

Covenant baptism as practised in the Reformed Churches

The question whether children of believing parents should be baptized has been discussed repeatedly in Christian circles, although the practice was not seriously questioned in the first 1000 years of church history. The idea of excluding children from baptism seems to have arisen in Armenia in 1140 AD, according to the Church of Scotland Draft Interim Report on Baptism-p.32 (1959). It had its full expression in the Anabaptist movement, which had its origin in Zurich in 1523. They were called Anabaptists, because they re-baptized those who had been baptized in infancy.

The question of baptism can be considered in the light of God's covenant with his people. God made a covenant with Abraham in Gen. 12: 1-3. God tells Abraham to leave his country and go to the land God will show him. God promises to make him into a great nation and bless him and "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you". In Gen. 17: 1-14 God confirms his covenant with Abraham (vs2) and God says to him: "I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you"(vs 7). The sign of the covenant was circumcision of every male amongst them (vs 10).

The covenant with Abraham is of central importance in the Bible.

It is mentioned about 100 times in the Bible in one form or another.

The essence of the covenant is "I will be your God and you will be My people"(Gen.17: 1-14; particularly vs 7; Leviticus 26: 12; Jeremiah 7:23; Jer.11 :4; Jer.30: 22; Ezekiel 36:28). In obedience to God Abraham circumcised Isaac his son when he was 8 days old (Gen.21:4).

Circumcision was not only an outward sign but had to be a matter of the heart also. The heart should also be circumcised in a spiritual sense (Deut 10: 16; Deut 30: 6; Jeremiah 4:4).

In His covenant with Abraham God promised him the land of Canaan (Gen 17: 8). God's promise to be Abraham's God had also further implications and Abraham saw these. Hebrews 11 shows that together with other heroes of the faith he also saw greater blessings in the future, "He was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God"(vs 10). He was looking forward to a better country, a heavenly one (vs 16).

The essential unity of the covenant in the Old Testament and in the New Testament is shown by the fact that Abraham is the father of all believers. Abraham received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. So then, he is the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised, in order that righteousness might be credited to them (Romans 4: 11). "Therefore the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring - not only to those who are of the law but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all (Romans 4: 16). Romans 4 shows clearly that salvation is through faith and by grace.

The fact that the New Testament believers are children of Abraham is also shown in Galatians 3:7 "Understand then, that those who believe are children of Abraham" Verse 29 of this chapter states:" If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise. The fact that the promise includes the children is also shown in Acts 2:38-39.Peter replied "Repent and be baptized, everyone of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off - for all whom the Lord our God will call". Children of the covenant are heirs of the promise of salvation. Salvation is not hereditary, they have to receive the content of the promise by faith and repentance.

Romans 4 and Galatians 3 show that faith was the condition associated with the promises to Abraham and the same condition still applies: "Repent and believe". Abraham believed in the coming Saviour. Jesus told the Jews in John 8:56 "Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad". There is only one Gospel whereby man can be saved: faith

in the promised Saviour (John 14:6: "No one comes to the Father except through me "). It is also not bound to any specific period of time: "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Hebrews 13: 8). Old Testament believers were saved by faith in the promised Saviour, which they knew was coming, and New Testament believers are saved by faith in the completed work of the Saviour.

The unity of the O. T. and N. T. church is also shown in Romans 11: 17, where Gentile believers were compared with a wild olive shoot being grafted into the tree, "and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root". The NIV commentary shows that the branches that were broken off are individual Jews, the wild olive shoot are Gentile Christians, the olive root the Patriarchs and the whole tree represents the people of God.

In the O.T. circumcision was the initiation rite of the covenant and in the N.T. baptism takes this place. Some of the Jewish Christians wanted to have the Gentile believers circumcised (Acts 15: 1,5) but the council meeting in Jerusalem opposed this view and set some basic rules for the Gentile believers, which did not include circumcision (Acts 15 :24-29). Paul states in Galatians 6: 15 that "neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything".

That baptism took the place of circumcision is also shown in Colossians 2: 11, 12:"In Him (Christ) you were also circumcised in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism."

In the O. T. the children were included in the covenant and the boys received its sign and seal in circumcision. As the covenant with Abraham continues in the N.T. (an everlasting covenant), it is logical to conclude that the children are also included in the N.T. church, unless they are specifically excluded, which is nowhere recorded in the N. T. To the contrary Christ Himself blessed the children and said that of such is the Kingdom of Heaven (Matthew 19: 14-15, Mark 10: 14-16).

In the Bible families are regarded as a spiritual unity.

Miracles were performed by Christ because of the faith of a father (Matthew 9: 18-26).

Psalm 103: 17, 18 "But from everlasting to everlasting the Lord's love is with those who fear him, and His righteousness with their children's children, with those who keep His covenant and remember to obey His precepts." In Luke 19:9 Jesus says to Zacchaeus: "Today salvation has come to this house because this man too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost". Noah believed, he was found righteous ,and he and his family were saved in the ark (Gen. 7:1).The children of one believing parent are "holy"(1 Cor 7:14).

There are 12 occasions recorded in the N.T. where Christian baptism was administered

(Acts 2:41; 8: 12, 13, 38; 9:18; 10:48; 16:15,33; 18:8; 19:5; 1 Cor 1: 14, 16). Four of these 12 are household baptisms, which could have included young children (Acts 10: 48; Acts 16: 15; Acts 16:33; 1 Cor 1: 16). In two other baptisms we know that the person who was baptized had no children, so obviously none could be baptized: the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:38) and Saul (Acts 9: 18).

The Book of Acts is a missionary book, therefore the people who are baptized are predominantly adults. But when they had children, these were also baptized, because as children of believers they were included in the covenant and had a right to the sign of the covenant.

It is of interest to note that baptism was administered very quickly, after only a short period of instruction, sometimes only hours, as with the Ethiopian eunuch, Saul, Cornelius, the Philippian jailer.

Baptism is essentially passive eg, "buried with Him in baptism "(Col 2: 12). "who were baptized with Christ Jesus were baptized into His death. We were therefore buried with Him through baptism into death."(Rom 6: 3,4). It is in essence a sign of what God does, not what man does.

It is obvious to all that there is no specific command in the New Testament that the children of believers should be baptized in infancy, but its practice can be defended on the basis of God's everlasting covenant with Abraham and his descendants, both physical as well as spiritual. In all ways the application of the covenant is wider and greater in the N.T. than in the O.T. If the children were not included in the N.T. application of the covenant and should not receive its sign and seal (which they received in the O. T.) God would certainly have indicated this in His word.

However, the fact that there were household baptisms would indicate that nothing had changed in this respect and that the children were still included. As such they would be entitled to the sign and seal of the covenant.

Those who dispute the Biblical character of infant baptism have to realise that adult baptism for sons and daughters born to Christian parents, which they insist upon, is nowhere recorded in the New Testament. If they want to be consistent they should only baptize converts from outside the church, since these are the only baptisms recorded in the N.T. The period of time between the first Christian baptisms on the day of Pentecost (about AD 30) and the writing of Paul's epistles to the Romans (about AD57), the Galatians (between AD 53 and 57) and Colossians (AD 60) is 23-30 years. so children born to Christian parents would have reached the "years of discretion" and could have expressed a desire for baptism. As there is not a single case of this in the N.T. it would tend to indicate that they were probably baptized as infants, in line with the customs of circumcision of infant boys in the O. T.

It may be of interest to note what is recorded in Church history about the practice of the early church in this respect.

Nine out of 10 early church fathers, writing before AD 200, refer to infant baptism as the practice of the church from New Testament times onward ("Biblical Baptism" by Arthur Gunn).

At the time of the Reformation in the 16th Century the great Reformers like Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, John Calvin and John Knox all rejected the teaching of the Anabaptists and practised infant baptism in their churches because they were convinced that this was the practice of the New Testament.

The Biblical teaching of the covenant and its implications are clear enough to justify the baptism in infancy of children of believing parents which is practised in the Reformed Churches and taught in their confessions.

A few further notes

1. The Baptism of Christ (Matthew 3:13-17; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-22; John 1:29-34)

The baptism of Christ was not the same as Christian Baptism, as John the Baptist called for a baptism of repentance. There could be no Christian baptism until Christ had died on the cross, risen from the dead and the Holy Spirit had come upon the church (Acts 2: 1-4 and prophesies of the fact). Jesus was not baptized as a sign of repentance and forgiveness, for He was sinless.

When Paul found some believers in Ephesus who had not received the Holy Spirit he asked them what baptism they had received. When he heard it was John's baptism they were re-baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus (Acts 19: 1- 7).

2 Re-baptism of children of believing parents who were baptized in infancy

There is not a single case in the New Testament where a person received Christian baptism twice; it is a once only sacrament.

Consequently people asking for re-baptism state by that action that they consider that their infant baptism was not a valid baptism. As there is only "One Lord, one faith, one baptism"(Ephesians 4:5) this implies a rejection of the promises attached to the covenant baptism they received in infancy, which is a very serious matter.

Footnote All texts quoted are from the New International Version of the Bible.

In the preparation of this article the following books have been used also:

The Biblical Doctrine of Infant Baptism by P.C. Marcel (Pastor of the French Reformed Church).

Biblical Baptism by Arthur Gunn (Minister of the Presbyterian Church of N.Z.).