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## WHY WE DO NOT BAPTIZE INFANTS

Genesis 17 & other Scriptures

By

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September 8, 1996

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Genesis Lesson 35

## Why We Do Not Baptize Infants Genesis 17 & other Scriptures

Since in our study of Genesis we have come to chapter 17, which is one of the main Old Testament Scriptures used in the argument for infant baptism, and since we have people who attend our church from many denominational backgrounds, and since we are having a baptism today, I thought it would be helpful to explain why we do not baptize infants, but rather baptize by immersion only those making a profession of faith in Jesus Christ.

Few subjects arouse more controversy among Christians than that of baptism. The Quakers do not practice it at all. Lutherans, Episcopalians, Orthodox Churches, and the Roman Catholic Church officially hold that baptism is the direct means of regeneration (the new birth). Since those churches baptize infants, they believe that those babies are being saved through their baptisms. For example, in a pamphlet titled, "Why Baptize Children?" Lutheran theologian John Theodore Mueller writes, "... Holy Baptism is the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Ghost, by which the new birth is wrought" (pp. 10-11, Concordia Publishing House). Presbyterians baptize infants, but most of them stop short of saying that baptized babies are saved. They view it as introducing the children into the covenant community and as serving as the sign and seal of the new birth, which it is hoped the child will enter in the future as he grows up in that community.

I'll say at the outset that many of my favorite theologians held to infant baptism. They were all men whose scholarship and godliness far exceed my own. I find myself agreeing with much, for example, that John Calvin writes about the meaning and significance of baptism (*Institutes*, IV:XV & XVI). But when he applies it to infants, I think he is utterly inconsistent with himself and with Scripture. While I strongly disagree with infant baptism, I think we must be gracious and agree to disagree with those who hold that view. But if anyone teaches that the new birth is conveyed through water baptism, whether with infants or adults, he is teaching serious heresy on that crucial point of doctrine. The Scripture is clear

that the new birth comes through faith in Jesus Christ alone (John 3:1-16).

First I want to set forth fairly the arguments in favor of infant baptism; then I want to present why we do not baptize infants and show what Scripture teaches about the meaning of baptism. It is Scripture and not church tradition which is our authority on this important matter.

#### WHY SOME CHURCHES BAPTIZE INFANTS:

The main argument for infant baptism is the connection between circumcision in the Old Testament and baptism in the New, especially as seen in the context of the covenant community. This is sometimes buttressed with the example of Noah, whose entire family entered the ark and was thus saved from the flood. First Peter 3:20-21 connects Noah's flood with baptism. Also, in 1 Corinthians 10:1-2, Paul states that all Israel was baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. Since this included the children, it is argued that they are proper subjects of baptism. But the main argument is the continuity between circumcision in the covenant community under the old covenant and baptism with us, who are under the new covenant.

In Genesis 17:7 God makes it clear to Abraham that He is establishing His covenant both with him and with his descendants ("seed") after him as an everlasting covenant. In verse 12, the Lord stipulates that every male eight days old must be circumcised. An uncircumcised male must be cut off from his people because he has broken God's covenant (17:14). Thus the sign of the covenant was commanded to be administered to infants. In Abraham's case, he had already believed in God when the sign was performed; but in Isaac's case, it was done before he was old enough to believe in God's promise, with a view to his believing later.

In the New Testament, the apostle Paul states (Col. 2:11-12), "And in Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ; having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead." Thus he con-

nects circumcision with baptism, and so, it is argued, establishes that baptism has replaced circumcision as the sign of the covenant.

Also, it is argued, the household baptisms recorded in the New Testament (Acts 16:15, 33; 1 Cor. 1:16) surely included infants. In 1 Corinthians 7:14, Paul refers to the children as “holy” or “sanctified” in a marriage where one partner is a believer, which is taken to mean that they are a part of God’s covenant people, presumably through baptism. The church fathers of the second and third centuries argued for infant baptism as an apostolic tradition. Since it is primarily a covenant sign and not a sign of faith on the part of the one receiving it, it is argued that we should baptize our infants into the community of faith where they will be exposed to the other means of grace. These are the main arguments for infant baptism as fairly as I can state them in the time allotted to me.

#### WHY WE DO NOT BAPTIZE INFANTS:

We do not baptize infants because baptism is a public confession of faith in obedience to Christ.

The clear teaching of Scripture is that all who believe in Jesus as Savior and Lord should be baptized in obedience to Him. The New Testament order is *always*: The preaching of the gospel; faith in the gospel; then, baptism. *Never once* is there an example of baptism preceding faith as the norm to be followed. And there are *no examples or commands* concerning the baptism of the infants or yet unbelieving children of believing parents. Consider the following verses from Acts, noting the order of belief first, then baptism:

2:41: ... those who had received his word were baptized; ...

8:12: But when they believed Philip preaching the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were being baptized, men and women alike.

8:36-38: And as they went along the road they came to some water; and the eunuch said, “Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?” [And Philip said, “If you believe with all your heart, you may.” And he answered and said, “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.”] And he ordered the chariot to stop; and they both went down into the water, Philip as well as the eunuch; and he baptized him.

While verse 37 [in brackets] lacks strong textual support in the earliest Greek manuscripts, its insertion in later manuscripts shows what the church held to be the necessary qualification for baptism.

10:44, 46b, 47, 48a: While Peter was still speaking these words [the gospel], the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the message.... Then Peter answered, "Surely no one can refuse the water for these to be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we did, can he?" And he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

16:30-34: [The Philippian jailer asks Paul and Silas] "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" And they said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you shall be saved, you and your household. And they spoke the word of the Lord to him together with all who were in his house. And he took them that very hour of the night and washed their wounds, and immediately he was baptized, he and all his household. And he brought them into his house and set food before them, and rejoiced greatly, having believed in God with his whole household.

If any children were baptized that night, the text is clear that they had believed. There is not a shred of support for infant baptism here.

18:8: And Crispus, the leader of the synagogue, believed in the Lord with his whole household, and many of the Corinthians when they heard were believing and being baptized.

Thus the abundant testimony of the New Testament is that faith in the Lord Jesus Christ precedes baptism.

What about the argument that infant baptism is the sign of the New Covenant, just as circumcision was the sign of the Abrahamic Covenant (based on Col. 2:11-12)? While there are some parallels between the two signs, there are many differences. The sign of circumcision was administered to the male, physical descendants of Abraham in obedience to the specific command of God. But the New Testament is clear that it is not the physical seed of Abraham who are saved, but the spiritual seed (Rom. 4:16; 9:8; Gal. 3:7). There simply is no command to administer baptism to the physical seed of Christians, male or female. If baptism is the fulfillment of circumcision, then just as circumcision was administered to the

physical descendants of Abraham in the age of type, so baptism ought to be administered to the spiritual descendants of Abraham in the age of fulfillment, namely, to believers. But Jesus made it clear that the sign of the New Covenant is the Lord's Supper, not baptism ("This cup is the new covenant in My blood ..." (1 Cor. 11:25).

Also, note that in Colossians 2 Paul is talking about believer's baptism. He specifically states that baptism pictures being raised up from spiritual death through *faith* in the working of God. The parallel between baptism and circumcision concerns the picture of dying to the flesh or old life so that we can live holy lives in Christ. Paul is taking the spiritual meaning of circumcision and applying it spiritually to believers, not physically to the baptism of believers' children.

In 1 Peter 3:20-21, Peter makes it clear that he is not referring to the physical act of baptism, but to what it symbolizes, namely, appealing to God for a good conscience, which infants who are baptized are not doing! In 1 Corinthians 10:1-2, Paul is applying the experiences of Israel spiritually to the church. Just as not all who came through the "baptism" of the Red Sea were right with God in their hearts, as evidenced by their unbelief and immorality, so not all who profess faith in Christ through baptism are necessarily regenerate. If the Corinthians think that they can claim that their profession of faith in baptism made them right with God, but continue in their ungodly living, they are greatly deceived. The text does not support infant baptism in any way; it's just not there.

Beyond this, we can argue that infant baptism is potentially detrimental. If an adult mistakenly assumes (as it would be most easy to do if brought up under this teaching) that because he was baptized as an infant, he possesses salvation and is a member of Christ's church, then he is sadly deceived on the most important issue of all, eternal salvation! There is no grace imparted in the physical act of baptism, apart from the faith of the one being baptized. To count on one's baptism, whether as an infant or an adult, as the basis for standing before God is to trust in a false hope. Only personal faith in the crucified and risen Savior saves a person from sin and hell. And to baptize an infant is to rob the person of a very meaningful spiritual experience, namely, the public confession

of Christ in obedience to His command after one has come to saving faith.

#### THE MEANING OF BAPTISM:

Baptism is a public confession of faith in Christ, done in obedience to His command, and as such is a picture of what salvation means. Baptism is important because Christ commanded it as a part of the Great Commission: "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 28:19). If we neglect baptism, we're disobeying our Lord. Since true faith always expresses itself in obedience, those who have believed in Christ and have been properly instructed about baptism will obey Christ by being baptized.

1) *Baptism is the place where a believer publicly confesses Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord and identifies with Christ and His church.* In talking of our need to follow Him, Jesus said, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.... For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels" (Mark 8:34, 38). Going forward or walking the aisle is not the biblical way to initially confess Christ publicly; that came into the church through a man of questionable theology and methodology, namely, Charles Finney. Baptism is the biblical way to confess faith in Christ.

The word "baptism" is a transliteration of the Greek word, *baptisma*, and some related words which have the meaning of dipping or immersing. Since the immersed object became totally identified with the substance in which it was placed, the idea of *identification* is central to the meaning of baptism. Jesus' baptism by John publicly identified Him who was sinless with sinners in anticipation of His death and resurrection as their sin-bearer. For us baptism symbolizes our identification with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection; our identification with Christ's church; and, our cleansing from sin.

2) *Baptism symbolizes total identification with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection.* This is Paul's point in Romans 6:3-4: "Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ

Jesus have been baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, in order that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life."

Technically, we were "baptized into Christ" through the baptism of the Holy Spirit. This is the work whereby the Holy Spirit places a person "in Christ" at the moment of salvation. So what Paul refers to in Romans 6 is not water baptism itself, but what it pictures, namely, the baptism of the Holy Spirit. At the instant we believed, we became totally identified with Christ. His death became our death, His burial our burial, His resurrection our resurrection. Going under the water symbolizes death to our old way of life; coming up out of the water pictures the beginning of a new life, lived unto God, in Christ's resurrection power (see also, Col. 2:11-12).

3) *Baptism symbolizes our identification with Christ's church.* In 1 Corinthians 12:13, Paul states, "For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit." The main reference here, as in Romans 6, is to the baptism of the Holy Spirit, when He places the believer in Christ at the moment of salvation. We become members of His body, the church. Water baptism symbolizes our identification with the church which took place spiritually at the moment of salvation. In the act of baptism, a person publicly identifies himself with other Christians. He is saying, "Now I'm one of them."

In our culture, with religious tolerance, water baptism isn't too threatening. But in countries where Christians are persecuted, baptism separates the true believers from the phonies. You open yourself to persecution by being baptized. But even if we don't risk persecution, baptism should represent that sort of bold, public identification with the church.

4) *Baptism symbolizes cleansing from sin.* This is the point of 1 Peter 3:18-21 plus several other Scriptures. Cleansing is obviously a main symbol of water. But it is not immersion in water (or sprinkling, pouring) that cleanses the heart. Peter makes that very clear. Water can only remove dirt from the flesh. It is the blood of Christ

which removes the filth from our hearts, because apart from the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness of sins (Heb. 9:22).

Because baptism is done with water, and water symbolizes cleansing, it is often mentioned in close connection with salvation. In Titus 3:5, Paul refers to God's saving us "by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit." But in the immediately preceding words he says that God saved us "not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness." The act of baptism cannot save anyone.

The overwhelming testimony of Scripture is that salvation is by grace through faith alone (Eph. 2:8-9). Both Romans and Galatians deal extensively with the theme that we are justified (declared righteous by God) through faith in Jesus Christ, not by any works of righteousness. Many Scriptures affirm what Jesus stated, "... he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life" (John 5:24). He told the dying thief on the cross, who called out to Him in faith, that he would be with Him that very day in Paradise (Luke 23:39-43). Obviously, the man was not baptized.

At the same time, Scripture is clear that genuine saving faith results in obedience (Eph. 2:10; 2 Thess. 1:8, "obey the gospel"). Thus every true believer who is properly taught and who has opportunity will be baptized in obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ. But baptism is the result of salvation, not the means to it.

Immersion, sprinkling, and pouring are three common modes. Some who practice immersion do it three times forward (once for each person of the trinity). I don't believe that the mode of baptism should be an issue worth dividing over.

But immersion is the meaning of the Greek word; it best represents the biblical truths symbolized by baptism; and, it was the method used in the early church. Immersion best represents the truth of total identification with Christ that baptism symbolizes. When the believer goes into the water, it pictures death (separation) to his old way of life. When he comes out of the water, it speaks of the fact that now he is raised to newness of life in Christ. Immersion also pictures total cleansing from sin. While it ought to be done in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Matt.

28:19), there is no indication that it requires three separate immersions. Once under better symbolizes the fact that we are placed into Christ once and for all by the Holy Spirit.

### Conclusion

When Cortez landed at Vera Cruz in 1519 to begin his conquest of Mexico with a force of only 700 men, he purposely set fire to his fleet of 11 ships. His men on the shore watched their only means of retreat sinking to the bottom of the Gulf of Mexico. With no means of retreat, there was only one direction to move, forward into the Mexican interior to meet whatever might come their way.

Some of you may have put your trust in Christ, but you're leaving your ship anchored safely in the harbor in case you decide to retreat. Baptism should be that act of setting fire to the ship. It's a graphic reminder that you have left the old life and now are committed to go ahead with Christ. If you know Christ as your Savior but you've never been baptized, I urge you to do so as a confession of your faith in obedience to Christ's command as soon as possible.

If you've never trusted in Christ as Savior, I hope that you will not think that because you have been baptized or that if you will get baptized, it will get you into heaven. Eternal life is the free gift God offers you based upon Christ's death on your behalf. You can only receive it by faith in God's promise in Christ.

### Discussion Questions

1. Should believers' baptism be a requirement for church membership? Why/why not?
2. Should a person who was baptized as an infant be re-baptized when he comes to faith in Christ? What Scriptures apply?
3. How should our view of baptism affect our daily lives?
4. After professing faith in Christ, how long should a person wait to be baptized?

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