

Infant Baptism and Sovereign Grace

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And although our young children do not understand these things, we may not therefore exclude them from baptism, for as they are without their knowledge, partakers of the condemnation in Adam, so are they again received into grace in Christ.

This passage from the *Form for the Administration of Baptism* used in Reformed churches very nicely sums up what we wish to show here, that is, that infant baptism is part and parcel of the doctrine of sovereign grace, and that a denial of infant baptism is essentially a denial of sovereign, irresistible, and efficacious grace.

The argument of the *Form for the Administration of Baptism* is founded on the truth that infants can be and are saved by God ([Ps. 139:13](#), [Jer. 1:5](#), Lk. 1:15, Mk. 10:13-16). If they can be saved, they can also receive baptism as the *sign* of salvation. To say that they cannot have the sign when they *can* have the salvation to which the sign points is inconsistent, to say the least.

A baptist will argue, however, that a person must give evidence of having salvation before he can receive the sign. He will insist, therefore, that faith must precede water baptism. So, he says, water baptism ought to be administered only to believers. The bedrock of baptist teaching is, then, the idea that faith must precede water baptism.

This teaching is based on a misinterpretation of [Mark 16:15, 16](#). These verses, however, do not say that faith must precede baptism. Nor does any other Scripture passage. The argument that this is the order of the passage is really no argument at all. It is true that faith is mentioned before baptism in [Mark 16:15, 16](#). That order is important. But that does not prove that the order is a *temporal* order, i.e., first faith, then baptism. The passage does *not* say, 'He that believeth and *then* is baptized shall be saved.' Baptists assume that it says 'then' but it does not. The order in [Mark 16:15, 16](#), is simply that of priority, i.e., that faith is *more important* than baptism, something we all believe.

Following the Baptist line of reasoning, one might just as easily prove from [II Peter 1:10](#) that calling comes before election, because it is mentioned first. In fact, following the Baptist line of reasoning, the order in [Mark 16:15, 16](#), is first faith, *then* water baptism, *then* salvation; an order no baptist could accept. All [Mark 16:15, 16](#), proves, then, is that faith, baptism and salvation are very closely related to each other.

The main point of the *Form for the Administration of Baptism*, however, is that infants are saved 'without their knowledge'. In this way the *Form* connects infant baptism and sovereign grace.

That infants are saved without their knowledge is self-evident. But this means that there is no other way to save an infant than by sovereign grace. He cannot respond to the Gospel, exercise saving faith, make any decision, or do any works, and must, then, be saved solely by the sovereign grace of God. Infant salvation, therefore, is a powerful demonstration of salvation by grace alone.

What is more, the salvation of infants demonstrates what is true for everyone whom God saves. We must all become like little children if we are to enter the kingdom of heaven, that is, we must be saved in the same way that a little child is saved, without our having done anything in order to be saved.

Many baptists believe this. Holding to the doctrines of grace and believing the sovereignty of God in salvation, they insist as we do, that God is always first in the work of salvation. Faith, therefore, is not something that precedes salvation, but is itself part of the gift of salvation ([Eph. 2:8-10](#)). It is not something we produce in order to be saved, but something God gives us in saving us.

Yet, the same baptists who insist that faith cannot not precede salvation, say that it must precede the sign of salvation. How inconsistent! Ought not the sign correspond to the reality? If it is not necessary to have faith before God can begin to save us, then the sign ought to say so. In infant baptism it does!

The truth is, of course, that no one is saved because he first believes the Gospel. He is saved through believing, but not *after* believing. That would make faith a work and be a denial of salvation by grace alone. When we believe it is because God has already begun His work of salvation in us. Yet even those baptists who believe in salvation by sovereign grace say that a person's receiving the sign of salvation does depend on his faith! He can receive salvation 'without his knowledge', that is, before he is capable of responding and while he is still dead in sin, but cannot receive the sign of that salvation in the same way.

We do not deny, of course, that sometimes water baptism follows faith. In the case of adults converts it is often so (but even then it marks the fact that they entered the kingdom as little children). We are only saying that it *need not* be so. The very idea that one *must* believe before receiving the sign of salvation *and of entrance into salvation* is implicitly Arminian - a denial of salvation by grace. This should be clear to anyone who understands the doctrines of grace.

It is even clearer when we understand that water baptism is only the *sign of baptism*. The real baptism is the washing away of sins by the blood of Jesus Christ ([Rom. 6:3](#), [Col. 2:12](#), [Tit. 3:5](#)). The real baptism is not something that depends on our believing response, or even follows our response, but is 'without our knowledge'. Indeed, it was principally

accomplished already at the cross, long before we were born ([Rom. 5:8](#)). How fitting that the sign should match the reality at this point.

Not only that, but we actually receive true baptism, the washing away of our sins, *as soon as we are reborn* into the family of God. At that time we are still 'infants' in understanding and obedience ([Heb. 5:12-14](#)). Is it so strange, then, that we should receive the sign of baptism at the time of our first birth and when we are still infants?

Baptism as the sign of salvation ought to reflect the character of that salvation, especially its free and gracious character. It does that in a very wonderful and beautiful way when infants are baptized. In fact, it is our conviction that only the teaching of infant baptism fits the doctrines of grace and the truth that salvation is by grace alone without works. What a beautiful picture of salvation by sovereign grace it is when a tiny infant, not even aware of what is happening to him, receives the sign of God's grace and salvation through the blood of Jesus! Just as that infant receives salvation 'without his knowledge', so also he receives baptism as the sign of that salvation 'without his knowledge'.

All this is the reason why [Mark 10:13-16](#) is sometimes used a proof for infant baptism even though it does not mention baptism at all. The children who were brought to Jesus were infants (the Greek word shows this, as does the fact that they were 'brought'). And, without even the possibility of any kind of believing response from them, Jesus grants them salvation; for what else is it, in being brought to Him, being received by Him, and blessed by Him, but to be saved in Him? The argument, therefore, is that insofar as these infants received salvation from Him, the sign of that same salvation should not be withheld from them. How could it be withheld?

The *Belgic Confession of Faith* uses this same argument (Article 34): '*And indeed Christ shed his blood no less for the washing of the children of the faithful, than for adult persons; and therefore they ought to receive the sign and sacrament of that, which Christ hath done for them.*'

When an infant is baptized, therefore, it must be on some other ground than his believing response to the Gospel promises. He is incapable of such a response. He must, in fact, be baptized simply on the ground of God's promise to be the God of His people and of their children ([Gen. 17:7](#), [Acts 2:39](#)). Because of that promise of God we may expect a response from him in later life, but neither his salvation nor his receiving the sign of that salvation depends on his response.

This promise does not mean that every baptized infant will be saved. Nor does some vain hope for the salvation of *all* their children cause believing parents to have their children baptized. The foundation for infant baptism is the PROMISE of God made to believers that He will be their God and the God of their children ([Gen. 17:7](#), [Acts 2:39](#)). Believing parents, therefore, expect that God will gather His elect from among their children and have their children baptized in the sure hope that God who promised will also perform it.

But why should all our children be baptized, when we know that not all will be saved? For the same reason that we bring them all under the preaching of the gospel. Believing parents have *all* their children baptized because they understand that baptism is a kind of visible gospel that will have the same twofold fruit among their children that the preaching of the gospel has, according to God's own purpose in predestination. Baptism, like the gospel, they believe, will be used by God for the salvation of those of their children who are elect, *and for the condemnation of the rest.*

Thus infant baptism teaches us that salvation does not depend on us, but on the sovereign grace of God, who grants salvation to sinners in the same way that they came under condemnation in Adam, that is, without their knowledge.

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