



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

Baptism: The Problem of Accountability

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Introduction

1. Around 200 AD in North Africa, Tertullian responded to the trend toward infant baptism by pointing out that, while the Lord had said that little children should be allowed to come to him (Matthew 19:14), they should “come” only after they had been instructed and learned why they were to come. “Let them become Christians when they are able to know Christ” (*On Baptism* 18, in Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 364).
2. That was only the beginning of Tertullian’s argument. He went on to introduce what is really the crucial, though often overlooked, issue in the discussion: the seriousness of spiritual commitment.

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? Should we act more cautiously in worldly matters, so that divine things are given to those to whom earthly property is not given? Let them learn to ask for salvation so that you may be seen to have given “to him who asks” (*On Baptism*).
3. Tertullian raised an important good point. Would we expect an infant/small child to hold a job and make his way in life? Would we allow an infant/small child to get married and start a family? No? Then, what are we thinking when we imply an expectation that children are ready for an adult-level spiritual commitment?
4. Tertullian’s analysis casts a longstanding question in a new light, but does not resolve it.
 - i. Child nurturing, properly understood, assumes that children are *growing* to the point of being able to handle adult-level commitments.
 - i. A child’s allowance is tied to his chores, he gets a summer job, etc., in *preparation* for a lifetime of career and work.
 - ii. She learns relationship skills through various social experiences even as she comes to terms with physical and emotional changes and maturation; those things are necessary for maturing to practice the kind of commitment involved in a marriage.
 3. Is it not sensible that the same kind of maturing commitment process would be involved in the spiritual realm? That there would be levels of commitment that are firm, yet are still moving toward a more mature commitment commensurate with being an adult?
 - b. More importantly—given what normally receives most emphasis in this discussion—is it not important for the maturing child to do something about the sin that has begun to enslave him?

If we can have “juvenile court,” is it not reasonable to say that one does not have to reach adulthood to be guilty of sin and in need of receiving salvation?

5. These are concerns to consider as we think about the problem of accountability. Most of us know that there is no simple answer (“age 12”), but we also know that we need something to help us as we seek an answer.

Body

I. Clarifying the Problem.

A. Some case studies.

1. Veteran preacher T. Pierce Brown wrote, “Two precious girls, one 9 and one 13 years old, came to me to be baptized. I baptized the nine year old, but did not baptize the thirteen year old . . .” (“The Age of Accountability,” *Firm Foundation* 100 [1983]: 121).
2. Edward Fudge shared these stories (“Baptism and the Children of Believers,” *Firm Foundation* 99 [1982]: 292).
 - a) Two Christian parents, earnestly discussing their children, say, “John (or Mary) is nearly twelve and hasn’t been baptized. Do you suppose we should have a talk with him/her?”
 - b) A high-powered evangelist “pours it on.” People stream down the aisles, requesting baptism. Many are from Christian homes, and some are no more than seven or eight years old.
3. A third story Fudge shares is better analyzed in light of conversations between a colleague and me a few years ago.
 - a) Several of our children, some no more than eight or nine, came forward for baptism. In more than one case, the child was accompanied down the aisle by a parent, some holding the child’s hand.
 - b) From Fudge: Someone comes for baptism at the time of invitation, saying, “I was baptized as a child, but I’m unsure about it now. I would like to be re-baptized.”

B. Questions arise from these experiences include the following.

1. Why do children feel the need to be baptized?
 - a) Do they view it as a rite of passage?
 - b) Are they being pressured into a sense of false guilt?
 - c) Do parents have an exaggerated sense of urgency, or a misunderstanding of the child’s state before God (evident in the inscriptions in the early church that show why infant baptism likely began; see Ferguson, *Early Christians Speak* 62ff.)?
 - d) Are they making a commitment to Jesus or to baptism? Deciding for discipleship or getting a spiritual “membership card”?
2. Do children (and parents/church family) have a faulty sense of right and wrong?
 - a) Brown calls our attention to this question: “The question which came to me in the Bible study was like this: ‘Suppose my child is told to leave the candy alone, and does not. She gets her hand slapped, and thus realizes it is “wrong” to take the candy. She sneaks and does it behind my back, knowing that she will be punished if she is caught. Is she not at the age of accountability? If not is it proper to punish her for her disobedience, since she is not accountable? If so, is she a sinner, and in need of salvation, since she did what she knew to be wrong?’”

- b) Brown answers by calling attention to the ambiguous use of the terms “right and wrong.” For example, we speak of putting a shoe on the “wrong foot.” In light of that analogy, he observes, “A similar question would be, ‘Does a child who learns that it is ‘wrong’ to take candy sin when he/she does so?’ The answer to that question is not ‘Yes,’ or ‘No,’ but ‘not necessarily so.’”
 - c) The question, then, is whether a child has reached “‘the age of accountability’ with reference to a conditioned response in which his parents have taught him that punishment will follow certain actions, and therefore he ought not do those things. But this does not mean he is at the ‘age of accountability’ with reference to what God wants” (Brown, 121).
3. There are also theological questions involved.
- a) “Sometimes there has been a tendency to come out where the old revivalism did: one must be lost in order to be saved, so the child is painted as a little sinner. Perhaps related is the tendency to baptize at a younger and younger age” (Ferguson, *The Church of Christ*, 199).
 - b) This goes directly to our theology of baptism. “We have been emphatic and clear in demanding that believers be baptized. That is good. But we have been less than careful to see where those believers were placing their faith. That is bad. We walk a tight rope between neglecting gospel baptism on one hand, and making an idol of it on the other” (Fudge, “The Roots of the ‘Age of Accountability’ Problem,” *Firm Foundation* 99 [1982]: 310).

II. Gaining Theological Perspective.

- A. Before thinking about the “age of accountability,” or even a theology of baptism, we are wise to think about the condition of the child.
- 1. The New Testament is positive about children, holding them forth as examples of humility (Matthew 18:1-4; 19:13-15).
 - 2. A believer’s child is in some sense “holy” because the parent is a believer (1 Corinthians 7:14).
 - a) The background for Paul’s comments here is not salvation, but Jewish ideas of ritual purity or impurity, and specifically with whether one who accepts Christ should put away his/her unbelieving mate (Ferguson, *Church*, 199).
 - b) “Paul does not assume that an unbeliever is saved because the spouse is a believer (vs. 16). The question is the legitimacy of the marriage relationship so that it is proper to remain in the marriage” (Ferguson, *Church*, 199).
 - c) “A corollary is the condition of the children; are they in a state of purity as it relates to the Christian community? Paul indicates that the answer is ‘Yes.’ Nothing is said here about baptism; the state of holiness comes from the believing parent not from baptism and no impurity requires the cleansing of baptism” (Ferguson, *Church*, 199).
 - 3. Ephesians 6:1, 4 shows that “the child of a Christian home is in some kind of relation to the Lord . . . The child of Christian parents sustains a special relation to the Lord that the child of non-Christians would not” (Ferguson, *Church*, 200).
 - 4. Relative to the “age of accountability,” “there must be some way in which the religious experience of the child is not denied and treated as non-Christian but the real meaning of believer’s baptism maintained” (Ferguson, *Church*, 200).
- B. We need a theology of baptism that is both as narrow and as broad as Scripture’s.

1. Some of David Lipscomb's analysis of baptism offers some help.
 - a) He observed that we focus on one passage where the preposition *eis* is used to convey the object of baptism (Acts 2:38), but the preposition is also used with baptism in several other texts: baptism *eis* the name of Christ (Acts 8:16; 19:5; 1 Corinthians 1:13, 15), the death and resurrection of Christ (Romans 6:3-4), the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:13), and putting on Christ (Galatians 3:27).
 - b) Lipscomb pointed out that *all* are biblical purposes; together, they show a breadth about baptism that we have not always stressed.
 - c) Going a step further, he noted "that the emphasis upon remission of sins in the examples of conversion in Acts occurred only where a strong sense of guilt was prominent in the minds of the converts [Acts 2:38; 22:16]. . . . However, in the other examples, the need for providing relief for a conscience agonizing over personal sin was not so pronounced (e.g., the Ethiopian treasurer in Acts 8). In these other cases, the emphasis shifts to baptism in the name of Christ. Lipscomb felt it extremely important to point out that the expression 'in the name of Jesus' was connected more often with baptism in Acts than the expression 'for the remission of sins'" (Jerry Gross, "The Rebaptism Controversy Among Churches of Christ," in David Fletcher, ed., *Baptism and the Remission Of Sins*, 312).
2. Some points of clarification.
 - a) Lipscomb was not saying that "for the remission of sins" should not be taught; he did say that it is *blessing that results* from baptism, not part of the command.
 - b) Nor was he dealing specifically with "the age of accountability."
 - c) But, his analysis is helpful for this study in that he calls attention to biblical evidence that does not put all the emphasis in baptism on guilt and forgiveness, a point that is helpful for dealing with the children of believers.
- C. Moving toward a theology of child baptism.
 1. We have already noticed the danger of making an idol out of baptism, of treating it as if it is the biggest issue in the salvation process, or even as the thing to which we make the commitment (witness our language: "we have to get [them] baptized").
 2. That may partly explain cases where believers show no urgency to be involved with the church beyond attendance, and may not attend: "I've always been 'Church of Christ'" they may say; i.e., "I got baptized"—my "membership card"—and all is therefore well.
 3. Put another way, more is involved than merely feeling guilty or the sense of being lost.
 - a) A broader, *New Testament*, view of baptism sees it as "the person's acceptance of Christ and of responsibility for public involvement in the life of the church" (Ferguson, *Church* 200).
 - b) The question is not merely one of having a sense of sin and guilt, but whether we've inquired "concerning the nature and content of [the child's] faith and commitment to Jesus (not to baptism) . . ." (Fudge, *Firm Foundation* 99: 292).

III. When Is the Right Time?

- A. This study should make it evident that there is no "one right time" for all children.
 1. Children mature at different rates.
 2. Different aspects of their maturity occur at different times (e.g., cognitive development may be ahead of emotional or moral development).

3. Commitment to discipleship is important, and reflects a more mature response than mere guilt, suggesting that postponing baptism until later may not be as concerning as some have said.
 4. Finally, all any of us can do is counsel the child; a commitment to Jesus is by definition a *personal* commitment; that counsel should take into account a sense of sin and guilt, but it should also consider more than that.
- B. Some comments from Everett Ferguson are of value as we consider our counsel.
1. For the child growing up in the Christian home, baptism “would mark a break with sin, in anticipation and resolve, if not in extent of experience. The baptism of a child of Christian parents should be seen in continuity with the childhood religious experience. Now is the time of deliberate choice and expression of personal faith (not still the faith of the parents)” (Ferguson, *Church*, 200).
 2. Questions remain.
 - a) At what time is baptism appropriate for *this* child?
 - b) When is he or she ready to make a responsible decision for a life of faith?
 - c) How long is he or she in a state of “holiness” by virtue of having believing parents?
 - d) When does he or she assume responsibility for himself or herself?
 - e) When is there real understanding and not just knowing the right words to say?
 3. “The Bible does not give an age. The person must face the consciousness of sin (which to some degree may come quite early) and the necessity of assuming the responsibility for actions (that may be very much later)” (Ferguson, *Church*, 201).

Conclusion

1. A story from the middle ages tells about a strange man who was a boatman on a river, ferrying people across. Sometimes, he would have just one passenger. “Are you a Christian?” he would ask. If any man said *no*, he would proceed immediately to forcibly baptize him in mid-river. (Felton Spraggins, “What Must One Know at Baptism?” *Study Echoes* V: 11)
2. We would never do such thing, but at times some may have gotten close to it where their children were concerned. It’s always difficult to let children grow and make their own decisions. But, if it is necessary for their careers and mates, how much more necessary is it for their spiritual growth?
3. Let us teach. Nurture. Equip. Help them to know what the Bible teaches about discipleship and church involvement and responsibility. Let us encourage them to think critically and grow in the kind of maturity that makes a free will choice for Jesus and his way. And when they are ready, let us joyously baptize them—and all who obey him in that step—that they may enter the joys of salvation.

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