

Infant Baptism

Jordan Bajis

"Should I be baptized again?" Many renewed Orthodox Christians have asked themselves and others whether they should be baptized as adults. I readily understand why this question is asked, for I myself must admit that I did not always feel comfortable about the Orthodox Church baptizing infants. I asked myself several other questions as well: "How can an infant 'believe and be baptized'?" "Where in Scripture does it show an infant being baptized?" "Is not the baptizing of infants the reason why the contemporary Orthodox Church has a need for renewal and re-evangelization?"

These questions were so significant to me that I refused to actively support or encourage the practice of infant baptism until I was able to get some satisfactory answers. On one occasion, I even rejected the honor of being the best man at a close friend's wedding unless he was willing to absolve me of the accompanying responsibility of being the baptismal sponsor for his first child. Only after he agreed to my request did I consent to become his best man.

Knowing that as a committed Christian I could not refrain indefinitely from making a decision on this matter, I embarked on an intensive study of Scripture and early Christian history. I resolved that I would not finish my study until I had settled the issue in my mind and in my heart. Surprisingly, the area was much more complex than I first envisioned it to be. I must admit that at the outset, it looked as though the argument for infant baptism was about as valid as the theory that the earth was cigar-shaped. However, I uncovered many facts that are usually unknown to the common layman and which I think will prove helpful for those who are now in a doctrinal dilemma similar to the one I was in previously. I can now say, after having looked into the arguments of some of the most respected scholars on this subject, that there is a very strong case for the baptism of infants of Christian parents.

Before I begin to share some of the things I discovered, I think it is important to note that, although I have dedicated months to the thorough study of this subject, I do not pretend to be a theologian, professor of Church history, or Greek scholar. I am not an expert on the subject; I am a student of the subject. It is also important to note, however, that the evidence and arguments I produce here are mainly, not my own but rather a synthesis of research and conclusions distilled from several noteworthy scholars. It is not my purpose to be overly technical, to illustrate the minute peculiarity of each counter-argument's counter-argument, or to take the reader back to study the original documents in order to discuss grammatical controversies surrounding the texts. It is not that I consider these types of investigations unimportant, but I simply restrained myself from doing this because I do not think it is very profitable for the average layman. The scholars are much better qualified than I to define and explain these more exacting details, in any case.

Given this preface, let me get to the point of the article. How is it that I can now recognize infant baptism as a valid practice whereas before I was highly distrustful of it?

I will record a number of reasons for this below in as straightforward and direct a way as I know. Some facts will require a bit of explanation, but many will consist of only a sentence or two. At the close of the list, I will offer some concluding thoughts and insights about infant baptism. I have categorized the evidence supporting the practice of infant baptism into three main sections: Scripture, History, and the Fathers of the Early Church. I recognize that each argument may not be able to stand on its own, but taken together, they present a conclusive picture.

SCRIPTURE

Peter's Sermon

The first time the Gospel was ever proclaimed was on the day of Pentecost by the Apostle Peter. In his Spirit-inspired sermon, he made it clear that the blessing and promise of salvation was not just for adults, but for children as well.

"And Peter said to them, 'Repent and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and your children, and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God shall call to Himself.'" (Acts 2:38, 39)

It is also interesting to note that this quote from Peter's Pentecostal sermon does not merely state "...the promise is for you and children," but "for you and your children," which makes it clear that the children mentioned here were young enough to still be considered under the protection and authority of their parents. This is underscored when one understands that it was common for women and men to marry at the very young ages of twelve and thirteen, respectively. From this it becomes reasonable to assume that these children to whom Peter refers were young juveniles or, at the very least, in their preadolescence.

The Baptism of Households

Although this is only indirect Scriptural evidence, the fact that the Bible mentions that entire "households" were baptized does make it seem probable that children and infants were included. "Now I did baptize the household of Stephanas..." (1 Corinthians 1:16) An angel spoke to Cornelius saying, "Send to Joppa, and have Simon, who is called Peter, brought here; and he shall speak words to you by which you will be saved, and all your household." Later, when Peter arrived at Cornelius' household, "...he ordered them to be baptized."(Acts 11:13b, 14; Acts 10:48a) "And when she [Lydia of Thyatira] and her household had been baptized..." (Acts 16:15a) "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you shall be saved, you and your household...and immediately he was baptized, he and all his household." (Acts 16:31, 33b) We know that the Greek word "oikos," translated "house" or "household," has traditionally included infants and children in its meaning for several

reasons. There is no evidence of this word being used either in secular Greek, Biblical Greek, or in the writing of Hellenistic Judaism in a way which would restrict its meaning only to adults. The Old Testament parallel for "house" carries the sense of the entire family. The Greek translation of the original Hebrew manuscripts (completed in 250 B.C.) uses this word when translating the Hebrew word meaning the complete family (men, women, children, infants). Similarly, we know that the phrase "he and his house" refers to the total family; the Old Testament use of this phrase clearly demonstrates this by specifically mentioning the presence of children and infants at times.

No Baptism of Older Children of Christian Parents Recorded

If the baptism of infants was not acceptable during New Testament times, then when does Scripture mention the alternative—the baptism of the children of Christian parents once they have matured out of infancy? The Bible never gives one example of the baptism of a Christian child as an adult. It is important that Scripture also does not speak of an "age of accountability or reason" (which many pinpoint at 13 years) when a child's capacity to believe the Gospel is developed enough so that he can receive baptism. Neither does the Bible state that every child is in a "suspended state of salvation" until they have reached this age, which one would have to believe if he held to the "age of accountability" theory.

The Saving Power of Christ's Presence in Holy Baptism

Although an opponent of infant baptism, Dr. Jewett, in his book *Infant Baptism and the Covenant of Grace*, makes a very logical conclusion about baptism if it is understood to be a release of supernatural power:

"...one believes that baptism washes away the guilt of eternal sin, so that any one departing this life without it is in danger of eternal damnation, he will have good reason to conclude that infants should be baptized. In fact, the question of infant baptism can hardly be raised without such a sacramental theology, since an affirmative answer is a foregone conclusion."

Certainly if there were a taint of sin upon each who is born in this world, there would be a need for every person to be cleansed from this impurity before leaving the temporal life. The Bible's "sacramental theology" states that there is such a need since "...through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men." (Romans 5:12) For this reason, "...there are none righteous, not even one" (i.e. not infants). (Romans 3:10) How are these young ones saved from the sin they have received from Adam's race? They are saved through the regenerative power of baptism and the faith of the Church (i.e. the Christian faithful):

"He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration (baptism) and renewing by the Holy Spirit." (Titus 3:5)

"Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins." (Acts 2:38)

"Jesus answered, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the Kingdom of God.'" (John 3:5)

"...when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through the water, and corresponding to that, baptism now saves you." (1 Peter 3:20, 21)

Baptism is not just a symbolic testimony of what God has done in the heart of an adult believer, but is in itself a dynamic means of actually effecting the power of the Gospel (the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ) in a life (Romans 6:4). Christian baptism is the means whereby we encounter and identify with Jesus Christ Himself. This is one of the reasons why Paul explains baptism as the manner in which we genuinely "put on" or "clothe" ourselves with Christ (Galatians 3:27). This is not just a metaphor; the Lord actually transforms a person through his baptism.

The Old Testament Symbols of Salvation and Baptism Include Infants:

1. Circumcision, the sign of God's covenant between the people of Abraham and Himself, was performed on every male child who was eight days old (Genesis 17:12). Many see a direct parallel between circumcision and Christian baptism in Scriptural passages such as Colossians 2:11, 12: *"And in Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of flesh by the circumcision of Christ; having been buried with Him in baptism..."* If baptism is the "New Testament circumcision," there can definitely be no objection to "sealing" the infant of a consecrated Christian family in Christ's New Covenant.
2. Moses' leading his people through the Red Sea is seen as an Old Testament foreshadowing of Christian baptism. The following New Testament passage clearly points to this: *"For I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea; and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink, for they were drinking from a spiritual rock which followed them, and that rock was Christ."* (1 Corinthians 10:1-4) It is worthwhile to note that "all were baptized" through Moses' leadership in crossing over the Red Sea. He did not leave the infants or children on the shores of Egypt to become prey to the angry armies of Pharaoh because they were not old enough to believe in the promise of the Old Covenant. Rather, entrusted to the arms of their parents' faith, they were carried through the "baptism of Moses."
3. The saving of Noah's entire family by the ark can also be seen as a prefigurement of a baptism which includes infants. All that needs to be said, as in the case of Moses' passing through the Red Sea, is that the entire family was on board the ark. Why should we leave infants out of the ark of baptism?

Secular Philosophy Redefines "Faith" and "Personhood"

Larry Christenson, in his pamphlet *"What About Baptism?"*, quotes Edmund Schlink (author of *The Doctrine of Baptism*) as stating that the rejection of infant baptism was

based on the secular philosophy of the sixteenth century, which assured man's individuality, and was not the result of a new Scriptural inquiry:

"Belief was seen in rationalistic and volitional terms, as an act of the mind and the will. 'Because an infant cannot think or decide, it cannot have faith, and therefore should not be baptized.' To this day, that is the only argument raised against the validity of infant baptism. One tosses off the sentence as though it were self-evident truth: 'A child can't believe.' But that 'truth,' upon examination, is neither self-evident, nor is it Biblical."

As Christenson goes on to say, faith is not merely a product of reason but relation. It is a relationship of love and trust, a relationship which is not limited to the mind. Some Scriptures which support the possibility of an "infant faith" are these:

"Yet Thou art He who didst bring me forth from the womb; Thou didst make me trust when upon my mother's breast." (Psalm 22:9)

"And whoever causes one of these little ones who believe to stumble, it would be better for him if with a heavy millstone hung around his neck, he had been cast into the sea." (Mark 9:42)

"For behold, when the sound of your greeting [Theotokos] reached my ears [Elizabeth], the baby [John the Baptist] leaped in my womb for joy." (Luke 1:44)

CHURCH HISTORY

- Polycarp stated at his martyrdom (167/8 A.D.) that he had been in the "service of Christ" for eighty-six years. Other recorded dates from Polycarp's life make it likely that eighty-six years was his age from birth. Joachim Jeremias, in *The Origins of Infant Baptism*, concludes the following from these facts: "This shows at any rate that his parents were already Christians, or at least were converted quite soon after his birth. If his parents were pagans at his birth, he would have been baptized with the 'house' at their conversion. But even if his parents were Christians, the words 'service of Christ for eighty-six years' support a baptism soon after his birth rather than one as a child of 'mature years'...for which there is no evidence at all."
- Jeremias supposes something similar for Polycrates of Ephesus. In 190/91, when writing to Rome concerning the dispute over Easter, Polycrates states that he is "sixty-five years in the Lord." Since this reference to his age is made "because of his concern for his long unimpeachable Christian standing," Jeremias postulates that his baptism "took place soon after birth, rather than that there was an age limit for baptism."

- Justin Martyr gives still another testimony to the practice of infant baptism by stating that many old men and women of sixty and seventy years of age had been disciples of Christ from childhood.
- No incident is recorded in the earliest of Christian history which gives evidence that baptism was forbidden to any person on the basis of an age limit, or that the right of a Christian parent to have his children baptized had ever been challenged or renounced.
- Although several examples exist from the third century of the children of Christians being baptized as infants, in all of the literature and collections of inscriptions from that century there is not a single example of Christian parents delaying the baptism of their children.
- Neither the Ebionites, Novatians, Arians, Donatists, Montanists, nor any other early heresy refuted infant baptism; many were even noted as practicing it.
- A significant parallel exists between Jewish proselyte baptism (when pagans were converted to Judaism) and early Christian baptism. The contacts between early Christian baptism and proselyte baptism, with the similarities in terminology, interpretation, symbolism, and the rite itself, are especially notable. What is of greatest interest, however, is that the baptism of the early Church followed that of proselyte baptism, in which children and infants were baptized with the convert's family. This is especially significant when one realizes that the very early Church was made up primarily of converted Jews.
- There is no evidence of anyone being against infant baptism in the early Church on the grounds that you must first "believe" and be baptized. Tertulian (160-230 A.D.) was the only one who questioned infant baptism. The bulk of his objection, however, was due to his heresy that sin after baptism was almost unforgivable.
- Cyprian, a leading bishop of North Africa, convened a synod of sixty-six bishops at Carthage to discuss whether or not they felt that infant baptism should be delayed until the eighth day after birth instead of the usual second or third day. Their unanimous decision upheld the universally accepted practice which they had always followed.

EARLY CHURCH FATHERS

- A very early Christian teacher, Irenaeus (120-202 A.D.), wrote the following:

"He came to save all through Himself—all I say, who through Him are reborn in God—infants, and children, and youths, and old men. Therefore He passed through every age, becoming an infant for infants, sanctifying infants; a child for children, sanctifying those who are of that age, and at the same time becoming for them an example of piety, of righteousness, and of submission; a young man for youths, becoming an example for youths and sanctifying them for the Lord."

Here we read that Jesus Christ came that all might be reborn in God. "How can an infant be reborn if he cannot believe?" a person may ask. I ask in return, "How can an infant be reborn if his Christian parents have refrained from baptizing him?" Is a child who has not reached the "age of accountability/reason" not reborn until he reaches the age of thirteen when he then needs to be reborn?

- Origen's (185-254 A.D.) view of baptism is direct and transparent:

"For what is sin? Could a child who has only just been born commit a sin? And yet he has sin for which it is commanded to offer a sacrifice, as Job 14:4ff and Psalm 51:5-7 show. For this reason the Church received from the Apostles the tradition to administer baptism to the children also. For the men to whom the secrets of divine mysteries had been entrusted knew that in everyone there were genuine sinful defilements, which had to be washed away with water and the Spirit."

In his Homily on Luke, he again states his beliefs on infant baptism:

"Infants are baptized for the remission of sins. What sins? Whenever have they sinned? In fact, of course, never. And yet: 'No one is free from defilement.' (Job 14:4) But defilement is only put away by the mystery of baptism. That is the reason why infants too are baptized."

- Hippolytus' (170-236 A.D.) perception of infant baptism is clear and straightforward as well:

"And first baptize the little ones; and if they can speak for themselves, they shall do so; if not, their parents or other relatives shall speak for them."

- There is not one Church Father who denies or even questions the validity of infant baptism. It was in no locality and at no time viewed as something that was created after New Testament times.

SOME FINAL COMMENTS AND CONCLUSIONS:

The evidence I have so far presented I believe merit attention by themselves. I would like, however, to make a number of random yet significant comments and observations about the area of infant baptism before I close this article.

Many times, the debate regarding infant baptism is a defensive one; those who propose that adult baptism is the only valid form challenge those who practice infant baptism to prove that it is an acceptable practice. What if those who exclusively favor adult baptism were interrogated? What answers would they give to questions which up until now have been virtually unaddressed? Questions such as these:

- If infant baptism is a later invention, when did it begin and who began it? Where did it originate?
- Why are there no protests against the validity of infant baptism from anyone in the early Church?
- Where is anything found in Scripture that expressly forbids the baptism of infants or children?
- How is it that God established a covenantal, corporate relationship with the tribes of Israel in the Old Testament, but you interpret the New Testament as abolishing the faith of an entire household with the father at its head in favor of a solely individualistic faith?
- Where does Scripture prescribe any age for baptism?
- Even if there were a special age when someone's faith reached "maturity," how could one discern that? Doesn't faith always mature? When is faith mature enough for baptism and when is it not? Who can judge?
- Where in Scripture does it say that children are free from the effects of the Fall simply because they are not old enough to believe? (Even creation is under the curse of mankind's fall-Romans 8:19-21.)
- What about the many Biblical meanings and early Christian understandings of baptism other than the one defining it as a visible sign of inward repentance, meanings such as the sacrament of regeneration (Titus 3:5), a grafting into the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:13), a passage from the reign of Satan into Christ's authority (Romans 6:17), the expression of the manifestation of God (Luke 3:21, 22), an admission into God's covenant (Colossians 2:11), the Lord's act of adoption and our putting on of Christ (Galatians 3:26, 27)? Why should these things be taken away from the small child of a Christian family?
- If it was the norm to baptize children at a later age, why is there no evidence in Scripture or early Church history of instruction given to parents on how to help their adolescent children prepare for baptism?
- If it is granted that baptism is for the remission of sins, why would the Church ever want to give baptism to infants if there were nothing in the infants which needed remission? Would not the grace of baptism, in this context, seem superfluous?
- In essence, laying aside all the polemics and prejudices and academic intricacies, what Scriptural principle is being violated if a child is baptized and matures in his faith?

There is a good reason why these questions are hard to answer for those who exclusively advocate adult baptism: infant baptism is not an innovation, it is the practice of the Early Church.

Over and over again, I am told that it is incorrect to allow infants to be baptized because the Scriptural order is to first believe, and then to be baptized (Mark 16:16). The error in this thinking is not that it is incorrect to have an adult believe before he is baptized, but that one cannot apply a command intended for adults to infants. The Bible was not written to infants and is therefore not going to direct them to do anything. They are under the care of their parents who can hear, understand, and believe. Additionally, there is an important distinction to be made between baptizing an infant and an adult believer—one has the need to repent, the other does not.

It is also important to recognize that the New Testament records the beginnings of the Christian people. This accounts for it reading like a missionary diary in a number of places. I am certain that were I to begin an apostolic work in a totally heathen country, and to write to the people there or to record my progress in preaching the Gospel to them, I would not mention infant baptism even once.

Some may ask why Sts. John Chrysostom, Gregory of Nazianzus, Basil the Great, and Jerome were all baptized as adults, even though they had at least one Christian parent. The earliest evidence that Christian parents refrained from having their child baptized immediately after birth is in the middle of the fourth century (Gregory was the first example of this in 360 A.D.). None of these men postponed their baptism because of faith, however. Surely Gregory and John Chrysostom at 30, Jerome at 20, and Basil at 27 (at which ages they were baptized) had reached the "age of reason" and individual faith long before then. They postponed their baptisms on the false premise that they could better assure themselves a place in heaven if they minimized the times they sinned after baptism. None of these men ever challenged the validity of infant baptism.

Baptism in and of itself, of course, is not enough. It must be accompanied by genuine faith. No parents should be allowed to baptize their infant if they themselves have not made an expressed commitment to serve Jesus Christ and raise their child in accordance with God's Word. As adults, we are called to accept the challenge of our baptism and live dedicated lives for Christ. If we do any less, we have rejected Christ and the gift of salvation He has made available to us since our birth.

Going full circle, I now end this article with the question with which I began it: "Should I be baptized again?" Given that our infant baptism is valid, the Scriptural answer to that question is clear: "There is...one Lord, one faith, ONE baptism." (Ephesians 4:4, 5) If you have been baptized once, there is no need to be baptized again. Let us then determine to bear witness to the truth of our baptism by living for Him who died and rose for us.

Copyright: © 1990-1996 Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America