

Explaining Infant Baptism

Infant baptism is practiced by many classical denominations and has been for centuries. It is also done by request in some modern evangelical churches as an alternative to believer's baptism of adults. People sometimes ask about the origins of infant baptism and where it is found in the Bible. Here is a short explanation.

Baptism is a symbol, a sign, symbolising what God has done in saving us through the sacrifice of Jesus' life on the cross.

Jesus said at the last Supper "This is the new covenant in my blood" and all of us who have accepted what Jesus did for us and have chosen to follow Jesus, are members of the Covenant People of God

One helpful way of looking at baptism, especially when baptising infants, is to see it as the replacement of the sign of the Old Covenant.

In the OT, God made a covenant, an agreement, a promise, with Abraham saying that he would become the Father of a great nation through which he would bless the world. Abraham was the father of the people of Israel, the Jewish nation, into which Jesus Christ was born

As a sign of this covenant, Abraham was told to first circumcise himself, and then circumcise his 8 day old son, Isaac.

Every male born into the people of Israel received that same sign of the covenant between God and His people, and any male who was converted to Judaism was also circumcised, along with their male children.

With the New Covenant which was introduced through Jesus came a new sign or symbol, that of baptism.

The classical churches would lean on the following two passages from the New Testament.

In the Apostle Peter's first sermon on the day of Pentecost, (Acts 2.38) he said, "Repent and be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. The promise is for you (meaning the listeners) and your children and for all who are far off."

Another popular verse is in Acts 16.31-33, where it is assumed that the word family implies that little children may have been involved in the baptisms of that night. In neither passage would the children have had time to become committed and converted believers.

"Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household. Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized.

So a helpful way to view the baptism of babies is to think of it as the sign of being part of the new covenant, which like the sign of the old, was rightly only given to those who had been born into the people of God.

It's a symbol of what God has done in saving us rather than a sign of what we have done in committing our lives to him. It must also be an expression of the faith of the parents in Christ and their trust in Christ to bring their child into personal belief and trust.

Without faith it would be no more than a religious ceremony without spiritual value, just as a believer's adult baptism without the person having faith or understanding would be another meaningless ritual.

People may ask "How can a baby repent of his or her sins and live a true Christian life?" The truth is he or she cannot - not yet. The hope and the trust is that the child will grow up, knowing and loving Jesus having been marked with the sign of the New Covenant from birth and covered by the faith and the prayers of believing parents.

The expectation is that one day the child will come to realise the full reality of his or her baptism when he or she reaches an age of full understanding of what it means to live a life committed to Jesus.

The child has been brought into the covenant people of God from the beginning of life by his or her parents, unless in later life he or she is foolish enough to reject her heritage and turn her back on God.

The hope and prayer of the parents, the minister and the congregation is that the child will grow up never needing to make a decision to start following Jesus, because he or she will never know a time when he or she hasn't been doing so.

Later on the child would expect to be confirmed rather than be baptised again as an adult in a believer's baptism ceremony.

The LORD said to Moses, "Tell Aaron and his sons,
This is how you are to bless the Israelites. Say to them:
The LORD bless you and keep you,
The LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you;
The LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace."
So they will put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them."