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INFANT BAPTISM

By Lee Gatiss

The *Thirty-nine Articles* say that “the Baptism of young children is in any wise to be retained in the Church, as most agreeable with the Institution of Christ” (Article 27). Is this something which we can still believe today? Or was it perhaps just a remnant of medieval Roman Catholicism which the Reformers didn’t get around to changing? Is there a biblical case for baptising infants?

To begin with, I think it’s important to say that I believe in baptism, *per se*. I do believe that the Bible says we should baptise people with water in the name of Jesus or in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. There are some people who deny this completely. They say that the references to baptism in the New Testament are all metaphorical, or that the command to baptise is no longer binding on us today. Jesus said “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” But some interpret that to mean we should immerse the world in the gospel, flood the earth with the teaching of Jesus. They say it is not meant to be taken literally. But I think it was, and I think that is almost the universal consensus of all churches for 2000 years.

I also want to say that I believe in believer’s baptism, or as it is sometimes called, credobaptism! That is, I love baptising adults who have come to a living faith in the Lord Jesus (if they have not been baptised before). I’ve done it many times myself. Indeed, the Church of England baptises three times more adults on profession of faith than the largest Baptist denomination in the UK.

Now, this whole debate can be confused because people don’t define the question properly. So let’s just clear away some misunderstandings first.

To start with, it is gloriously true that baptism is not strictly necessary for salvation. We believe salvation is by faith alone! However, it is clearly abnormal in New Testament terms to neglect water baptism altogether. After all, there are many things which are not strictly necessary for salvation, but which are beneficial to our growth in faith, or matters of simple obedience to God’s word. Bible reading, prayer, the Lord’s Supper - none of these are strictly necessary for salvation, but it would be a bad idea to neglect them. But we don’t say, as some like the Roman Catholics say, that baptism is absolutely necessary.

Second, faith and repentance should come first, for adults being baptised. That is the normal pattern in Acts. People repent and believe in Christ, and *then* they are baptised. We agree! But that doesn’t settle the matter of *infant* baptism. That would be too simplistic. It does not logically follow that just because adults need to believe first before being baptised that infants do as well. 2 Thessalonians tells us that if someone does not work, he should not eat. But clearly we don’t apply that to children. And in the same way, we can’t just take the adult baptism narratives in Acts and make them normative for children.

Third, paedobaptism doesn’t mean that ALL infants should be baptised. Some children certainly should NOT be baptised. Baptism is for believers and for their children. It is part of the outward administration of the covenant. It is not a magical charm that can be given out like sweets to every child. It does not abolish the need for evangelism!

Having cleared away these common misunderstandings, what about the Reformed Protestant case for infant baptism?

First, then, we might ask, why NOT baptise infants? We throw back a question to those who would deny it. You want to be biblical? OK. So where does scripture forbid infant baptism? What verse? There isn't one - no verse forbids infant baptism and there is no verse inconsistent with infant baptism.

Let's take it further. Where can I find a verse in the Bible where the children of believers are not given the sign of the covenant? Where do we find children of believers having to wait until they are 18 years old before they are baptised? Where are they told they have to wait for that?

It's an argument from silence. There is no clear command to baptise infants either. And the evidence for it happening in the New Testament has been debated. But there are several areas where we don't require a specific command in the New Testament for something to be done, aren't there? We think polygamy is wrong. Where do Paul or Peter talk about that? They don't. They assumed that Christians knew it was wrong from the Old Testament. Just as they assumed Christians knew it was wrong to marry your sister or your aunty, because it says so in the Old Testament.

There is no express command in the New Testament telling us that women should be allowed the Lord's Supper. But that does not mean we deny them the bread and wine, does it? In the same way, we don't necessarily need a direct command to baptise infants, if it can be established on other grounds that it is acceptable to God.

So, there are no easy proof texts on either side of the debate. There are arguments from silence on both sides, but the case for infant baptism does not need rely on an explicit command in a verse somewhere.

Second, we might also ask, why would we make things worse for children? That is, if the anti-paedobaptists are right, it seems that God has made things worse for the children of believers under the new covenant.

In Genesis 17, God made his covenant with Abraham. And he said to him that it was "for you and for your children." And so Abraham's children were circumcised as a sign that they were a part of the covenant with God. It wasn't just an individual thing, but a family thing.

So children were considered part of the church under the old covenant, and had the sign of the covenant. But now that the greater light and glory have come in Christ - shall we make it worse for children and deny them access? Surely we would need an explicit and clear instruction from God before we did something like that?

If God has made things worse for covenant children, this would be contrary to the way he has worked up to now. Having a right to the seal of the covenant is a spiritual privilege, and things have always been improving and getting better for the church in terms of its spiritual privileges. There has been a progression in redemptive history. God's people were better off after Abraham than before; they were more blessed after Sinai, then with the replacement of the tabernacle for the more permanent Temple. The spiritual privileges of God's people were constantly being enlarged as time went on. If this is how God works, why with the great and final revelation of his Son would he remove completely such an immense spiritual privilege as believers' children had previously enjoyed?

It seems, when you look at the Old Testament, that it was looking forward to a day when all the people of God, *including their children*, would enjoy a greater and higher blessing. Places such as Isaiah 44:3, 59:20-21, 65:23 and Jeremiah 32:38-40, and Ezekiel 37:25-26 seem to indicate this.

Now I'm not saying those verses completely settle the argument. But they certainly don't make it sound as if God is going back on his inclusion of children within the covenant once the messiah comes. Quite the opposite - it sounds as if part of the glory of the new covenant is that it includes our children. Our kids continue to be important in God's plan.

There is a powerful pastoral argument here which all those tasked with the spiritual education of children would do well to ponder. Should we think of them as "pagans and infidels" requiring evangelisation? That's the logical conclusion of seeing believers' children as outside the covenant. Should we bring them up to doubt their salvation all the time, to make them think they have to prove it to us all the time before we will accept them as part of the church?

Ephesians 6 tells children to obey their parents *in the Lord*. Paul treats them as Christians. They are not just taught *about* God, but nurtured in the faith as part of the covenant people. Some may never have a conversion experience, but grow up knowing and loving Jesus from their earliest days, albeit with growth spurts along the way perhaps. At some point they will be born again, but it may be an unnoticed, un-dramatic event. Would it really be right to presume such children are unregenerate and un-elect?

A child's faith may not have the sophistication of an adult's, but that does not mean they are incapable of relying on and trusting Christ until they have passed through puberty. Speaking of infants, Jesus said that "of such is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 19:14). He did not just mean that people who are *like* children in some way are saved, (a point made elsewhere in Matthew 18:3). He's saying that infants themselves would make up a part of his kingdom.

Now, if kids can be regenerate and saved, who are we to say that they should not be baptised?

These sort of arguments add up to this: children and parents go together, they are treated by God as being in the same covenant, and associated together. If children of believers are part of the covenant their parents are in, then they should be given the sign of that covenant. There is no need to deny them the sign if they have the thing signified by it already.

Now of course this doesn't mean that baptism automatically saves the child, or that they are automatically saved simply by virtue of being born to Christian parents. We all know that that is not the case, and we see examples of Christians whose children are not believers. But the point here is that this is not supposed to be normal.

And baptism is an outward sign. We cannot see a person's spiritual state, and guarantee that they are definitely elect and saved and will be in heaven. So we must use some kind of judgment in practice. The logic of the anti-infant baptism case seems to me to suggest that we must only baptise those we are 100% sure are definitely saved. Well, in that case, we should probably only baptise people on their deathbeds, when we can be sure they have persevered to the end!

But it seems to me that for the last 4000 years or so, God has been happy for us to give the sign of inclusion in the covenant to our children. As far back as Abraham, *well before the Mosaic Law even*, he promised to be their God, and that they would be his people. He will not break his promise, though we are weak and sinful and often do. Christ has fulfilled that very promise to Abraham, in all its glory - including the promise to be God to our kids.

The Reformers praised God for this generation-spanning, covenant love of God, and retained the practice of infant baptism, duly reformed of un-biblical sludge that had sometimes built up around it. I am convinced that we need have no qualms about doing so today too.

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For further reading:

Lee Gatiss, 'The Anglican Doctrine of Baptism.' *Foundations*, No. 63, Autumn 2012:
www.affinity.org.uk/foundations-issues/issue-63-article-4---the-anglican-doctrine-of-baptism

Lee Gatiss, 'From Life's First Cry: John Owen on Infant Baptism and Infant Salvation', in Lee Gatiss, [ed.], *Preachers, Pastors, Ambassadors: Puritan Wisdom for Today's Church, St Antholin's Lectures, Volume II, 2001-2010* (London: The Latimer Trust, 2011), pp. 325-366, and available to listen to on audio: www.theologian.org.uk/doctrine/fromlifefirstcry, and available to purchase on Kindle: www.amazon.co.uk/kindle/dp/B00EEDNPYM/ref=rdr_kindle_ext_eos_detail