

# INFANT *baptism*

Infant baptism is a new practice for many people. Some grew up with the practice but don't know where (or if!) it is taught in the Bible. Some grew up without the practice and are not sure whether it is biblical, while others are convinced it has no biblical basis at all.

Over the years, we have come to appreciate the complexities surrounding infant baptism. In addition to biblical and theological questions, there are personal and family dynamics. Am I robbing my children of the rich personal experience baptism was for me? What will our parents think if we have our children baptized? Ultimately, the question is whether God teaches us in the Bible to present our children for baptism, but many personal, family, and theological issues are wrapped up in that basic question.

Because of the many theological, personal, and family dynamics involved, it is best to work through these questions in person with a pastor or elder. Nonetheless, we hope this document will introduce you to infant baptism by answering some commonly-asked questions.

## **Where does the Bible teach infant baptism? Does it?**

Bethel practices infant baptism because we believe that God commands it. God has always commanded it. In Romans 4:11 we read, "Abraham received the sign of circumcision as a seal of righteousness that he had by faith while he was uncircumcised." So circumcision was a sign and seal of "righteousness" or justification by faith alone. This is how Paul taught us to think of circumcision. Now go back and read Genesis 17:10-12. God commanded Abraham to give this sign of justification by faith alone to his children when they were eight days old! So, from the beginning, God has wanted believers to give their children the sign of salvation by faith.

This Old Testament practice informs how we read the Great Commission in Matthew 28. "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you." Does God still want the children of believers to receive the sign of salvation by faith alone? Yes. In Acts 2:38-39 Peter says, "Repent and be baptized everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord calls to Himself." If the promise is for our children, they should continue to receive the sign of that promise as well.

## **What is God's wisdom in giving children a sign they cannot understand?**

The children of believers are too young to articulate faith; they don't even know what's going on. Why give them such a profoundly meaningful sign? What Paul says in Romans 4:11, in reference to circumcision, helps us understand God's wisdom in giving the sign of salvation by faith to the infant children of believers.

First, Paul speaks of a *sign*. The water symbolizes (is a sign of) the washing of sin by the blood of Christ and the outpouring of the Spirit. Baptism does not save anyone (infant or adult!); only Christ's blood saves. Baptism does not give strength to believe and obey: only the Holy Spirit does. The water of baptism itself cannot wash away sin or restore our hearts. It is God who saves through Christ and the Holy Spirit. Still, the water of baptism points to these realities, which are as real as the water used in baptism.

Second, Paul speaks of a *seal*. A seal is visible marker of authenticity, such as a watermark on \$20 bill. If you wonder whether the bill is legitimate, you can hold it up to the light and, seeing the watermark, assures you that the bill is legitimate. Similarly, God designed baptism to function as a seal of His promises. Through baptism, God visibly confirms that His promises are true and trustworthy.

Paul's language of sign and seal is important to a right understanding of infant baptism. A lot of confusion about infant baptism is due to a misunderstanding of who is primarily speaking in baptism. For some, the primary speaker is the person being baptized: he or she is declaring personal faith and identifying with Christ publicly. The person being baptized is saying, "I believe in Christ. I am with Him now." If the primary speaker is the person being baptized, infant baptism doesn't make a lot of sense. Infants can't speak. Since children cannot speak, the question becomes, "What are we saying about them?" Are we saying we *know* that the infant children of believers are elect? Are we saying they will automatically be saved, just because their parents were believers? Does baptism somehow guarantee or help children become believers one day?

We are not saying any of these things in infant baptism. We do not know who is elect. We do not baptize children because we know or think they *will* believe some day. We do not baptize because it somehow gives children a "better chance" of being believers in the future. The thing is, we are not the primary speakers. God is. The question, then, is what is God saying to the person being baptized?

When someone is baptized, God pulls them aside in a personal and direct way, as it were, and says, "My promises are true—not just for others but also for you. I am the God who saves sinners. I am the One who gives Christ and the Holy Spirit. Trust me." No one who is baptized (whether as an infant or as an adult) will be saved without receiving Christ by faith as He is offered in the gospel. Through baptism, God encourages and strengthens faith.

Still, the question remains. What does any of this mean to an infant? It is important to know that baptism is not only for the person being baptized. *It is for the whole church*. By God's design, everyone who is present is to look to the water of baptism and remember that those same waters have washed over them, and God is again visibly assuring them that His promises are real and trustworthy. God saves sinners by Christ and the Spirit.

The parents of children are to teach their children the meaning of baptism. They are to train their children to trust that God alone saves, by giving people Christ and the Spirit. When Christ received children and laid hands on them, he designated them to be "kingdom

children.” He was claiming rights over them, to have them trained to trust in Him alone for salvation.

Much more can be said of infant baptism and God’s purpose in giving the sign of salvation by faith alone to the children of believers. What are the implications, for instance, for how you parent and raise your children in the Lord? What are the similarities and differences between New and Old Testaments, and how does they shape our understanding of God’s purpose in giving the sign of the covenant to the infant children of believing parent?

We invite you to talk to a pastor or elder. Many of us have wrestled through these questions, and we know how much is involved in the apparently simple question of whether or not to have your children baptized. We don’t want you to struggle alone. We’ll be gracious in working through questions and differences and give you the time you need to work through this complicated issue.