

Studies in renewal

Study 5:

Infant baptism or believer's baptism: a wrong alternative

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WHAT COMES FIRST: BAPTISM OR FAITH?

In one form or another 'believer's baptism' seems closely linked with many charismatic renewal groups. It is not rare for 'born-again' Christians to doubt the value of their one-time infant baptism. As a result of such doubts many desire a second baptism, a believer's baptism, while others refuse to have their infants and small children baptised 'until they are old enough to believe'.

Such attitudes usually go hand in hand with a criticism of infant baptism as it is practised in most traditional churches, including the Lutheran Church of Australia. The supporters of believer's baptism claim that in the New Testament only those people who believed in Jesus and expressly desired to be baptised as a result of their faith were baptised.

The implication is that first there must be faith, then we may have Baptism. Obviously, this leads to a total negation of infant baptism in the sense that an infant cannot say, 'I believe, and desire to be baptised.'

What does the New Testament say about this?

BAPTISMAL PRACTICES IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

There can be no doubt that the New Testament gives us examples of the baptism of adults who have come to faith in Christ as their Lord and Saviour. For these men and women, faith in Christ preceded their baptism. Using our terminology: they desired a believer's baptism.

This circumstance is not surprising. After all, the New Testament reflects the first missionary period in the history of the Christian Church. On that first Pentecost Sunday the first Christian congregation was formed through the baptism of adult men and women (Acts 2:41). Philip also baptised the Ethiopian after this man had clearly expressed his wish to be baptised

(Acts 8:37). Wherever the Christian Church grows through missionary expansion, adult baptism will be part of such growth. This has been the case from the Church's earliest beginnings to this very day. And as the number of unbaptised adults grows in our secularised society, adult baptisms will continue to be an important aspect of the Church's ministry. This is reflected in a text such as Mark 16:16, 'He who believes and is baptised will be saved.'

This is, however, only the one side of New Testament baptismal practice. There is also evidence that not only individuals were received into baptism, but also whole families (Acts 16:15; 16:32, 33; 1 Cor 1:16). As we well know, the early Christian households included not only the parents and their children, but also the servants and their children. If the head of the household became a Christian through Baptism, all other members were also baptised. The sociological structure of society in those days made any other practice unthinkable. Totally unthinkable is also the suggestion that infants and small children were excluded from such family/household baptisms with the explanation, 'You must wait until you are old enough to know what you believe. Then you can make your own decision.' No, all the members of a household were included in that fellowship with Christ that comes through Baptism.

Another passage from Scripture also gives us information about how the earliest church regarded the children of baptised and believing parents. In 1 Corinthians 7:14 such children are called 'holy' (i.e. belonging to Christ), if they have a believing father or mother. Paul elsewhere uses the term 'holy' to describe those who are members of a Christian congregation, and as such, are baptised (e.g. Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 1:2; 2 Cor 1:1; Eph 1:1; Phil 1:1; etc.). While it is possible that the unbelieving husband or wife may leave the family and the sanctifying influence of the Christian partner, Paul accepts that the children in such a family are not separated from their Christian parent (v 15). In this way the unity of the Christian family remains. Even though there is no mention of Baptism in this context, the terminology here used with reference to the children reminds us of Paul's concept of the 'saints', which elsewhere clearly presupposes the act of Baptism.

To exclude children and infants from Baptism would therefore be in conflict not only with the earliest Christian concept of the family, but also with Paul's concept of the saints. So there can be no reason for doubting that the New Testament baptismal practice included infants and children, even at a time when the majority of baptisms would have been performed on adults. It should also be pointed out that the New Testament nowhere regards the matter of baptising small children as a problematical issue. And the alternative: 'infant baptism/believer's baptism' is most definitely alien to it.

For study:

1. Read Acts 2:41; 8:37 and Mark 16:16 in their context.
What conclusion may we draw from such passages with respect to the age of many candidates for Baptism in New Testament times?
Why were there so many candidates for Baptism from this age sector in early Christian times?
2. Read Acts 16:15; 16:32, 33 and 1 Corinthians 1:16.
What term do we use to describe baptisms which included more than just one individual?
What important conclusion may we draw from such baptisms?

BAPTISM AND INSTRUCTION IN THE FAITH

As the Church grew, it developed a period of instruction for adult candidates for baptism, who were called catechumens. This instruction culminated in Baptism, which then resulted in participation in the Sacrament of the Altar.

In the case of such adults, it was certainly meaningful and necessary that Baptism be preceded by instruction in the faith. But as more and more children were baptised, and this became the general practice, the order of instruction and Baptism had to be reversed. Since an infant cannot be instructed in the faith, instruction followed Baptism. This is not a theological reversal, but simply a practical one. Nor is this sequence unscriptural, as our Lord's Great Commission reminds us: 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them ... teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you' (Matt 28:19, 20). It is certainly noteworthy that Baptism is mentioned before teaching.

It must be stressed that the church is certainly not wrong in first baptising infants and instructing them later on, while reversing this order in the case of adults.

For study:

3. Baptism and instruction in the faith have always belonged together for the Church. What is the normal order for these two where adults are involved? Why?
4. Read Matthew 28:19, 20.
In the light of this passage discuss the statement: 'As more and more children were baptised, and this became the general practice, the order of instruction and Baptism had to be reversed.'
Why do we say that such a reversal was not a theological but a practical one?

BAPTISM IS ALWAYS AN ACT OF GRACE

What we have said up to this point means that the Church is obedient to its Lord's command, and in harmony with earliest Christian practice, whenever it ensures that the unity of Baptism and teaching is maintained - irrespective of the sequence of these events.

Those who insist that the (adult) believer's baptism is the only valid form of Christian baptism, not only ignore what Holy Scripture says about family/household baptisms; they also place a potentially very dangerous emphasis on the importance of our human decisions in making Baptism possible. In adult baptism there is, of course, a point at which the believer says: 'Yes. I do desire to be baptised.' It is crucially important, however, to see that it is not this human decision that allows us to perform the act of baptism. Nor is it this decision that makes Baptism effective.

In Baptism, the eternal God reaches down to us sinners, embraces us with his love, and says, 'I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine' (Isa 43:1). We are not redeemed, nor are we called, because of our worthiness. We do not come to Baptism because that is faith's prerogative. Nor are we baptised because we have already been born again. No. We are baptised without any merits or worthiness on our part. But God says to us, 'I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you' (Jer 31:3).

In Baptism, adults and infants alike are the recipients of that love. The old are no worthier than the young. Those who can understand are not better suited than those who cannot understand. Since all people are born in sin, infants need the 'washing of regeneration' as

much as adults. We are all like an empty, outstretched hand, waiting to be filled. And God fills us with his Spirit through the water and the Word.

That is Grace!

Nothing exemplifies such grace more clearly than the baptism of a helpless infant.

For study:

5. Read Isaiah 41:1 and Jeremiah 31:3.
The word 'Baptism' is not mentioned here, yet these references tell us something important about an action of God such as Baptism. What is it?
6. Discuss the statement: 'In the last instance Baptism is an act of grace.'

BAPTISM AND RESPONSIBILITY

Baptism as an act of God's grace can be described as an act of divine creation. God begins something totally new in our life: he accepts us as his own and gives us his Holy Spirit. Our faith does not create this gift; in faith we receive it. Our faith cannot tell God when it is time to act in this manner in our life; in faith we react to God's offer.

The adult who is baptised accepts the responsibility of growing in faith and not quenching the Spirit he has received. In the case of the infant, this responsibility is primarily that of the Christian parents, but also of the child's God-parents. It is clear that baptismal grace can be neglected, even despised. We can never foresee whether those who come to be baptised will indeed continue in baptismal grace. As God's people we all too often witness how parents who brought an infant to baptism later neglect to fulfil their promises. But such neglect is often experienced also with those who have received a believer's baptism; they lapse in faith and sincerity at a later time.

Such experiences disappoint us and surround our baptism with uncertainty. But then again they serve to remind us of how much everything is really taken out of our control and rests in God's good hands.

Our responsibility is to ensure, as far as is humanly possible, that those desiring Baptism for themselves or for their children are genuinely serious in their intentions and promises. We must remind them of this before and, if necessary, after they have received God's gift. We have the right to exclude from Baptism only those who are obviously insincere about coming to Baptism, who have no intentions of growing in the knowledge of their baptismal grace, and who thereby make a mockery of God's great gift of love. But we may never exclude anyone from baptism on the grounds of age or lack of maturity in the faith.

For study:

7. Baptismal grace can be neglected. Do we have a guarantee that this will not happen?
8. What can we do to ensure, as far as is humanly possible, that baptismal grace is not abused?
9. What steps can we take as a congregation to help parents and godparents be aware of and carry out their responsibilities towards their baptised children?

A WRONG ALTERNATIVE

What we have said in the light of Scripture makes it clear that it is wrong to regard believer's baptism as an exclusive alternative to infant baptism. Both have their place in God's plan for his people. Apart from this, the term 'believer's baptism', as it is frequently used in renewal groups, seems to suggest that there is no involvement of faith in infant baptism, and that believer's baptism is therefore the only real thing. This seems to suggest that faith is related to age.

We must always remember that it is the Spirit of God who works faith in people, irrespective of their age. It is well within his capacity to work in an infant that faith by which we receive the grace of God. After all, Baptism is not a means of grace because we can understand it, but because it is God's saving gift to us. The reality and effectiveness of this gift does not depend on our understanding. A small child can receive its parents' love long before it can understand and respond to it. Parental love is nonetheless a reality for that child.

So, it has rightly been said that in Baptism God makes children of adults and adults of children. In the true sense infant and adult baptism alike are believer's baptism.

For the reasons outlined here it would seem advisable to refrain from using the term 'believer's baptism' as though it were synonymous only with adult baptism. This shifts our focus away from our faith as a means of access to Baptism onto the more important aspect of what God offers us, unworthy though we be.

For study:

10. Discuss the statement: 'In Baptism God make children of adults and adults of children.'

REMEMBER

- There is no reason to doubt that the practice of Baptism in New Testament times included children and infants.
- The Church certainly is not wrong in first baptising infants and later on instructing them, while reversing this order in the case of adults.
- It is wrong, in the light of Scripture, to regard an adult's baptism as being superior to an infant's baptism. Both have their place in God's plan for the salvation of people.