

Household Baptism

by Scott Sauls adapted for City Church

It is the regular practice at City Church to baptize two groups of people. The first group consists of men, women, and children who demonstrate both a genuine faith in Jesus Christ and a desire to join the City Church family (i.e., “believer’s baptism”). The second group consists of the infants and children of our church members. Perhaps one of the most common questions asked of us is, “Why do you baptize infants and children who have not yet made a public profession of faith in Christ?” The simple answer to this question is that (1) while we firmly believe this is *not* an issue over which Christians should divide, yet (2) we are convinced that both the Bible and early church history support the practice of household baptism, which includes infants and young children. Following are some of the factors that have led us to this conclusion.

Biblical Rationale

It is the belief of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC) and of City Church that God’s covenant of grace (His promise to be our God and have us as His people), in a mysterious way that we cannot quite grasp, extends to the children, “offspring,” or “seed” of believers. Such children, we believe, therefore have a right to the covenant sign, which in the New Testament is baptism (in the Old Testament the sign was circumcision). Following is a detailed reasoning of why we, at the request of those who share our beliefs on this matter, will baptize infants, as well as other children in a believing household who have not yet made a profession of faith.

Covenant Continuity

In the New Testament, baptism replaces circumcision as the sign of the covenant.

- Colossians 2:11-12 teaches that baptism is the full expression of circumcision. The covenant of circumcision required that the infant male be circumcised as a newborn infant (Genesis 17:12), and this covenant was to be an *everlasting* covenant (Genesis 17:13). Physical circumcision is clearly no longer in effect (Galatians 6:11-18), but the covenant it represents *is* still in effect (Romans 2:29). The new outward sign of this “everlasting” covenant with believers and their children is baptism (Colossians 2:11-12). Therefore, we believe it follows, then, that baptism is to be administered to the children of believing parents.
- Acts 2:38-39 describes baptism with virtually the same language and terms with which Genesis 17:9-14 describes circumcision. The promise connected with baptism in Acts 2:38-39 explicitly includes the children of believers, as did the promise connected with circumcision in Genesis 17:9-14. No mention of a required age or profession of faith is made with respect to such children.
- As circumcision was a requirement for the Old Testament household (Genesis 17:10, 12-13), so, we believe, was baptism for the New Testament household (Acts 16:15, 31-33; 1 Corinthians 1:16). Never once are children said to be excluded from a household baptism, except in the case of the Ethiopian eunuch, who obviously had no children.
- There is no biblical command given for believers to cease the application of the covenant sign with their children.

The “Sainthood” of Covenant Children

In the New Testament, believers’ children were regarded as members of the covenant community.

- In Luke 18:15-17, Jesus said that God’s Kingdom belongs to little children (from the Greek *brephe*, which literally means “baby” or “infant”).
- In Ephesians 6:1-4 and Colossians 3:20-21 Paul addresses children (from the Greek *tekna*, meaning “child”) as believers in Christ. He speaks to them as he would any saint, regardless of age.
- In 1 Corinthians 7:14 Paul refers to the children (*tekna*) of believers as “holy” (meaning set apart for God). The word translated “holy” (*hagia*) is the exact same word used elsewhere by the apostles in reference to believers (translated “saints” – see Ephesians 1:1, for example). The New Testament assumption, then, is that children of believers should be *regarded* and *treated* as believers unless or until they prove themselves to be covenant breakers.
- In 2 Timothy 3:15, Timothy is said to have known the Scriptures from infancy (*brephe*).
- In Luke 1:15, John the Baptist is said to have been filled with the Spirit, “even from his mother’s womb”.

- The New Testament suggests nowhere that the sign of the covenant (previously circumcision, now baptism) is to be withheld from the children of believers until they make an informed profession of faith in Christ.

Disclaimer

Our position on household baptism does not reflect a belief that baptism itself saves a child. In order to be saved, a child must possess his / her own personal faith in Jesus as Savior and Lord. The initial seeds of faith may or may not be in chronological union with the time of baptism. When a child professes faith at some point after baptism, that is the time in which the baptism and all that it signifies takes full effect. Until that time, the child's baptism is regarded as the sign of the child's inclusion in the church community (and all its benefits, except the Lord's Supper) by virtue of his / her parents' faith and the promise of God to be "their God and the God of their children."

Historical Rationale

It is a well-attested fact that household / infant baptism was the universal practice of the early church. No reputable biblical historian or scholar, whether Presbyterian or Baptist or otherwise, will dispute this fact.

- Irenaeus (a disciple of Polycarp, who was a disciple of the apostle John) speaks of infant baptism as a universal practice in the early church.
- Tertullian (end of 2nd century) acknowledged the universal practice of infant baptism.
- Origen (2nd and 3rd centuries) spoke of infant baptism as the common practice of the early church.
- These things being the case, were household (and consequently infant) baptism *not* the New Testament church practice, then the conclusion must be made that a full reversal of the early church's practice occurred immediately following the death of the last apostle. Because there is neither biblical nor extra-biblical evidence indicating so much as a debate about this issue in the first or second centuries, such a reversal is extremely unlikely. We conclude this in large part because there is a wealth of documentation about virtually every other theological debate and/or alleged "heresy" in the early church.

City Church's Attitude about Household Baptism

We encourage household baptism at City Church, but *do not require it* of those who cannot accept it. To us the biblical and supporting historical teaching seems clear, so we do encourage City Church parents to have their children baptized. However, parents who are not convinced of our position are *not* required to have their children baptized in order to be fully active and fully received church members, and will not in any way be pressured to do so. This is an issue about which we are happy to disagree without it being any hindrance at all to full Christian fellowship. We will under no circumstance make this "non-essential" issue an essential one.