

“Getting to Know COTR: Why do we baptize babies?”

(September 26, 2018)

There is no specific verse that commands the baptism of infants and that has raised a number of questions about the legitimacy of the practice. But we must remember that there are many things that we believe and do that have no specific command that authorizes them or teaches them directly (the Trinity, the divine and human natures of Christ, worship on Sunday, etc.). We believe these teachings and do them because they are legitimately deduced from the teaching of the Scriptures. In the same way, even though there is no direct command to baptize the infants of Christian parents, it is clear that God expects them to be baptized.

God is a Triune being. And the Bible teaches us that He is love. That love is essential to His being. And this love that exists in God is life. All life flows from the love that God has in Himself. Thus, to live means to be in covenant with God, which means to become a sharer in the life and love of God.

God’s purpose involves the children of His people: Adam was created as God’s son, in covenant with Him – God breathed into him the “Spirit of life” (Gen. 2:7). Then God created a wife for Adam and commanded them to “be fruitful and multiply” (Gen. 1:27-28). God’s purpose from the beginning was to have a world that was filled with humans who would love and serve Him – filling the world with His glory. The children of Adam and Eve would have come into the world in the same relationship with God that Adam and Eve had (prior to the Fall). All the blessings that belonged to their parents would have belonged to them. And the same would be true of their children and their children’s children so that the earth would be filled with image-bearers who would worship and serve Him faithfully all their days.

This didn’t happen because of the Fall. When Adam and Eve sinned, they fell under God’s wrath and curse, lost communion with Him (which is life) and had to be reconciled to God again. And this is what God did by coming to them, restoring their relationship with Himself and with one another and the world, clothing them with skins of animals (Gen. 3:21) – which pointed to the way in which full and final reconciliation would be made for all men. What was true of fallen Adam was true of all His children who came into the world. So, Paul says, we all come into the world “dead in trespasses and sins” (Eph. 2:1). We are all in need of reconciliation.

But God promised Adam and Eve not only that He would send One who would crush the head of the serpent but that there would be a “seed” who would hate the serpent and love Him (Gen. 3:15). Later God promises to be the God of all those who trust in Him and to be the God of their children as well (Gen. 17:7).

Thus, when God renews the covenant with Israel at Mt. Sinai, Moses points out that the things that He has revealed belong not merely to the adults, but to their children as well (Deut. 29:29). For this reason, God commanded them to teach His word and ways to their children and grandchildren (Deut. 4:9-10; 6:7; 11:19; 23:28). This was to be done because their children belonged to Him (Deut. 32:46). God’s promises and blessings go to “thousands generations” of those who love Him (Exo. 20:5-6).

The great promise of God to Israel was that He would be a God to them and to their children (Exo. 6:7). This meant that the children of Israel were His own special treasure, the objects of His love, provision, and protection. And this was true of the children as well as the parents. God claims the children of believers for Himself and thus, every male member of the household was given the sign of God’s ownership, circumcision (Gen. 17:10). This was given to sons on the 8th

day (Gen. 17:12) and was also given to slaves who were brought into the household (Gen. 17:13). Slaves were circumcised because they were members of the believing household – NOT because they made a decision to become an Israelite or believe in Yahweh.

Circumcision marked out the priestly people of Israel – it was a sign of God's covenant in that it looked forward to the time when the old death nature of humanity would be destroyed and the new flesh (a new humanity) would come into being. On the cross, Jesus put away the reproach of Adam's death nature and by His resurrection on the first day of the week (the 8th day), a new transfigured humanity emerged from the tomb (Col 2:11-12). But the fact that all male children were given the sign of circumcision (which pointed to the work of Jesus and the blessings of life that were to come) shows us that God's covenant includes children.

By Jesus' death, sin and death were destroyed and by His resurrection, the new life that was signified by circumcision became a reality. Now we partake of that reality by means of baptism (Col. 2:11-12) where we are united to the death and resurrection of Jesus. By baptism we are made partakers of all that the covenant sign of circumcision pointed to. And thus, if circumcision was given to children, we would expect baptism to be given to them as well. And that's the case.

Children are still included in God's covenant: God hasn't changed the way He works His gracious purposes in the earth. He still works in and through His covenant. Jesus makes this plain in Matthew 18. Here Jesus calls upon the disciples to receive little children in His name (v. 5). To receive them means to believe the promises that He has made concerning them. It means treating them as members of His family and people. (He uses the same language to describe these little ones as He uses to describe those He sends out as apostles). Because of the covenant, they are embraced by God just as He embraces adult believers. Thus, He warns any adult who causes them to stumble of serious judgment (v. 6). He makes it clear that these little ones are the special object of the Father's love and of His work of redemption (v. 10). God loves these children as His own and desires their salvation (v. 14). He would gladly leave the 99 to pursue the one who strays (vv. 12-13). God views the children of His people, His own children.

In Matthew 19, we see the same thing. The disciples try to prevent parents from bringing their babies to Jesus but He rebukes them and welcomes the babies (vv. 13-15). Jesus calls for infants to be brought to Him and declares them full citizens of the kingdom – the kingdom belongs to them – and then blesses them. He identifies with them and pronounces God's favor and blessing upon them. They are the objects of God's love and mercy as much as He is Himself. The disciples are reflecting the view of the Jews that children didn't begin seriously to embrace God's kingdom until age 12. Jesus makes plain that infants fully qualify for membership in the Kingdom.

On the day of Pentecost, Peter proclaims the same promise that was given to Abraham (Acts 2:38-39). Paul says that even the children of one believing parent are members of God's covenant (1 Cor. 7:13-14). The people of Corinth were concerned about the covenant status of their children if their spouse was not a Christian. If the children's position was affected by the unbelieving spouse, should they divorce? Paul's answer is "No. The children are still holy – i.e. they are recipients of the promise and have a right to baptism. No divorce is necessary. This question would never have arisen if it was known that children were no longer subjects of the covenant promise. The very fact that it is one of the questions that Paul has to address shows us that children were still viewed and treated as recipients of the covenant promise and were being given the covenant sign.

Children must be baptized: Because our children come into the world with a death nature, they must be delivered from their union with Adam and brought into union with the second Adam (who frees us from this death by His death on the cross). Because they come into the world dead in trespasses and sins, they must be cleansed and made partakers of the new life in Christ Jesus. Because God has pledged Himself to be our God and the God of our children, we are to give our children the sign and seal of His ownership – baptism.

When children are baptized, God, by the power of his Holy Spirit, joins them to Christ (1 Co. 12:13; Gal. 3:27). God unites our children to His Son and admits them not only into the household of the faithful (the church, the body of Christ) which is the place of communion with the Trinity (Matt. 28:19-20). By baptism our children are no longer identified with Adam or the world but with Jesus and bear His name. They do not belong to themselves or to us as parents. They belong to God. And because of this, they are to love Him and trust in Him with all their hearts and souls and minds and strength all their days.

The paradigm for child-rearing in Christian homes is Christian nurture, i.e. our children must be viewed and treated as Christians. They belong to God and must clearly know this reality.

Will this lead to presumption? It can if we are not careful to instruct them fully in what this means. The promises of God are always conditional. The blessings of the salvation are granted to those who fear the Lord and keep His commandments (Psa. 103:17-18). Our children must learn to love, trust, and obey Jesus. But they also must know that if they forsake Him, they will receive a greater condemnation than the world who has never known Him.

Therefore, we should have the expectation that our children will grow up in faith as opposed to living like pagans and being “converted” at some later time in life. The normal pattern of Christian experience of our children is not conversion but nurture. Normally, covenant children, if they are faithfully reared, grow up believing, growing in faithfulness and never know a time when they did not believe and trust in the Savior.

Objection: “Isn’t it true that in the Bible, we see the pattern of conversions?” What we see is adults who have been raised as Jews coming to believe the truth about Jesus and trusting in Him as the fulfillment of the types and shadows of the Old Covenant. But even so, Paul’s experience on the Damascus road is not the norm. Most did not have dramatic experiences. And as these new converts teach and train their children, we find that the norm for Christian experience is Timothy (who from his youth had known the holy Scriptures) and not Paul.

Why is water used in baptism? Water has tremendous significance throughout the Bible. In the beginning the first creation emerged out of the water. And after the sin of mankind, God flooded the earth with water again – and a new creation emerged from the flood. Water signifies cleansing from sin and new creation.

On the 2nd day of creation, some of the water was taken up above the firmament to form a barrier between heaven and earth. This was not intended to be a permanent feature of creation. It is not declared to be good because heaven and earth are not going to remain permanently separated. But the waters above signified that men must pass through water to have communion with God. And by means of the application of God’s heavenly water, heaven and earth would eventually be reunited.

Water is associated with life. Eden is a well-watered land. The world’s river flowed through the garden. Literally, the world receives all its water through the garden of God (Gen. 2:12-14).

Later, the temple had water chariots which went from the doors of the temple to the gate – a symbolic river of the water of life flowing from God’s throne (and we see this in John’s vision of the Church in Rev. 22:1ff). The water of life always comes to us through worship and communion with the living God (who is called the “fountain of living waters”). We become fountains of living water ourselves by being united to Jesus (John 4:14).

In the temple and tabernacle, water was used in ceremonial cleansing. These “baptisms” restored a man who had been cut off from communion with God (i.e. “dead”) to communion once again (“life”). They were akin to being born again. When we are born the first time, we come out of our mother’s womb which is filled with water – but this birth only leads to “death.” We must be born a second time. So, we are born again through the heavenly waters of baptism (thus Paul says that baptism is a washing which leads to regeneration, new birth – Tit. 3:5).

The Spirit’s work is associated with water. He is “poured out” (Acts 2; Isa. 32). It is through Jesus’ work that the Church is brought into being by the Spirit. Thus, at the cross, the soldier pierces Jesus’ side and blood and water pour out (John 19). This points us to baptism (water) and the Lord’s Supper (body and blood) through which God forms and nourishes His Church.

Why is baptism done by sprinkling or pouring rather than immersion? Immersion is a valid form of baptism, but the baptisms we find in Scripture are by sprinkling or pouring. The key difference between sprinkling or immersion is not the amount of water or how much of the body gets wet – but the location of the water. Is the water from above or below?

Every baptism in Scripture involves sprinkling or pouring water – not immersion. Peter likens the flood to the baptism of Noah (1 Pet. 3:19-21). Noah was rained upon by the water from above. Paul speaks of Israel’s baptism in the Red Sea (1 Cor. 10:1-2). The Israelites were rained upon with water from sea and the glory cloud (Psa. 77:17). The “baptisms” (washings of Heb. 9:10,18-20) were all done by sprinkling the object or person with clean water. The ordination of priests also involved sprinkling with water.

The prophets depict the promise of baptism for God’s people in terms of sprinkling or pouring (Ezek. 36:25; Isa 32; 52:15). John the Baptist prophesied that God would baptize with His Holy Spirit – but this was also accomplished by “pouring out” the Spirit upon the Church. In Romans 6, Paul is not likening baptism to a burial in water, but saying that by baptism we are united to Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection. Baptism points not merely to the burial of Christ but preeminently to His resurrection, ascension, and session at the right hand of God.

If Jesus’ baptism was by immersion, it would have had no connection with any of the Old Covenant baptisms. The point of Jesus’ baptism was His ordination to the office of priest. We are told that He was 30 years old (the same age in which Levites were ordained into office). He is the fulfillment of all that the Old Covenant priesthood pointed to. There would be no reason for John to immerse when he knew that priests were ordained by sprinkling with clean water.

The historical record shows that baptism by sprinkling or pouring has been the predominate practice of the Church throughout the centuries. The earliest artistic depictions of baptism show water being poured over the head. So, though immersion has been practiced from ancient times and is a valid mode, it seems that sprinkling or pouring is a more biblically appropriate mode.