

REFORMED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
OF IRELAND

*Why we Baptize
the Children*

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What does Baptism mean? More especially, what does Infant Baptism mean? What is the use of it? Is it justified on grounds of Scripture and common sense? Does it matter in what way it is administered? These questions are often asked, and it is in response to many such that this booklet is issued.

Faith and Life Series — 2

PRICE SIXPENCE

Why we Baptize the Children

BAPTISM is the sacred ceremony appointed by Christ, by which the Church places upon the baptized person the seal of Christ's promised grace, and receives him into its fellowship.

It was a definite command of the Risen Saviour. And though it would not be in accordance with His spirit to regard an outward sign as absolutely essential to salvation, yet to treat His express command as a matter of trifling importance, which we might obey or not obey at our option, is to be guilty of disloyalty to Him. "If ye love Me, ye will keep My commandments" (John xiv. 15).¹

All adults who profess faith in Jesus Christ, and who have not already received the sacrament, ought to be baptized. Our Church believes in adult baptism as a matter of course, and practises it incessantly on every mission field, and wherever it receives into its communion a believer who has not been already baptized.

It further maintains, however, that the infant children of Christian parents are also to be baptized, and that those parents who withhold their babes from the sacrament are narrowing its gracious Gospel meaning, and impoverishing their own and their children's view of the wealth and tenderness of the Saviour's grace to His little ones.

¹ The quotations are from the Revised Version.

THE MEANING OF INFANT BAPTISM

1. We do not *apologise* for infant baptism as a merely *permissible* practice. We maintain that, even more fully than believers' baptism, **it symbolises the saving truths of the Gospel**. We believe that it was under the guidance of the Holy Spirit that the Church was led to follow the practice, and that it is in perfect harmony with the teaching of our Lord.

The sacraments have two sides, a Divine and a human—what God does, and what we do. **It is a supreme mistake to lay the main emphasis on the human side**, as if baptism were a mere act of self-dedication, a profession of one's repentance and faith. That would be to strip it of all that makes it most precious. It is not only a human act, but a Divine gift and promise. It is not by repentance and faith that we are saved, but by the grace of God in Christ Jesus, His saving love that seeks us long before we can know or seek Him. "If we love Him, it is because He **FIRST** loved us" (1 John iv. 10, 19).

And that is the glorious truth which is represented and sealed in infant baptism. The sacrament declares to the parents, and to the Church, and afterwards to the child, that God loves that child and is seeking to save him, before he has any conscious life or will or repentance or faith. Is it not a great thing to be able to tell the child that, even *before* he could understand, Christ met him with His loving welcome, and called him by name? Every holy impulse in the youngest heart is but a response to a redeeming love that was there **FIRST**. The little babe received at baptism the Saviour's assurance that all the blessings of His salvation were intended for *him*. There, in the symbolic cleansing, the promise was given that the cleansing from the guilt

and stain and power of sin is for *him*, and that Christ is ready from the very beginning to receive him.

Indeed, infant baptism, the rite by which the little one is publicly received into the Christian community, declares the further truth that the child of the Christian home is already *experiencing* certain blessings of the Gospel. Is it not a priceless gift of God's goodness to be born of Christian parents, and to grow up in the atmosphere of the Christian Church and home? From his very birth the child is intended to be Christian, and is actually receiving through the Church life countless ministries of grace.

For this reason **the sacrament should always be administered publicly**, unless there be a very valid excuse. Parents must surely feel that private administration deprives it of a great part of its beautiful significance as the rite by which their child is recognised and welcomed as a member of the community of Christ's disciples.

But still more important is it to remember that infant baptism **lays upon the parents a very solemn obligation**, not only to be themselves living members of the Body of Christ, but also to bring up their children "in the nurture and admonition of the Lord." It is sad that so many still appear to cling to the superstition that the mere act of baptism is in some way a safeguard against eternal danger. Let it be remembered that baptism by itself effects no change in the child's soul, and does not obtain for it any Divine love that was not there before. Fathers and mothers who think they have discharged their whole religious duty to their children when they have had them baptized are grievously mistaking the purpose of the sacrament. Baptism *may* be an empty and meaningless rite either to an adult or to an infant. But that is due to man's faithlessness, not to any deficiency in Christ's grace.

2. The view of infant baptism here offered is thoroughly **in accordance with the teaching of Scripture.**

(a) There are certain obvious and profound **analogies between baptism and circumcision**, and there is scarcely any objection to infant baptism which is not equally applicable to circumcision.

It is taken for granted in the New Testament that the Christian dispensation is the *fulfilment* of the Jewish. Christ came not to destroy, but to fulfil. We may be sure that the ordinances of the Church are not intended to be poorer in holy significance than those of the Synagogue.

Now circumcision was a *religious rite*, and not merely the recognition of the male child as a member of the Jewish *nation*. It was a "seal of the righteousness of faith" (Rom. iv. 11). It imposed far-reaching spiritual obligations: the circumcised are debtors to keep the whole law (Gal. v. 3). It was a "token of a covenant," of which the Divine side was, "And I will be their God" (Gen. xvii. 7-11). And yet, as everybody knows, this *religious rite*, which imposed a moral obligation, and betokened a Divine promise, was administered to infants of eight days.

Circumcision thus declared and sealed God's gracious promise to the unconscious child, and God's claim upon his obedience. And when the Gospel came, with its glorious fulfilment of the promises, there was most assuredly no curtailment of God's loving intention towards the lambs of the flock.

The Scriptures contain not the slightest suggestion that the privileges which the babes enjoyed under the old dispensation should be discontinued under the new. Accordingly, when the Church sets upon its infants the seal of the New Covenant, it is acting in harmony with God's declared attitude to the children of His people.

(b) It is acting also **in harmony with the spirit of the Saviour**, who said, "Suffer the little children to come unto Me, and forbid them not; for of such is the kingdom of God" (Luke xviii. 16). We certainly cannot claim that lovely incident as an express warrant for infant baptism, but it clearly declares the thoughts of Christ about our babes. It has been argued that, if He had intended them to be baptized, He would Himself have baptized them on that occasion. But our Lord baptized no one (John iv. 2). And in any case there was at that time no Christian baptism! Baptism into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit was not instituted until after the Resurrection.

No, He did not baptize them, but He blessed them, and gave them signs of His blessing. He took them up in His arms, and laid His hands upon them (Mark x. 16). He conveyed to them there—and they were only "babes" (Luke xviii. 15)—the assurance of His love, the wonderful, redeeming love of God.

That is what the Church does in infant baptism.

Who dares to say that it meant nothing in after years to those children to know that they had once been held in the arms of Jesus Christ, and blessed by Him? And who can estimate how much it means to countless thousands of young men and women to remember that on the very threshold of their life the Saviour's claim and promise were imprinted on them, and they were welcomed into the fellowship of His people?

II

OBJECTIONS TO INFANT BAPTISM

1. It is urged, for instance, that the New Testament contains no *express command* for the baptism of infants; and that is quite true.

But where a practice is in itself reasonable, and in full accordance with the spirit of the Master, the Church has always felt itself at liberty to act *without* express commands. There is such a thing as the guidance of the Holy Spirit through the Scriptures.

Of this procedure there are two often - quoted illustrations.

(a) **There is no express command to admit women to the Table of the Lord.** In New Testament times, as is well known, the position of women was vastly inferior to that of men. It was by no means to be taken for granted that women should be received to the Lord's Supper. The Supper was instituted at a gathering composed exclusively of men. There is not a hint of any woman ever participating in the sacrament. Yet women *were* received to communion at some definite point in the history of the Church, not because there was an express instruction, but because it was felt to be in accordance with the mind of Christ. Similarly, children were received to baptism, not because there was an express instruction, but because it was felt to be in accordance with the mind of Christ.

(b) **There is no express command in the New Testament to alter the provisions of the Fourth Commandment,** yet the Church, in the exercise of its Christian liberty, abandoned the seventh day in favour of the first. It did this with a good conscience, and with a good conscience we all concur.

2. It is urged that our Lord Himself did not intend infants to be baptized. Did He not say (Mark xvi. 16), "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved," so that obviously belief must precede baptism, and a child, who cannot believe, ought not to be baptized?

But this sort of argument proves too much. Did our Lord really mean that *none but* those who both believed and were baptized should be saved? Did He

really mean that babes who were too young to believe could not be saved? If that is incredible, why should we suppose He meant that *none but* those who were old enough to believe should be baptized? The fact is that a saying like this, which obviously refers only to adults, has no bearing whatever upon the baptism of infants.

In the great Words of Institution (Matt. xxviii. 19, 20) there is not a syllable about either repentance or faith. It is, indeed, most striking how carefully our Lord refrains from detailed regulation, and leaves His people to be guided by the Spirit in the right understanding and administration of the sacraments.

The Words of Institution, however, not only do not exclude infant baptism, but almost suggest it. Our Lord said, "Go ye, therefore, and *disciple*¹ all the *nations*, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I commanded you." Observe that it was the nations corporately that were to be "discipled," and that this was to be done by baptizing and teaching. To disciple a nation, or even a family, would certainly mean to bring all the members of it within the sphere of discipleship—yes, to let even the infants grow up from their earliest days in the atmosphere of discipleship. The Church has recognised that **its Lord intended Christianity for families**, and has rightly interpreted baptism in that sense.

3. It is urged that the only cases of baptism explicitly recorded in the New Testament are those of believers, and that the Apostles in their preaching invariably assume the necessity of repentance and faith preceding baptism. We have, it is said, no New Testament precedent for infant baptism.

¹ There is just *one* Greek word for "make disciples of."

But, if we are to be bound strictly by precedents, remember that we have no New Testament precedent for female communion. And we have no New Testament precedent for baptizing in adult life a child of Christian parents who were Christian when he was born.

If the Apostles dwell so constantly on the necessity of repentance and faith, we must not forget that by the very necessities of the case, they had in view adults who were to be won from paganism and Judaism. **The Church of the New Testament was a Mission Church.** In every mission field, even of a Church like our own which believes firmly in infant baptism, there will at first be none but adult baptisms. Repentance and faith will be constantly set forth as the indispensable conditions. The problem of the place of infants in the Church does not come into prominence until there has been time for Christian family life to develop, and for a settled Christian society to be established.

At what precise point of history the baptism of infants began, or whether it was or was not practised by the Apostles, we have absolutely no evidence. **There is not the slightest trace in Christian history of infant baptism being at any time regarded as an innovation.** There is no record of any ripple of controversy regarding the introduction of a practice which, according to the objector, must have been a startling break with apostolic tradition.

That is a very remarkable fact.

The first of the Fathers to dispute its advisability was Tertullian, who was born about A.D. 160. But the ground of his objection is not that it was an innovation, or that it was contrary to the mind of Christ or the teaching of the Apostles, but simply the superstitious idea that the sacrament ought to be delayed, because sins committed after baptism were more heinous than those committed before. For the same reason he actually goes on to advise against the baptism of unmarried

persons and widows, lest, yielding to their greater temptations, they should become involved in greater sins (*De Baptismo*, 18).

We thus see that, while superstitions often attached themselves and still do, to infant baptism, they attach themselves with equal facility to adult baptism. It came to be believed that the sacrament actually washed away all sins, and many deferred baptism till their death-bed, that they might go clean into the Unseen. Constantine the Great, though long a Christian, was not baptized till the very end of his life.

The truth is that both the sacraments, in whatever form they may be observed, are liable to abuse. It is often alleged that the baptism of infants tends to produce a merely nominal Christianity, and it is perfectly true that a baptized child may fail to avail himself of the grace which was sealed to him. But is it not equally true that a baptized adult may disappoint the expectations of the Church and the love of the Redeemer? And have Churches which restrict themselves to believers' baptism any less reason than others to deplore the existence of a nominal Christianity in their midst? To whomsoever the sacrament is administered, it is a gracious sign and promise. The thing signified must be appropriated, either at the time or afterwards, by faith.

III

THE MODE OF BAPTISM

The mode of baptism is a very secondary matter, but it is sometimes exalted into primary importance.

Does it really matter at all whether baptism is administered by immersion, or by pouring or by sprinkling?

1. There is no doubt whatever that the original meaning of the word "baptize" is to dip or immerse. Further, it is quite possible, though it is wholly incapable of proof, that immersion was the most usual mode of baptism in New Testament times. That it was the *only* mode is extremely improbable.

The original meaning of a word, however, is not necessarily that which it bears in ordinary usage, and does not necessarily represent its essential significance. Thus the root-meaning of *capital punishment* is the *cutting off of the head*; but in universal usage the phrase means simply the *death penalty*, howsoever inflicted. So to pretend that the religious significance of baptism is lost if we depart from the root-meaning is to assert something that is refuted by the usage of every language.

The religious significance of baptism is *cleansing*; e.g., "Be baptized, and wash away thy sins" (Acts xxii. 16). And since the cleansing is symbolic, the *quantity* of water employed is of no importance. In Leviticus (xiv. 7) the leper is to be *sprinkled* with blood, and then to be pronounced *clean*. In Ezekiel (xxxvi. 25) it is said, "I will *sprinkle* clean water upon you, and *ye shall be clean*."

2. St. Paul in two places draws a felicitous and moving illustration from the familiar practice of immersion. He compares the baptism of a convert to the burial of Christ, from which He rose to a new life (Rom. vi. 4; Col. ii. 12). This is a striking and profound figure of speech. **But no one would contend for a moment that the reference to burial is part of the original and essential significance of baptism.** Except in these two incidental uses of the metaphor of burial there is not a word in the New Testament to suggest that baptism was intended to symbolise being buried and rising again. The Apostle speaks of being baptized into Christ's *death*, but it cannot be maintained

that the act of immersion could ever symbolise the act of *crucifixion*¹. His metaphors are exceedingly rich and numerous, and we might just as well argue from his words that baptism was intended to represent a changing of raiment: "As many of you as were baptized into Christ, did *put on* Christ" (Gal. iii. 27).

3. There is not a particle of evidence in the New Testament that immersion was regarded as essential to a valid baptism. And in "The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles," believed by some to date from about the same period as the Fourth Gospel, it is expressly enjoined that, in the absence of a sufficient supply of cold or warm water, baptism should be by *pouring*. Had immersion been regarded as essential, the writer would certainly have suggested that the sacrament ought to be postponed until the candidate could be immersed. The custom of the Church evidently was to recognise that a baptism by pouring was a *valid* baptism. It would have been strange indeed if the Church had not felt itself at liberty to adapt the mode of administration to varying situations while still carefully preserving the essential religious significance.

Our Church uses this liberty. It declares, on Scriptural authority (Ezek. xxxvi. 25), that *sprinkling* symbolises cleansing as effectually as immersion, while it is better adapted to our climate and social conditions.

The sacrament of baptism is a beautiful, instructive, and profoundly significant and solemn rite. It seems a great pity that its inward meaning should be obscured by an inordinate attention to its outward details.

In the end of the day only one thing will really matter, not *when* you were baptized, nor *how* you were

¹ Nor could it symbolise the manner of Christ's burial—Ed.

baptized, nor (in some cases) whether you were ever baptized at all, but only whether you have answered the Saviour's call, whether you have been born again, baptized with the Spirit, washed from your sins in the precious blood of our Lord Jesus Christ.

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