

# WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT CHILDREN AND BAPTISM?

## 1. CHILDREN AND BAPTISM AT IMMANUEL

### Introduction

Having a Biblical view of children and families is crucial to the life of any church (for both theological and practical reasons). In talking about children (and the related question of baptism) we are touching upon:

- (i) A relatively *uncontroversial* subject, though one that is important and needs to be thought through: namely, how we plan and pray for the ministry to children and families.
- (ii) One *controversial* area, namely questions surrounding the baptism of infants. This is important for us to think about, not least given a diverse range of views among Bible-believing Christians.

### 1. The status of children: they need to be saved

Children are not naturally good! We are all born with a sinful nature (cf. Psalm 51:5). Our young ones need a work of God in their life – and they need to be taught (primarily by their parents) of their need for God’s sovereign saving grace. Thus we need to pray for our children, soak them in the Scriptures, and encourage and train our parents in the task to which God has called them (cf. Deuteronomy 6:7, 20-25, Ephesians 6:4).

### 2. How do the children of Christians typically come to know the Lord?

We can here distinguish two contrasting views, each of which *tends* to lead to differing views on baptism. I will briefly summarize these views here (without, at this juncture, seeking to provide evidence for either):

- Conversionism: At a certain point in time a child (usually older rather than younger) realizes his/her sinfulness and makes a personal decision to repent and believe in Jesus (i.e. they’re converted). This decision may be made – or made public – during a church service. At this point baptism may be administered, or be delayed until the individual requests baptism or reaches a particular age (which is determined either by their parents or by the practice of their church). On this model baptism is only administered to someone who is considered personally able to give a credible profession of faith. The actual baptism is chiefly a celebration of the individual’s decision to follow Christ.
- Children of the covenant: According to this view the children of Christian parents are not viewed by God solely as individuals. Rather, by virtue of their parent’s faith they are in a covenant relationship with God (though *not* necessarily regenerated). Thus, it is appropriate for the infant children of believers to receive the covenant sign (circumcision in the Old Testament and baptism in the New Testament). Some such children may never know a day when they don’t trust in Christ and may not have a “conversion experience,” although others may have a decisive time when they are conscious of personally appropriating their parents’ faith for the first time.

### 3. Baptism at Immanuel Church Brentwood

The ministers of Immanuel have always held that the Bible teaches “covenant baptism” – i.e. that the infant children of a believing parent are proper recipients of the sign and seal of baptism. This

was true whilst we were a congregation in the Church of England (from 2012-2019), and has continued to be the case since we left the CofE and adopted the Westminster Confession of Faith.

As pastor, I (together with my fellow elders) am an entirely convinced paedobaptist. But I have huge respect for dear friends (including church members at Immanuel as well as fellow pastors elsewhere) who hold to a baptistic viewpoint. It has always been our practice to offer services of dedication for their children when infants and of baptism when older.

What follows below is a summary of the Biblical basis for covenant baptism – both a briefer summary, followed by a fuller explanation.

It's important for the whole church – whatever our background and personal views – to understand this important area, and to know the reasons for Immanuel's beliefs and practices.

Where we disagree with one another we will want to disagree Christianly. We will all want to be humble on matters of Baptism: great ones in church history are found on both sides of the argument. And we need to be driven by the Bible and not just by our own church traditions and personal experience. In practice, all of us are in danger of allowing personal experience and preference to govern what we believe. (e.g. "I have found *this* to be encouraging." "This is what I've always believed." "I like to think that..."). Our experiences need to be critiqued in the light of Scripture.

## **2. COVENANT BAPTISM – A BRIEF SUMMARY**

**The Scriptures teach one single saving plan of God – a covenant of grace – in which the children of believers are members and are proper recipients of the covenant sign.** This sign was circumcision in the Old Testament, and baptism in the New Testament.

Sometimes it's said that the NT doesn't give explicit proof texts in support of covenant baptism. However, this objection carries much less weight if the direction and testimony of the whole Bible suggests that believers' children are members of God's covenant people. (This is one reason why the burden of proof lies with Baptist theologians – they need to show that the Lord's ways of dealing with believing families has sharply changed between Old and New Testament times).

**There are many NT passages that support this understanding:**

- Acts 2:38-39 and 1 Corinthians 7:14 speak distinctly about the status of covenant children;
- Colossians 2:11-12 connects circumcision with baptism;
- Paul's epistles explicitly include children as recipients – they are assumed to be among the "saints" (e.g. see Ephesians 1:1, 6:1-4);
- In Mark 10:14 the Lord Jesus blessed little children and specifically stated that "to such belongs the Kingdom of God." If Christ blessed little children during his earthly ministry there seems no reason to think that he would change his ministry of blessing after he ascended.
- Of the 12 NT references to baptism, 4 are "household" baptisms (Acts 16:15, 16:33-34, 1 Corinthians 1:16, probably Acts 10:47-48 in the light of Acts 11:14). This reflects the OT's understanding of identity: we are not just individuals (though we do possess individual responsibility), but exist also in those covenant relationships where the Lord has placed us. Family and household is prominent in this regard. Hence, Joshua can truly say: "As for me and for my house, we will serve the Lord" (Joshua 24:15). Similarly, God worked in and through the families of Abraham, Noah, David, etc. There is no good reason to think that the Lord's way of working has now changed.
- 1 Corinthians 10:1-5 teaches that the whole people of Israel (adults, children, foreigners who had joined with them) were "baptised" in the cloud and in the sea.

**Theologically, baptism testifies primarily to what God has promised and to what God has secured for us.** This is illustrated, for instance, in 1 Peter 3:21. The baptistic view, though not always, is at risk of placing its focus on man and on his conscious decision. This is to turn things rather upside down. The baptism of a small, covenant child – utterly helpless and weak, contributing nothing – is a powerful sign of grace to the helpless. It "fits" with the nature of the Gospel.

**In summary:** God has not changed, nor has His plan of salvation or His promises. So, since the Lord does not tell us otherwise, it is right that covenant children (i.e. the children of a believing parent) receive the sign and seal of baptism.

### **3. "COVENANT CHILDREN" AND INFANT BAPTISM: A FULLER EXPLANATION**

#### **1. The key question**

In the Old Testament God worked in families. Male children received the covenant sign (circumcision). All children within God's people were expected to be brought up in the faith (e.g. the commands to parents in Deuteronomy 6). Those children grew up to be *either* covenant believers (in which case they were justified by Christ's work on the Cross) *or* to be covenant breakers (who will perish eternally). This much is relatively uncontroversial.

The key question is whether or not under the new covenant and within the New Testament church an analogous situation persists. Thus, the propriety (or otherwise) of infant baptism has actually to do with this broader (and more complex) question:

Where is the continuity and where is the dis-continuity between the old and new covenants?

For our purposes we are required to ask:

Are there reasons for believing that the Lord has, with the coming of Christ, ceased to work in families in the same sort of way he did in Old Testament times?

Historically, *most* people in the Reformed tradition (i.e. those Protestants who tend to locate themselves in the theological stream of John Calvin and the Puritans) have *tended* to emphasise continuity in these matters. Along with many such people it is our conviction that that the Lord does continue to work in families in this sort of way.

Here is some more detail:

#### **2. What do we mean by a "covenant"?**

Scripture talks often about divine covenants. But what is a covenant? Here is a definition:

In the Bible a covenant is a bond or relationship which binds persons together. It is an ultimate commitment, the implications of which cover life and death. It is sovereignly imposed by the Lord God of heaven and earth.

#### **3. Evidence that the children of believers are included in the covenant**

The Abrahamic covenant states this:

Genesis 17:7, "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."

What God promises here is that the "seed" or offspring of Abraham are in the covenant. Or to put it another way, the descendants – or children – of Abraham are included in a covenant relationship with God. Significantly, the promises made to Abraham (in Genesis 12, 15, 17) are none other than the promises of the Gospel. Far from Jesus ending the Abrahamic covenant, he actually enacts and fulfils it.

As the Old Testament looks forward to the coming of Christ and to the new covenant we also read that God's people and their children shall enjoy covenant blessing and privilege:

Ezekiel 37:24-28 "My servant David shall be king over them, and they shall all have one shepherd. They shall walk in my rules and be careful to obey my statutes. They shall dwell in the land that I gave to my servant Jacob, where your fathers lived. They and their children and their children's children shall dwell there forever, and David my servant shall be their

prince forever. I will make a covenant of peace with them. It shall be an everlasting covenant with them.

It is hard to find New Testament evidence that gainsays the OT's own expectation that believers' children will be in the covenant. In fact, we read striking verses such as:

Acts 2:39, "The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call."

This verse strikes an important balance: the gospel is given to all whom God elects or calls (he is sovereign). However, the people converted (as adults) at Pentecost are given the tremendous assurance that the promise of the Gospel is for their children. That is, the Gospel promise belongs to their children in a special and particular way.

Paul will touch on this idea when he writes:

1 Corinthians 7:14, "For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy."

The child of even a single believing parent is "holy." This does not mean they are necessarily born again. To be holy literally means to be "set apart." Thus, the children of believers are "set apart" from other children and families. This is a way of alluding to the particular privileges and responsibilities that come with being in the covenant.

#### **4. Further evidence supporting the idea of "covenant children"**

None of the following three reasons is in itself determinative. However, they do represent other evidences which support and are consistent with the idea that believers' children are in the covenant (though *not* necessarily or automatically regenerate).

##### **(i) Jesus' words about little children in Matthew 19:13-15, Mark 10:13-16, Luke 18:15-17.**

Here Jesus uses little children as a metaphor to describe how we must all be in order to enter the kingdom of God. The words used here for an infant refer sometimes to a small child unable to walk or even to the unborn. The very fact that Jesus receives and blesses such little children suggests (at the very least) that (i) little children *can* be proper objects of Jesus' blessing and (ii) these *particular* children were in his gracious covenant. After all, as various commentators have noted, it seems problematic for Jesus to bless a group of little ones whom he later chooses to condemn.

##### **(ii) There is an expectation that the children of Christians will believe**

We read in places like Proverbs 22:6,15 and 23:13-14 of strong encouragement or expectation that children brought up in the Lord's ways will believe and persist in the faith. This is *not* an absolute guarantee: the book of Proverbs mainly describes how things *usually* work in God's world. Nor does it in any way remove the necessity for fervent prayer and teaching for our children (in fact Proverbs 22:6 precisely makes this point). But it does give us an expectation of a normal pattern, which is consistent with the idea that believer's children are in a covenant.

It is unsurprising that in the New Testament we then read in Ephesians 6:1 of children who are included in God's church, who are among the specific recipients of the apostle's letter, and from whom godly conduct is expected. These children are certainly small and dependent, since the particular form of parental honour which they are expected to show is *obedience*.

### **(iii) Bible examples of infant faith**

Strikingly, we read of examples of what might be called “infant faith.” In Psalm 22:9-10, we read of David who trusted the Lord at his mother’s breast, and who – from the womb – called the Lord his God. Similarly, the writer of Psalm 71:5-6 records these words: “Upon you have I leaned from before my birth.”

These Bible writers had no conversion experience. Rather, they claim to have had some kind of infant faith. This is difficult to understand. Nevertheless, these verses *are* in the Bible and they *do* mean something!

(In this respect we also note the example of John the Baptist (called and appointed from his birth) and texts such as Psalm 8:2, 127, 128, 2 Samuel 12:23, 2 Kings 4:8-37, and Job 3:16-17).

Many great theologians (including Calvin) have understood these verses to speak of a “seed” of faith which the Lord can plant in covenant children. If that child lives into adulthood their faith will duly grow and flourish as their capacity expands.

We turn now to consider two implications that flow from the doctrine of covenant-children:

### **5. An implication: God’s inclusion of children in his covenant comforts Christian parents when their infants die**

In many parts of the world – and down the ages – a great proportion of infants do not survive into adulthood. It is worth noting here that the doctrine of covenant-children provides sweet comfort to Christian families who grieve the loss of their little ones.

A biblical example of this may be found in David’s words and actions in 2 Samuel 12:23. Viewed in isolation they are rather cryptic. Set against the background of wider Biblical teaching on covenant children they are evidently words of hope. When David hears that his infant son has died he *stops* fasting and praying, declaring that one day “I will go to him.” This is in stark contrast to David’s despair at the death of his adult son Absalom who rejected the faith of his father and died as a covenant breaker (2 Samuel 18:33-19:4).

There is very strong reason to hope that believers’ children dying in infancy are regenerated before death and thus safe with their heavenly Father. Here are relevant extracts from two seventeenth century Reformed statements of faith which express this conviction:

*Synod of Dordt (1618-19), Article 17: The Salvation of the Infants of Believers*

“Since we must make judgments about God’s will from his Word, which testifies that the children of believers are holy, not by nature but by virtue of the gracious covenant in which they together with their parents are included, godly parents ought not to doubt the election and salvation of their children whom God calls out of this life in infancy.”

*Westminster Confession of Faith (1646), Chapter X Section III*

“Elect infants, dying in infancy, are regenerated, and saved by Christ, through the Spirit, who works when, and where, and how He pleases: so also are all other elect persons who are incapable of being outwardly called by the ministry of the Word.”

## **6. An implication: covenant children should be baptized as infants**

If the children of believers are in the covenant, then it is appropriate for them to receive the “sign” of the covenant, even as infants. In the OT this was circumcision. In the NT this is baptism. Passages like Colossians 2:11-12 suggest that circumcision and baptism are connected.

The Westminster Confession of Faith summarises the Bible’s teaching on the sacraments (i.e. both baptism and the Lord’s Supper) and draws this conclusion about covenant children:

WCF 27.1. Sacraments are holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace, immediately instituted by God, to represent Christ and His benefits; and to confirm our interest in Him; as also, to put a visible difference between those that belong unto the Church, and the rest of the world; and solemnly to engage them to the service of God in Christ, according to His Word.

WCF 28.1 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. Which sacrament is, by Christ's own appointment, to be continued in His Church until the end of the world.

WCF 28.4. Not only those that do actually profess faith in and obedience unto Christ, but also the infants of one or both believing parents, are to be baptized.

## **7. Understanding baptism: what does baptism “do”? – for infants? – and for adults?**

Even if it can be proven that baptizing infants is appropriate it is reasonable to ask what is the POINT of so doing? Why bother baptizing a baby who will have no memory of the event and who is certainly unable to exercise mature faith in Christ?

“Because it is entirely consistent with what God teaches” would of course be an entirely sufficient reason for doing anything! But does the Bible give us any indication of WHY this practice is a good thing? We will here consider briefly what Baptism “does” – both in infants and in adults.

Baptism is *not primarily* about a person declaring his/her faith in God. In baptism – just like the other sacrament of the Lord’s Supper – *God preaches the gospel to us visibly*. It is a means of grace and a faith-strengthenener to those who receive it rightly.

When an adult is converted out of unbelief and is baptized, their baptism speaks powerfully to their soul of God’s goodness to them. Additionally, it marks them out as members of God’s covenant community (the church).

When the child of believers is baptized God similarly preaches to him/her of the Lord’s saving goodness. As a covenant child, he or she is there and then marked externally as a member of the covenant community. Their parents are provided with a powerful teaching aid to use in gospelling their son or daughter. But, in chronological terms, it will be at a later date – when God so chooses – that the child will “rightly receive” all of which their baptism speaks.

Thus the Westminster Confession helpfully states:

WCF 28.7, “The efficacy of baptism is not tied to that moment wherein it is administered; yet, notwithstanding, by the right use of this ordinance, the grace promised is not only offered, but really exhibited, and conferred, by the Holy Ghost, to such (whether of age or infants) as that grace belongeth unto, according to the counsel of God’s own will in His appointed time.”

Here we must note one thing which neither baptism nor covenant membership does: namely, remove from believing parents their obligation to teach their children the good news of Jesus, to model godly living, and to plead with the Lord with the salvation of their souls. There is great reason for confidence and hope. But there are no grounds whatsoever for presumption (based on some kind of hyper-covenantalism).

### **8. Responding to common arguments against covenant theology & favouring “believers’ baptism”**

#### **(i) “Doesn’t the New Testament state that repentance & belief precede baptism?” (e.g. Acts 2:38)**

If you are an *adult* who is coming for baptism some evidence of repentance and faith is of course necessary (although, given the speed with which new converts were baptized in the New Testament they were *not* expected to be “perfect” or “sorted” Christians).

However, when the New Testament describes the relationship between baptism and belief (certainly in the book of Acts) it is almost always speaking to first generation believers who are converted out of either Judaism or paganism. None of them are covenant children. For what to do with the infant children of believers we have to look to other biblical data.

#### **(ii) Doesn’t a text like Jeremiah 31:31-34 speak against covenant theology and specifically against the inclusion of children within the new covenant?**

Firstly, the new covenant *does* include children as members of it. In Jeremiah 31:36-37 we read of the “offspring” of believers. Other OT passages support this conclusion. (See Ezekiel 37:24-28 – mentioned above. Also Deuteronomy 30:6, Isaiah 44:3, 59:20-21, 61:8-9, Zechariah 10:7, Malachi 4:5-6).

Secondly, the new covenant still allows for the category of person who is “in the covenant” but who is *not* faithful to it. Sometimes it is claimed that *every individual* who is in the new covenant is actually forgiven. Thus, the category of unsaved covenant person disappears with the coming of Christ. However, this isn’t what Jeremiah 31 is stating. It is much more likely that Jeremiah is anticipating that *all types* of person will have a deeper and clearer knowledge of salvation than was possible under the ceremonial law and priesthood of the Old Testament.

This interpretation is consistent with the New Testament which still assumes the reality of covenant-faithful *and* covenant-unfaithful people. Note the various ways in which the NT speaks of people who come extremely close to saving faith but who ultimately fail and fall; (see variously John 15:1-6, Romans 11:17-24, Hebrews 2:1-3, 3:7-4:2, 6:4-12, 10:26-39, 12:25-29, 2 Peter 2, Jude 5-7, Revelation 2:1-7, 3:1-6, 3:14-22).

#### **(iii) “Infant baptism is Catholic in appearance and can give a person false assurance.”**

The Roman Catholic Church teaches that God works automatically in the waters of baptism in order to remove from *every* baptized person the consequences of original sin. Other groups – including some within Anglicanism – have taught baptismal regeneration: that the water of baptism automatically saves someone.



No Bible-believing Christian should believe this false teaching. The waters of baptism do not save anyone (be they infant or adult). GOD alone saves, through the work of his Son, not through the mediatorial work of a human priest or pastor. It is hard to under-estimate the importance of this truth. We need to tell people – infant and adult – that their baptism does *not* mean that they or their children are automatically saved.

However, just because we reject the Roman Catholic theology of infant baptism does not mean we should automatically reject *any* theology of infant baptism.

**(iv) “An adult baptism is hugely encouraging – we get to hear someone explain how and why they have decided to follow Jesus.”**

No Christian could do anything but rejoice at the baptism of an adult believer! As a minister it is my great privilege to baptise people on such occasions. It is wonderful to hear someone explain why they are now following Christ. However, two qualifications may be here in order.

Firstly, just because I may find something personally encouraging does not mean that it is exclusively right or true. To so conclude would be to make my personal experience determinative in working out what God wants me to believe and do.

Secondly, baptism is NOT *primarily* about me declaring something to God and to other people. Whilst personal testimony is highly appropriate on such an occasion it should not obscure the fact that Baptism – just like the whole Gospel of which it is a picture – is a movement of grace from God to man. At a service of Baptism (just like any in any service of gathered worship) the focus should be consciously *removed* from man and *placed squarely* on our great God.

Put more succinctly:

- Whilst we rejoice that someone has chosen to follow Christ, we should rejoice much more in the fact that God has sovereignly worked in their hearts to regenerate them.
- Whilst we rejoice that someone is being baptized, we should rejoice much more in the Gospel of which the waters of baptism speak.

**(v) “Infant baptism robs a child of what could be a significant spiritual moment (i.e. their own baptism as a mature believer)”**

We should not imagine – let alone teach – that baptized children growing up in faithful Christian families are in any way deprived. We should constantly remind them of their status as baptized people. We can encourage them to recall all that their baptism speaks of. We will celebrate with them – privately and publicly – their milestones in repentance, faith and obedience to the Lord. And we will trust that the Lord will continue to use their baptism as a means of grace in their lives.

It may prove very helpful to offer services of confirmation or public profession of faith in which an older child can testify publicly to their faith in Christ. But, above all, we will want continually to celebrate with them God’s sovereign and saving goodness, which includes his mercy in placing them within a covenant family. They are in *no way* poorer if they lack a decisive conversion experience or memory of their baptism.

Further, it can be argued that the “believer-baptist” position can create potential pastoral problems for young people. For example, one consequence of delaying the baptism of a child (as is common in *many* baptistic churches) is that it creates the impression that a profession of faith from the lips of a younger child is never credible or sufficient. This sits badly with the practice of the NT (which

knows no probationary period before baptism) and with the simple truth that we are saved by grace and through faith *alone*. There seems no good reason to create a class of person within the church who is saved but who is unbaptised.

### **9. Conclusion and implications**

A biblical understanding of children in God's covenant brings us to this kind of conclusion: "The best understanding of the covenant blessing to children of believers is that there is reason for parents to hope for and anticipate the salvation of their children though there is no room for complacency nor taking this hope for granted. Parents may see faith given to their children in infancy mature and blossom, leading to a clear profession and behaviour consistent with it. Others may see their children make a more specific decision to follow Christ." (Timothy Sizemore, "Of such is the kingdom," p68.)

Various implications follow from this understanding of covenant children. These include:

- (i) Children of believers should receive the sign of the covenant (baptism).
- (ii) Children of believers are to be brought up as little Christians, unless or until they explicitly reject Christ
- (iii) Don't expect covenant children to know the date of their conversion. This is pastorally very important (children who grow up in grace can be made to feel second class Christians because they don't have a conversion "moment" or experience).
- (iv) Teach parenting as well as evangelism. In God's economy, Christian parents are critical to the salvation and maturity of the next generation.
- (v) There is very strong reason to hope that believers' children dying in infancy are regenerated before death and thus safe with their heavenly Father.

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**April 2011, revised May 2013, December 2014, May 2024**