

# What About the baby?





## When Joy Breaks In!

There is nothing quite like the arrival of a newborn baby to attract attention! Everyone wants to share in the joy when a new life enters the world.

During a British postal worker's strike, Norman Perry and his wife welcomed a new daughter into the world. Unable, because of the strike, to spread the good news to as many friends and family as he would have liked, and bursting with fatherly pride, Perry opted to buy seven seconds of air time on a local television station to announce the arrival of Tracey Margaret!

The sight of a new baby brings some very unusual behavior out of even the most composed and controlled of us. Baby sounds emanate from grown men, strangers speak to people they would never have smiled at before, grandparents stand taller than they have in years. The joy of a new life is contagious!

Amid the joyous flurry of birth announcements, visiting relatives boasting grandparents, a fatigued mother, a bewildered father and an avalanche of well wishers there often comes a question that can cloud the joy that all are feeling.

What about the baby's baptism? For some the question has been long answered because of the tradition of their religious lives. For others the issue can become a springboard to hurt feelings, misunderstanding and a painful sense of alienation from well intentioned family & friends. What if the parents decide not to have the child baptized? Many astonished grandparents, aunts, uncles & friends have faced the disillusionment of discovering that the child they have together so celebrated and cherished will not be baptized. Why not?

The question forms the purpose for this little booklet. Unfortunately too often people on both sides respond in untimely ways; way that hurt, not help. Those taken aback by the thought of not baptizing this precious baby often unintentionally and unknowingly belittle the parents. On the other hand the new parents can often fail to realize how difficult their decision is for others to understand.

One tract pictures on the outside an adorable infant adorned in the daintiest of baby clothing and sporting an irresistible smile. The letters above read: "What the Bible Say About Infant Baptism." One then opens the tract to discover a blank page.

Such approaches to the issue seldom help and more often put up defensive walls that are difficult to overcome. The fact is that for most people the bottom line in the issue of baptizing an infant is not arrived at by disciplined study of the Scriptures, but rather it is an emotional issue buttressed with strong, often unspoken expectations formed through years of exposure to their particular religious tradition.

Therefore I suggest that for a few moments we lay down the hurt feelings, the shock, the bewilderment, the fear and take a good look at what the Bible has to say about this matter of the infant and the parent's responsibility to care for it before God.

## Why Not?

For many these are the only words they seem able to articulate upon the discovery that the parents have no intention of baptizing their child. There seem to be no categories in their thinking with which to process such a decision. We call them paradigms: ways of thinking. It has been said that we seldom if ever have an original thought. So when some idea that is without precedent in our precious experience is presented to us we have little understanding of how to react.

Roger von Oech suggests that there are ten "mental blocks" that keep us prisoners of our own thinking, even if it is wrong thinking! Do any of these sound familiar?

1. The Right Answer
2. That's not logical
3. Follow the rules
4. Be Practical
5. Avoid Ambiguity
6. To Err is Wrong
7. Play is Frivolous
8. That's not my area
9. Don't be foolish
10. I'm not creative <sup>1</sup>

These ten ways of thinking create a "mental block" that often binds us to the comfortable and familiar, and at times keep us from a knowledge of the truth. The fact is that often our opinions about baptizing or not baptizing infants are more a matter of custom, routine, security and tradition than they are an outgrowth of examining God's word. These mental blocks can be especially strong in areas where ethnic ties are still quite dominant and a select few denominations or theological traditions have gained prominence. The unfamiliar can quickly become "wrong" simply because it is unknown. The "new" can appear unorthodox merely because we are unaccustomed to it.

The great need here is to look at what God has said. His Word, the Bible, contains the answers we need. If the Scriptures need to form some new tracks for the wheels of our minds to run on, then may God help us see them as He does.

What is the Biblical evidence in this matter of baptism? We cannot, in this format, give ourselves to an in depth discussion of all the meanings and implications of baptism. Therefore let's limit ourselves to the implications of the Bible's teaching on baptism as it might relate to the questions of infants. Our familiar friends of investigation will help us here: Who, What, Where, When, Why & How?

**Who?** According to the Bible who ought to be baptized? It comes as quite a surprise to some people that in the Bible the only people ever described as being baptized were adults. There is never any command to baptize infants, nor is there any example of an infant being baptized.

Some point out that the book of Acts speaks about whole "households" converting to following Jesus and being baptized. They reason, therefore, that surely there must have been some infants or very small children in those households. The

problem with this is that it is at best an argument from silence. The fact is that the evidence points the opposite direction.

For example Acts 16 describes the gospel coming to the jailer of the town of Philippi. After Paul shared the Gospel message of Jesus Christ with him and his family, it says, "...and immediately he was baptized, he and all his household." (v33) So quickly someone will say, "See his whole household was baptized. Surely they would not have excluded infants." But notice how verse 34 describes this jailer as "...having believed in God with his whole house." The Bible says nothing of the jailer having infant children. In fact it says that all his household were of an age where they could understand the message of Jesus Christ and personally put their faith in Him. When they had each believed in Christ they were then baptized.

The other examples of whole households turning to Christ also contain similar statements about each one believing or in some way giving evidence that each recipient of baptism was of an age where they could hear, understand and personally respond to the Gospel message of Jesus.

Church history also aids us in answering our question of "who?" Church historians tell us repeatedly that there is not one definite mention of infant baptism until the third century! In fact Lutheran scholar Kurt Aland, who holds to the practice of infant baptism, says, "...no one can show proof of a case of infant baptism before the year 200. All passages from earlier sources tell only of the baptism of adults. This conclusion is incontestable.... Definite testimonies in favor of the practice of infant baptism do not occur until after the third century." A Catholic professor of theology, O. Heggelbacher, similarly admits: "This controversy has shown that it is not possible to bring in absolute proof of infant baptism by basing one's argument on the Bible without the help of Tradition." <sup>2</sup>

If the Scriptures are going to be the basis for our lives then we must conclude that the answer to the "Who?" of baptism does not include infants.

But if we are to still more clearly understand this issue we must ask "When?" The Bible again clearly answers our question. The accounts of the early church leave a clear record of action as to when baptism ought to take place. There is a distinct pattern found in the book of Acts when it describes baptism taking place. This pattern might be summarized by the words "Hear...Believe...Baptize." over and over again we observe this pattern in the lives of those who were baptized in the early church. (Acts 2:38, 41; 8:12; 16:14-15, 31-33; 18:8) They heard the Gospel, they personally believed it and then and only then were they baptized. The pattern is never once out of synch. Believing never preceded the hearing of the Gospel message. Baptism never once preceded the believing. The pattern is clear for us to see: "Hear...Believe...Baptize."

Is this Biblical precedent something an infant can follow? Can an infant hear? Yes, when in normal health. Can they understand intelligibly? The answer is only as far away as the observation of how we behave around them. We gurgle, coo and talk "baby talk" because we know they do not understand our words or what we mean. Can an infant then personally believe what they have never been able to understand? The answer seems obvious..."no."

We need also to raise the question of "Why" baptize, or another way of asking the same question is "What" does baptism mean? Baptism according to the Scriptures is not an act or sacrament that confers the grace of God upon its recipient, rather it is an outward evidence that grace has already come to that life. Baptism is a symbol of a marvelous, dynamic change within a person's life. Baptism symbolizes a believer's union with Christ entered through faith alone. (Romans 6:3, 8; Colossians 2:12-13; Galatians 3:27). This union symbolized by baptism is a real and dynamic union into Christ's death and resurrection (Romans 6:3-11; Galatians 2:20, 6:14; Colossians 2:13, 3:1-4; Ephesians 3:5-7). Baptism symbolizes the washing and purifying work God performs in our lives when He draws us to put our faith in His Son as our Savior. (Acts 22:16; Ephesians 5:26, John 3:5; Titus 3:5; Hebrews 10:22; I Corinthians 6:11). Baptism is a symbol of the seal of acceptance God places upon

us because of our faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ on our behalf (Ephesians 1:13-14, 4:30; 2 Corinthians 1:21-22). Baptism symbolizes the fact that through faith in Christ we have passed out of our old nature and are now new creatures in Him (I Peter 3:18-22; Colossians 1:13).

Baptism then is a symbol...a God-given way of outwardly expressing to the world the inner reality of our faith relationship with Jesus Christ and the change this relationship has wrought within us. For the believer in Jesus, baptism is an act of obedience to His command (Matthew 28:18-20). It is a testimony or a confession of their faith in Christ and His work in them.

Does this Biblical understanding of baptism describe something that is of benefit to or appropriate for an infant? Seeing as baptism is designed for those who can hear, understand and personally believe the Gospel message, its meaning and purpose offer nothing for the infant since they are not yet at a place to respond in this way to the Lord.

The question "How?" remains. How ought baptism to be performed? Actually the Bible says very little about the mode of baptism. The only place any direct reference to the manner of baptism in the early church is made is in Acts 8. Here we find Philip having shared the message of Jesus Christ with an Ethiopian who then placed his faith in Christ. After this the Ethiopian asked Philip, "What prevents me from being baptized?" (v36) And with that Philip ordered the chariot in which they were riding to stop, "...and they both went down into the water, Philip as well as the eunuch; and he baptized him." (v. 38) Verse 39 adds that they "came up out of the water." This points to the fact that they went down into a body of water and lends itself most logically to immersion as the mode of baptism they would have used.

We are, however, not left without other evidence as to how the early church baptized. The Greek word, which is translated into our Bibles as "baptize" means to dip, immerse, wash, plunge, sink, drench or overwhelm.<sup>3</sup> The word was used in non-Christian writings of the way to describe cloth being dyed to a different color. The cloth was "baptized" in the sense it was immersed into the liquid dye. The root meaning of the word then points to immersion as the mode of baptism.

The early Church was made up almost exclusively of Jewish people who had turned to faith in Jesus as the Messiah. When Jesus commanded them to baptize those who had become His disciples (Matthew 28:18-20) their natural understanding of baptism would have pointed them back to the ceremonial Jewish baptism performed on those Gentiles who willingly chose to follow the Hebrew God. The proselyte baptism was performed on adults by immersing them in water.

The mode of immersion also best fits the symbolism of baptism. The picture of our union with Jesus in His death, burial and resurrection is best pictured by going down into the water (in burial and death) and coming up out of the water (in newness of life). What a wonderful picture of the facts of our salvation!

It is not hard to understand how immersion would be most difficult to perform upon newborn infants, especially if you factor in the high mortality rate for infants in those days. So this again points to adults as the appropriate recipients of baptism.

What then can we conclude concerning what the Bible teaches about baptism? What of the relationship of these facts to this wonderful newborn child that God has blessed us with? Baptism according to the Scriptures is for those who have been drawn to the point where they can hear, understand and believe the facts of who Jesus is and what He has done to save them. Having personally put their faith in Jesus and now following Him as His disciple, they should be baptized. This baptism is an outward testimony and symbol of the inner reality of the new life they have found through personal faith in Jesus.

The Bible nowhere says that baptism is the means by which God "saves" a person from sin and delivers them into a new rela-

tionship with God.

This can be quite a revelation to those who have, perhaps all their lives, heard churches preach a very different message about baptism. Because these convictions can run quite deep and because these facts of Scripture are perhaps new to you, you are encouraged to do some personal Scripture searching, with reflection on and prayer over what you find. You should not form your convictions on what you read here or what any other Pastor may tell you. You should form your convictions on what the Word of God says. You should check it out for yourself.

## But What About....?

You may be wondering how some particular Scripture passage fits with this matter of baptism and infants. Often we have a verse stuck in our minds and we do not understand how it fits with this matter. The great need is to go back to these verses one by one and ask ourselves what they mean in context. We may have nothing to do with what the original writer intended. In fact if you approach Scripture this way you can make it say almost anything. Our concern is what God means as He guided the Biblical writers to pen the Bible. Therefore, let's take a look at a number of Scriptures that often come up in this discussion of baptism and infants.

John 3:5

"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the Kingdom of God."

This is one of the favorite verses of those who teach infant baptism. They say, "There it is! You must not only be born of the Holy Spirit to enter God's Kingdom, you must also be baptized in water. Why would God withhold such a provision from dear, sweet children?"

It is instructional to note that there are generally three different ways that interpreters view the "water" referred to in this verse. Some say that the water refers to Christian baptism. This is reflected in the kind of approach stated above. Others see this as a reference to John the Baptist's baptism of repentance. John baptized people as an outward confession of their repentance from sin and turning toward God. So in other words the verse would be saying that a person must repent and be born again by the Holy Spirit to enter God's Kingdom. A third view of John 3:5 is to see the water as a reference to the natural birth process. This would make the water of verse 5 a reference to the presence of watery fluid at the natural birth of a child. The verse would then mean that a person not only has to be born physically, but must then be born spiritually by the Holy Spirit to enter the Kingdom of God. How do we decide between these options? The problem with viewing the water in verse 5 as a reference to Christian baptism is that at the point Jesus spoke these words there was no such thing as Christian baptism. It would have been impossible for Nicodemus, to whom Jesus was speaking these words, to think of it as a reference to something that did not yet exist. Jesus' purpose in speaking to Nicodemus was to clarify his understanding of salvation. Why then would he confuse him using a mysterious reference to a sacrament that did not yet even exist.

Either of the other two understandings may be correct, seeing that the Scriptures clearly teach that repentance is a necessary part of our salvation and that a person must be born again to enter God's Kingdom.

1 Peter 3:21

"And corresponding to that, baptism now saves you—not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a clear

conscience—through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”

One tract, seeking to support infant baptism, quotes Peter’s words “baptism now saves you” and declares “ If this is the case, then certainly a loving God would not provide baptism as a means for adults and make no provision whatever for infants who are just as precious in his sight.” 4

This is the only place the Bible says anything about baptism “saving” a person. Naturally it is seized upon by those who baptize infants as a key argument in the defense of this practice. But the necessary question is “saves from what?” They assume that it means baptism saves from sin, Satan and hell. But the context of the verse tells us something very different.

The illustration used here is of Noah and his family, eight persons in all, who were “saved through water.” (v20) Peter then adds, “And corresponding to that, baptism now saves you.” (v21) What were Noah and his family saved from? Certainly from the watery death of drowning, but much more importantly they were saved from the corrupt world system that God sent the flood to judge. (Genesis 5:5-7) Through the flood God judged the wickedness of men and saved righteous Noah and his family out of the wicked world. The Bible nowhere says it was through the ark that God saved Noah into eternal salvation. Noah was already seen as righteous in God’s eyes through his faith in Him. (Genesis 6:8-9)

So what does the baptism Peter refers to save us from? Certainly not from sin to bring us eternal life. The Bible says it is through personal faith, placed in Jesus Christ alone, that a person is saved from sin and unto God. (Ephesians 2:8-9); John1:12) What is more, if Peter’s illustration is to hold up, it must be seen that whatever this salvation is in 1 Pet 3:20-21 it must correspond to that which Noah experienced in Genesis 6-8.

Peter, having stated “baptism now saves you, ” quickly makes two clarifying statements about what this baptism does and does not mean. He tells us this is “not the removal of dirt from the flesh.” (v.21) Baptism is not merely concerned with cleaning up the external filth of our bodies, like some kind of divine bath. Then he adds that this baptism is “an appeal to God for a good conscience through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.” Baptism, says Peter is an “appeal”. Greek scholar First Rienecker tells us that this word “appeal” means “... making a contract and denotes the ‘pledge’ or ‘undertaking’ given by one of the parties in answer to formal questions addressed to him. The word implies the registering of an agreement to conditions or demands. Here the pledge is an expression of assent to certain conditions; i.e. it may imply a confession of faith as well as the willingness to accept the new duties...” 5

Whatever the pledge of baptism is it is made by a person who can hear, understand and willingly chose to enter into certain conditions of discipleship as placed before them at their baptism. Can an infant do this? No.

Through this personal commitment to Jesus Christ and a willing pledge to follow Him as His disciple (witnessed to in baptism) one is then saved out of our corrupt world systems’ power, just as Noah and his family were saved out of theirs.

Mark 10:14-15

‘But when Jesus saw this, He was indignant and said to them, ‘Permit the children to come to Me; do not hinder them; for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it at all.’

Those who baptize infants sometimes use these verses as evidence that Jesus would not exclude them from baptism. The



question is: "Where is the baptism in these verses?" The fact is that these verses have nothing to do with baptism. In fact as with John 3:5, Christian baptism as we know it did not yet exist when Jesus spoke these words.

The point here is that the disciples were trying to keep the children from Jesus because they thought he was too important and too busy for them to bother him. There was a Jewish custom that encouraged parents to have great men bless their children. These children wanted to be blessed by Jesus. The disciples thought he had better things to do. Jesus, however, taught us that he is not too busy or important to be bothered by anyone.

He also taught us that entrance into the Kingdom of God is for those who are "like a child" (v15) or for "such as these." (v14) These expressions are examples of the figure of speech known as simile. Simile is used to teach a lesson through comparison of two things. "A" does not equal "B", but both "A" and "B" have common elements called "C". Children and those who enter the Kingdom of God are not necessarily the same, but to make a point about those who do enter the Kingdom Jesus used the common elements of simplicity, faith, lack of pride, etc. to show the conditions for one who does enter the Kingdom. So rather than teaching that Jesus wants infants to be baptized these verses do quite the opposite.

#### Acts 2:38-39

"And Peter said to them, 'Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God shall call to Himself.'"

Some will seize upon the words "the promise is for you and your children" and, since a reference to baptism precedes these words, they draw the conclusion that baptism is for infants as well as adults. But we must ask, "What is the promise referred to as being for both our children and us?" The promise is that if we respond and believe in Jesus Christ and follow Him in discipleship (which is evidenced in baptism) we will be forgiven and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Jesus had told them not long before this, "And behold, I am sending forth the promise of My Father upon you..." (Luke 24:49) This was a reference to the Holy Spirit, as mentioned here in Acts 2:38.

So? Notice that the response of repentance is a necessary condition placed on this promise. Repentance means a changing of our minds,<sup>6</sup> It means a turning of our thinking from the way we have thought to a new and different way. This thinking then works itself out in a change of actions. Can an infant participate in such a response to truth? No, not until they grow to the point where they can hear, understand and personally accept the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Then, yes, in that sense the promise is for all of us, we and our children who can participate in the conditions of the promise.

Notice that even the people to whom these words are spoken understood this. Two verses later we read, "So then, those who had received his word were baptized..." (v41) There was a recognition of truth and response to it by those who were then baptized.

#### Colossians 2:11-12

"And in Him (Jesus Christ) 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."

These verses are also often used by those who baptize infants in an attempt to prove their position. They reason this way:

"The Apostle Paul says that baptism replaces circumcision as the external sign of the old covenant. Circumcision was performed not only on adults, but also on their infant children. Therefore we, under the New Covenant, should baptize our infants."

While such logic may seem clear, there are some simple problems associated with it. Notice first of all that the circumcision Paul is speaking of is not a literal one made with hands. He is not referring to Jewish rite of physical circumcision performed on infant boys. Rather he is making reference to the more important inner circumcision of the heart that God required of His followers and that physical circumcision was to symbolize. The Old Testament writers often spoke of this inner circumcision of the heart. (Leviticus 26:41; Deuteronomy 10:16,30:6, Jeremiah 4:4, 9:25) Elsewhere the Apostle Paul made the same point in the New Testament. (Romans 2:25-29; Galatians 5:6)

So here in Colossians 2:11-12 Paul is not making literal physical circumcision equal to water baptism. The inner circumcision of the heart, rather, equals the union with Christ in his death and resurrection that we experience through the inner baptism of the Holy Spirit. (1Corinthians 12:13) The Baptism of the Holy Spirit places us into the Body of Christ and thus into a share in the very experience of his death and resurrection. This is the point Paul makes in Colossians 2:12.

Our outer, physical, water baptism is a visible symbol of the inner reality of the baptism of the Holy Spirit that we came to share in at the point of our repentance and faith in Jesus.

So again we see that this verse does not lend support to the practice of baptizing infants.

Certainly we have not been able to deal with every possible question that might be raised from Scripture. But these represent the most commonly asked questions and give a broad sampling of the Scriptural teaching on this issue of baptism as it concerns infants.

## So What About the Baby?

This is a welcome question by now—we began this journey some pages back because we all love and care for a beautiful new baby. God has blessed us with this little one. Lest we lose our original focus under a pile of Bible references, let's return to consider this precious little one we share our common love for.

What about this baby? We all agree that we want what is best for this little one. If not baptism for the baby then what? The Bible does give us direction as to how we ought to respond to God with this child. God's desired response is the act of dedicating the child to Him.

The act of dedication follows the example of Mary and Joseph, Jesus' earthly parents. We are told that they took Jesus to the Temple in Jerusalem and dedicated Him to God. "And when the days for their purification according to the law of Moses were completed, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord." (Luke 2:22) Likewise we follow the example of Samuel's mother Hannah. As she brought her son to the house of the Lord she told Eli the priest, "For this boy I prayed and the Lord has given me my petition which I asked of Him. So I have also dedicated him to the Lord; as long as he lives he is dedicated to the Lord." (I Samuel 1:27-28)

It is important to know that you cannot do for your children what God requires them to do—that they repent of their sin, believe in Jesus Christ as their Savior and choose to follow Him as His disciple. As much as you may wish to make that decision for them, God places that responsibility on them. But as their parents we are responsible to do everything within our power to raise them for Jesus Christ, providing every opportunity for them to personally choose to follow Him.

Therefore, when we dedicate our children to God we are not only committing them to God's protection, care and direction, but we are also dedicating ourselves to God to raise them for Him. This means that we pledge to love them with Christ's love, teach them the Scriptures, teach them to read God's Word for themselves, to pray with them and for them, bringing them regularly to worship Christ in a Bible-teaching church, and surrounding them with friends who will reinforce God-honoring values. In short, we pledge to do all we can to bring them to that place where they will put their personal faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

This is a commitment God will honor. The birth of a baby is a wonderful and joyous time. It should not be a time split asunder by rash words and wounded emotions. The new mother and father need your prayer and encouragement now more than ever. Parenting has never been an easy job and isn't getting any easier! The newborn also needs your prayer, direction and support for a lifetime. Why not agree together now to model the love and unity of Jesus Christ to this little one, even in the areas like this where we are all still growing and learning?

## End notes

1. Roger von Oech, *A Whack on the side of the Head* (New York: Warner Books, 1983), p. 9
2. Quoted in Alfred Kuen, *I will Build My Church* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1971), pp.167, 173
3. William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979), p.132
4. Ralph B. Piper, "Why Baptize Infants?" (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Leaflet Ministry, Augsburg Publishing House, 1981), p. 4
5. Frits Rienecker, *A Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), p.760
6. W.E. Vine, *Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (McLean, Virginia: MacDonald Publishing Company). pp.961, 962