

How We Dedicate Our Children to God

To many Christians the idea of baptizing little children seems utterly ridiculous. They believe that the practice is pagan, rooted solely in tradition, and totally lacking in Scriptural support. I know this is true because there was a time when I was completely opposed to it myself. I could not imagine how anyone who believed the Bible and had studied what it had to say on the subject could possibly follow the practice of infant baptism.

In the course of further study, however, I discovered that the overwhelming majority of Christians whom God had used in the past centuries of the Church not only practiced infant baptism but did so because they believed the Scriptures taught it. The great evangelical theologian of the Ancient Church, Augustine, held to the practice and so did the great Reformers: John Hus, Martin Luther, John Calvin, and John Knox. Those devout scholars, John Wycliff and William Tyndale, who labored to give us the English Bible, and all the translators involved in the King James Version held that the practice was biblical.

When we come to the revivalists of the Eighteenth Century, we find both John and Charles Wesley, George Whitfield and Jonathan Edwards, men whom God used in the conversions of untold thousands, all practiced infant baptism. This is true also of the overwhelming majority of the Christians who were involved in settling and founding the United States—from the Pilgrims on the Mayflower to the Huguenots from France. These were not people who did things because of tradition; they laid down their lives that they might worship God strictly according to the instructions given in Holy Scripture. They held to justification by faith and the necessity of the new birth. To their number must be added most of the authors of the great Evangelical hymns which have stirred the hearts of so many Christians, hymns such as “Amazing Grace,” “Rock of Ages,” and “Just As I Am.” Today, however, we find a different story. Many Twentieth Century Christians no longer believe the practice is Scriptural. Why is that?

One reason for the rejection of infant baptism is the widespread distrust in the relevance of the Old Testament. Very few would want to reject the Old Testament altogether, but for most people the Old Testament is simply a closed book. Was this the case in the First Century Church? If we were to remove all the Old Testament quotations and their explanation and application from the teachings of the Apostles, we would be left with a very small New Testament. As a case in point, the next time you read Paul’s epistle to the Romans, notice how often he establishes each point of doctrine out of the Old Testament. In fact, the Apostles appealed to the Old Testament for their doctrine the same way Bible teachers appeal to the whole Bible today.

As we will see, the practice of infant baptism—and many other New Testament doctrines, such as the Trinity and justification by faith—rests squarely on an Old Testament foundation. Remove that foundation, and infant baptism is only an inference.

How should we view the Old Testament? Should we reject it as having nothing to say to us today? Or should we obliterate all distinctions between the two Testaments? I believe that we should avoid both extremes. The Old Testament is related to the New in the way that a bud is related to a flower and an acorn is to an oak. The people of God in the Old Testament are compared to children; in the New they have come to adulthood. (*Cf. Galatians 4:1-7*)

Our attitude toward the Old Testament should be like the Lord Jesus’. Think of the number of times our Lord established his teaching by quoting the Old Testament. Many people seem to overlook what the Lord Jesus himself said: *Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.* (Matthew 5:17)

How is the Old Testament fulfilled in the New? Let us take the Old Testament celebration of the Passover as an example. After having given elaborate instructions about selecting the Passover lamb, God told his people, *Obey these instructions as a lasting ordinance for you and your*

descendants. (Exodus 12:24) How are New Testament believers to carry out this commandment? Are we to slaughter lambs today, or are we simply to abandon the Passover ordinance completely? We are to celebrate it, says Paul, *For Christ, our Passover Lamb, has been sacrificed. Therefore let us keep the Festival.* . . . (1 Corinthians 5:7,8)

Christian people have continued to observe the Passover for almost two thousand years; they do it every time they break the bread and drink the wine in the Lord's Supper. And just as Old Testament believers purged the leaven out of their houses, so we must purge out of our hearts *the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness.* (1 Corinthians 5:8)

This idea of fulfillment is written large over the doctrines and practices of the Old Testament. The power of the Holy Spirit brings the inner meaning of Old Testament institutions to greater significance. This new, heightened Spirituality normally involves modifications in the outward form.

What is true of the Passover is true of other Old Testament institutions: the kingdom promised to David is fulfilled in his Son, Jesus Christ, who sits at the Father's right hand in glory and subdues all nations unto himself by pouring out his Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. (Cf. Acts 2:29-36) The bloody death of Jesus on the cross fulfills the Tabernacle with its bloody animal sacrifices. (Cf. Hebrews 9 and 10:1-22) The glorious Temple of the New Covenant is composed of the people of God, whom the Holy Spirit indwells. (Cf. 1 Corinthians 3:16, 17) However, God has made modifications: the heavy veil separating sinful man from a holy God is gone; it was ripped apart as the flesh of the Son of Man was ripped on the cross. (Cf. Matthew 27:51 and Hebrews 10:19,20)

As with other New Testament institutions, baptism does not exist simply as a New Testament phenomenon. It is the Spiritually enriched, outwardly modified, continuation of an Old Testament ordinance, circumcision.

What is the real meaning of circumcision, and how is it fulfilled in baptism? The most basic significance of circumcision lies in the historical fact that Jesus was circumcised for us. The real circumcision of Jesus did not occur when he was eight days old but in his thirty-third year. A rabbi's knife did not carry it out, but iron spikes and a spear on a Roman cross.

The Bible had prophesied all of this centuries before. In the prophecy of the seventy weeks Daniel foretold, *Then after the sixty-two weeks the Messiah will be cut off* (Hebrew: *karath*), referring, of course, to the crucifixion of Christ. (Daniel 9:26) But this cutting off of Christ on the cross pointed to his suffering the judgment due to those who had broken the divine covenant.

When God made his gracious contract with Abraham, he cut (*karath*), or established that covenant—not only with Abraham, but with his descendants as well. (Genesis 15:18) In time God expounded on the meaning of that agreement in greater detail. His promises are sure to all who believe, but God warned that the one who does not respond to this contract *will be cut off (karath) from his people; he has broken my covenant.* (Genesis 17:14)

God gave an outward reminder and seal of confirmation to this covenant: *Every male among you shall be circumcised.* (Genesis 17:10) They cut off the foreskin to remind the people of the blessings and obligations of the contract. It was a symbolic way of saying, "May I be cut off in damnation, if I do not live up to this covenant."

As Moses was about to enter Egypt, God sought to kill him because he had failed to perform this ordinance on his son. (Exodus 4:24) How could he expect God's blessings on his mission when he had flagrantly disregarded God's ordinance? *But Zipporah took a flint knife, cut off (karath) her son's foreskin and touched Moses' feet with it. 'Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me' she said. So the Lord let him alone. (At that time she said 'bridegroom of blood,' referring to circumcision).* (Exodus 4:25, 26)

As we know from reading the history of God's people in the Old Testament, they broke

God's contract with them repeatedly. The wrathful judgment of God was stored up over nearly two millennia until it came crashing down in full brunt on him who took the place of the covenant breakers, Jesus Christ. *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.* (2 Corinthians 5:21)

The crucifixion of Jesus is not only the reality of circumcision. It is also the reality of baptism. Jesus, in looking ahead to his death on the cross, asked James and John, *Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?* (Mark 10:38) On the cross Jesus drank to the last bitter dregs the cup of God's wrath. As our Savior hung on the cross, he was baptized with the judgment of a holy God against human sin. He was circumcised by divine justice as his life was cut off.

The Apostle Paul unites circumcision and baptism (the Old and New Testament signs of membership among God's people). After reminding the Gentiles of the total sufficiency of Christ to save them, Paul tells them: *In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.* (Colossians 2:11,12)

When Jesus died on the cross, all believers in all ages, both Jew and Gentile, male and female, bond and free, were circumcised with him. So, too, were we all baptized with him. That is the connection between circumcision and baptism: the death of Christ on the cross for our sins. Because of the substitutionary death of Christ as our curse-bearer, we may wear the sign of judgment as a token of God's favor. The Old Testament believer received circumcision as a token of God's grace; so today, our baptism is the seal of God's kind intention toward us because his justice was satisfied on the cross.

Some people seem to think that circumcision was little more than a sign of national identification, a kind of glorified pledge of allegiance to the nation of Israel. Scripture, however, does give us a clear understanding of the significance of circumcision. Perhaps the fullest treatment on the subject is found in the Book of Romans. There Paul tells us: *A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code.* (Romans 2:28,29) The meaning of circumcision, then, is not some outward thing; it points to the work of the Holy Spirit in giving a new heart. Circumcision reminds us of the individual's need of being born a second time.

Paul tells us further that circumcision is a sign of being justified by faith. He reminds us that *Abraham received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised.* (Romans 4:11) In other words, Abraham believed, he was justified by faith, and then he received God's sign and seal of this in circumcision. Sometimes people are married and cannot afford a wedding ring. Some years later they buy a good set of rings and begin to wear them. They are no more married now than when they were poor. But now they have an outward sign, a token of their true state. Abraham was right with God the moment he put his trust in him. He was no less saved before circumcision and no more saved after it. The important things about circumcision are the Spiritual realities to which it points: the new birth and justification by faith.

To be circumcised was to wear a sign that said, "I am a believer; I have been born again; God accepts me as holy and righteous; he has established his covenant promises with me." It was to bear the seal of God's ownership. To be circumcised was to say that Christ would die for your sins and to confess that you were united to him as he is offered in the gospel, the same gospel that was preached to Abraham. (Galatians 3:3) Abraham was circumcised because he joyfully looked forward to the day of Christ. (John 8:56)

What can be said about the real meaning of circumcision can be said about the real meaning of baptism, because baptism is New Testament circumcision. Under the New Covenant the gospel encompasses all nations and is not limited to one race as it was, for all practical purposes, under the Old Covenant. This is part of the reason why females receive the seal of faith along with males today. As with the other great symbol of the Old Testament, the Passover, so with circumcision: blood had to be shed. However, the death of Christ has fulfilled the shedding of blood, once for all time, on the cross. The outward form of circumcision is different from that of baptism, but the inward meaning is the same.

This presses us to the great objection to infant circumcision: how could the Lord command Abraham to dedicate his children to God by placing on them a mark which symbolized that they were believers, born anew by the Spirit, justified by faith? Yet that is exactly what God commanded him to do in Genesis 17:9-14. And it was Moses' failure to carry out this commandment which so angered God that he sought to kill him before he entered Egypt. (Exodus 4:24 ff.)

Whatever God's reasons, we see that every objection which people have raised against infant baptism may also be raised against the practice of infant circumcision in the Old Testament. It is not our place to object to God's commandments. It is our place to submit to his will in all things. Why did God command us to do this?

God told Abraham to place the mark of divine ownership on his household because it was God's purpose for them to belong to him: *I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you.* (Genesis 17:7) Moses brings the same thought out hundreds of years later, on the plains of Moab, as God's people were about to enter the promised land: *The Lord your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live.* (Deuteronomy 30:6)

God instituted the family, and it is God's purpose to save not only individuals, but families as well. This was not only true in the Old Testament. It is also true in the New. Paul said to the Philippian jailer: *Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household.* (Acts 16:31) That is why circumcision was done not only to those who professed faith, but to their children as well. That is why we read in the New Testament—not only of individual, adult believers being baptized, but of their households being baptized, too. Thus we find that the Holy Spirit recorded the baptism not only of the Philippian jailer, but of his entire family as well. (Acts 16:33) And concerning Lydia we read, *When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home.* (Acts 16:15) Paul, in mentioning the matter of baptism and how it is not important when compared to the preaching of the gospel, remembers Stephanas' family: *Yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I don't remember if I baptized anyone else.* (1 Corinthians 1:16) Since we have seen that Scripture teaches that circumcision and baptism are essentially the same ordinances, how can anyone teach that there were no infants present in these households?

What does it mean to have the mark of God's ownership placed on a child? Does it mean that he is automatically a believer? No, it means that God has promised to call his people from among our children. We express our faith in God's promise by presenting our little ones for baptism. God commanded Abraham to circumcise both Ishmael and Isaac in Genesis 17, yet Ishmael remained a lost man. It was with Isaac alone that God established his covenant. (Genesis 17:19) Isaac in turn had two sons, Jacob and Esau; both received the sign of God's favor, and yet God's favor was on Jacob alone.

Paul's comment on this is striking: Rebecca's children had one and the same father, our father Isaac. Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad—in order that God's purpose in election might stand: not by works but by him who calls—she was told, "The

older will serve the younger.” Just as it is written: “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.” (Romans 9:18)

In Peter’s sermon on the Day of Pentecost, we find him stressing that the glorious Old Testament truth remains in effect, that it is still God’s purpose to save not only individuals, but families as well. Yet Peter reminds his hearers that God’s sovereign purpose is always the deciding factor: *The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.* (Acts 2:39)

God makes his gospel covenant with Abraham and his descendants ultimately with only one descendant of Abraham, the Lord Jesus Christ. *The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. The Scripture does not say ‘and to seeds,’ meaning many people, but ‘and to your seed,’ meaning one person, who is Christ.* (Galatians 3:16)

No one, therefore, is a child of Abraham and heir of the divine, covenant promises but the one who has been united with Christ by faith. If we know the Lord Jesus, we are Abraham’s descendants: *There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.* (Galatians 3:28,29) *Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham’s offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all.* (Romans 4:16)

That is why we present all our children for baptism, because God himself has commanded it. Not all who are baptized are elect, not all will become believers—even as in the Old Testament, not all who were circumcised became believers. We place the mark of God’s ownership on them, because we are to dedicate ourselves and all that is ours to the Lord of the Covenant. We place no trust in the outward sign. Rather, we prayerfully look to our gracious Father that he may, in his own good time, save our little ones.

How then should we view our children? Are they pagans or Christians, or is there a category in between? We must rule out a third category; people are either saved or lost. There is no middle position. Though many people teach the idea of an age of accountability, there is no biblical evidence for the idea. People are not born innocent; they are born in desperate need of the cleansing blood of Jesus Christ. David confessed, *Surely I have been a sinner from birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.* (Psalm 51:5) It is not simply a bad environment that produces evil doers; rather, *Even from birth, the wicked go astray; from the womb they are wayward and speak lies.* (Psalm 58:3)

The Lord Jesus, however, told his disciples, *Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.* (Matthew 19:14) Why did Jesus have to say such a thing? It was a rebuke to his disciples, who thought that little children, especially infants (Cf. Luke 18:15), could not benefit from the Savior’s touch. “Don’t waste the Master’s time asking him to bless your babies. Wait till they’re grown up and can decide for themselves,” seems to be the disciples’ attitude. Nevertheless, Jesus rebuked the disciples, and he placed his hands on the little children of the believers who had brought them to him. (Matthew 19:15)

We should view our children the same way we view others in the church. That is to say, we are not to judge them as unbelievers unless there is positive evidence against them. There is a very different approach in how we are to assess our own Spiritual condition from how we form our assessment of others. The most striking illustration of this comes from a comparison of what Jesus says in Matthew 12:30 with what he says in Mark 9:40. In Matthew 12:22-37 Jesus encounters strong opposition: the Pharisees accuse him of being in league with the devil. After answering their charges Jesus goes on to warn them of the great danger they are in: *He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters. And so I tell you, every sin*

and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. (Matthew 12:30,31) After further warning Jesus tells them about the necessity of Spiritual fruit. Notice the focus on self judgment—*He who is not with me is against me.* (Matthew 12:30) If I see no positive evidence that I am for Christ, I must conclude that I am against him.

How different this standard of self-judgment is from that by which we measure others. In Mark 9:38 we read, “Teacher,” said John, “we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us.”

What is Jesus’ response? Jesus said, No one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, for whoever is not against us is for us. I tell you the truth, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to Christ will certainly not lose his reward. (Mark 9:39-41) When we look at others, we are to use a different standard: Whoever is not against us is for us. (Mark 9:40) If a person professes to be a follower of Christ, we must accept him as such, unless we see positive evidence to the contrary.

This is what we may call a judgment of charity. Paul used the judgment of charity when he wrote to the church at Corinth. He addressed all of them as saints and brethren. (1 Corinthians 1:2, 10) He regarded every one of them as fellow believers whom God had called, including, we may add, Stephanas’ children. (1 Corinthians 1:9, 16) Did he mean that every person there was a true Christian? No, in fact he warns them to take a close look at themselves: *Examine your selves to see whether you are in the faith; test your selves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test?* (2 Corinthians 13:6)

If we are to deal with our baptized children as with Christians, how can we keep them from a false hope? The only answer here is the same answer we must give regarding adults in the church: we must not base the assurance of our salvation on our baptism, our joining the church, our coming to the Lord’s Table, nor even on our religious experiences. Our assurance of salvation comes as the Holy Spirit bears witness in our hearts and enables us to recognize the fruit of his indwelling in our lives. (Cf. Romans 8:9-17, especially verse 16 and Galatians 5:22- 24) I am assured that God will save all who believe; I am assured that I have truly believed as I see the evidence that the Holy Spirit is making me more like Jesus. (Cf. 2 Corinthians 5:17 and Romans 8:29)

There is no way that we can keep our children, nor ourselves for that matter, from a false hope of salvation apart from the careful examination which strong, soul-searching preaching should lead us to. We must encourage our children to look to the Lord Jesus, daily to turn to him from their sins with godly sorrow, and to believe that all their sins are forgiven for Jesus’ sake. Yet we must press them to self-examination and remind them that it is only those who have the positive fruit of faith and repentance who should regard themselves as Christians. Their baptism lays on them, as circumcision did in the Old Testament, and indeed as our baptism lays on us, the obligation to make our *calling and election sure.* (2 Peter 1:10)

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