adam all die*" (I Corinthians 15:22).

All Are Guilty by Attribution

It is difficult to imagine anything more offensive to ideas of human justice and fair play than for the natural person to accept guilt by imputation. Hence the doctrine of Original Sin has often been assailed in particularly abusive language. The truth or falsity of Original Sin may be simply be settled by the answer given to a simple question: Where does sin come from if it does not come to us from Adam as the Bible declares? What other answer is there? None, except the answer found in Scripture: The universality of sin is the result of God's judgment upon the human race because of Adam's transgression. Adam was the representative of the human race, the entire human race, including children born and unborn. He stood before God for us so that when he fell we fell and were caught up inevitably in the results of his rebellion.

Infant Baptism is Normative in Scripture

Scriptural support for the intent that infants are to be baptized is wide and deep. First we must look to 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 (Mark 10:13-16; 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 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?

Infants Can Have Saving Faith

Christ 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 it would seem that 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).

Faith Can be Given to Children by Baptism

We started with the understanding that Baptism is a spiritual circumcision that puts off our sinful nature (Colossians 2:11-12). Therefore, since Baptism is like the old Covenantal circumcision it should also be accomplished in a time frame similar to the 8 days required for circumcision (Genesis 17:12). They should be brought by their parents or by someone in authority over their lives (Mark 10:13; Ephesians 6:4), even if they are unbelievers [though now the church has a spiritual responsibility to nourish the child's new faith], for we should not hinder the little children to be brought to Christ (Mark 10:14). If the child (or for that matter an adult) is unregenerate, then it is lost for only by faith can one accept the grace of the Holy Spirit.

Baptism is not Necessary for a Saving Faith

Baptism is not necessary to a saving faith, as we can be saved without it [thief on cross], as only unbelief condemns (Mark 16:16). However, if we have faith and we are not prevented from Baptism, then to not be baptized is to despise Baptism which is a sign of unbelief (Luke 7:3). Since God alone works faith and salvation is a free gift of God without our works, then why cannot we trust that Baptism forgives sins and works faith in all who are baptized.

Raising Children as Christians

Lastly, in this cumulative argument, there persists a question from the New Testament: 'How should believers bring up their children?' If the answer is 'As unbelievers to be later converted,' then infant Baptism is certainly inappropriate. But is that the answer? If children in believing homes are being taught to pray to God as 'Father' and to trust in the love of Jesus, who is present with them, then they are in fact being treated as believers from the start, and should then be baptized from the start. To treat them in other respects as believers (even in a tentative way) and yet not to baptize them is to fly in the face of the New Testament use of Baptism.

The New Testament provides a great range of baptismal motifs: repentance, conversion, adoption, rebirth by the Spirit, being united with Christ in his death and resurrection, becoming a disciple, being put under the headship of Christ (or the name of the Holy Trinity), being transplanted into the body of Christ, walking in newness of life morally, and becoming an inheritor of eternal life and of the final resurrection. It appears reasonable to suggest that everything that is involved in being Christian at all is symbolized in Baptism. Thus we go on to say that, whether Baptism is given to an infant or an adult, thereafter that baptized person has the same consequence of the same Baptism pertaining to him or her as a baptized person, irrespective of when the Baptism was given.

Unbaptized Children

The final argument that can be made against infant Baptism is an emotional appeal to the fate of unbaptized children. First of all, Scripture says nothing about its fate, but we know from Scripture that there are examples of faith being worked in children while yet in the womb and thus unbaptized by mankind (John in womb, Luke 1:41, 44; Jeremiah sanctified in the womb, Jeremiah 1:5). So since Christ is both Redeemer and Judge, and we know that God has a way to work faith without Baptism, we can offer believing parents hope that the same Christ that said in Mark 10:14, "*Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of God*" is the one before whom they must appear in Judgment. For the unbelieving parent, it is difficult to offer such hope.

EXAMINATION OF LUTHERAN CONFESSIONS

Original Sin—Man is Sinful by Nature

Confessionally, we find much support for this notion of Original Sin. In the *Augsburg Confession*, Article II: Of Original Sin, it says in part: "since the fall of Adam all men begotten in the natural way are born with sin, that is, without the fear of God, without trust in God" and further that "this disease, or vice of origin, is truly sin, even now condemning and bringing eternal death upon those not born again through Baptism and the Holy Ghost." The follow-up *Apology of the Confession* also notes in Article II (I): Of Original Sin, "our description of original sin...[is] having concupiscence, which seeks carnal things contrary to God's Word, i.e., seeks not only the pleasure of the body, but also carnal wisdom and righteousness, and, contemning God, trusts in these as good things."

This understanding of Original Sin is also echoed in the *Formula of Concord Epitome*, I. Of Original Sin, where it says "we believe, teach, and confess that original sin is not a slight, but so deep a corruption of human nature that nothing healthy or uncorrupt has remained in man's body or soul, in his inner or outward powers." It is also taught and extended to be understood as the main reason for all sin, in the *Formula of Concord – Solid Declaration*, I. Of Original Sin, which reads in part "it is true that Christians should regard and recognize as sin not only the actual transgression of God's commandments; but also that the horrible, dreadful hereditary malady by which the entire nature is corrupted should above all things be regarded and recognized as sin indeed, yea, as the chief sin, which is a root and fountain-head of all actual sins."

Catechism Support for Infant Baptism

Luther expands on the concept of infant Baptism at great length in Luther's Large Catechism (142), "That the Baptism of infants is pleasing to Christ is sufficiently proved from His own work, namely, that God sanctifies many of them who have been thus baptized, and has given them the Holy Ghost." He goes on later to explain what that receiving of the Holy Ghost does in infant Baptism and correctly understands that the prime reason we baptize infants is that Christ has commanded it be done, "Thus we do also in infant Baptism. We bring the child in the conviction and hope that it believes, and we pray that God may grant it faith; but we do not baptize it upon that, but solely upon the command of God. Why so? Because we know that God does not lie. I and my neighbor and, in short, all men, may err and deceive, but the Word of God cannot err."

In discussing the actual rite of Baptism, Luther articulates in vivid language how he perceives the action of Baptism to work, "But the act or ceremony is this, that we are sunk under the water, which passes over us, and afterwards are drawn out again. These two parts, to be sunk under the water and drawn out again,

signify the power and operation of Baptism, which is nothing else than putting to death the old Adam, and after that the resurrection of the new man, both of which must take place in us all our lives..." He goes on to explain how we must continue to live our lives in recognition of the change that Baptism has brought to it by nourishing it with a Christian life [lived in the Word and Sacraments], "...so that a truly Christian life is nothing else than a daily Baptism, once begun and ever to be continued. For this must be practiced without ceasing, that we ever keep purging away whatever is of the old Adam, and that that which belongs to the new man come forth. But what is the old man? It is that which is born in us from Adam, angry, hateful, envious, unchaste, stingy, lazy, haughty, yea, unbelieving, infected with all vices, and having by nature nothing good in it."

EXAMINATION OF HISTORIC PRACTICES

Baptism was a Normal Part of Jewish Proselyte Conversions

So, it would seem to be clear from our review of Baptism so far that Baptism is far more than just a rite of obedience to Christ, but actually brings faith, forgiveness of sins and endows with the Holy Spirit. We also find that all people are born with a sinful nature that first begins at conception and because of it we are condemned from conception whether we have committed an actual transgression or not. Simply by our inheritance of this sinful nature from Adam on brings death, even to infants.

So then can we find a means of grace for children's sinful nature even before they have the capacity to understand and through the grace of the Holy Spirit affirm their faith? Scripture is quick and emphatic to put the two together. First, Jewish proselyte baptisms were normal in the New Testament era. Colin Buchanan in a recent article concerning Baptism also opined:

The Baptism of proselytes (converts to Judaism) is known in the late first century A.D., and families that were baptized brought their children into Baptism with them. Certainly, in the atmosphere of Roman Empire, women could become Jews in their own persons, which may have suggested the need of a ritual initiation other than circumcision. If the practice began round the Empire before the 20s AD, then it is a clear background factor in the New Testament. It would add to the likelihood that converts to Christ took their children into Christian Baptism with them. There were proselytes present on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:10), and they heard that the heart of their existing Judaism was in fact Jesus Christ, that the promise was to them and to their children, and that they were now to be baptized into the name of Christ (Acts 2:38-39). If their children had been baptized into Judaism with them, it is almost unimaginable that they did not now take their children into Christian Baptism with them.

Then there is the consideration that the church in Acts is missionary church, so that we can expect to have mostly adult baptisms. In Biblical times, children were enumerated as part of household [like women & slaves] and that entire households were baptized—Acts 16:15 Lydia; 16:33 Philippi Jailer; 18:8 Crispus; I Corinthians 1:16 Stephanas.

Adult Baptisms were Without Instruction—Baptize then Teach (Matthew 28:18-20)

We need to also look at the Baptism of adult converts in the New Testament. They were baptized on the spot; indeed it is almost appropriate to say they were converted in the water—in principle they entered it as applicants, they emerged from it as converts (see for example Acts 2:38-41, Acts 8:35-38). So there was no probationary period leading from first profession of faith to later Baptism, such as what later was usual in most parts of Christian history and missionary practice since then. Of course, there are good pastoral reasons for the introduction of probationary or 'catechumenal' preparation, and are good pastoral reasons

for preparation for adult Baptism today. But the archetypes in the New Testament show no such preparation, and our theologizing about Baptism must work from the archetypes and not from later adjusted practice.

Baptism came at the very beginning of the Christian life, as true 'initiation'. Among its many meanings was that it established a basis of treating people as believers thereafter. The baptized are believers; and the believers are baptized. If in Acts 10 the Spirit falls upon Gentiles (which had hardly been anticipated), then all that Peter can say is 'Quick! Get the water! We cannot leave these new believers unbaptized a second longer!' (Acts 10:44-48). The New Testament does not allow for unbaptized believers; all that can be said to them is 'Quick! Get the water!' and thus delaying the Baptism of the children of believers runs the risk (or underlines the policy) of creating a category of unbaptized believers as they grow up.

Early Church Norm was Baptism of Infants and Children

The practice of baptizing infants and children continued as the norm in the church up until the fifth century. Irenaeus, Hippolytus, Origen and the great theologians and leaders from various different geographical areas of early church supported infant Baptism, unbroken from apostolic times, and did so because of apostolic teachings. The one exception of note was Tertullian (160-225 A.D.) of Carthage, who criticized infant Baptism, but only from the standpoint of it putting too much responsibility on sponsors. (He may also have felt infants were innocent until age of reason, but we can't be sure). In spite of his position on infant Baptism, the Cyprian bishop of Carthage from 200-258 A.D., who had Tertullian as his spiritual father, urged parents not to even wait the 8 days before having an infant baptized.

Polycarp of Smyrna (martyred around A.D. 156) stated at trial that he had said served the Lord 86 years, thus he must have been brought to faith at infancy through Baptism during the lifetime of apostles.

Augustine's understanding was that, "All people are born spiritually dead in original sin and are dependent totally on the grace of God for salvation". Luther's defense of infant Baptism from *Concerning Rebaptism and the Large Catechism* was that it brought the blessings of the cross and faith to those that receive them.

CONCLUSIONS

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 is not meant to 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.