

## Infants, Baptism and Faith

### I. Little children can and do believe the Gospel.

#### A. Matthew 18:1-6 (NIV)

<sup>1</sup> At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" <sup>2</sup> He called a little child (Gk.: *paidion*) and had him stand among them. <sup>3</sup> And he said: "I tell you the truth, unless you change [or "are converted", so NAS, KJV, and NKJV] and become like little children (*paidia*), you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. <sup>4</sup> Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child (*paidion*) is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. <sup>5</sup> "And whoever welcomes a little child (*paidion*) like this in my name welcomes me. <sup>6</sup> But if anyone causes one of these little ones (*ton mikron*) who believe in me to sin (*skandalizo*), it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.

1. Notice that, according to Jesus, these little children believe in him, v. 6.
2. In v. 6, the NIV translates *skandalizo* as "to sin." This is too mild. Here it means to "cause to stumble," i.e., "to cause someone to give up his faith."

#### B. Mark 9:34-36, 42.

<sup>34</sup> But they kept silent, for on the way they had discussed with one another which of them was the greatest. <sup>35</sup> And sitting down, He called the twelve and said to them, "If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all, and servant of all." <sup>36</sup> And taking a child (*paidion*), He set him before them, and taking him in His arms, He said to them, . . . <sup>42</sup> "And whoever causes one of these little ones (*ton mikron*) who believe to stumble, it would be better for him if, with a heavy millstone hung around his neck, he had been cast into the sea.

1. The Greek word for child here is *paidion* which means little child, vv. 36-37.

2. "One of these little ones", v. 42, refers to the little child of vv. 36-37. Note what is said of these little ones: They believe (i.e., they believe in Christ), v. 42.

### C. **Mark 10:13-16**

<sup>13</sup> People were bringing little children (*paidia*) to Jesus to have him touch them, but the disciples rebuked them. <sup>14</sup> When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, "Let the little children (*paidia*) come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. <sup>15</sup> I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child (*paidion*) will never enter it." <sup>16</sup> And he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them.

1. Throughout this text, Jesus is speaking of *paidia*, i.e., little children.
2. We get an idea of how young some of these children were, in a parallel account in Luke 18:15-17. There, we read:

<sup>15</sup> People were also bringing babies (*brephe* plural of *brepheos*, meaning an infant) to Jesus to have him touch them. When the disciples saw this, they rebuked them. <sup>16</sup> But Jesus called the children (*paidia*) to him and said, "Let the little children (*paidia*) come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. <sup>17</sup> I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child (*paidion*) will never enter it."

Conclusion: Both infants and little children belong to, and are members of, the Kingdom of God.

## II. **Baptism: God's means of creating faith in children.**

A. **Children cannot come to faith through the oral proclamation of the Word. They cannot intellectually comprehend the Gospel truths.**

B. **What does Baptism do?**

1. **Titus 3:5 (It works regeneration)**

He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit (NASB).

The phrase, "washing (Gk. *loutron*) of regeneration refers to baptism. This *loutron* is not the washing away of sin by the blood of Christ. It is specifically a reference to water baptism. The only other place where *loutron* is used in the New Testament is in Ephesians 5:26. There, we read, [Christ gave himself up for the church] "that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing (*loutron*) of water with the word," Here, it is specifically stated that the washing is with water.

It seems clear, then, that, in Titus 3:5, the washing is also a washing of water. What does this baptismal washing do? It regenerates and renews. That is to say, it brings a rebirth (NIV), it creates saving faith in the heart of the one who is baptized.

2. **Acts 2:38-39 (It works forgiveness of sins).**

Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. <sup>39</sup> The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call." (NIV).

What brings the forgiveness of sins is not repentance but baptism.. A literal translation of the Greeks reads, "Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized , each of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins . . . ." One does not "repent" in the name of Christ. We are, however, baptized in his name, for Jesus said, "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

We note, furthermore, that the promise of forgiveness extends to children.. So, then, it is clear that baptism works forgiveness of sins.

3. **Acts 22:16 (Baptism washes away sin)**

Ananias is speaking. He says to Paul,

"And now, what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized (*baptisai*) and wash (*apolousai*) your sins away, calling on his name.'(NIV).

To what are we to ascribe the washing away of sins. Those who hold that it is the "calling on his name" read something into the text that is not there. In the first place, nowhere in Scripture is sin remitted by the sinner calling on the name of Christ. In point of fact, it is God who calls sinners to himself to receive forgiveness. The calling is always from God to the sinner, never the reverse. In the second place, the Greek grammars call *baptisai* a "causative middle,"<sup>1</sup> meaning that baptism is the cause of the washing away of sins. In the third place, it is better to construe *baptisai* with the other finite verb (*apolousai*) in the clause than to construe it with the participle (calling). The latter would be irregular. We might also note that when one is baptized in the name of the Triune God, he does, in fact, call on the name of the Son of God.

4. **John 3:5. (To be baptized is to be born of water and the Spirit)**

Jesus is speaking to Nicodemus. He says to him,

"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit (*gennethe ex hydatos kai pneumatos*), he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. (NASB)

The preposition *ex* (of) has two objects, water (*hydatos*) and Spirit (*pneumatos*). It denotes one event. It describes water baptism. The first object, water, denotes the earthly element. The second, Spirit, denotes the divine agency, namely the Holy Spirit. The absence of the Greek articles with the two nouns makes the unity more apparent.

Some see in this phrase two acts. The first is the physical birth in the womb surrounded by a sack of water. The second is the spiritual birth caused by the Holy Spirit. But this can hardly be true. The new birth is one event. It is an event in which there is water. And it is an event in which there is Spirit. There is only one thing that this can refer to, namely, water baptism. This passage teaches that the Holy Spirit regenerates through the waters of Holy Baptism.

5. **1 Peter 3:21 (Baptism saves you)**

"And corresponding to that, baptism now saves you— not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience— through the resurrection of Jesus Christ" (NASB).

Here Peter makes a dramatic statement. This passage is one of the strongest in Scripture that speaks of the saving efficacy of baptism. How one can read this passage and reject baptismal regeneration is difficult to comprehend. It even goes on to point out that the cleansing of baptism is not "a removal of dirt from the flesh." If it is not an outer cleansing of the body, there is only one other possibility, viz., an inner cleansing of the soul.

Yet, many persist in their error and see nothing but an empty ordinance. With regard to 1 Peter 3:21, the usual line of reasoning is to say that baptism saves in the sense of giving a "good conscience." They do not go on to explain what a "good conscience" is, but they cover the salvific nature of baptism by cluttering it up with many words. If only they would unpack the term "good conscience," perhaps they would see the light.

In Scripture, much is said about the unregenerate and regenerate conscience. Unbelievers are said to have an "evil conscience" and a conscience that is defiled. They are never said to have a good, clean, or blameless conscience.

Contrariwise, believers are described as having a "good conscience," or a "clean conscience," or a "blameless conscience." The inference is that if anyone is described as having a good, clean, or blameless conscience in the New Testament, that person is a believer.

What does Baptism do? It creates faith . . . faith that trusts in Christ. Faith receives the forgiveness of sins won by Christ. In these passages, the Scriptures do not speak of baptism actually creating faith. Rather, they make a stronger statement. They teach that

- Baptism works forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:38-39, Acts 22:16).
- Baptism saves (1 Peter 3:21, Titus 3:5, and John 3:5).

Since we know that forgiveness is obtained through faith alone (Ephesians. 2:8-9, Romans 3:28, and Galatians 2:16-17) baptism must create such faith. Cf. Mark 16:16.

- C. **As with any means of grace, the working of God in baptism can be resisted.**

### III. **Argument for infant baptism.**

- A. **Children need to be reborn through faith since they are sinners from the womb. Never once in Scripture do we read that children are innocent of sin or that they are innocent until they reach the "age of accountability."**

1. Genesis 8:21
2. Psalm 51:5
3. Psalm 58:3
4. John 3:6
5. Ephesians 2:1

- B. **Matthew 28:19. "All nations" must certainly include infants.**

- C. **The Book of Acts does not specifically address infant baptism. There are at least three reasons for this:**

1. It is a mission book dealing with adult conversion.
2. Since Christianity grew out of Judaism, which had a sacrament for infants (circumcision), baptism of infants was, as a matter of course, taken for granted.
3. The Jews at the time of Christ already were familiar with baptism. When a pagan became a Jew, he was baptized. His entire family was also baptized. Jewish baptism was held to wash away the filth of paganism. Also, John the Baptist—the forerunner of Christ—also preached a "baptism of repentance for the remission of sins" (Mark 1:4, Luke 3:3)

- D. **Whole households were baptized.**

1. 1 Corinthians 1:16
2. Acts 16:15
3. Acts 16:33-34

**E. Baptism replaced circumcision as the sacrament for infants, Colossians 2:11-12.**

**F. Christ wants children in the Kingdom of God.**

1. Mark 10:13-16
2. Matthew 18:10-14

**G. Infant baptism was an accepted, nearly unanimous practice of the Early Church.**

1. Polycarp stated his martyrdom (167/8 A.D.) that he had been in the "service of Christ" for eighty-six years. Other recorded dates from Polycarp's life make it likely that eighty-six years was his age from birth. Joachim Jeremias, in *The Origins of Infant Baptism*, concludes the following from these facts: "This shows at any rate that his parents were already Christians, or at least were converted quite soon after his birth. His parents were pagans at his birth, he would have been baptized with the 'house' at their conversion. But even if his parents were Christians, the words 'service of Christ for eighty-six years' supports a baptism soon after his birth rather than one as a child of 'mature years' . . . for which there is no evidence at all."

Jeremias supposes something similar for Polycrates of Ephesus. In 190/91, when writing to Rome concerning the dispute over Easter, Polycrates states that he is "sixty five years in the Lord." Since this reference to his age is made "because of his concern for his long unimpeachable Christian standing," Jeremias postulates that his baptism "took place soon after birth, rather than that there was an age limit for baptism."

Justin Martyr gives still another testimony to the practice of infant baptism by stating that many old men and women of sixty and seventy years of age had been disciples of Christ from childhood.

2. No incident is recorded in the earliest of Christian history which gives evidence that baptism was forbidden to any person on the basis of an age limit, or that the right of a Christian parent to have his children baptized had ever been challenged or renounced.

3. Although several examples exist from the third century of the children of Christians being baptized as infants, in all of the literature and collections of inscriptions from that century there is not a single example of Christian parents delaying the baptism of their children.
4. Neither the Ebionites, Novatians, Arians, Donatists, Montanists, nor any other early heresy refuted infant baptism; many were even noted as practicing it.
5. A significant parallel exists between Jewish proselyte baptism (when pagans were converted to Judaism) and early Christian baptism. The contacts between early Christian baptism and proselyte baptism, with the similarities in terminology, interpretation, symbolism, and the rite itself, are especially notable. What is of greatest interest, however, is that the baptism of the early Church followed that of proselyte baptism, in which children and infants were baptized with the convert's family. This is especially significant when one realizes that the very early Church was made up primarily of converted Jews.
6. There is no evidence of anyone being against infant baptism in the early Church on the grounds that you must first "believe" and be baptized. Tertullian (160-230 A.D.), was the only one who questioned infant baptism. The bulk of his objection, however, was due to his false belief that sin after baptism was almost unforgivable.
7. Cyprian, a leading bishop of North Africa, convened a synod of sixty-six bishops at Carthage to discuss whether or not they felt that infant baptism should be delayed until the eighth day after birth instead of the usual second or third day. Their unanimous decision upheld the universally accepted practice which they had always followed.

### **EARLY CHURCH FATHERS**

8. A very early Christian teacher, Irenaeus (120-202 A.D.), wrote the following: " He came to save all through Himself—all I say, who through Him are reborn in God—infants, and children, and youth, and old men. Therefore He passed through every age, becoming an infant for infants, sanctifying infants; a child for children,

sanctifying those who are of that age, and at the same time becoming for them an example of piety, of righteousness, and of submission; a young man for youths, becoming an example for youths and sanctifying them for the Lord."

Here we read that Jesus Christ came that all might be reborn in God. "How can an infant be reborn if he cannot believe?" a person may ask. I ask in return, "How can an infant be reborn if his Christian parents have refrained from baptizing him?" Is a child who has not reached the "age of accountability/ reason" not reborn until he reaches the age of thirteen when he then needs to be reborn?

9. Origen's (185-254 A.D.) view of baptism is direct and transparent: "For what is sin? Could a child who has only just been born commit a sin? And yet he has sin for which it is commanded to offer a sacrifice, as Job 14:4ff and Psalm 51:5-7 show. For this reason the Church received from the Apostles the tradition to administer baptism to the children also. For the men to whom the secrets of divine mysteries had been entrusted knew that in everyone there were genuine sinful defilements, which had to be washed away with water and the Spirit."

In his Homily on Luke he again states his beliefs on infant baptism: 'Infants are baptized for the remission of sins. What sins? Whenever have they sinned? In fact, of course, never. And yet: 'No one is free from defilement.' (Job 14:4) But defilement is only put away by the mystery of baptism. That is the reason why infants too are baptized. "

10. Hippolytus' (170-236 A.D.) perception of infant baptism is clear and straightforward as well: "And first baptize the little ones; and if they can speak for themselves, they shall do so; if not, their parents or other relatives shall speak for them.
11. There is not one Church Father who denies or even questions the validity of infant baptism. It was in no locality and at no time viewed as something that was created after New Testament times.

#### **IV. The Necessity of Baptism.**

##### **A. Baptism is necessary.**

1. It is a means of grace, Titus 3:5-7.
2. It is commanded by Christ, Matthew 28:19.

**B. Baptism is not absolutely necessary for salvation.**

1. Only faith is necessary.
2. Augustine: "It is not the lack of baptism but the contempt for it that damns."
3. Example: The thief on the cross. Luke 23:42-43.

**C. What about infants who die without baptism?**

- A. Scripture does not address this question.
- B. We affirm, however, that children can be saved without baptism. God is able to receive children into His Kingdom as He wills.

**V. An Important Distinction.**

- A. Infants do believe in Christ.
- B. They cannot, however, articulate their faith yet.
- C. We must not insist that faith (to be true, saving faith) be capable of being confessed in all situations. A person while sleeping, or in a coma, for instance, cannot confess his faith. Yet, who would deny that faith exists? Similarly, an infant, though incapable of confessing his faith, cannot be said to lack such faith.
- D. Some churches make oral confession of faith a requirement (or a necessary prerequisite) for salvation. This is a gross error.

---

**References**

1. A.T. Robertson, A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research, (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1934), p. 808, and F Blass, A. Debrunner, and Robert Funk, A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature, Rev. Ed, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 66. [\[Return\]](#)