Should I Have My Baby Baptized?
A Study of Infant Baptism
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“Should I have my baby baptized?” Lutherans, Catholics, Episcopalians, Methodists and others say “Yes.” Baptists, Seventh Day Adventists, and many “Bible” and non-denominational churches say, “No.” Sadly, this question divides modern Christianity.

But if you’re asking that question, you probably already know that. Still, you’re wondering, “Which side is right?”

The Lutheran Church has always taught that baptism is for everyone, including infants. We believe that Jesus wants babies to be baptized. We do so for the following reasons.

I. Christ Has Commanded Us.

Many raise the objection: "There is not a single command for infant baptism in the New Testament. Therefore Christians should not baptize babies.”

But is that objection valid? What were the marching orders that Jesus gave to his church? In Matthew 28:19-20, our Savior said, “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

The purpose of God’s Church is making disciples. Of whom? “All nations.” The term is as broad as can be. It is all-inclusive. It includes infants and elderly, toddlers and teens, those who are highly educated and those who never finish high school, those who are brilliant and those who are mentally challenged, male and female, black, white, red, and brown. God discriminates against no one. His love in Christ is for all. (2 Corinthians 5:19, John 3:16) His Church is open to disciples from all walks of life and all ages.

But how shall we make these disciples? Jesus makes that clear, doesn’t he! “By baptizing them,” “and teaching them.” In each case the pronoun “them” refers to all nations. No one is left out.

But for some this verse isn’t clear enough. Some still object, “Nowhere has Jesus explicitly commanded us to baptize infants.” Is the objection valid? Consider this. Nowhere in the New Testament does Jesus explicitly say, “I want you to baptize adults.” “I want you to baptize teens.” “I want you to baptize the elderly.” “I want you to baptize children ages 5 and up.” “I want you to baptize women.” “I want you to baptize men.” “I want you to baptize whites, blacks, reds, and browns.” Yet we baptize individuals from all those groups. Why? Because they are part of “all nations.” Why would we leave infants out?

Now let’s add two more verses for consideration. Acts 2:38-39 "Repent and be baptized, every one 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."

The context tells us that thousands upon thousands of “God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven” were gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate the Old Testament Pentecost. (Acts 2:5) From that cosmopolitan group, a crowd gathered to hear Peter and the other apostles preach the Good News. What they heard astounded them, because God’s Holy Spirit gave the apostles the ability to preach Christ in a variety of languages. “Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10 Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome 11 (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs--we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!” (Acts 2:9-11) God’s Holy Spirit was sending a message that day. Jesus lived and died for everyone! The forgiveness he won is for all. The new life He gives is offered to all!

Now let’s get back to Acts 2:38-39. Peter spoke those words at the conclusion of his Pentecost sermon. Notice again, how all-inclusive Peter’s words are. “Repent, and be baptized, every one of you.” No one is left out! And if we want to leave out the babies, then we have to deal with what Peter said next. “The promise is for you and your children.” The Greek word used by Peter, teknon, is a broad term that includes children of all ages—including infants.

About 3,000 people were baptized that day. Dare we say this number included no children, especially in light of what Peter had just said?

Our Savior might not have said, in so many words, “I want you to baptize babies.” But he did say, “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations.” Through his servant Peter, he did say, “Repent, and be baptized, every one of you.” “The promise is for you and your children.”

If we keep reading in the New Testament, we see how God’s own apostles understood the Savior’s command. Entire households were baptized. (Acts 10:24ff, Acts 16:14-15, Acts 16:30-34, 1 Corinthians 1:16)

It is also interesting to note that the earliest Christians (those who lived in the generations right after the apostles) also practiced infant baptism. The “Church Fathers” (leaders in the early Christian Church) speak about infant baptism as the universal practice of the church. Here are a few examples.

Irenaeus teaches, "For He came to save all through means of Himself all, I say, who through Him are born again to God, infants, and children, and boys, and youths, and old men” (Against Heresies, Book 1, Ch. 22.4).

In his commentary on Romans, Origin writes, "The Church has received from the apostles the custom of administering baptism even to infants. For those who have been entrusted with
the secrets of divine mysteries, knew very well that all are tainted with the stain of original sin, which must be washed off by water and spirit" (Romans Commentary, 5.9).

Cyprian writes, "In respect of the case of infants, which you say ought not to be baptized within the second or third day after birth, and that the law of ancient circumcision should be regarded, so that you think that one who is just born should not be baptized and sanctified within the eighth day, we all thought very differently in our council. For in this course which you thought was to be taken, no one agreed; but we all rather judge that the mercy and grace of God is not to be refused to any one born of man." (Letter 58 to Fidus. Cyprian is answering this specific question. Some were saying you shouldn’t baptize infants until the 8th day, because that’s when baby boys were circumcised in the Old Testament. Others were saying, “We shouldn’t wait even that long. Let’s baptize sooner.”)

In his Enchiridion, Augustine declares, "For from the infant newly born to the old man bent with age, as there is none shut out from baptism, so there is none who in baptism does not die to sin" (Enchiridion; ch. 43).

When it comes to infant baptism, will we disregard the practice of the early Church and the apostles? Will we disregard the command of our Savior?

II. Babies Need Forgiveness.

We’ve already seen that there is no New Testament verse in which Jesus says, “I want you to baptize adults.” “I want you to baptize children older than 5, or 6, or 7.” “I want you to baptize women, men.” Instead, there is only this all-inclusive command to make disciples of “all nations,” by baptizing and teaching them. (Matthew 28:19-20) So why do some churches refrain from baptizing infants? Why is this one group excluded from Jesus’ command?

For two reasons. The first one? Some churches teach that babies aren’t accountable for their sins. Some churches have even coined a term for this concept: age of accountability. But is this a Biblical teaching?

Consider the words of King David as recorded in Psalm 51:5. “Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.” David speaks about being sinful from the moment of conception. His words are one reason why the Christian Church, from its earliest years, has recognized there is such a thing as original sin.

What is original sin? Read Romans 5:12-21. In verse 12 Paul says, “Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned.” Paul is speaking about the sin that entered our human race when Adam and Eve broke God’s command by eating the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. (Genesis 3) According to Paul, this original sin now infects every last human being ever born, including infants.
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But where is Paul’s proof that all people are now born in sin? “Death came to all men.” And why did this happen? Paul explains, “For the wages of sin is death.” (Romans 6:23) Paul echoes the judgment the Lord God first made in the Garden, when the Lord said to Adam, “For dust you are and to dust you will return.” (Genesis 3:19; see also Ezekiel 18:4; John 3:6; 1 Corinthians 15:21-22) Every time an infant dies, this is tragic proof that infants are conceived and born in sin. Infants need God’s forgiveness.

See also Genesis 5:1-3. These verses remind us that God created Adam and Eve in his own image. That means our first parents were perfect and holy. (Ephesians 4:24, Colossians 3:9-10) However, when Adam and Eve had their first child, this child was born in Adam’s “likeness,” Adam’s “image.” God’s image has been lost. Adam’s “image” has replaced it. Seth is born a sinner. Seth needed God’s forgiveness.

III. Babies Can Believe.

There is a second reason why some churches don’t baptize infants. They will say, “Infants can’t believe. They can’t make a decision for Christ.” There are two Biblical problems with this assertion.

The first is this. Jesus himself said infants do believe. Read Luke 18:5-7. Notice how people were bring “babies” to have Jesus touch them (bless them). The disciples didn’t think Jesus should be bothered in this way. Jesus’ response? “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. 17 I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.” Remember the context. “Babies” are being brought to Jesus! Jesus is referring to those “babies” when he says, “the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.” Babies are not in any way excluded from God’s Church! And what about faith? Can even a baby have it? Jesus’ words are clear. “Anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.” (See also Matthew 18:1-6, and Mark 9:42)

There is a second problem with the statement, “Infants can’t believe. They can’t make a decision for Christ.” The statement shows a basic misunderstanding about faith and where faith comes from.

Is faith ever our work? Is it ever our decision? Or is it the work of our God? Is it a miracle of grace created by the Holy Spirit, whether in a new-born baby or an 85 year-old who hears the Gospel for the very first time? What does the Bible say?

When speaking about the sinful human nature, the Apostle Paul says, “As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.” (Ephesians 2:1-2) Paul’s assessment of the sinful human nature is extreme. We are all “dead.” Can dead people make decisions?
Can anyone of any age choose to believe in God? In the Upper Room, Jesus told his mighty apostles: “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name.”

Through Saint Paul, our Lord has told us this. “No one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit.” (1 Corinthians 12:3) No wonder that the Apostle Paul also wrote, “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-- and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- not by works, so that no one can boast.” (Ephesians 2:8-9) Our salvation is God’s gift from start to finish. Even the faith that we have is God’s gift of grace, and he can give it to a new-born just as easily as he can give it to the 90-year old on her deathbed!

IV. Baptism and Circumcision

Those who reject infant baptism have to explain why the Apostle Paul compares baptism to circumcision.

You can read about circumcision in Genesis 17:10-14. There God instructed Abraham that every male child among his descendents was to be circumcised when that child was eight days old. Did the child choose this? Of course not. This was God’s work. This was God’s covenant, marking that child as a member of God’s family.

By inspiration, St. Paul compares baptism to circumcision. In Colossians, he writes, “In him 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 and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross. (Colossians 2:11-15) Baptism is the “circumcision not done by the hands of men.” This verse, among others, led the apostles and the first generations of New Testament Christians to baptize infants.

Notice something else about these verses. Who is doing all the work! God! And what about us? What do we do when it comes to baptism and believing? We sinners (of any age) are described as “dead in . . .sins and in the uncircumcision of (our) sinful nature.” We are helpless. We are powerless. But God is gracious and powerful. “God made you alive with Christ.” Our coming to faith is all God’s work. Baptism is all God’s work.

V. Baptism: A Final Observation

Those who don’t baptize infants seem to change the focus in baptism. How so? Baptism becomes something we do for God, instead of something God does for us. Is that how the Bible speaks about baptism? In the course of this review,
we’ve already shared some verses that teach us it God who is doing all the work in Baptism. Here are several more. In each case, read the verses carefully. Notice who is doing all the work. That’s God! Notice who is receiving God’s gracious gift. That’s the one being baptized!

1 Peter 3:20-21 “In it (Noah’s ark) only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also-- not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”

Titus 3:4-7 “But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.”

We’ve also discussed how faith is God’s gracious work in anyone who believes. Here are more verses that emphasize that point. Again, notice who is doing all the work. That’s God! Notice who is receiving God’s gracious gift. That’s the one brought to faith!

1 Corinthians 6:11 “You were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.”

2 Thessalonians 2:13-14 “But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers loved by the Lord, because from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. 14 He called you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Ephesians 2:4-5 “But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions-- it is by grace you have been saved.”

Colossians 2:13-14 “When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross.”

2 Corinthians 4:4-6 The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake. For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.”