



WHY WE BAPTIZE INFANTS A REFORMATIONAL ANGLICAN VIEW

Diocese of the Rocky Mountains
The Anglican Church in North America

Anglicans, in keeping with ancient church tradition and the majority of Christians throughout the history of the church, practice infant baptism (*paedobaptism*). We believe that this practice is consistent with a biblical view of a gracious God who chooses us in Christ before we believe in him (Eph. 1:4). It highlights the role of the family (both one's family of origin and the church family) in passing down the promise of salvation from generation to generation. Our theology of baptism teaches that God's grace is at work by his word and the Holy Spirit in the waters of baptism, but also that each baptized person must respond to Christ in faith and repentance to receive the sacrament rightly. We celebrate baptism as an entry into the church and the beginning of a journey of new life in Christ, begun and sustained by God's abundant grace.

In what follows we provide a concise biblical, doctrinal, and historical defense of our position. We appreciate that Christians who practice believer's baptism (*credobaptism*) find it hard to accept the paedobaptist's view. We acknowledge and mourn that disagreements over baptism have been a source of painful and even, at times, violent division among fellow believers.¹ We hope that this brief paper will promote mutual understanding and will help those from other Christian traditions who are interested in Anglicanism to better understand our beliefs and practice.

THE BIBLICAL ARGUMENT: COVENANT AND FAMILY

The concept of covenant is fundamental to our view of baptism. In Israel's foundational covenant, God first called Abraham, then pronounced promises to Abraham in a solemn ceremony (Genesis 15), and then provided circumcision as a sign of the covenant (Genesis 17:11). According to the Apostle Paul, the sign of circumcision was a seal of the righteousness that Abraham had by faith while he was still uncircumcised (Romans 4:11). Circumcision did not save Abraham, but it was a sign and seal of God's covenant of salvation. Crucially for our

¹ On the tragic history of violence related to this debate see Scott McKnight's comments in *It Takes a Church to Baptize: What the Bible Says about Infant Baptism*, Kindle ed., (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press), 13, location 349.

point of view, God commanded Abraham to give this covenant sign to male infants in his household when they were eight days old (17:12). When the infant was circumcised he was initiated into the covenant community and made heir of the covenant promises.

Paedobaptists believe that the Old Testament covenant sign of circumcision is a type and foreshadow of the New Testament covenant sign of baptism.² Paul makes this connection in Colossians 2:11-12 when he writes, “In him [Christ] you also were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in *baptism*. . .” Here Paul brings the sacrament of baptism into “direct contact with God’s ancient dealings with Abraham” and indicates that baptism is the new covenant sign.³ Since infants born into Jewish families received the covenant sign in the Old Testament, infants born in Christian families should now receive the new covenant sign of baptism. Indeed, given this biblical understanding of God’s gracious operation within covenant families, the question might be posed to credobaptists: *why deny the covenant sign to children born in Christian families?*

Credobaptist argue that there is no explicit record of infants being baptized in the New Testament church. Instead we read only of believers being baptized, upon repentance and faith. Of course it is not surprising that we see adult baptisms in the New Testament since Christianity was a first-generation movement. But how do we respond to the charge that infant baptism cannot be found in the New Testament?

In the ancient world a person did not choose their own religion. Instead religion was “something passed to *one’s children* by way of culture, instruction, and family traditions.”⁴ Thus if the earliest Christians only baptized adult believers, such a practice would have been a decisive break with their heritage and cultural context. It is likely, instead, that they baptized their infants and children.

² It might be argued that a link between OT circumcision and infant baptism breaks down because circumcision was given to males only, whereas paedobaptists baptize male and female infants. According to Peter Toon, however, the Old Testament covenant operated on “the principle of unity of the household/family with its members”, thus female members were viewed as included with the male head of the family. *Mystical Washing & Spiritual Regeneration: Infant Baptism and the Renewal of the Anglican Way in America* (Philadelphia: Preservation Press of the Prayer Book Society, 2007), 29.

³ Alec J. Motyer, “Baptism in the Book of Common Prayer,” *The Anglican Evangelical Doctrine of Infant Baptism*, Kindle ed., (London: Latimer Trust, 2008), location 544. It should be noted that Credobaptists do not believe that baptism is the NT covenant sign that replaces the Old Testament covenant sign of circumcision. Instead, they argue that the NT covenant sign is regeneration and that is what Paul is referring to when he writes of a “circumcision made without hands” in Col. 2:11. Engaging this part of the debate is beyond the scope of this paper, but for a brief articulation of the credobaptist’s position see Sam Storms, “A Brief Defense of Believer’s Baptism”, <https://www.samstorms.org/enjoying-god-blog/post/a-brief-defense-of-believers-baptism>.

⁴ McKnight, *Ibid.*,63; location 1002,1006. My emphasis.



While there is no explicit example in the New Testament of young children or infants being baptized, there are several texts that speak of households being baptized (Acts 16:15, Acts 16:31-33; Acts 18:8, 1 Cor. 1:16).⁵ The term household (*oikos*) is very significant. New Testament scholar Joachim Jeremias concluded a study of this word in Old Testament and Jewish sources by stating that it denotes an “entire family; normally husband, wife and children. In no single case is the term ‘house’ restricted to the adult members of the house.”⁶ Since the narratives are silent on the matter we cannot say definitively, but given the cultural-religious context of 1st century Judaism and the definition of household, an honest evaluation should recognize, at least, the possibility that infants and small children may have been baptized as part of some of these household baptisms.

Two other New Testament texts are important for the paedobaptist position. First, according to Mark 10, Jesus told his disciples “Let the children come to me, do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God” (v.14) and then “he took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands on them” (v. 16). The argument is not that Jesus had infant baptism in view in Mark 10. However, it is clear that Jesus “saw babies as proper recipients of divine blessings, and proceeded to bestow such blessing on them.”⁷ We believe that in the waters of baptism, Jesus now bestows his new covenant blessings to infants and little children.

A second key passage is 1 Corinthians 7:14. Here Paul writes that an unbelieving spouse is made holy by a believing spouse and adds, “otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.” Paul doesn’t mean that children born to a Christian parent are automatically saved, but they are considered distinct from children born in unbelieving homes. Paul is drawing on the Old Testament use of the word holy, which means “set apart” for God. In the Old Testament children born into covenant families were set apart for God and received the sign of covenant membership. Thus it is right and proper to give “holy” children born into a new covenant Christian family the new covenant sign of baptism. In fact the family into which such covenant children are born extends beyond the biological family to the church family, where they continue to be nurtured in the faith by God’s word, his sacrament, and the witness of his people.

The biblical case for infant baptism is cumulative. It starts with a covenantal view of God’s relationship with His people. God graciously elects a people, establishes a covenant with them

⁵ Credobaptists will point out that these narratives connect belief in the gospel with baptism. This connection is clear in the case of Acts 18:8 when after Crispus and his household believed in the Lord, “many of the Corinthians hearing Paul believed and were baptized.” On the other hand, as McKnight points out, the other texts do not explicitly mention “the presence of the household’s faith; instead they suggest rather calmly and firmly that the faith of the *paterfamilias* led to the baptism of the entire household,” *Ibid.*, 69, loc. 1091.

⁶ Jeremias, *Origins*, 24, quoted in McKnight, *Ibid.*, 70, loc. 1100.

⁷ Motyer, *Ibid.*, loc. 822, 831.



and gives them and their children the sign of the covenant. In examining scripture we discover that there is no New Testament text that forbids infant baptism. On the other hand, several passages and the historical context of the New Testament imply that infants were baptized and that it is right for the church to do so today.

THE DOCTRINAL POSITION: BAPTISM IN THE ARTICLES OF RELIGION

For Anglicans within the Reformation tradition, it is necessary to look to the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion for a basic understanding of baptism.⁸ The Articles teach that sacraments are not only “badges or tokens of Christian men’s profession, but rather they are certain sure witnesses, and effectual signs of grace” (Article 25). As “effectual signs of grace” the sacraments are not a sign of “what we do, or are, but of *what God has done or does.*”⁹ This God-centered view of the sacraments makes a crucial difference in the debate over infant baptism. A credobaptist will tend to think of baptism as sign of *my* personal faith and obedience, whereas the covenantal theology of the Articles teaches us to think of baptism first and foremost as God’s act of grace.¹⁰ God graciously acts to initiate his covenant and God graciously acts within the covenant to call his people to faith in his promises.

If the sacraments in general are effectual signs of grace, what in particular does baptism signify and what grace is given, according to the Articles? At this point it is necessary to quote the 27th Article at length:

Baptism is not only a sign of profession, and mark of difference. . . it is also a sign of Regeneration or new Birth, whereby as an instrument, they that receive Baptism rightly are grafted into the Church; the promises of forgiveness of sin, and of our adoption to be the sons of God by the Holy Ghost are visibly signed and sealed; faith is confirmed, and Grace increased by virtue of prayer unto God. The Baptism of young Children is in any ways to be retained in the Church, as most agreeable with the institution of Christ.

⁸ Reformation Anglicans hold that the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion contain the “true doctrine of the church agreeing upon God’s word” and that they are therefore “authoritative for Anglicans today.” See DRM Constitution and Canons, Title III, Canon 2, section 4, <http://rockymountainanglican.org/founding-documents>.

⁹ John Stott, “The Evangelical Doctrine of Baptism,” *The Anglican Evangelical Doctrine of Infant Baptism*, Kindle ed., (London: Latimer Trust, 2008), loc. 153.

¹⁰ Michael Horton writes that he grew up viewing baptism as “my own sacrament, my own act of obedience in which I declared my resolve to follow Jesus.” He wondered, “how could a child make such a declaration?” His mind began to change when he grasp the covenantal nature of God’s relationship with his people. “Just as the rainbow was a sacrament of divine, not human resolve, and the ceremony of halved animals was a sacrament of God’s commitment to the covenant, baptism is God’s announcement of his intentions to bring me into his dynasty of faith.” *God’s Grandchildren, August 14, 2007*, <https://modernreformation.org/resource-library/articles/gods-grandchildren>; On the covenantal theology of the Articles, see Lee Gatiss, “The Anglican Doctrine of Baptism,” *Foundations* 63 (Nov. 2012), 86-87.

Note that according to this article baptism is a sign primarily of regeneration or new birth and there follows, in JI Packer's suggestive phrase, a "five-fold fruitage of regeneration" under the following aspects: grafting into the church, the promises of forgiveness of sin, adoption into God's family by the Holy Spirit, confirmation of faith, and growth in grace.¹¹

The link between regeneration or new birth and baptism has occasioned controversy and misunderstanding. Anglicans in the Reformation tradition do not believe that baptism automatically and immediately regenerates the baptismal candidate. Some hold that baptism gives new spiritual life in the sense that the recipient is "brought into the sphere of God's covenant of grace."¹² This is referred to as the objective covenant view.¹³ Packer's understanding of regeneration seems to fit within this category: "regeneration is here conceived as a dynamic, life-changing process in and through Christ, decisive in its initial stage and moving toward perfection by what the church calls sanctification and the New Testament calls growth."¹⁴

Many Reformed Anglicans stress that the declaration of regeneration made at baptism is conditional. When, in the baptismal service of the Prayer Book the baptized infant is declared "regenerate", this is the language of charitable presumption, of anticipating that faith will follow as the child grows in the covenant family.¹⁵ Thus the word "instrument" in the Article 27 should be understood in a legal sense. A legal instrument, "conveys its benefits only to the person who falls within its terms, thus acting not inevitably, but conditionally; not mechanically, but morally."¹⁶

Although there are different ways to articulate the meaning of regeneration as it relates to baptism, Anglicans in the Reformation tradition reject the idea that baptism infuses grace into soul of the recipient in a mechanical or *ex opere operato* (or "by the work worked") manner.¹⁷

¹¹ See JI Packer, "Baptism and Regeneration", (August 2013), pg. 5. The link between baptism and regeneration is explicit in Titus 3:5, although as Packer's article argues, "regeneration" is not a technical term that carries precise meaning. Packer's article is available at <https://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/index.php/additional-resources-and-translations/>

¹² Peter Toon, *Ibid.*, 20, 22-23.

¹³ For other examples of this view see Gattis, *Ibid.*, 84-85.

¹⁴ Packer, *Ibid.*

¹⁵ This is the view of Stott, *Ibid.*, loc. 373. Stott is following J.B. Mozley's *A Review of the Baptismal Controversy* (1854) on the use of hypothetical language in scripture and liturgy. Gattis says that most evangelicals hold to the hypothetical, conditional view of regeneration. Gattis *Ibid.*, 84.

¹⁶ Motyer, *Ibid.*, loc. 755.

¹⁷ One major problem with such a conception is that it obscures the doctrine of justification by grace through faith and the distinction between justification and sanctification. In the *ex opera operato* view of baptism, particularly in the Roman Catholic view, the grace infused at baptism is the grace of justification, with which the baptized must cooperate in order to grow in salvation. Reformation Anglicans insist that we are justified not by baptism but by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. On justification conferred in

This stream of Anglicanism has laid particular stress on the conditional phrase “they that receive Baptism rightly” and on the covenantal language of “sign and seal”. To receive the sacraments rightly is to receive them with faith (see Articles 28 and 29 regarding the Lord’s Supper). The phrase “sign and seal” implies not only God’s gracious action in baptism, but also the responsibility of the recipient. The covenant sign itself is not sufficient for salvation— recipients must personally believe God’s promises. The seal is a pledge which acts as a title to the gift of God’s covenant blessings, which the baptized person must receive by faith. Receiving this gift may happen “before, during or (in the case of infants) after the administration of the sacraments.”¹⁸

On the other hand, Reformation Anglicans balance the need, indeed the requirement, of subjective personal faith in Christ, with trust in God’s objective work of grace within the sacrament of baptism. Exactly *how* God’s spiritual grace is at work in baptism is difficult to define with precision.¹⁹ Perhaps at this point it is appropriate to recall that the early church used the term *mysterion* (mystery) to refer to the sacraments! However, Anglicans in this tradition will be comfortable pointing out that the ground of our assurance regarding the efficacy of baptism is the promises of God. Moyter helpfully summarized the pastoral and liturgical implications of such perspective. He notes that when we pray for a child who is baptized we do not surround him or her with “ifs but with prayers and promises”.

We [are] asserting all God has pledged in his covenant of grace, and believing that what he has promised, ‘He for his part will most surely keep and perform’. Because our practice of baptism is not grounded on anything as insecure as man’s professed faith, but upon the word of God which lives and abides forever, we can afford to speak with a boldness of faith.²⁰

THE HISTORICAL WITNESS

While we are committed to the Reformation principle that scripture is the supreme authority in matters of faith and practice, Anglicans also value the witness of the early church. The Reformation in the Church of England sought to preserve continuity with the catholic church where possible, rejecting things that were deemed contrary to the clear teaching of scripture, but preserving traditions which scripture does not forbid. This approach to tradition informs how

baptism, see the Roman Catholic Catechism, part 3, sect. 1, art. 2, “Grace and Justification.”
https://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p3s1c3a2.htm

¹⁸ John Stott, *Ibid.*, loc. 221.

¹⁹ Stott is comfortable saying that the sacrament of baptism conveys grace by “arousing within us the faith to embrace” the blessings of which they signify” (*Ibid.*, loc. 328) ; McKnight writes of baptism as a “seed of grace” implanted in the life of the infant, *Ibid.*, pg. 60, loc. 971). But see Packer’s caution regarding the seed analogy in Packer, *Ibid.*, 5-6.

²⁰ Moyter, *Ibid.*, loc. 921.



Anglicans view infant baptism. What we find in the history of the early church is the widespread practice of infant baptism, at least by the early third century, and the uniform practice by the fifth century. Furthermore, the argument that the practice of infant baptism is contrary to scripture and apostolic practice does not appear in the history of the church until much later in the history of the church, particularly with the Anabaptist movement in the sixteenth century.²¹

The first earliest unambiguous evidence of the practice of infant baptism comes from the *Apostolic Tradition*, which is attributed to Hippolytus of Rome and dated around the beginning of the third century. In this document we find the following instructions: “And first baptize the little ones; if they can speak for themselves, they shall do so; if not, their parents or other relatives shall speak for them.”²² Here is clear evidence that infants and young children were baptized by the church. By the 250s we have evidence from Tertullian of Carthage, Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, and Origen of Alexandria, of the widespread practice of infant baptism. In fact Origen writes that it is established custom, handed down from the apostles. Evidence from these writings “would seem to demonstrate conclusively that by the last quarter of the second century, infant baptism was well-established across the Roman Empire.”²³

It is likely that the practice of infant baptism in the early third century is a continuation of what occurred in the second century, as several suggestive passages from second century documents indicate. Justin Martyr, a second century church father, writes of Christians then sixty or seventy years old who “had from childhood been made disciples” (*The First Apology*, chp.15). At his martyrdom (c. A.D. 155-56), Polycarp claimed to be Christ servant for 86 years (*The Martyrdom of Polycarp*, 9). Irenaeus (c. 130-c.200) writes of infants and little children, having been born again through Christ (*Against Heresies.*, 2.22.4) and his consistent usage of the phrase “born again” suggests baptism.²⁴

None of this is meant to imply that only infant baptism was practiced in the late second and early third century of the early church. Adult baptism was advocated by some church fathers like Tertullian. And we know of some church fathers, like Augustine, who were not baptized as infants. Indeed, the historical record indicates that although widespread, infant baptism was not practiced universally until the fifth century. Nevertheless, it is clear that “by a tradition at least as old as the 3rd century and virtually universal until the Reformation, children born to Christian

²¹ Lane states that the first *in principle* objection to infant baptism does not arise until some “small medieval sects and the sixteenth-century Anabaptists.” Anthony N.S. Lane, “Did the Apostolic Church Baptise Babies? A Seismological Approach,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 55.1 (2004), 124.

²² *The Apostolic Tradition*, part 2, chp. 21.4. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/61614/61614-h/61614-h.htm>

²³ Lane, *Ibid.*, 118.

²⁴ The references and information in this paragraph are taken from “Infant Baptism”, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. F.L. Cross and E.A. Livingstone (New York: Oxford UP, 1975), 701.



parents have been baptized in infancy.”²⁵ In its practice of infant baptism, Anglicans stand firmly within this historical, majority tradition.

CONCLUSION

Along with our credobaptist friends we believe it is a right, good, and joyful thing (to use the celebratory language of the Prayer Book’s communion liturgy) to baptize adults who make a profession of faith in Jesus Christ. We also believe, for the reasons given above, that God calls the church to give the covenant sign of baptism to the children of believers. In the waters of baptism the Triune God marks the child as a member of his family and offers the gospel promises of the new covenant. Infant baptism is much more than a human ceremony because God’s grace is at work in the life of the child, the family, godparents or sponsors, and indeed the entire church community for the salvation of the child. Anglican sacramental and pastoral theology in the Reformation tradition will stress the necessity of personal faith in order to rightly receive the sacrament of baptism. It will also not fail to trust in God’s sovereign grace to accomplish his purposes in those marked as his covenant children.

²⁵ *Ibid.*