



WHY BAPTIZE INFANTS?

by Dr. Glenn Parkinson

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

Matthew 28:18-20

These are the parting words of Jesus recorded by the Apostle Matthew. They declare Christ’s great plan to reconcile people to God—people of every sort. Folks of every age, race, gender and social condition are invited to become *disciples*—apprentices of Jesus who learn to live forever in the relationship with God that He originally intended.

Throughout the Old Testament, this relationship was called a *covenant*. A covenant is simply a legally binding relationship—something like a modern contract or a marriage or an adoption. God instituted a covenant with the Old Testament nation of Israel that served as an historical model of the relationship He planned to establish with people internationally through Christ. This covenant defined God’s perfect will, or Law, on the one hand, and outlined God’s grace, or unconditional love, on the other. People “in covenant” with God are those who trust in His gracious love and are committed to nurture God’s Law in their hearts.

Christ’s cross and resurrection turned this model into a reality, and the Risen Christ sent His apostles out to establish this relationship with God—“make disciples” He called it—in every nation. He commanded His apostles to initiate new disciples with a special ritual called baptism. Having been baptized, the new disciples would begin to follow all Jesus commanded.

Baptism is from an old Greek word. Its meaning developed over the years as it was used in a religious context. Originally, it referred to washing or dipping in water. Applied to Jewish religion, it came to mean a ceremonial or symbolic physical washing that represented spiritual purification. You can still see this old usage in the Gospels—cf. Luke 11:38-41. Indeed, the Jewish religion of Jesus’ day had a number of uses for ceremonial washings of various kinds. By New Testament times, the word had come to refer to spiritual consecration (1Corinthians10:1-2) even when water was not in view (Matthew 3:11).

Why did
Jesus
command
baptism?

In Old Testament times, spiritual consecration had been symbolized by circumcision. Adult Gentile males who wished to lead their family in faith under Israel's God were expected to receive circumcision (Exodus 12:48-49). In addition, each male child born into an Israelite home was to be circumcised as an act of consecration to the covenant. From then on, the adult or child would become what Christ would later call a "disciple"—a learner who is taught the covenant of God's grace and God's Law.

Circumcision was a pictorial reminder of the covenant as it was revealed to Abraham (cf. Genesis 15 and 17). When Abraham asked what God would base his blessing upon, the Lord answered by promising to stand in a pool of His own blood—somehow offer Himself as a sacrifice—if that is what it would take to bless Abraham. In other words, God promised that while Abraham was expected to embrace His Law, Abraham's blessing would be guaranteed by God's grace, not by the quality of Abraham's obedience. Circumcision expressed how each succeeding generation was responsible to pass along this message of God's grace and God's promised sacrifice. Gentile adults who wished to follow the Lord, as well as all male Hebrew babies, were circumcised as an act of consecration and were then taught to build their lives around this wonderful gospel promise.

When adopting Abraham's faith, Gentile males had always been circumcised on behalf of themselves and their female relatives. But during the period between the Old and New Testaments, Jews encountered independent women in the Gentile world who wished to follow the Lord but who obviously could not be circumcised. Instead, they were ceremonially washed with water, and eventually the practice of religious washing or *baptism* was also required of male Gentile converts. Thus, baptism became recognized informally as a sign of God's covenant, along with circumcision.

This informal association was "officially" recognized in the New Testament, when the Prophet John (known as the Baptist) called Jews to personally become disciples of Christ and find the consummation of their Old Testament covenant in Him. Since John could not very well tell them to be re-circumcised, he commanded them to be baptized like Gentile converts. Jesus later adopted this form of consecration, perhaps because it was more suitable for Gentiles—women especially. You can see the close association between baptism and circumcision by reading Paul's explanation of the cross in Colossians 2:9-15. He isn't really speaking about either ritual directly, but uses them as parallel illustrations to describe the significance of Jesus' sacrifice.

This is why Jesus called all who become disciples to be baptized in His

name. Ceremonial water baptism is God’s sign of the gospel covenant, pictured in the Old Testament and fulfilled in Christ. It represents the Lord’s promise to “baptize with the Holy Spirit”, or dedicate to Himself, anyone who believes in Christ and trusts in His gospel. Baptism should be given whenever someone is consecrated as a disciple of Jesus. It represents the beginning of their training in a new relationship with God. As Jesus said: make disciples, baptize them, and then teach them to live as I have taught (Matthew 28:18-20).

Note that Jesus commanded baptism as an outward sign for disciples; it is not an inward experience of faith. Some people confuse the word “disciple” with the word “believer”, but there is a difference. Just think of Judas, who was definitely called a disciple but who certainly was not a believer. A believer is one who personally believes from the heart. A disciple is one who is outwardly committed to learn and obey. Every believer is a disciple, but not all disciples are necessarily believers. We can make ourselves or our children disciples, committing ourselves or committing our children to be taught. Only God can grant rebirth and new faith to the soul. It is important to make disciples because it is in the context of biblical teaching and prayer that God brings people to faith. Jesus said that all disciples should be baptized or given the sign of the covenant they are learning.

Since Jesus designed His church to be the instrument of preserving and teaching the gospel (1Timothy 3:15), baptism is a religious ritual properly administered by and in the church. Therefore, when people are baptized either they or the parents presenting them make public affirmations of faith in the gospel and their commitment to follow Christ in His church. It is this commitment to learn or teach the gospel among Christ’s people that makes baptism a mark of discipleship.

Baptism is an integral part of confessing Christ as an adult. Confessing Christ means to publicly profess faith in Him and openly declare our own discipleship in His church. All who would confess Christ must be baptized, either previously or in conjunction with their confession. Prior baptism is always required in order to properly participate in the Lord’s Supper.

**Affirming
our own
discipleship**

After appropriate preparation, people presenting themselves for discipleship and baptism are asked to positively and publicly respond to the following questions:

1. *Do you acknowledge yourselves to be sinners in the sight of God, justly deserving His displeasure, and without hope save in His sovereign mercy?*
2. *Do you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as the Son of God, and Savior of sinners, and do you receive and rest upon Him alone for salvation as He is offered in the Gospel?*
3. *Do you now resolve and promise, in humble reliance upon the grace of the Holy Spirit, that you will endeavor to live as becomes the followers of Christ?*
4. *Do you promise to support the church in its worship and work to the best of your ability?*
5. *Do you submit yourselves to the government and discipline of the church, and promise to study its purity and peace?*

Notice how questions 1-2 personally affirm Christ as Savior, and questions 3-5 affirm His Lordship, both individually and in His church. Anyone presenting him/herself for baptism should thoroughly understand these five affirmations, discussing any questions with a pastor.

**Affirming
our
children's
discipleship**

Children with at least one parent who is a church member are entitled to be baptized members of the same church. Their membership, however, is called “non-communicant”, meaning that they are not allowed to partake of the Lord’s Supper until such time as they come to personal faith and confess their own discipleship before the congregation.

Until that time, parents are responsible to make their children disciples. When presenting them for baptism, believing parents are asked to positively and publicly respond to the following affirmations:

1. *Do you acknowledge your child’s need of the cleansing blood of Jesus Christ, and the renewing grace of the Holy Spirit?*
2. *Do you claim God’s covenant promises in (his) behalf, and do you look in faith to the Lord Jesus Christ for (his) salvation, as you do for your own?*
3. *Do you unreservedly dedicate your child to God, and promise, in humble reliance upon divine grace, that you will endeavor to set before (him) a godly example, that you will pray with and for (him), that you will teach (him) the doctrines of our holy religion, and that you will strive, by all the means of God’s appointment, to bring (him) up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord?*

We also include one other affirmation, which is directed to the congregation:

4. *Do you as a congregation undertake the responsibility of assisting the parents in the Christian nurture of this child?*

Notice how questions 1-2 affirm our confidence that God will honor His gospel promises for our children, as they put their faith in Him one day. Question 3 includes many important promises, and is the heart of our commitment to raise our children as Christian disciples. Spouses should discuss these commitments and plan together how to best pursue them. Question 4 includes the larger church family in our children's upbringing. Anyone presenting a child for baptism should thoroughly understand these four affirmations, discussing any questions with a pastor.

How should baptism be performed?

Some churches are very particular about how a person should be ceremonially washed with water. The Bible, however, gives absolutely no direction whatever. A Christian "minister's manual" dating from the early second century makes it clear that early Christians baptized in running water, still water, cold water, warm water, with lots of water or just by pouring water over the head.

Some like to parallel the use of water with a particular biblical symbol — immersion for being buried with Christ, pouring for the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, or sprinkling for the sprinkling of the blood of the sacrifice on worshipers.

Any procedure is appropriate which indicates physical washing with ordinary water in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

However, since baptism is a ritual given to indicate discipleship in Christ's Church, it is appropriate that it be performed by an Elder recognized for that purpose, and in the presence of the congregation.



Does baptism make a child right with God?

No.

While the religious ritual (or "sacrament") of baptism may symbolically stand for the whole promise of salvation (1 Ptr. 3:21), the Bible is quite

clear that the forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with God does not come through a ritual. Rather, it comes through personal faith.

Look, for example, at how Paul understood circumcision in Romans 4:11. Speaking of Abraham, Paul said, “*he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. So then, he is the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised, in order that righteousness might be credited to them.*” Paul said that circumcision signified the righteousness which God credited to Abraham because of his faith. Abraham was not made righteous (forgiven of his sin and reconciled to God) because of the circumcision ritual. Rather, the covenant sign symbolized the salvation God offers by grace through faith. The covenant sign is like an official seal testifying to God’s original promise to save people on the basis of His shed blood. That is why Abraham was told to give this sign to his children, affirming that God’s promise was not only for him but also for them—indeed, for anyone who shares his faith. (cf. Genesis 12:3 and Acts 2:39)

Baptism serves exactly the same purpose. It is a sign or seal of God’s promise to save anyone who is “washed”—not just physically by water, but spiritually with Christ’s blood (Rev. 7:14). Christ is God in the flesh, who offered Himself as the promised sacrifice. For anyone with faith in Christ, God receives Christ’s death (blood) as the just payment for his/her sins. They are washed clean of all guilt—forever and always.

Like circumcision, baptism represents God’s official promise of this salvation. No one is saved, therefore, just by being baptized. We are saved when we personally believe and embrace the promise baptism represents.

While the Lord may extend His grace toward those who die in infancy or who are otherwise mentally incapable of responding in faith, there is no biblical reason to think that the ritual of baptism is in any way related to their salvation.

Should we baptize infants?

Yes.

It should be clear from all that has been stated above why children should be baptized when their parents make them disciples. Some, however, are troubled by the lack of a separate New Testament command to baptize our children. It is obvious that unchurched adults who wish to follow Christ should be baptized (Acts 2:37-39). But what about infants?

While there are references to whole households being baptized, the New Testament never mentions anything specifically about baptizing infants. How do we know what to do?

The question is not really that hard. Actually, it is the complete *absence* of any additional teaching which makes it certain that all New Testament believers baptized their children. For 2,000 years, God commanded that infants be given the sign of the covenant (Genesis 17:9-14). It was not that God allowed this, or permitted it, or simply saw nothing wrong with giving the covenant sign to a child—He *commanded* it. He wanted each child of Israel consecrated and dedicated to Him by his/her parents, and He wanted that dedication to include a commitment to teach the child His covenant of grace. Therefore, He commanded that parents give the sign of His covenant to their children.

The first generation of Christians (who were mainly Jewish) did not find the issue confusing. The absence of additional teaching on the subject demonstrates that it was a question no one was asking. Since there is absolutely no teaching about infant baptism in the New Testament—none whatever—one must ask which is more likely: 1) *nobody* ever thought it appropriate to give the covenant sign to their children, or 2) *everyone* already knew to give the covenant sign to their children. We must assume that believers simply continued doing what they had been commanded to do for 2,000 years. The first time infant baptism is found in historical documents is much later, but it is then treated as an established practice. There is certainly no ancient record in the Bible or in church history of Christians who decided *not* to baptize their children.

Withholding infant baptism did not occur until the Protestant Reformation, when one movement decided that baptizing believers *only* was a good way to counter problems they saw in the church. Except for churches which follow this Baptist tradition, the Christian church in all its forms has always baptized children.

What is at issue in this disagreement with Baptists is what baptism symbolizes. What we actually do with our children is virtually identical: Presbyterian and Baptist parents alike consecrate their children to the Lord at birth, promising to teach them the gospel, pray for them and love them in Christ. Neither believes their children to be saved until they come to personal faith. Upon the faith of the child, both recognize his/her personal salvation. What is different is the understanding of what baptism symbolizes. Baptists think of baptism as a new invention of Jesus

signifying an individual's faith, and therefore wait to administer it until a person confesses faith. Presbyterians understand baptism as Jesus' sign of the fulfilled covenant rooted in Old Testament circumcision, and therefore administer it at the beginning of discipleship. This covenantal understanding of baptism and circumcision parallels exactly the other connection Jesus made between the Lord's Supper and the Old Testament Passover.

While salvation neither depends upon it nor is conferred by it, children of believers should be baptized in order to mark their initiation as disciples.

At what age should children be baptized?

Children should be baptized as soon as their parents are committed to raising them as Christian disciples. For believing parents, this would be as soon as is convenient after birth. For parents who become believers later, children of any age may still be baptized as long as they are dependent and under their parents' instruction.

Should we recognize god-parents?

It is a wise precaution to secure the promise of people you trust, people with similar spiritual convictions, to take your children and raise them as Christian disciples in the event of your death. It is a very important request, and should not be entered into lightly.

However, since the Bible does not command such an arrangement, and the discipleship commitments of baptism are only required of parents, we do not generally involve god-parents in the baptismal ceremony itself.

Is it ever appropriate to be re-baptized?

Sometimes, when people change their understanding of baptism, they think about being baptized again. However, since baptism is a one-time event, a given church will not re-baptize someone if it recognizes the person's original baptism as valid.

As always, specific questions should be directed to your pastor.



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