

## **Baptism and the Nurture of Covenant Children**

*By Rev. Andy Wilson*

### **A Means of Grace**

Baptism is an essential feature of Christian discipleship. It is one of the chief means by which the church fulfills her calling of making disciples (see Mt. 28:19). Baptism signifies our union with Christ in his death and resurrection, as well as our corporate identity with his covenant people. It is the rite of initiation into the covenant community. Baptism is one of the church's two sacraments (the other is the Lord's Supper). As a sacrament, baptism is not merely a sign that testifies to a person's faith; it is also a means by which God applies the gospel to our lives. It is a "means of grace." What does this mean?

It does not mean that saving grace is somehow conveyed by the water itself or by the power of the one who baptizes. Nor does it mean that baptism is inseparably linked to salvation. Many people get baptized but never exhibit the qualities that are produced by genuine saving faith.

Instead, baptism is a means of grace in the sense that it is one of the instruments that God uses to apply the gospel to our lives. Baptism is a means of grace, but neither baptism nor the one who administers it is an agent of grace. There is only one agent of grace: the Holy Spirit. Baptism is made effectual for salvation by God's promise to use it to that end and by the working of the Holy Spirit within the lives of the elect. Like the other means of grace (the Word of God and the Lord's Supper), baptism is only effectual for salvation when it is accompanied (at some point) by faith.

Along those lines, it is important to realize that the Holy Spirit's use of baptism as a means of grace is not tied to the moment when a person is baptized. In the case of baptized infants, the Holy Spirit uses baptism as one of the means by which He produces saving faith within the elect. Notice the consistency between this understanding of baptism and what the Bible teaches about salvation. Salvation is ultimately contingent upon God's grace in election, not upon an individual's profession of faith (see Eph. 1:3-14). While an infant cannot make a profession of faith when he is baptized, the Holy Spirit can and does use baptism as one of the means by which He brings elect infants to saving faith. Remember, baptism is the entrance rite into the church. By providentially placing an infant into a Christian family and commanding those parents to baptize that child, the Lord graciously gives that child the benefit of being raised within the church.

### **Infant Baptism**

In the OT, circumcision was the sign of inclusion in the covenant community. Circumcision was not merely a sign of membership in ethnic Israel, but a spiritual sign,

the sign of the covenant (see Gen. 17:11). As such, it was a sign of faith. Abraham only received the sign of circumcision after he believed God (see Rom. 4:11). But God commanded Abraham (and Israel) to place the sign of faith upon his children, even those that were not yet able to exercise faith.

In the NT, circumcision is replaced by baptism as the sign of inclusion in the covenant community; the sign of faith. Since the NT does not repeal the OT command to place the sign of the covenant upon the children of believers, there is no reason why the children of Christian parents should not be baptized. This is the basic argument for why we baptize the infant children of Christian parents. In Col. 2:12-13, Paul uses both circumcision and baptism to describe the Christian's inclusion in Christ. Circumcision was the sign of covenant inclusion in the Old Testament. Baptism is the sign of covenant inclusion in the New Testament. In this passage, Paul brings both of them together in reference to the cross of Christ. The cross is the bridge between the covenants. The Old Covenant pointed forward to the cross, and the New Covenant points back to the cross.

This connection between the two covenant signs helps us to understand why the church practices infant baptism. While some Christians might think that infant baptism is something that was inherited from Roman Catholicism, it is actually rooted in our belief that the NT is the fulfillment, not the replacement, of the OT. For this reason, the church's administration of the sign of baptism should be guided by Israel's administration of the sign of circumcision under the old covenant. In the OT, Jewish infant males were circumcised when they were eight days old. Even though they were only infants, the children of believers were given the sign of inclusion in the covenant community.

It is also noteworthy that God claimed the children of Israelites as his own possession. In Ezek. 16:20-21, a passage where God is rebuking the Israelites for handing their children over to idols, he calls the children of the Israelites "my children." This is not merely an Old Testament idea. In 1 Cor. 7:12-14, Paul says that children who have at least one Christian parent are "holy." In other words, God claims them as his own because they have been born into the covenant community.

Some of the other New Testament passages that strongly infer the practice of infant baptism include: Peter's declaration that the gift of the Spirit is for Christians and for their children (Acts 2:39); the "household baptisms" in the book of Acts (16:15, 33, 34; 11:14); Paul's ascription of covenant status to children (Eph. 1:1; 6:1).

It is also significant that the historical evidence is overwhelmingly in support of the practice of infant baptism. There are references to infant baptism dating as early as the 2nd century AD, and infant baptism was the universal practice of the church until it was opposed by the Anabaptists in the 16th century.

Finally, it is important to clarify that infant baptism in no way guarantees salvation for the children of believers. In both the OT and the NT, the only way of salvation is through faith. Many circumcised Israelites proved to be apostate, and many who have been baptized in the church fail to exhibit genuine faith. Nevertheless, the sign of the

covenant has been given by God, and he determines how he will define who is included in the covenant community. The consistent testimony of Scripture is that children who are born into covenant families by God's providential grace are entitled to receive all of the benefits of being raised within the covenant community. This is why we baptize the infant children of believers.

### **The Duties of Parents**

Children are a great blessing and a great responsibility. Children should not be treated as a burden, but as a heritage from the Lord (see Ps. 127:3). Christian parents are commanded to instruct their children about God and His ways. For this reason, parents who present their children for baptism at our church are asked to make these vows before God and his church (from The Book of Church Order, 56-5):

1. Do you acknowledge your child's need of the cleansing blood of Jesus Christ, and the renewing grace of the Holy Spirit?
2. Do you claim God's covenant promises in (his) behalf, and do you look in faith to the Lord Jesus Christ for (his) salvation, as you do for your own?
3. Do you now unreservedly dedicate your child to God, and promise, in humble reliance upon divine grace, that you will endeavor to set before (him) a godly example, that you will pray with and for (him), that you will teach (him) the doctrines of our holy religion, and that you will strive, by all the means of God's appointment, to bring (him) up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord?

We urge parents to be faithful to these vows by cultivating the habit of family worship and by teaching our church's catechism to their children (The Westminster Shorter Catechism, and the simplified version for younger children). Children can begin learning the catechism as soon as they learn to talk. The key to catechesis is repetition. Keep on reviewing questions and add new ones as your child is ready. The practice of catechetical instruction is especially helpful because it prevents us from seeing the faith as our own private possession that we are free to transmit as we wish.

As for family worship, set a daily time (after dinner can work well), be consistent, and keep it simple, with these basic components: (1) Sing a hymn(s) together; (2) Read a portion of Scripture (or a good story Bible) together; (3) Spend a few moments explaining and asking questions about the basic elements of the passage that has been read; (4) Spend a few moments reviewing catechism and memory verses; (5) Pray together, responding to what you have learned about God from his Word.

Finally, it is also important for Christian parents in our age to teach their children to be wise in their use of electronic media (television, videos, movies, video games, recorded music, the internet, cell phones, etc.) In some cases, this may require a serious change in your own lifestyle, but it is a change worth making. Our culture has shifted away from being a word-based culture to being an image-based culture, and the results have not

been good: shortened attention spans, instant gratification, loss of discipline, laziness, materialistic values, and disinterest in reading. Images communicate in a different manner than words. Even “educational” or “Christian-based” programs, videos, and games send children the implicit message that the only things worth learning are those things which entertain and stimulate them. This is problematic because learning requires hard work, and discipleship requires discipline. There is a good reason why the Bible consistently elevates the written and spoken word over the image. Words make a moral demand upon us. To truly listen to someone, whether by hearing or reading, requires that we set aside our interests and take the time to try to see things from that other person’s perspective. For the most part, the images used by today’s media simply cater to our own interests. So make a commitment to be a family of the Book, as well as a family of books in general. It is a decision that you, and your children, will not regret.