



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

Baptism: What About the Children?

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Introduction

1. Sometime around 200 AD, just a century after the death of John, a Christian in North Africa named Tertullian wrote a treatise, *On Baptism*, in which he expressed concern about a practice that had developed with regard to the immersion of small children:

According to the circumstances and nature, and also age, of each person, the delay of baptism is more suitable, especially in the case of small children. . . . The Lord indeed says, "Do not forbid them to come to me." Let them "come" then while they are growing up, while they are learning, while they are instructed why they are coming. Let them become Christians when they are able to know Christ. . . .¹

2. From Tertullian's remarks, we learn at least the following:
 - a. Some in his part of the world were baptizing small children, perhaps even infants.
 - b. The practice was not universally accepted, as shown by Tertullian's dissent.
 - c. Tertullian's argument against it was based on the understanding that baptism should be delayed until those being baptized understood why they were coming to Christ.
3. About fifty years later, sixty-six bishops meeting in Carthage (North Africa) rejected a questioner's assertion that baptism of an infant should not come before the eighth day (like circumcision), but should be allowed "immediately after birth" (Ferguson, 370, summarizing Cyprian, *Letters* 64).
4. So, in just fifty years, "the opposition to infant baptism voiced by Tertullian is no longer heard in North Africa" (Ferguson, 371). By the late 300s (4th century), things would develop quickly to the point that infant baptism was the norm (see Ferguson, 379).
5. What is apparent in the sources is that the practice did not develop from a cavalier desire to change God's word, or even because of a prior belief in original sin. It appears to have been the result of a genuine concern for the well being of children who died young.
 - a. One inscription (epitaph) from the period points out that, at birth, a couple's daughter was not a Christian and so needed to be "made a believer." "She was born a pagan on the day before the nones of March . . . She lived eighteen months and twenty-two days and was made a

¹ Tertullian, *On Baptism* 18, as cited in Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 364. This information is also covered in Ferguson's *Early Christians Speak*, 55-65.

believer in the eighth hour of the night, almost drawing her last breath. She survived four more hours . . .” (in Ferguson, 374).

- b. Another refers to the case of an older child: “He lived twelve years, two months, and . . . days. He received grace on September 20 . . . He gave up (his soul) on September 21. May you live among the saints in eternity” (Ferguson, 373).
 - c. Still another explains the reasoning behind emergency baptisms: “. . . Florentius made this monument for his well-deserving son Appronianus, who lived one year, nine months, and five days. Since he was dearly loved by his grandmother, and she saw that he was going to die, she asked from the church that he might depart from the world a believer” (Ferguson, 373).
 - d. “. . . there was the natural human concern about the welfare of the child’s soul and a desire to make every preparation for the afterlife. Request[s] from parents or family members for the baptism of a gravely sick child would have been hard to refuse” (Ferguson, 379).
6. These concerns resonate with us.
 - a. Correctly, we do not want our children in jeopardy with regard to their salvation.
 - b. Correctly, we understand that baptism is for the forgiveness of sins.
 - c. But, when are children accountable for their sins? Is it not wise to err on the side of baptizing them too soon rather than risk not baptizing them before it is too late? Within the church family at least, these questions have proved troubling.
 7. What are we to do with the children with regard to baptism?
 - a. Because of its prevalence—and because the reasoning behind it does to some extent influence some who do not practice it—we’ll deal first with infant baptism.
 - b. Having done that, we’ll talk more (in a following lesson) about baptizing children.

Body

I. Arguments Offered In Support of Infant Baptism.

- A. Some things need to be said as a foundation for this part of our study.
 1. One reason some early Christian writers allowed infant/child baptism was because of their conviction that it had ancient, if not New Testament, origins.
 - a) Origen, for example, declared that “the church had a tradition from the apostles to give baptism even to infants” (*Commentary On Romans* 5.9.11 on Romans 5-6, the “body of sin.” in Ferguson, 368).
 - b) “He offers no further evidence for this claim” (Ferguson, 369), but some will use it to support their defense of infant baptism.
 2. The New Testament is silent about the practice, neither “forbid[ding] or command[ing] the baptism of children.”²
 3. Silence per se proves nothing, but other teachings often show its significance.
- B. We’ll notice three of the arguments commonly offered in defense of infant baptism.³
 1. Some conflate the old and new covenants, note the place of circumcision in the former and its connection to baptism in the latter (Colossians 2:11-13), and conclude that baptism is the new covenant’s circumcision and should be administered to children.

² T. M. Lindsay, “Baptism (Non-Immersionist View),” *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia (ISBE)* [1915], I: 391.

³ See Everett Ferguson, *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today*, 196-199. Jewish proselyte baptism is a fourth argument, omitted here for reasons of time and space. See Lindsay, 391. For a rebuttal, see Ferguson, 197-198.

- a) But the New Testament's use of circumcision emphasizes the work of the Spirit within the heart (Romans 2:28-29; Philippians 3:3; cf. Deuteronomy 30:6; Jeremiah 4:4).
 - b) Also, in the NT, the sign of the covenant (circumcision in the old covenant) is the receipt of the Spirit, not baptism (2 Corinthians 1:21-22; Ephesians 1:13-14; 4:30).
 - c) Colossians 2:12-13 does not provide a basis for seeing baptism as the new circumcision; the reference there also to a "spiritual circumcision."⁴
2. Passages featuring "household baptisms." In the first century a household included children and servants who were governed by what the head of the household did.⁵
- a) This argument claims too much and misses other points in the New Testament texts.
 - (1) Re: Cornelius (Acts 11:14), we have no record of the household members; there is indication that members of the household were fearing God (10:2).
 - (2) The jailer was promised salvation based on his belief (Acts 16:31); the household responded to the teaching of the word of the Lord (32) before being baptized (33) at which time they are said to have rejoiced (34).
 - (3) Crispus believed, "together with his entire household" (Acts 18:8).
 - (4) The household of Stephanas (1 Corinthians 1:16) were the first converts in Achaia and were devoted to service (1 Corinthians 16:15).
 - (5) Regarding Lydia (Acts 16:15): "... since Lydia was head of her own business and household and nothing is said about a husband, it seems the household was her slaves and business associates and the presence of infants highly unlikely" (Ferguson, *Church*, 196).
3. Some argue for infant baptism based on the doctrine of original sin.
- a) Support for this is often found in an appeal to the understanding of the early church, but the evidence supports the reverse of what is generally claimed: the doctrine of original sin was the result of the practice of infant baptism, not its cause.
 - (1) Multiple writers who report infant baptism affirmed the innocence of children.⁶
 - (2) Origen spoke of a "stain" on infants, but said it was part of being human and was also attached to Jesus; he was not affirming "original sin."⁷

⁴ See Ferguson, 197. Also Jack Cottrell's discussion of Colossians 2:11-13 in *Baptism: A Biblical Study*, 121-132. For an opposing view, see T. M. Lindsay, "Baptism (Non-Immersionist View)," *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia (ISBE)*, I: 391.

⁵ See Lindsay who argued, "One has only to remember the position of the head of the household in that ancient world, to recollect how the household was thought to be embodied in its head, to see how the repentance and faith of the head of the household was looked upon as including those of all the members, not merely children but servants, to feel that had the children been excluded from sharing in the rite the exclusion would have seemed such an unusual thing that it would have at least been mentioned and explained" (*ISBE* I: 391). But this statement, an argument from silence, claims more than the evidence will allow.

⁶ Tertullian: "Let them become Christians when they are able to know Christ. In what respect does the innocent period of life hasten to the remission of sins?" (*On Baptism* 18, in Ferguson, *Baptism*, 364).

Origen: "Christian brethren often ask a question. The passage from Scripture read today encourages me to treat it again. Little children are baptized 'for the remission of sins.' Whose sins are they? When they did sin? . . ." (*Homilies on Luke* 14.5 on Luke 2:22, in Ferguson, *Baptism*, 367). See also Cyprian *Letters* 64.5 and Ferguson's comment (*Baptism*, 371).

⁷ "Earlier in the same homily Origen contrasts sin (of which Jesus had none) and stain and explains that Jesus needed the purification recorded in Luke 2:22 because of the stain involved in his taking a human body for human salvation (*Homilies on Luke* 14.3). 'Every soul that has been clothed with a human body has its own "stain"' (14.4). . . . The same impurity that attached to Jesus' birth applies to all human beings. . . . Origen's innovation is to extend the baptismal forgiveness of sins to ceremonial impurity, particularly that associated with childbirth. It remained for a later age to extend the concept to inherited sin" (Ferguson, *Baptism*, 368-369).

- (3) Simply put, "Original sin was not the basis of the practice, but the practice was the basis of the doctrine (since everyone agreed that one purpose of baptism was forgiveness of sins)" (Ferguson, *Church* 198).⁸
- b) This historical evidence further weakens efforts to justify original sin in the face of Scriptures that teach personal accountability (e.g., Ezekiel 18:20).⁹

II. Considerations Against Infant Baptism.

- A. The Scriptures never mention the baptism of infants.¹⁰
- B. Every account of baptism in the New Testament shows that it was a response by believers (see Acts 18:8).
- C. Historically, the beginning of infant baptism is no earlier than the end of the second century.¹¹

Conclusion

- 1. The question of infant baptism is one of authority.
 - a. The NT is silent about the specific practice.
 - b. But the NT is far from silent about baptism's meaning. Baptism does not stand alone as the cause of salvation. It is part of a process in which one indicates a willingness to take God at his word and accept his grace in the manner and timing he has determined.
 - c. The Bible authorizes immersion in water to enter newness of life for those who, by their faith and repentance, show that they understand its significance in light of God's plan.
- 2. What about the children? We need to love them, teach them, and nurture them. But we do not need to baptize them until they, too, demonstrate the faith and repentance upon which baptism is based.

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⁸ "Origen's statements indicate that infant baptism preceded this justification [original sin] for its practice. As has often been true in Christian history, the practice preceded its doctrinal defense" (Ferguson, *Baptism*, 369).

⁹ See Ferguson's elaboration of this evidence in his *Church*, 145.

¹⁰ It has been pointed out that "the NT is equally silent about any postponement of the baptism of children of Christian parents to riper years. There is no recorded instance in the NT of the baptism on profession of faith of any but new converts. If the practice of the early church was to postpone baptism in such cases until years of discretion, it is remarkable that it has left no trace in documents written over a period of at least three generations. The direct historical evidence of the NT is insufficient to settle the question either for or against infant baptism; the case must be argued on other grounds." (W. F. Flemington, "Baptism," *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. 1, 352.)

In response, I would argue that there are in fact other grounds for arguing against infant baptism, namely the prerequisites for baptism of faith and repentance. I would also observe that the point about typical NT conversion cases cuts both ways. Since the general rule is baptism upon the basis of faith and repentance, it seems odd that if there was an exceptional case for children of Christians, it would not have been mentioned. In fact, infant baptism cannot be proved from the New Testament and the other considerations (the prior expectation of faith and repentance and subsequent expectation of informed discipleship) weigh against it.

¹¹ Support for this point has grown in recent years, even among those who practice infant baptism. For recommended sources in this debate, see Ferguson, *Church* 196, n. 47, and his chapter on the subject in *Baptism*, 362-379.