

Gen. 17:1-14 - The Meaning of Infant Baptism

Written by Tim Black
Sunday, 12 July 2009 13:00 -

1.

Introduction

1.

The relative prominence of circumcision. Among the ceremonial feast days and sacraments of the OT, which ones stand out as the most important to you? Without a doubt the Day of Atonement is the highest day, because at its center stood the sacrifice that pictured Christ's death on the cross which reconciles us to God. After the Day of Atonement, the two most prominent ceremonies are circumcision and the Passover

. Circumcision marked the Jews as God's special people among all the families of the earth, and the Passover commemorated God's work of saving His people through the Exodus. In Ex. 12:26-27 God told His people when their children asked what the Passover meant, they should explain it. And so in Reformed churches when we celebrate the sacrament of communion or baptism we explain what it means by preaching the gospel along with celebrating the sacrament.

2.

Outline. Because we have not had a baptism for quite a while, this morning we will take a careful look at scripture's teaching about two things: first, the meaning of baptism, and second, the reason to baptize infants

3.

Body

1.

The Meaning of Baptism: A Sacrament. "Baptism is a sacrament ordained by the Lord Jesus Christ." [1](#)

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1.

Sign and Seal: A Visible Promise. Sacraments are signs and seals of God's saving grace. Baptism "is a sign and seal of the inclusion of the person who is baptized in the covenant of grace."
[2](#)

1.

Circumcision was a sign and a seal. These terms come straight from scripture. Circumcision was a "sign" and a "seal."
Rom. 4:11
says Abraham "received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised."
"

2.

The sacraments of the OT and NT are the same in spiritual substance. This is true not only of circumcision, but of baptism as well, because the sacraments of the OT and NT are the same in spiritual substance (see WCF 27.5).

1 Cor. 10:1-4

says "
our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, 2 and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, 3 and all ate the same spiritual food, 4 and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ.
" Notice that the function of NT baptism was performed during the time of the OT! "
All were baptized

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into Moses.

" This was possible because God's " spiritual

" relationship to His people in the OT and the NT is one and the " same

," despite the differences in their administration.

The sacraments of the OT and the NT are the same in spiritual substance

.

3.

Baptism parallels and replaces circumcision. Baptism parallels and replaces circumcision . This is evident in **Col. 2:11-12**

,

11 In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, 12 having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.

" In these verses, the spiritual function of OT circumcision is signified by NT baptism. So we learn about the meaning of baptism not only from the NT but also from the OT.

4.

A Visible Promise. Following Augustine's terminology the Reformers maintained that as a sign and a seal baptism is a "visible promise." What it means that baptism is a

sign
and a
seal

is that it is a "
visible promise

." As a

sign

baptism makes God's promises
visible

, and as a
seal

baptism

promises

God's saving grace.

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5.

Making A Covenant. Baptism is God making a covenant. As a sacrament, baptism functions to make a covenant between God and the person baptized. Or more precisely, it is God establishing His covenant with a particular individual

. Turn to Genesis 17 again and notice several elements of its teaching.

1.

Circumcision "is" the covenant, as the mark or sign of the covenant. First notice how God says circumcision "

is

" the covenant, as the mark or sign of the covenant. In

Gen. 17:10

He says "

This

is

my covenant...Every male among you shall be circumcised.

" God's promises and laws in Gen. 17 are the same in substance as those He gave in ch. 12 and ch. 15. God made His covenant with Abram in ch. 12 by giving His promises, and confirmed it with the self-imprecatory signs of animals split in two in ch. 15, which symbolized the sacrifice of Christ necessary to reconcile Abram to God. Then in ch. 17 God gave Abram a visible reminder of His covenant in the sign of circumcision.

Gen. 17:11

calls it a "

sign

" saying "

it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you.

" It

is

the covenant, as its

sign

. God made the covenant with Abram once and for all in ch. 12. God gave Abram the symbolic promises of an atoning sacrifice in ch. 15 once and for all. But God also promised in

Gen. 17:7

"

I will

establish

my covenant between me and you

and your offspring after you

.

" How would God establish His covenant with Abram's offspring? How would they know the covenant was made with them, and not only with Abram? By receiving the sign of circumcision. This is why God said in

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v. 10

"
This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you.
" In this same way, baptism establishes God's covenant with the one who is baptized. It shows that God's promises are not only for Abram, not only for Pastor Tim and Becky, but they are also for Jonathan their son.

2.

Baptism Identifies Us as God's People: The Covenant Formula: I will be your God, and you shall be my people. Because it establishes God's covenant with us, baptism identifies us as God's people.
. We see this in God's promises throughout Gen. 12-17, especially in their reflections of the covenant formula, "I will be your God, and you shall be my people." That formula is reflected in v. 2, "
that I may make my covenant between me and you
," v. 4, "
my covenant is with you
," v. 7, "
to be God to you and to your offspring after you
," v. 8, "
and I will be their God
," v. 10, "
between me and you and your offspring after you
," and v. 11, "
the covenant between me and you.
"

3.

Union with Christ as our Savior in His Death and Resurrection, and the Church as Christ's Body. Like with Abraham, God makes His covenant with us through the atoning death of Jesus Christ, and so baptism signifies our being united with Christ in His death and resurrection, and as a seal it promises and effectually applies to us the benefits of Christ's death and resurrection. **Rom. 6:3** teaches that those who "were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into His death
."
"Teaching that we and our children are conceived and born in sin, it witnesses and seals unto us the remission of sins and the bestowal of all the gifts of salvation through union with Christ. Baptism with water signifies and seals cleansing from sin by the blood and the Spirit of Christ, together with our death unto sin and our resurrection unto newness of life by virtue of the death and resurrection of Christ."

3

Because baptism signifies and seals union with Christ, it signifies and seals union with Christ's body, the church, by the work of the Spirit.

1 Cor. 12:13

teaches this, "

For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body- Jews or Greeks, slaves or free- and all were made to drink of one Spirit.

" This is the inner working of the reason why baptism makes a person a member of the church. This is in fact what happens through baptism, as we see in

Acts 2:41

, "

So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.

" Baptism added those who were baptized to the number of the members of the church.

Through baptism today, Jonathan will become a member of the church. This is its outward effect which baptism works for all who receive it.

4.

Baptism's Effectiveness. But baptism also has an inward, spiritual effect which it does not work for all who receive it. Because it is a visible promise, baptism is effective in the same way God's promises are effective. God makes His visible promise in baptism effectual unto salvation by working in us the right response of faith and repentance. For this reason Peter says " baptism...saves...by the resurrection of Jesus Christ

" (

1 Pet. 3:21

), and baptism is "

unto the remission of sins

" (

Acts 2:38

); it brings about the remission of sins. But baptism does not save all who receive it, as Simon the magician was baptized in

Acts 8:13

, but inwardly his "

heart [was] not right before God,

" but remained full of "

bitterness...and...iniquity.

" (

Acts 8:21, 23

) Baptism unites a person to the church outwardly, and unites a person to Christ and His church inwardly and spiritually as well when God the Spirit effectually applies the salvation baptism promises. Becky and I have washed Jonathan's body many times now, but only God can wash his soul from sin.

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5.

Obligations of those baptized. God sovereignly saves some who are baptized by granting them faith and repentance. But because baptism is the mark of the covenant—because it marks us as God's special people—it places obligations upon those who are baptized. It calls you to repent and believe. Every day of his life, Jonathan Black's baptism will call him to repent and believe. God said to Abram in **Gen. 17:9**, "As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations

."

"Since baptized persons are called upon to assume the obligations of the covenant, baptism summons us to renounce the devil, the world and the flesh and to walk humbly with our God in devotion to his commandments."

[4](#)

We see this in

Rom. 6:1-3

and

11

,"

1 What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? 2 By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? 3 Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?....11 Consider yourselves dead to sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord.

" Have you been baptized? If you have, then you belong to God, whether you obey and worship Him or not. Repent of your sins, and call out to Him to forgive you for your sins, and He will wash not your skin but your heart, your conscience; He will wash away your sin. "

He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to His own mercy, by the

washing of regeneration

and renewal of the Holy Spirit.

" (

Titus 3:5

) "

Baptism...now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

" (

1 Pet. 3:21

) Your baptism calls you to repent and to appeal to God to cleanse you from the guilt of your sin. What a blessing to be cleansed from a guilty conscience before God! In this way, whether at the moment you are baptized or many years later, God does save His people through baptism.

6.

In the name of the Triune God. It is God who saves, so baptism is administered in the

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name of the triune God

"Since these gifts of salvation are the gracious provision of the triune God, who is pleased to claim us as his very own, we are baptized into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost."

[5](#)

For this reason Christ commanded us to baptize in the name of each person in the Trinity, and following Christ's command this is what we will do.

7.

The Reason to Baptize Infants

1.

The modern objection to infant baptism. The common practice of God's people in the OT and NT church, and throughout church history up until modern times, has been to give the mark of the covenant to the infant children of believers. Only in the modern era have Baptists rejected this common practice of the church, but since their rejection has become the norm in the modern church, we should briefly give attention to the reason to baptize infants

2.

The promise is for you and your children. The reason is that the promise is for you and for your children.

1.

The reason is woven throughout the meaning of baptism which we have just seen. "Although our young children do not yet understand these things, they are nevertheless to be baptized. For the promise of the covenant is made to believers and to their seed, as God declared unto Abraham: 'And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee and to thy seed after thee.'" [6](#) God made His covenant not only with Abram, but also with Abram's children, whether they were believers or not. Abram's son Ishmael was not a believer, yet God made His covenant with Ishmael. Ishmael received the covenant outwardly, but rejected the covenant inwardly. Yet God promised to be Ishmael's God, and for that reason Ishmael must be circumcised.

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2.

The same is true in the NT. At the end of his sermon at Pentecost, Peter said "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins....For the promise is for you and for your children.

" (

Acts 2:38

) The promise is for you and for your children. It is for your children today

, not only when they decide to believe the promise. "

Repent and be baptized

every one of you

!" "

Every one

." If you think the promise isn't theirs until they believe it, you will never give them the promise, because it isn't theirs to have. That is the practical effect of truly believing the believer's baptist position. If you're a Baptist you teach your children to sing "Jesus loves me" but you don't really mean it. The promise is not theirs to have, and the proof that you think so is that you withhold the visible promise of baptism from your children.

3.

But God calls you to be more faithful to Him than that. Do you not believe He is powerful enough to save your children? He is. And for that reason He commanded Abram to place the mark of circumcision upon Abram's children, to establish God's covenant with those children. Circumcision, and baptism, are the outward way God begins to establish His covenant with your children. This sacrament shows your children that God promises to be their God, and calls them to be His people. The promise is for you children! How dare we withhold the promises of the gospel from our children! To do so is to declare them unbelievers before we have proof that they are, and is to leave them outside the church rather than to invite them in. Do not be surprised if your children who were never baptized never make a public profession of faith, and never join the church. You never fully gave them God's promise!

4.

Believers are the seed of Abraham, and so heirs of God's promise. Believers are the seed of Abraham, and so heirs of God's promise

.

Gal. 3:29

says "

If you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.

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" By implication this means believers today stand in the position of Abraham's children stood; God's promise to Abraham's children applies to believers and their children today, and God's command to place the mark of the covenant on the children of Abraham applies to believers and their children today.

"In the new dispensation no less than in the old, the seed of the faithful, born within the church, have, by virtue of their birth, interest in the covenant and right to the seal of it and to the outward privileges of the church. For the covenant of grace is the same in substance under both dispensations."

[7](#)

5.

God Intends the Children of Believers to be Members of the Church. A further reason to baptize infants is that

God intends the children of believers to be members of the church

.

1.

Explicit Principles Must Guide Our Interpretation of Biblical Examples and Application of Biblical Commands

.

Baptists argue that only believers should be baptized, so baptism must be given only after a person makes a public profession of faith. They arrive at this view by attempting to follow NT commands

and

examples

, which is commendable. But they go wrong when they fail to allow certain biblical principles

to guide their interpretation of biblical

commands

and

examples

. The NT's commands do not explicitly command us to baptize infants, and the NT's examples do not state explicitly that any infants were baptized. But OT and NT principles indicate that the NT's commands and examples include infants among those who should be, and were, baptized.

Explicit Biblical principles must guide our interpretation of Biblical examples and application of Biblical commands

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God's covenant is made with believers' children. The first principle is in **Gen. 17:10**, "my covenant...[is] between me and you and your offspring after you."

God's covenant is made with believers' children

Some infants are in the kingdom of God. The second principle is in **Luke 18:15-17**: some infants are in the kingdom of God

(See also Matt. 19:13, 14; Mark 10:13-16)

"Our Saviour admitted little children into his presence, embracing and blessing them, and saying, "

Of such is the kingdom of God

."

[8](#)

He said this not only of children who were old enough to understand the gospel, but even of infants. The Greek word is used that only means "

infants

."

Some infants are in the kingdom of God

The children of believers are positionally holy. The third principle is that the children of believers are positionally holy

. They are not all holy in their character and actions, but they are holy in terms of the position in which they stand as members of a Christian family. As such they are outwardly numbered among the saints, and are counted as members of the visible church.

1 Cor. 7:14

teaches this, saying "

The unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.

"

Biblical Examples. We must keep these principles in mind when we read Biblical examples. These principles are born out by David implying that his deceased infant was in heaven when

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he said in hope in
return to me
explicitly saying of Jeremiah (

2 Sam. 12:23, "I shall go to him, but he will not
," and by God

Jer. 1:5

), "
before you were born I sanctified you.
"

In

Acts 16:15, 33, 34

we learn that Lydia "
was baptized, and her
household
as well,
" and likewise the Philippian jailer "
was baptized at once, he and
all his family

" Paul says in

1 Cor. 1:16

I did baptize also the household of Stephanas.

" Following God's command regarding circumcision, and scripture's principles that believers' children and even infants are positionally holy, in the covenant, and in the kingdom of God, and seeing the NT pattern of household baptisms, we must assume that if infants were present in these households, they were baptized.

Biblical Commands. These biblical principles must also guide our application of biblical commands. We must understand that Christ's command to " make
disciples of all nations, baptizing them
" requires us to baptize the children of believers. (

Matt. 28:19

) When Peter preached "
Repent and be baptized every one of you
," he didn't say "every one of you except your children;" instead he said "
for the promise is for you and for your children
." (

Acts 2:38-39

) Believers' children must be told to "
obey your parents in the Lord
," calling them to live out the obligations of the covenant, obligations which belong to those
whom the Lord calls His own; those who "
obey
...in the Lord

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" because they
are
"
in the Lord.
" (
Eph. 6:1, 4
)

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Conclusion

1.

"So the children of the covenant are by baptism distinguished from the world and solemnly received into the visible church." [9](#) This is the meaning of infant baptism, and this is what we will now do.

[1](#) Directory for Public Worship, chapter IV.B.1.

[2](#) Directory for Public Worship, chapter IV.B.1.

[3](#) Directory for Public Worship, chapter IV.B.1.

[4](#) Directory for Public Worship, chapter IV.B.1; cf. Larger Catechism 167.

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[5](#) Directory for Public Worship, chapter IV.B.1.

[6](#) Directory for Public Worship, chapter IV.B.2.

[7](#) Directory for Public Worship, chapter IV.B.2.

[8](#) Directory for Public Worship, chapter IV.B.2.

[9](#) Directory for Public Worship, chapter IV.B.2.