



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 10.4 – The Doctrine of Baptism

The Baptism of Infants and Young Children

Because Scripture clearly tells us that infants are actually sinful from conception and because baptism gives the forgiveness of sins, it is clear that God's gift of baptism is a blessing and a gift of God's grace also for infants and small children. The apostle Paul cautioned against unlimited participation in the Lord's Supper when he said: **"Let a man examine himself, and so let him of the bread and drink of the cup"** (1 Corinthians 11:28). But neither Paul nor our Lord Jesus nor any of the apostles ever spoke of any kind of limitations with respect to baptism. When Jesus instituted baptism, He said to His followers: **"Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age"** (Matthew 28:19-20).

We do not baptize persons contrary to their own desire, however, for the kingdom of God is not an earthly kingdom and **"the weapons of our warfare are not carnal"** (2 Corinthians 10:4). Nor do we baptize infants and small children against the will of their parents or those who are responsible for them. But Peter made it clear on the day of Pentecost that baptism for the remission of sins was intended by the Lord as a blessing for all: **"Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call"** (Acts 2:38-39).

It is true that there is no specific example in the New Testament of an infant or small child receiving baptism, but there are several examples of family or household baptisms. It is certainly probable that these families had members of various ages. On Paul's second mission journey, the woman Lydia living in Philippi heard the Gospel of Christ as preached by Paul and Silas. We read: **"The Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul."** And then we are told: **"She and her household were baptized"** (Acts 16:14-15). Later in this same chapter we learn of the conversion of the jailer of Philippi. Paul and Silas **"spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house... And immediately he and all his family were baptized"** (Acts 16:32). It is possible that the Gentile Cornelius also had his family baptized after listening to the message brought by the apostle Peter (Acts 10:48; 11:14). In his letter to the Corinthians the apostle Paul mentions that he **"baptized the household of Stephanas"** (1 Corinthians 1:16).

There are also many indications in the writings of the early Christians that it was customary for them to baptize infants and small children. One of our Lutheran teachers has written: "Origen calls the baptism of children a practice stemming from the apostles... It would be completely impossible to understand how the church fathers could have spoken in favor of children's baptism if it had been established as fact that only adults were baptized by the apostles or their helpers" (Adolf Hoenecke: *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics*, Vol. IV, p. 100).

These early writings present much testimony that the baptism of infants and small children was standard practice in the first years of the church. But later the false teaching that baptism provides forgiveness only for sins committed before baptism took hold among many. As a consequence of this teaching some persons delayed their baptisms as long as possible, so that they would have greater assurance of forgiveness all the way to the end of their lives. Some even waited until they were about

to die. But this custom of delaying baptism did not prevail in the church, and soon the standard practice was to baptize a child soon after birth. This practice prevailed in the church until the time of the Reformation, when persons known as Anabaptists (rebaptizers) arose. They insisted that infant baptism was invalid, and that all persons baptized in infancy should be rebaptized as adults.

Today there are many Christian groups who oppose infant baptism, particularly those who are known as Baptists. In some parts of the world the majority of Christians baptize only adults who are able to confess their faith. What are some of the arguments used by those who oppose infant baptism? One argument is that there is no direct mention of an infant baptism in the New Testament. But this is an argument from silence. One cannot prove that the families baptized in the Bible comprised only adults.

The main argument used by Baptists and others is that since infants and small children are unable to express their faith in Christ, it is not possible for them to believe in Jesus. How then can they be saved? It is the view of Baptists and others that God does not charge sin against children until they reach the age of discretion. In their view, infants and children do not really need baptism for the remission of sins at their age. In fact, most Protestants – both those in favor of infant baptism and those opposing infant baptism – do not believe that baptism conveys forgiveness of sins in any case, and, therefore, the baptism of infants and children serves no purpose. In their view, it is not reasonable to believe that pouring water on the head of an infant while saying some words from the Bible can accomplish anything.

Because of the prevalence of these views that oppose infant baptism, it is necessary for us to teach very clearly why we, as confessional Lutherans, practice infant baptism and believe that those who oppose infant baptism are, in fact, opposing the will of God.

1. Our first reason for practicing infant baptism is simply that Jesus has commanded us to baptize all nations, and that Scripture does not express any limitations on this are expressed.
2. Secondly, the examples of family baptisms in the Bible make it probable that the apostles themselves practiced infant and child baptism.
3. Thirdly, the records of the early Christians indicate that infant baptism was practiced from the very earliest days of the church.
4. Fourthly, the Scriptures clearly teach that baptism is for the remission of sins, that baptism a washing of regeneration, that infants and small children are sinners from birth, and that they need the forgiveness of sins and regeneration. They need baptism. Our Lord Jesus told Nicodemus: **“Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God... Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit... You must be born again”** (John 3:3-7). Before this spiritual regeneration, we are all **“dead in trespasses and sins”** (Ephesians 2:1). Baptism provides a cleansing **“with the washing of water by the word”** (Ephesians 5:26). The notion that infants come into the world with a clean slate and are not responsible to God for the sins of childhood is clearly contrary to the teachings of Jesus, who said: **“Out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies”** (Matthew 15:19). **“The imagination of man’s heart is evil from his youth”** (Genesis 8:21).
5. Fifthly, even though Baptists and others argue that little children cannot believe in Jesus because they do not have any reasoning power, Jesus taught that little children can have faith in Him. Jesus said: **“Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea”** (Matthew 18:6). John the Baptist was still in his mother’s womb when he was **“filled with the Holy Spirit”** (Luke 1:15). His mother Elisabeth testified: **“The babe leaped in my womb for joy”** (Luke 1:44). When little children praised Jesus as He rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, He said to those who objected: **“Have you never read, ‘Out of the**

mouth of babes and nursing infants You have perfected praise'?" (Matthew 21:16).

6. Sixthly, there can be no doubt that Jesus is very much concerned for the spiritual needs of infants. It is written: **"Then they brought little children to Him, that He might touch them; but the disciples rebuked those who brought them. But when Jesus saw it, He was greatly displeased and said to them, 'Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of God. Assuredly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will by no means enter it.' And he took them up in His arms, laid His hands on them, and blessed them"** (Mark 10:13-16). We are inclined to think that little children must become adults before they can receive Jesus' blessings, but Jesus turned that around and said that adults must become like little children. Jesus also said: **"Take heed that you do not despise one of these little ones"** (Matthew 18:10). **"It is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish"** (Matthew 18:14). Are not those who deprive infants and small children of the blessings of baptism guilty of a serious disservice to them?
7. Seventhly, baptism is compared with Old Testament circumcision, which was administered to male infants when they were eight days old. Paul wrote to the Colossians: **"In Him (Christ) you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, buried with Him in baptism"** (Colossians 2:11-12). Circumcision was limited to males in the Old Testament, but it was not limited to adults. Surely baptism, which is Christ's circumcision or Christian circumcision, would not be more limited than Old Testament circumcision, which included infants and small children. In fact, it is clear that baptism is for all: men and women, adults and children, Jews and Gentiles. It is written: **"Both men and women were baptized"** (Acts 8:12).

Perhaps the chief reason why so many reject infant baptism is that they do not believe what the Bible teaches about baptism: that it is a washing of regeneration. In other words, they do not believe that an infant or a child is born again or regenerated through baptism. Since baptismal regeneration is something that must be believed rather than seen and since it is contrary to human reason, it is rejected. But on the basis of human reason we would have to object to almost all of the teachings of the Bible. In spiritual matters we have no sure guide apart from the Holy Scriptures, which our God has given to us as a source of Christian teaching. **"All scripture is given by inspiration of God (breathed out by God), and is profitable for doctrine"** (2 Timothy 3:16).

Questions

1. How does Matthew 28:19 teach us that we should baptize infants and children?
2. How does Acts 2:38-39 teach us that we should baptize infants and children?
3. Give some examples of family baptisms in the New Testament.
4. What evidence is there that the early Christians practiced infant baptism?
5. Why did some Christians delay their baptisms?
6. Who opposed infant baptism at the time of the Reformation?
7. What arguments are used by those who oppose infant baptism?
8. List the arguments in favor of infant baptism.
9. Which of these arguments is the strongest argument, in your opinion?
10. Why is it dangerous to argue on the basis of human reason?
11. Which groups practice infant baptism in your locale?
12. Which groups oppose infant baptism in your locale?
13. Why should we not force people to be baptized or to baptize their children?