

Issues in Reformed Theology

Infant Baptism

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Perhaps the most noticeable difference between Reformed churches and most Evangelical churches is regarding baptism. Reformed churches baptize infants and do not see that a requirement for belief exists in order for baptism to occur. Similarly, other mainline Protestant denominations besides the Presbyterians baptize infants but are not Reformed, such as Lutherans, Episcopalians and Methodists.

Reformed churches do not view baptism as remitting original sin or that sin is washed away. They do not believe that every baptized infant will necessarily go to heaven. They do not baptize infants because they are cute or because the parents need encouragement to raise their child in the Lord. They baptized infants because they believe they are covenant children, which points back to our class on Covenant Theology.

The contrasting view to infant baptism, also known as padeobaptism, is believer's baptism. Certainly Reformed churches baptize believers if they have not been baptized properly beforehand, but the term "believer's baptism" speaks to the specific requirement of belief before baptism occurs. Believer's baptism, also known as credobaptism from the Latin word for believe, was practiced by the early church and has become the belief of most Evangelical churches today.

The issue of baptism is not only a noticeable difference but has historically been a very divisive issue. People with a sacramental view of baptism can view those who do not baptize their infants as depriving the child. This can be seen most dramatically in the Reformation era with the Anabaptists. One of the very first martyrs in the Reformation was Felix Manz, who came to oppose infant baptism. Convicted by the Reformed Zurich city council under the influence of Ulrich Zwingli for baptizing adults who had received infant baptism, Manz was executed by drowning in Zurich on January 5, 1527.

While modern Reformed theologians certainly would not approve of such action, there is a remarkable lack of attention by Reformed teachers to the horrible violence of many of Reformers. For as much as the Reformers are exalted in some circles, this omission is noteworthy. The issue of baptism was a significant part of the reason why the Anabaptists suffered greatly.

Today there is less vitriol over baptism than in the prior centuries. This softening in position is partially due to the rise of Ecumenism and also due to the diminishing numbers of those holding to a Protestant view of infant baptism. But because baptism is such a visible event, particularly in more liturgical churches, there continues to be an active defense for the basis of the practice of baptism. Also, the historic confessions of faith have codified their opposition to believer's baptism.

1. The sacrament of baptism as a means of grace

According to Reformed Theology, there are two sacraments: the Lord's Supper and Baptism. Our last class looked into the sacrament of the Lord's Supper and the same issues of the concept of a sacrament are found in the Reformed sacrament of baptism.

While the Reformers rejected the concept of the sacraments as means of grace unto salvation, they did not oppose the view of the sacraments being a means of grace that delivers a certain objective benefit upon the faithful recipient. Reformed Theology views the sacraments as bringing a special grace to the participant.

What exactly is the grace that the Reformed tradition of baptism believes is conveyed through infant baptism? Grace is imparted to the infant by including them in the covenant community. It sets the child apart with a sign of the covenant, in the same way the children were set apart by circumcision in the Old Testament. The child receives what Christ has done for them and if they are elect, salvation will be manifested in their future belief.

Reformed Theologians have much more to say about what infant baptism does not accomplish but are vague about what infant baptism does accomplish. Roman Catholics teach that infant baptism remits original sin. Baptists believe it is a symbol of inward regeneration. A few of the Reformed perspective equate baptism regeneration (the Federal Vision view) to support the belief of actual grace objectively delivered through the sacrament itself, but this has been opposed by mainstream Reformed theologians.

The typical Reformed view cannot agree with either the Catholic perspective or the Baptist perspective and cannot say that the infant is necessarily elect since some become manifestly apostate. What is left is confusion about what grace is actually conveyed and to whom. To only say the parents are blessed is too similar to the "baby dedication" of the Baptists and to only talk against baptismal regeneration does not advance what is believed.

The question of what the actual benefit that occurs in the grace of infant baptism in Reformed thinking has led Wayne Grudem to respond, "The only alternative seems to be to say that it symbolizes a regeneration that will occur in the future...It does not cause regeneration, nor does it symbolize actual regeneration; therefore it must be understood as symbolizing probable regeneration at some time in the future."

Practically speaking, infant baptism leads to the presumption of future regeneration. As Peter Martyr Vermigli writes, "We assume the children of believers are holy; as long as in growing up they do not demonstrate themselves to be estranged from Christ." It appears that it is the grace of God through the parental instruction of the child that will make future regeneration occur, all within the bounds of the doctrine of God's election. This is referred to as sign and seal of what then will take place, Lord willing, rather than with believer's baptism as a symbol of faith actually professed.

2. Arguments used to defend infant baptism

There are no Bible verses that teach or even refer to the baptism of infants. Most advocates of infant baptism will admit that infant baptism is not explicit in the Bible. Nevertheless, certain Bible texts and concepts are used to support the belief in infant baptism.

a. Generic statements of ministry to children

Statements made by Jesus about children such as “unless you are converted and become like children you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:3) and “let the children alone, and do not hinder them from coming to Me for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these” (Matthew 19:14) say nothing about baptism. They instruct on the kingdom but there is no evidence regarding anything about them to support infant baptism.

b. The mention of household baptism

There are few verses that mention the baptism of entire household (Acts 10:48, 16:15, 33, 18:8, and 1 Corinthians 1:16). This is taken by Reformed theology to mean that very young children were included in baptism. Yet there is no mention of the inhabitants of each household so this point is at best conjecture.

Interestingly, this is viewed as that the households were baptized not based upon the faith of each member of the household but on the basis of the faith of the head of the household. As Byron Chapell writes, “Already we have acknowledged that the mention of a specific infant’s baptism does not occur. But fairness requires that another question also be asked: Are there any examples of households being baptized because of the faith of the head of the household? Over and over again the answer to this question is yes.” Thus infants (and others) are exempt from the requirement to believe as long as the head of the household professes faith.

Yet this idea of the faith not existing on the part of the household is in conflict with the examples in Acts. Acts 10:44 speaks of “all” (not just Cornelius) hearing the word and the Holy Spirit falling on “all.” We find the same thing in Acts 18:8 where all in the household of Crispus believed and were baptized. Also, the household of Stephanas (1 Corinthians 1:16) is later described as having “devoted themselves for ministry to the saints” (1 Corinthians 16:15). The only household baptism that does not have a specific indication of household faith is the case of Lydia’s household in Acts 16:15. To include infants is difficult to believe given that she would have travelled hundreds of miles conducting business in purple fabric while nursing infants.

At times, Peter’s statement in Acts 2:38-39 is used to support infant baptism, “Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and your children, and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God shall call to Himself.”

Yet the command to “repent” is included in Peter’s address, along with the context of 2:41, “So then, those who had received his word were baptized,” indicating faith being exercised by those baptized.

Not only is there no evidence that anyone was baptized based upon the faith of another, there is every indication that the entire household actually believed prior to baptism.

c. Colossians 2:11-12

Colossians 2:11-12 says “in Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ; having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead.” The claim is made by Reformed teachers that the rite of circumcision that once signified the benefits of Abraham’s covenant has been replaced by baptism. Therefore, since the sign of faith in circumcision was provided for infants, so then the sign of faith in baptism is for infants as well.

However, water baptism is no more in view in Colossians 2:11-12 than physical circumcision is being spoken of. Just because this verse contains the words “circumcision” and “baptism” does not mean that water baptism has replaced circumcision. The circumcision spoken of is “circumcision made without hands” or God’s work in the heart of man in salvation. The baptism spoken of is our spiritual death and resurrection in our union with Christ (cf. Romans 6:4).

Furthermore, the idea that baptism replaced circumcision is not only unaddressed in the Bible, its application is different. Only males were circumcised. This is because they were the physical descendants of Abraham, as a sign of ethnic identity, not because of their faith. Baptism is a sign of spiritual union with Christ for all believers. There is no connection between circumcision of infants and baptism of infants in the Bible.

The view that circumcision for the Jews was replaced by baptism for the children of believers is also in conflict with the fact that circumcision continued as a means of identification with Israel (cf. Acts 16:3). Both practices existed at the same time.

d. 1 Corinthians 7:14

1 Corinthians 7:14 says “For the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her believing husband; for otherwise your children are unclean, but now they are holy.

This verse is used by Reformed teachers to argue that infants are made holy through the believing parent and therefore defends the practice of infant baptism. Infant baptism is not practiced in Reformed churches without a believing parent and the belief is that through baptism the infant is incorporated into the covenant community on the basis of the belief of that parent.

1 Corinthians 7 is about marriage and has nothing to say about baptism. The immediate context of 1 Corinthians 7:14 is regarding a spouse who is married to an unbeliever being exhorted to remain with the spouse and the reason given is for sanctification. Obviously this is not sanctification unto salvation but that the unbelieving spouse is “set apart” in some fashion. The same term is used in this verse for being sanctified, or holy, or “set apart.”

Although not speaking of baptism, in a practical fashion, unbelievers have a special place apart from the world through the ministry of the believing spouse (cf. 1 Peter 3:1). Whatever is spoken of for the children is also spoken of about the unbelieving spouse. Are we supposed to baptize the unbelieving spouse? Of course not since baptism is not at issue in 1 Corinthians 7 but the practical influence of godliness is a blessing to the believer’s family. It is in this sense that the family is “set apart.”

e. The lack of a counter command forbidding infant baptism

This perspective is based on the premise that infant baptism has always been practiced and those opposed to it are therefore denying children the covenant blessing. The reason given is that if the apostles intended infants to no longer participate in the covenant, they would have spoken specifically to this. Because the New Testament does not forbid the baptism of infants, the conclusion drawn is that the early church under the direction of the apostles practiced it. Thus the burden of proof rests on those who oppose infant baptism.

However, the New Testament teaches a clear prerequisite that infants cannot fulfill, namely belief. Even Luther, in advocating infant baptism, settled on believing that infants exercise their own faith and receive the Holy Spirit at baptism. The requirement of faith necessarily excluded infants.

There is no evidence that the early church practiced infant baptism until over two centuries after the time of the apostles. That the practice of infant baptism became normative for the church is very similar to so many other religious practices the church wrongly adopted as the centuries progressed. We find no negative command in the Bible regarding infant baptism because there was no practice of it in the church.

It is worth noting the inconsistency of this argument with the Reformed principle of the “regulative principle” which we will discuss further when we look at the issues of church order. The regulative principle asserts that the conduct of church worship should be restricted to only what the Scripture affirms and, conversely, should exclude all other practices. Under this principle, infant baptism should be excluded from practice since it is not found in the Scripture.

Fundamentally, the attachment that Reformed Theology has to infant baptism comes from its history. The followers of Calvin did not make a complete break from Roman Catholicism in regard to the sacraments and their opposition to believer’s baptism and instead supported the institutional church ritual while attempting to defend it from the Bible.

3. Reasons to believe in believer's baptism

a. The requirement of belief for baptism

When baptism is commanded in the Bible it is always associated with the requirement of belief (Acts 2:41, 8:12, 37, 9:18; 10:44-48; 16:14-15; 16:30-34; 18:8; 19:1-5). These verses are significant and should end the debate since infants cannot profess faith in Christ. While faith is possible without baptism, baptism is necessarily accompanied by faith.

Other verses support the examples of the book of Acts. 1 Peter 3:21 says, "baptism now saves you—not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience" which an infant cannot do. The disciples of Jesus baptized Christ's followers in the task of making disciples (John 4:1-2) and Christ commanded baptism be done as part of the disciple-making process (Matthew 28:19-20). This required active participation by the one baptized and taught.

b. The meaning of baptism

Baptism means "to dip" and the practice of baptism is described in connection to bodies of water. John the Baptist used the Jordan River (Matthew 3:6). Examples in Acts used bodies of water for baptism (Acts 8:38-39, 16:13-15). Peter 3:21 speaks of water baptism with words "not the removal of dirt from the flesh" which connotes a larger amount of water. Baptism is a picture of the death, burial and resurrection of Christ (Romans 6:4) and only immersion communicates the illustration.

As John Calvin admitted, "the word '*baptizo*' means to immerse and it is clear that the rite of immersion was observed in the ancient church." This significance of the mode of baptism directly affects the issue of infant baptism since it is difficult to imagine immersing infants.

c. The function of baptism

Baptism serves as an outward symbol of the beginning of the Christian life. Galatians 3:27 says, "For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ." This verse makes little sense for those for whom this symbol is not an actual reality. Since Reformed teachers by and large do not claim that infants who are baptized are regenerated, it is hard to understand this verse as speaking to infants.

The illustration of death and burial with Christ in Romans 6:4, "Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, in order that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life," could hardly have been written with infants in mind. Colossians 2:12 includes the same imagery that cannot be used of those unable to exercise faith. Baptism is more than a sign, it symbolizes the believer's death and resurrection with Christ, which only corresponds to those baptized according to their faith.

4. Problems with infant baptism

a. Infant baptism leads to a misunderstanding of true baptism

Many are those who have awareness, but no memory, of a religious ceremony referred to as baptism. It was done to them but they did not participate in it actively and certainly not as a result of their faith. What are the actual results of these religious events?

The benefits derived from infant baptism appear only in the mind of its advocates. Certainly there is no greater likelihood of a child's salvation, much less even a child's continued participation in a church based upon their infant baptism. The simple fact that Reformed churches and practice infant baptism are shrinking testifies to the ineffectiveness of its role in preserving children as they grow into adulthood.

Yet the problems with infant baptism grow from people who are confused about baptism in the Bible. As people who have been baptized as infants believe in Jesus there can be a reluctance with themselves or with their family on being baptized as a believer in Christ. The negative effect that infant baptism has upon people who need to obey the Lord in believer's baptism is significant.

b. Infant baptism leads to a misunderstanding of the need for salvation in Christ

Bryan Chappell speaks of the following blessing that infant baptism supposedly brings to a child baptized into a covenantal community of believers, "in this atmosphere, faith naturally germinates and matures so that it is possible, even common, for the children of Christian parents never to know a day that they do not believe that Jesus is their Savior and Lord."

As the children grow, there is no time when they are not a part of the church unless they leave. So there is no sense of need to believe in Christ, to choose to participate in the church, no decision to "opt in" so to speak. This leads to children moving along into adulthood devoid of repentance and confession to follow Christ.

c. Infant baptism leads to a misunderstanding of the nature of the church

The Church universal is all the true believers in Christ. The local church is the physical manifestation of the true church, but to a lesser degree due to the tares among the wheat (Matthew 13:24-30). Infant baptism necessarily includes those who are unregenerate into the people of God in the local church.

As they remain over time, the church suffers from a greater number of people who are under the delusion that their religious practice has granted them membership in the church. The church becomes made up of an increasing number of people who were born into it without true faith. The truth is that unbelievers who populate the church do not serve the church and the church is not designed for them. The result is an increase in nominal Christianity that breeds spiritual lethargy.

5. Baby dedication

Many churches that practice believers' baptism have instituted a practice known as "baby dedication" or alternatively "parent dedication" in order to not lead anyone to think the baby is actively involved in this practice. Valley Bible Church did this annually on Mother's Day for decades until a couple of years ago. Why?

There is value that mankind sees in a religious ceremony for an infant. While not done to replace infant baptism, baby dedication provides a congregation the opportunity to see babies and parents can enjoy presenting their babies to the church. Of course prayer for parents and their children is a positive practice and this was the focus of the "dedication." However, the practice of baby dedication is problematic.

The primary challenge is in light of infant baptism. An explanation is necessary in order to protect anyone from thinking this dedication was saving, imparting grace, or otherwise directly benefiting the child. Over time, we came to even contact families in advance to ensure they understood what baby dedications were not. Often the explanation exceeded the prayer in length. Whenever you have to continually explain what you are doing in order to prevent people from misunderstanding, you have a problem.

In that the parents are the active part of the baby dedication, the impression could be given that the parents bear the responsibility for the salvation of the child. Indeed, this is often an area of unrighteous judgment in churches.

There are many commands in the New Testament, of which parenting is addressed sparingly. The most direct command is Ephesians 6:4, for fathers to bring the child up in "the discipline and instruction of the Lord." Yet we do not practice any other public commitment of obedience to any other specific command.

The most significant reason why baby dedication is problematic is the sheer nature of the religious exercise. There is no biblical command, precedent, or example for baby dedication. The examples of Hannah and Samuel, and Mary and Jesus were specific incidents for special cases that are nothing like a baby dedication. Adding a man-made supplemental ceremony of any kind brings about the same type of adherence to religion that has so plagued Catholicism and much of Christianity. Our focus must be on the emphasis of the Bible over the religious ideas of man.

6. Conclusion

Recently, theologians like as Wayne Grudem have advocated that baptism ought not to be a divisive doctrine, calling for membership and even church leadership to be granted to those with differing views. At Valley Bible Church, we welcome all who are interested in learning about Christ and do not require baptism for membership. But baptism as a testimony of inward faith is not optional for it is commanded in the New Testament. More so, we are commanded ourselves to baptize according to Matthew 28:19 so this is hardly a matter to leave to personal opinion.