

On the Baptism of Infants and Young Children

By Drew Knowles

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OAK FOREST

Introduction

For several centuries now, theologians have been debating whether or not to baptize infants born to Christian parents. The discussion has been largely amiable and brotherly, but most of these theologians hold deeply entrenched views. So they lob their arguments from all sorts of angles, but few are ever convinced to the contrary.

Throughout most of church history, and even today, the vast majority of Christians practice infant baptism (paedobaptism). Many practice paedocommunion as well. In the United States, however, the Baptist view has largely prevailed (baptism is reserved for those who credibly profess the Christian faith). In fact, for reasons we will explore below, the average American tends to be Baptist by default, by instinct.

During the 17th and 18th centuries, Western civilization underwent significant cultural shifts, which ultimately led to the elevation of the individual ego over and above family and social obligations. The United States of America were founded in the very midst of this change. Now, despite flaws and shortcomings, the United States have long been a worldwide beacon of freedom, equality, dignity, prosperity, and stable, democratic government. However, this has largely been predicated upon a uniquely American form of individualism. Americans have taken the positive, wholesome value of freedom, and we have radicalized it. After all, what is transgenderism if not the most radical form of individualism? Americans are free to be whatever we claim to be. Thus, in the name of freedom and individualism, subjectivity abounds.

What does this have to do with baptism? Well, if the air we breathe as American citizens is a radicalized form of freedom, then we will tend to syncretize this value with our understanding and practice of the Christian faith, even subconsciously. In the case of baptism, we will tend to treasure voluntaristic "proclamations of faith" and "decisions for Christ" rather than inheriting by default the traditions preserved for us by preceding generations. Americans naturally prefer to "opt in." Again, Americans are instinctively Baptist. Though, as we will see, this is not how most people actually go about raising their children.

As you might have guessed by now, this paper will present a case for paedobaptism (infant baptism) I submit my rationale humbly, with little expectation of contributing to the broader, centuries-long debate. I write with my local church family particularly in mind. At minimum, I hope to convince you that these are reasonable, biblically defensible practices.

My Personal Journey

I was baptized as an infant into a Methodist church, but I was in my 20s when my parents told me so. For most of my childhood, my family attended nondenominational, dispensational bible churches. In other words, our churches did not baptize infants. I had very little exposure to the practice of infant baptism in my formative years.

From what I could gather, baptism was a symbolic act whereby a person proclaims his/her personal faith in Christ. It was only for professing Christians, and it was predicated on a story of conversion. Thus, the ritual of baptism was less an act performed upon a recipient and more a dramatization of personal testimony.

Years later, I found myself serving the church in a vocational capacity. This afforded me more time to read and study Scripture than ever before, and I began to notice a theme amongst my favorite pastors and theologians: Most of them were paedobaptists! In fact, I came to realize that credobaptism has been the minority view throughout the history of the Church. And yet, the mere acknowledgement of that fact was insufficient, in and of itself, to convince me that Christian infants were proper recipients of baptism. Before I could affirm infant baptism, I would need to be convinced by the Bible.

Suffice to say, several years on, I consider myself thoroughly convinced. But I do not share my personal journey to imply that I have "matured" into this way of thinking, as if to suggest that credobaptists interpret the Bible immaturely. Rather, I share my personal journey in order to champion unity and empathy and mutual understanding despite our differences. I know and love many faithful brothers and sisters who disagree with my arguments below, but by the grace of God, we will spend eternity together, our views on baptism notwithstanding. We must always keep that in mind. For a variety of reasons, I am quite passionate about extending the sacraments to covenant children, but my passion for Christian charity and ecumenism remains greater. We ought to be humble, gentle, and patient, bearing with one another in love, and eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Ephesians 4:2-3). Thus, to the degree that this paper is sectarian or schismatic in tone, I will have failed. Lord, help me.

What is Baptism?

Our understanding of baptism begins in the earliest chapters of the Bible (the creation account, Noah and the flood, the Red Sea crossing, etc.). There is so much meaning packed into this simple ritual. But thankfully, the power and purpose of baptism do not depend upon the depth of our understanding. We are not saved by the acquisition and rearticulation of doctrine, and we will spend a literal eternity coming to appreciate the gospel in all its fullness. So God does not expect the recipients of baptism to *understand* baptism; He gives us baptism as a ritual to *perform*. The Bible commands us to wash new Christians in water in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19). And despite our relative ignorance at the time of our baptisms, there is power and purpose in doing so.

Baptism is sometimes called a sacrament. Protestants believe Jesus gave two sacraments to the Church: Baptism and the Lord's Supper (also known as Communion or the Eucharist). Sacraments are rituals that bind us together as God's family by the death and resurrection of Jesus. The Holy Spirit uses the sacraments to more fully express and apply God's promises to us in the gospel.

Baptism is a sacrament of the New Testament, ordained by Jesus Christ, not only for the solemn admission of the party baptized into the visible Church; but also to be unto him a sign and seal of the covenant of grace, of his ingrafting into Christ, of regeneration, of remission of sins, and of his giving up unto God, through Jesus Christ, to walk in the newness of life.

Westminster Confession of Faith

In particular, baptism is a ritual washing that signals our adoption into the family of God, our being united to Jesus and His Body (Romans 6:3-5, Galatians 3:27, 1 Corinthians 12:13, Colossians 2:12), our cleansing from sin (Mark 1:4, Titus 3:5), and our consecration into the priesthood and Temple (Hebrews 10:22). In short, baptism is a ritual that welcomes us into the Church, which is the Kingdom, Temple, Body, and Bride of Christ.

Because the Church is a covenant community, entering into the Church is entering into a covenant with God. Through baptism, we become recipients of a gracious covenant promise (Acts 2:38-39). Too often, evangelicals approach the sacraments with individualistic presuppositions. The sacrament of baptism then devolves into a

personal profession of faith, a statement of an individual's new (or renewed) commitment to Christ. Even when we acknowledge the initiatory nature of baptism, evangelicals tend to emphasize human initiative over divine initiative. But this is precisely backwards. Baptism is not primarily man's pledge to God; baptism is primarily God's pledge to man. Christians are baptized "into" the triune name (Matthew 28:19). God speaks, and we passively receive. God adopts, and we get a new name. Thus, baptism is not so much a matter of "committing our lives to Christ." In baptism, we acknowledge that we have nothing worth committing. Our lives are owed to God from the outset, and He is claiming what is already His. The true glory of baptism, therefore, is that God does not brand us like cattle, He names us like children. He welcomes us into a new family, a new society, the triune society of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:4, Ephesians 2:19). Through the waters of baptism, we are made citizens of a new kingdom.

So baptism is a powerful symbol, but baptism is more than just symbolic. By the Holy Spirit, Jesus is truly present when a person is baptized. Jesus is with us in baptism, and He is pouring out His grace and building up the faith of His people. Baptism is therefore a "means of salvation" (Westminster Shorter Catechism), not because the water is magic, but because we are baptized into the name of God and into the Church of God.

Does this mean that baptism saves a person eternally? No. Baptism is the initial watering of a seed of grace, and there is more work to be done if we are to cultivate that seed into maturity. The grace offered to us in baptism must be received, maintained, and built upon. How? Through faithful living. As God's children, as priests in the Temple, as members of a holy Body, as citizens of a holy Kingdom, we are called to mature into our new identity. We must always remember that we are baptized people, because God wants to continue speaking through our baptisms. He wants to remind us continually that we are His cherished children, that we have been united to the death and resurrection of Jesus, that we live by His Spirit, that we belong to the Church, that we are called to build His Kingdom, and that glory awaits us when Jesus returns to make all things new!

As you can see, there is so much meaning packed into the sacrament of baptism, and we really only covered a small sprinkling (pun intended). But remember, this is a sacrament to *perform* long before we fully *understand*. So, having thus defined baptism, we will turn to the question of whether the infants of Christian parents are proper recipients of this sacrament.

Asking the Bible (Systematic Theology)

Systematic theology is the study of biblical teaching on key doctrines. The emphasis is on right doctrine and right application. Systematic theology, when done well, presents a biblical way of thinking about a variety of topics. When it comes to baptism, for instance, systematic theologians ask questions such as: What does baptism mean? How should we baptize a person? Who should be baptized?

So systematic theology is helpful. It helps us to apply Scripture rightly, and it guards us from error. But before we can formulate true biblical doctrine, we have to ensure true biblical interpretation. That might seem obvious, but it's worth stating. It means that we cannot simply parachute into the text of the New Testament with a list of questions regarding baptism. We all come to the Bible with biases and presuppositions, so before we look for answers, we need to question our questions.

If we interpret the Bible incorrectly, our applications are likely to be misguided. Thus, when doing systematic theology, we must take care to approach the Bible as written. The Bible is rarely systematic in its presentation of doctrine. The Bible is mostly narrative, poetry, and parable, and even when we do come across something more systematic, it's really just commentary on all the narrative, poetry, and parable. Thus, we should not expect the Bible to offer straightforward answers to our topical questions. We must come to understand the grand narrative sweep of Scripture as a whole. But we will get to that.

For now, what can systematic theology teach us about infant baptism?

The Absence of Explicit Directives

To begin, I will happily admit that the New Testament contains no explicit command to baptize infants, nor any unequivocal description of the practice. However, I believe the desire for an explicit directive rests upon credobaptist assumptions regarding the Bible, assumptions which are widespread within the American evangelical world. Namely, credobaptists tend to emphasize a supposed "discontinuity" between the biblical covenants, which fosters a dismissive and/or skeptical posture towards argumentation rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures. Plus, this desire for an explicit directive is exacerbated by the somewhat arbitrary division of Scripture into two distinct Testaments, Old and New. Why hath man separated what God hath joined together?

Here's a thought experiment: Imagine that infant baptism is uniformly practiced within the early church, with the full, enthusiastic approval of the Apostles. Why should we expect them to address the issue in Scripture? What issue would there be to address? Infant baptism would have been perfectly consistent with their worldview; Jews had been incorporating their children into the covenant for millennia. So the absence of an explicit directive to baptize infants proves nothing.

If anything, the question ought to be flipped: Taking into consideration the ancient Jewish worldview and ancient Jewish ritual heritage, why does Scripture give no defense for the supposed radical departure toward credobaptism? The Bible's silence on infant baptism is actually quite eloquent. If the grace of the New Covenant is more expansive than the Old, why have our children been excluded? Explain yourself, Apostles!

"The promise is for you and for your children."

Peter, Acts 2

I believe this line of reasoning shifts the burden of proof to the credobaptist theologian. Only in the individualistic West are paedobaptists expected to defend their practice. In first century Jerusalem, credobaptists would have had a lot of explaining to do (though I'm not convinced that credobaptists existed in first century Jerusalem).

The Household Baptisms

What about the household baptisms? There are a number of instances within the New Testament that record the baptisms of entire households (Acts 16:15, Acts 16:30-31, Acts 18:8, 1 Corinthians 1:16). What are we to make of this?

Well, believe it or not, ancient Israelite children did not choose their religion (nor did pagan children, for that matter). The Jewish faith was passed down to covenant children through instruction, tradition, and cultural norms. This runs counter to our postmodern sensibilities (remember, we prefer to "opt in"), but if the Bible is true and God's covenant is real, then this is the only truly loving way to raise God's children, the children He gives us to steward in trust.

So we should not be surprised to see the Apostles baptizing entire households. And yet, many credobaptists claim that entire households were baptized because entire

households had heard the gospel, come to believe the gospel, and professed the gospel. In other words, these households may have uniformly been without young children.

It is unrealistic, if not actually evasive, to suppose that when the apostles and others baptized households there were no very young children in any of the families.

J. I. Packer

In the end, the household baptisms present arguments from silence, whichever position you hold. Paedobaptists point out how extremely unlikely it would be for this many households to be without a single young child. But in turn, credobaptists remind us that these household baptisms never explicitly mention young children. Again, arguments from silence.

So I would submit that systematic theology does not get us very far. There is no proof text *for* infant baptism. There is no proof text *against* infant baptism. And the household baptisms are inconclusive. So where do we go from here? Back to the beginning. We need to question our questions and revisit our interpretation of the narrative sweep of Scripture as a whole.

Listening to the Bible (Biblical Theology)

Biblical theology attempts to comprehend the “whole counsel of God.” As mentioned above, the Bible is rarely systematic in the proffering of truth, but biblical theology can lay a healthy foundation for systematic theology by showing how the Bible relates to itself. The emphasis is on right interpretation, without which our systematic doctrines are unreliable at best.

Now, before we begin our survey of Scripture, let me attempt a summary of the main points to be covered below: From the moment God made a covenant with Abraham, children were considered recipients of the covenant promises, even in their infancy. By God’s explicit command, Jewish infants were to be given the covenant sign. Initially, the covenant sign (circumcision) was reserved for Jewish males, but in the fullness of time, the New Covenant sign (baptism) broadened to include Gentiles and females as well. In fact, the New Covenant fulfills the Abrahamic Covenant, meaning that we are Abraham’s offspring, recipients of the same covenant promises. If children

were included under the relatively restrictive Old Covenant, how much more should they be included under the expansive New Covenant?!

Children in the Garden

But before we get to Abraham, let's begin in the beginning. By the grace of God, Adam and Eve were placed in a perfect Garden. They were in right relationship with God, and He commanded them to be fruitful and to multiply, to have babies (Genesis 1:28). Now, had Adam and Eve *not* sinned, how do you think their children would have related to God? What would be the nature of that relationship? Would they have been in need of conversion? Would they have needed to ask God into their hearts? Of course not!

The children of Adam and Eve would have shared in the same blessings. They would have been raised in the same Garden. And as they matured, they would have been given the same divine commission. Their knowledge of God would not have been fully mature, but they would have known God nonetheless. They would have been in right relationship with God, even as they lacked maturity. The children of Adam and Eve would have sung with the psalmist, "From my mother's womb you have been my God" (22:10), and "Upon you have I leaned from before my birth" (71:6).

This is precisely how paedobaptists view their children. After all, Jesus Christ is the Last Adam. He obeyed in the Garden, and He put His people back into right relationship with God. So to imply that infants are too immature to be in right relationship with God is to limit the scope of Jesus' redemption.

The Covenant Sign of Circumcision

Let's read from Genesis 17. God says to Abraham,

I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you. And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.

Genesis 17:6-7

So God's covenant with Abraham is an "everlasting covenant." God promised to make Abraham the father of a "multitude of nations," and this was ultimately fulfilled in Christ, through whom both Jews and Gentiles are made sons of Abraham. Thus, the New Covenant fulfills and builds upon the Abrahamic Covenant. In other words, the Abrahamic covenant continues to cover the Church today: "It is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham" (Galatians 3:7-9). From Abraham until today, this has always been true of God's people.

And God said to Abraham, "As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised."

Genesis 17:9-10

"Every male among you shall be circumcised." As the Lord would go on to explain, "every male" included Abraham, his male descendants, and all of his male servants. So as the head of his household, Abraham determined the spiritual commitments of all his dependents. As individualists, this all seems very strange to us. Abraham circumcised himself as an act of faith, but Abraham circumcised infant Isaac without any reference to Isaac's faith. But that's precisely what God *commanded*, and this is the framework within which a 1st century Jew would have read about the household baptisms in the New Testament.

This is also how 1st century Jews would have read 1 Corinthians 7,

If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.

1 Corinthians 7:13-14

In this passage, the Apostle Paul is explaining how households work under the New Covenant, specifically when married couples are divided on the gospel, one believing and one unbelieving. Essentially, the question was, as a new convert, how does God view my marriage to an unbeliever? Should I seek a divorce? Paul counsels against divorce by speaking to the sanctifying presence of a believing spouse. The

unbelieving spouse of a Christian convert is *being made* holy, but the children of a Christian convert *are* holy. This is very interesting, and it gets to the very heart of what it means to be born into the New Covenant. If Christian children do not have the right to be baptized and admitted into the fellowship of the church, why go so far as to call them “holy”?

Isaac did not opt in to Abraham’s family. God put him there. And the same is true of our children. No matter how much I value “opting in,” some of the most important things about me (my name, my family, my ethnicity, my socioeconomic status, my physical appearance, etc.) are determined for me. Infants are quintessential recipients, and in my opinion, this makes them quintessential candidates for baptism. If God received Isaac into the covenant through the faith of Abraham, it seems clear that God considers this to be a healthy way to raise a child. Give the covenant sign to your infants, and then nurture them in the covenant and teach them to be faithful to the God who sovereignly placed them there. That’s the biblical pattern. And if the pattern were to change, the Bible would need to say so.

Back to Genesis 17. In ratifying the covenant promise, God commanded Abraham to circumcise every male in his household, even the infants. Circumcision signified the removal of spiritual uncleanness, the destruction of the flesh from generation to generation (Deuteronomy 10:16, Jeremiah 4:4). It was a bloody ritual, as blood was a purifying agent under the Old Covenant (Hebrews 9:22). Notably, water was also a purifying agent commonly used ritually under the Old Covenant (Leviticus 8:6-9, 14:8-9).

But that’s not all. God had already promised to make the Woman (Sarah) fruitful and to bring forth the Offspring (Isaac), but first, the Man (Abraham) must be “pruned,” if you will. Abraham must undergo a mini-death before he can give life. And of course, this pointed forward to the fulfillment of circumcision centuries later, as the Man (Christ) was cut off entirely in order to make the Woman (the Church, the Bride) fruitful. So the ritual that marked initiation into the Old Covenant was reserved for males, but females were not thereby excluded. As Scripture demonstrates repeatedly, there would have been no covenant fulfillment had God not preserved the promise through faithful women (Sarah, Rachel, Tamar, Jochebed, Miriam, Zipporah, Rahab, Michal, Mary, etc.).

Lastly, circumcision was God’s pledge to keep His promises, so the sign and seal of circumcision could be applied long before the recipient could profess the faith (Romans 4:11). Circumcision signaled to every Israelite man, woman, and child that God was graciously extending His covenant blessings. The question was: Would the

Jews claim these blessings by accepting the Lord's pruning, or would they spurn the covenant and worship other gods?

Colossians 2

At this point, paedobaptists commonly refer to Colossians 2, where the Apostle Paul connects both circumcision and baptism to the cross.

In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.

Colossians 2:11-12

While this is a powerful passage for the paedobaptist argument, I do think it's possible for paedobaptists to overstate their case. Some have argued that Colossians 2 shows that baptism is the new circumcision. But strictly speaking, baptism does not *replace* circumcision. The covenant sign of circumcision was *fulfilled* in the cross, where Abraham's true Offspring was cut off and baptized into death. So baptism and circumcision both point to the same reality, but they are not thereby interchangeable.

Even so, Colossians 2 is highly significant for paedobaptists. Circumcision and baptism both point to Jesus. Under the Old Covenant, every recipient of the covenant promise also received the covenant sign (circumcision). In Acts 2, Peter says that the New Covenant promise is "for your children." In other words, our children are recipients of the New Covenant promise. Why should they not also receive the New Covenant sign (baptism)?

Acts 2 & Genesis 17

On that note, let's take a closer look at Acts 2. Peter spoke these words on the day of Pentecost, the day the people of God were born again by the Holy Spirit into what we now call the Church. Whatever Peter is saying, it must be important.

Now when they heard [Peter's sermon] they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?"

And Peter said to them, "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. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself."

Acts 2:37-39

As you might imagine, paedobaptists and credobaptists have long debated the meaning of these verses. As mentioned earlier, we all bring biases and presuppositions to the Bible (which ought to produce humility in us), but these biases and presuppositions are particularly pronounced in discussions of Acts 2:37-39. So rather than getting into the grammar and vocabulary of these verses, I want us to notice the sentence structure of verse 39.

In Acts 2, the promise is for

(1) you, (2) your children, and (3) all who are far off.

Now, if we turn back to Genesis 17, we see something strikingly similar. I will summarize it below, but if you would like to follow along, open to Genesis 17:10-13.

In Genesis 17, the promise is for

(1) Abraham, (2) his children, and (3) the foreigners in his house.

#1 and #2 remain the same, and #3 changes in the breaking down of the wall of division between Jews and Gentiles. Indeed, the "far off" people in Acts 2 are Gentiles! So under the covenant of circumcision in Genesis 17, Abraham was called to circumcise foreigners who had been integrated into his household. And under the covenant of baptism in Acts 2, the Church is called to baptize the Gentiles. Christ having broken down the dividing wall of hostility (Ephesians 2:14), this is precisely what we should expect Peter to say here. The emphasis is no longer on Abraham's family *receiving* the nations. The emphasis is on Abraham's family *going to* the nations!

In this way, we have aligned the respective institutions and administrations of both circumcision and baptism with the radical shift in mission that occurred when King Jesus began claiming authority over all the nations. Jesus did not change the way His people relate to their children; He changed the way His people relate to the world!

In conclusion, if we accept the so-called “continuity” of Scripture, if we learn to read the Bible as the story of God’s unfolding covenant of grace, a clear argument in favor of infant baptism begins to emerge. We no longer need to find an explicit New Testament directive to baptize infants. Rather, we should be looking for an explicit New Testament directive to withhold the covenant sign from our children.

At this point, I can hear the unconvinced credobaptist reminding me, “But faith is a necessary prerequisite for baptism, and infants cannot have faith!” For the sake of argument (and only for the sake of argument), I will grant that objection. So let’s give an answer to it.

Raising Christian Children

Infant Faith?

Ordinarily, a child is born with a family, including a name, heritage, class, ethnicity, etc. These things are predestined yet undeniably consequential. Infants receive these things long before they say or do anything. They lack the self-consciousness to “opt in.” However, infants are others-conscious from the outset. Johnny may not know his own name, but he can surely distinguish between his mother and a babysitter. Society precedes individuality. We are social beings well before we develop a sense of self.

This is consistent with Christian theology. In fact, it is fundamental to our being made in the image of God. As the doctrine of the Trinity reveals, we are not persons in isolation. We are relational beings.

So children are able to relate to others long before they are able to profess doctrine. No one would deny that earthly fathers are able to have loving, mutual relationships with their infant children. Is our Heavenly Father somehow less able? After all, even credobaptists teach their children to sing “Jesus Loves Me” and to pray the Lord’s Prayer (“Our Father”). Is this mere sentimentalism or wishful thinking? Should we wait until our children profess faith to teach them the Lord’s Prayer? Or is credobaptist practice simply inconsistent with credobaptist doctrine?

If faith is a necessary prerequisite for baptism, we should take care to define the word *faith*. According to Wayne Grudem, a leading Baptist theologian, faith involves “personal trust in Christ, not just belief in facts about Christ... The word *trust* is closer [than *faith* or *belief*] to the biblical idea, since we are familiar with trusting persons in

everyday life. The more we come to know a person, and the more we see in that person a pattern of life that warrants trust, the more we find ourselves able to place trust in that person to do what he or she promises, or to act in ways that we can rely on. This fuller sense of personal trust is indicated in several passages of Scripture..." (Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 710).

Well said. But it begs the question, what about this definition of faith as a relationship of trust necessitates cognitive maturity? Can you imagine a person more trusting than the average infant? Can you imagine a person more dependent? Could this be why Jesus calls us to receive the kingdom like children (Mark 10:15, Luke 18:17)?

Indeed, if Jesus tells adults to have faith like children, how can we tell our children to have faith like adults? Perhaps it would be helpful to read through a series of episodes from the Gospels.

Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me...

Matthew 18:3-5

But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonderful things that he did, and the children crying out in the temple, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" they were indignant, and they said to him, "Do you hear what these are saying?" And Jesus said to them, "Yes; have you never read, 'Out of the mouth of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise?'"

Matthew 21:15-16

And they were bringing children to him that he might touch them, and the disciples rebuked them. But when Jesus saw it, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it." And he took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands on them.

Mark 10:13-16

Now they were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them.

Luke 18:15

Listen, I know credobaptists love their children. That is not in question. But having read the passages above, ask yourself: Would the average American Christian think to speak this way about children? Or are we tempted to qualify the words of Jesus here? Because Jesus is *not* unclear in these passages. If we have to do interpretive gymnastics in order to fit His words into our doctrines, we have a problem.

Jesus speaks of children as model kingdom citizens, but we struggle *even to call* children kingdom citizens. Jesus accepts the praise of children in the temple, but we want them out of the sanctuary, and we respond to their earliest professions with skepticism. In withholding baptism and analyzing the genuineness of their first professions of faith, are we not hindering our children (“even infants”) from coming to Jesus?

Biblical Commands for Adults vs. Children

Maybe you remain unconvinced that infants can be given the grace of faith as defined above, or maybe you disagree with the definition. That’s okay. The practice of infant baptism does not rest upon that point.

For the sake of clarity, Protestant paedobaptists agree with credobaptists that all non-Christians must repent and profess faith in Christ prior to baptism. At Pentecost, Peter told the people, “Repent and be baptized” (Acts 2:38). Paedobaptists affirm this. The question is whether we are to read Peter’s directive as addressed to the children of Christian adults. I contend not, and for good reason.

We know that Scripture addresses children as members of the covenant community. We see this in both the Old and New Testaments (Exodus 20:12, Ephesians 6:1, Colossians 3:20). This is significant. So how are we to read verses like 2 Thessalonians 3:10, “If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat.” The text is very clear, but if we were to apply this to our infants, the Christian faith would not survive to the next generation. So we all know that Paul *is not* addressing infants in 2 Thessalonians 3. But how do we know that? And how do we know that Peter *is* addressing infants in Acts 2?

When the Lord commanded Israel to “go through the sea on dry ground,” did He actually expect every Israelite infant to walk on dry ground? Or when we read that Israel was “baptized” in the Red Sea (1 Corinthians 10:1-2), are we to conclude that of the multitude of Israelites who were baptized, none were infants? Of course not! So we cannot simply quote a command given to adults as a proof-text against infant inclusion.

Practical Concerns

Now, perhaps you will grant me one of the arguments above. Nevertheless, many credobaptists have practical concerns over infant baptism: If a person cannot remember their baptism, how can baptism be formative for them? What about people who were baptized as infants who are no longer following Jesus? Does not infant baptism communicate to children that they do not need to repent and trust in Jesus personally?

These are good questions and legitimate concerns, but I do not think they warrant throwing the baby out with the baptismal water. Rather, these questions and concerns highlight the need for conscientiousness and responsibility in administering the sacraments. Put simply, if we cannot know with confidence that an infant will be nurtured and educated within the context of a Christian home and faithful covenant community, we should not baptize that infant. To do so would indeed communicate false things regarding baptism. Just as circumcision was administered within the context of discipleship and covenant faithfulness (Deuteronomy 6:4-9), so infant baptism should be administered within the context of discipleship and covenant faithfulness. Otherwise, infant baptism is unlikely to be of benefit to the child’s maturing faith.

God commanded Israelite children to obey, and He commanded Israelite parents to raise their children to trust Him. God designed this relational hierarchy as a means of preserving and propagating His covenant people. Likewise, Christians naturally treat our children like young disciples, not like unbelievers. This is true of both paedobaptists *and* credobaptists. We teach our children and help them to grow in the gospel as maturing Christians; we do *not* try to *convince* them of the gospel, as with non-Christians. This is as it should be.

[Infant baptism] should be administered only where it is certain that the act of salvation already accomplished once and for all will be repeatedly remembered in faith. And that can only be the case in a

living church community. Infant baptism without the church community is not only an abuse of the sacrament. It also betrays a reprehensible thoughtlessness in dealing with the children's spiritual welfare, for baptism can never be repeated.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

In infant baptism we consecrate young children to God, commit them by proxy to thoroughgoing adult Christianity, ask God to bring this about, and administer to them God's own covenant sign, seal and bond of this full adult relationship. Believing that our actions accord with his will, and that he is a faithful, loving, prayer-answering God, we trust that he has now received the children covenantally and in some way started the work in them that we have asked him to do.

J. I. Packer

All baptisms, whether infant or not, incorporate the baptized person into the Church. This ought to be a heavy, heavy thing. The parents and caretakers of a baptized infant, with the support of the entire covenant community, must exhort the child to keep on believing, to repent, to obey, and to lean into God's grace. Parents ought to regularly remind children of their baptisms. They ought to teach their children to live out of the grace extended to them, to receive and rest in and represent the Triune Name. In short, baptized infants are to be nurtured into maturity and taught to "improve their baptisms."

The needful but much neglected duty of improving our baptism, is to be performed by us all our life long, especially in the time of temptation, and when we are present at the administration of it to others; by serious and thankful consideration of the nature of it, and of the ends for which Christ instituted it, the privileges and benefits conferred and sealed thereby, and our solemn vow made therein; by being humbled for our sinful defilement, our falling short of, and walking contrary to, the grace of baptism, and our engagements; by growing up to assurance of pardon of sin, and of all other blessings sealed to us in that sacrament; by drawing strength from the death and resurrection of Christ, into whom we are baptized, for the mortifying of sin, and quickening of grace; and by endeavoring to live by faith, to have our conversation in holiness and righteousness, as

those that have therein given up their names to Christ; and to walk in brotherly love, as being baptized by the same Spirit into one body.

Westminster Larger Catechism, Question 167

So infant baptism is only properly administered within the context of a faithful covenant community. The practice is inextricably tied to the family and local church. Thus, if our practice of the Christian faith is overly individualistic, we will struggle to appreciate the beauty and wisdom supporting the practice of infant baptism.

Concluding Thoughts on Infant Baptism

- If the Church is a Temple, we ought to anoint/consecrate our children as they enter. To withhold the consecration is to bring an unclean thing into the Temple.
- If the Church is a Garden, we ought to water our children as we plant them here. To withhold the water is to jeopardize the seed.
- If the Church is a Holy Nation, we ought to receive our children as natural born citizens. To withhold citizenship is to contradict the clear teachings of Jesus.
- If the Church is a family, we ought to give our children the family name. To withhold the family name is to withhold membership in the family.
- If the Church is a covenant community, we ought to extend the covenant sign to our children. To withhold the sign is to withhold the covenant.

Despite our best intentions, unbaptized, non-communing children hear the Church saying, "You are welcome here, but you will have to grow up and prove yourself." Or, to put this more severely, "You are welcome here, but membership in the family of God is by works, not by grace." Of course, no Christian person would say these exact words, but this is the environment we create for our children when we weigh and analyze their immature, inarticulate demonstrations of faith. We tell our children that they must attain to a higher knowledge in order to be welcomed into this "spiritual" community (see *Gnosticism*). But we ought to be celebrating and pouring water on the sapling, not despising the day of small beginnings, not weighing and analyzing the viability of early growth.

If Christians are truly saved by God's grace, there is no better candidate for baptism than a Christian infant. Infants are recipients of grace in the truest sense, and nothing could be a clearer picture of grace than to baptize a person simply as a recognition that God, who could have given this new life to any community on the planet, has

sovereignly ordained to give this new life to this community, a Christian community, the Temple, the Holy Nation, the Kingdom and new creation of God.

And so the question becomes: Would *God* baptize our infants?

He has placed them within the Church and commanded us to receive them as the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven. If children are the greatest in the Kingdom, that means they are "greater" than the adults mature enough to read (or write) this paper. Now, again, we might find a way to wiggle free from this line of reasoning, but why should we desire to wiggle free? From where do we derive this implicit bias against welcoming our children into the covenant?