



Why Does the OPC Baptize Infants?

A message from the
**ORTHODOX
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH**

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It might surprise you to learn that even though we're presbyterians, we're also baptists. In other words, we *do* baptize. Our disagreement with our baptistic brethren isn't over *whether* we should baptize; it's over *whom* we should baptize. Why do we baptize the children of believers?

As an aside, let me just say that we're not alone. As a matter of fact, infant baptism is the historic Christian practice! In his book *Outlines of Theology*, A. A. Hodge sums it up like this: "The practice of infant baptism is an institution which exists as a fact, and prevails throughout the universal church, with the exception of the modern Baptists, whose origin can be definitely traced to the Anabaptists of Germany, about A. D. 1537." Then, as proof, he cites Irenaeus (who was born about AD 97), Justin Martyr (138), Tertullian (born 160), Origen (born 185), Cyprian (253), and Augustine (born 354). Hodge concludes that "infant baptism has prevailed (a) from the apostolic age, (b) in all sections of the ancient church, (c) uninterruptedly to the present time, (d) in every one of the great historical churches of the Reformation" (pages 622–623). Now that's interesting. It's encouraging. But that's not why we baptize infants.

The bottom line is, *we baptize the children of believers in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church because we firmly believe that God tells us to!* To correctly answer the question, "Should we baptize infants?" we have to look to God's Word as our authoritative guide. We have to ask, "Is infant baptism biblical?"

Having said that, we still have to face the question of how rightly

to *approach* the Bible in order to correctly understand it. Believers commonly approach topics like baptism by looking at disconnected “proof texts.” They will ask, “What verse in the Bible explicitly teaches infant baptism?” We begin to see a serious problem with this approach, though, when we observe that it is the very same approach that sects use to deny other doctrines. For example, they ask, “What verse in the Bible explicitly teaches that the Sabbath was changed from the seventh day to the first day of the week?” In fact, this is the exact same approach that cults use to deny the very essentials of the faith. For example: “What verse in the Bible explicitly teaches the Trinity?”

A better way to approach the Bible is to let Scripture interpret Scripture—that is, to interpret Scripture texts in light of their immediate setting, in light of their broader setting, and in light of *the total system of truth* unfolded in God’s Word. This approach is better because in order to correctly understand individual texts, we need to interpret them in their context. And when we do take this approach, we find that there *is* clear biblical warrant for baptizing both believers and their children.

Let’s consider the biblical warrant for infant baptism by working through the following five-step explanation:

- (1) The church of the Old Testament and the church of the New Testament are, in essence, the same church.
- (2) God regards the children of believers as members of this church.
- (3) In the Old Testament era, the children of believers, because they were church members, were given the covenant sign of circumcision.
- (4) In the New Testament era, God has taken the sign of circumcision and changed it to baptism.
- (5) Therefore, in the New Testament era, the children of believers, because they are church members, are to be given the sign of baptism.

Let’s take a closer look at these five steps.

Step 1

The church of the Old Testament and the church of the New Testament are, in essence, the same church.

Kind of like a caterpillar and a butterfly, the church of the Old Testament and the church of the New Testament are quite different in *form*, but they're the same in *essence*.

Both have the same way of salvation. *Romans 4:13*—“It was not through law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith.”

Both look to the same Savior. *Romans 3:20–26*—“But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify.... In his forbearance [God] had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.” In Old Testament times, people were saved by trusting in the redeeming work that God *would provide* in Christ. Today, people are saved by trusting in the redeeming work that God *has provided* in Christ.

When Old Testament believers brought sacrifices in faith, they were trusting in the sacrifice that God would one day provide. *Hebrews 10:1, 4, 10, 12*—“The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship.... It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.... We have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.... When this priest [Jesus] had offered *for all time* one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God.”

Both are in the same covenant relationship. *Galatians 3:7–9, 14, 29*—“Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham. The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: ‘All nations will be blessed through you.’ So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.... [Christ] redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.... If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.”

Both are members of the same body. *Ephesians 2:11–13, 19*—“Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called ‘uncircumcised’ by those who call themselves ‘the circumcision’ (that done in the body by the hands of men)—remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ. ... Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household.”

Both are “branches” in the same olive tree. In *Romans 11:17–32*, the apostle Paul declares that Israel has not been forsaken, but that Gentiles have replaced many of the Jews in it. Comparing Israel to an olive tree, he says that unbelieving Jewish branches have been cut off, and that believing Gentile branches have been grafted in. He also predicts that a time will come when God will convert many Jews who have been cut off and graft them back into the same tree with the believing Gentiles.

Because the church of the Old Testament and the church of the New Testament are in essence the same church, they sometimes

swap names. On the one hand, the Bible calls Old Testament Israel “the church.” The word *church* in the New Testament (*ecclesia* in Greek) corresponds to the word *congregation* in the Old Testament (*qahal* in Hebrew). Thus, Hebrews 2:12 (quoting Psalm 22:22) calls the church “the congregation.” And Stephen calls the congregation of Israel at Mount Sinai “the *church* in the wilderness” (Acts 7:38 KJV).

On the other hand, the Bible calls the New Testament church “the Israel of God” in Galatians 6:16. The apostle Peter applies the rich terminology of Old Testament Israel to the New Testament church in *1 Peter* 2:9 NASB—“You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession.” The apostle Paul describes all who rest in Christ alone as “the true circumcision” (Phil. 3:3 NASB). The “elders” of the New Testament church are identical in name and function to those of the Old Testament congregation.

So, the church of the Old Testament and the church of the New Testament are in essence the same church.

Step 2

God regards the children of believers as members of this church.

Our baptistic brethren sometimes wonder why we consider the children of believers to be members of the church. The reason is that the living God himself embraces the children of believers as members of his church.

Genesis 17:7—“I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you.”

Further, God never rescinded this principle that the children of believers are church members. This is very significant. In order to maintain their position, those who oppose infant baptism have to

prove that God did rescind this principle . Where does God’s Word teach that? This is a question that demands an answer. Matthew Henry put it this way in “A Treatise on Baptism”:

Our opponents call upon us to prove by express Scripture that infants are in the covenant; but certainly, having proved even to demonstration that they were in the covenant, it lies upon them to show *where* and *when* they were thrown out of the covenant; which they were never yet able to prove, no, not by the least footstep of a consequence. It is as clear as the sun at noon-day that the seed of believers *had* a right to the initiating seal of the covenant; and how came they to lose that right?...

If the seed of believers who were taken into the covenant, and had a right to the initiating seal under the Old Testament, are now turned out of the covenant, and deprived of that right, then the times of the law were more full of grace than the times of the gospel; which is absurd. Can it be imagined that the Gentiles are, in respect of their children, in a worse state than they were under the [Old Testament]? Then, if a Gentile was proselytized and taken into the covenant, his seed was taken in with him; and is that privilege denied now? Is the seed of Abraham’s *faith* in a worse condition than the seed of Abraham’s *flesh*?

You see, the baptistic view is built on this hidden assumption—the assumption that, in the New Testament, children of believers are no longer members of the church.

But, when we read the New Testament we find just the opposite! The New Testament lines right up with the Old Testament in continuing to assume that children of believers are included in the church.

Our Lord Jesus Christ assumed that children of believers are part of his church. *Luke 18:15–16*—“People were also bringing babies

to Jesus to have him touch them. When the disciples saw this, they rebuked them. But Jesus called the children to him and said, ‘Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.’”

The apostle Peter also assumed that the children of believers were included in the church. Acts 2:39—“The promise is for you and your children.” Shades of Genesis 17:7! Peter was talking to Jews—people who were steeped in the Old Testament. If he intended to teach that God was rescinding the principle of church membership for covenant children, then he chose exactly the wrong language!

“Wait a minute!” someone might object, “Peter’s not talking about the promise made to Abraham. He’s talking about the promise of the Holy Spirit (verse 38), isn’t he?” Yes, he is, but look again at Galatians 3:14—“He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.” The promise made to Abraham involves the promise of the Spirit. So Peter is saying that the promise made to Abraham is for you and your children right now in the New Testament era.

Likewise, the apostle Paul assumed that children of believers were included in the church. If he was trying to teach that God no longer includes covenant children in the church, he used exactly the wrong words when speaking to the Philippian jailer in Acts 16:31—“Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you *and your household*.”

Again, in 1 Corinthians 7:14, Paul assumes that God includes children in his covenant community, the church—“For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are *holy*.” The word *holy* is a covenant word. It means “set apart.” Children of even one believer are holy, that is, set apart in a special way to God.

Again, in Ephesians 1:1, Paul says that he is writing his epistle “to the saints in Ephesus.” The word *saint* (in Greek) comes from the

word *holy*. *Saint* literally means “holy one.” In *Ephesians 6:1*, Paul directly addresses some of the holy ones who are part of the church in Ephesus—“Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.”

You see, the children of believers *are* part of the church. God included them as members in the Old Testament, and he never took back this “you and your children” principle. Rather, the New Testament confirms it and carries it on.

Step 3

**In the Old Testament era,
the children of believers,
because they were church members,
were given the covenant sign of circumcision.**

Everyone pretty much agrees on this point, so we’ll look at just one Scripture. *Genesis 17:10–12*—“This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised.”

Step 4

**In the New Testament era,
God has taken the sign of circumcision
and changed it to baptism.**

How do we see that God replaced circumcision with baptism? First, our Lord Jesus put baptism in the place of circumcision as the

rite marking entrance into the visible church.

In the Old Testament, whenever someone was converted, he had to be circumcised to mark his entrance into the church. But when Jesus gave the Great Commission, commanding his disciples to go into all the world and make disciples of all nations, he told his church to *baptize* converts, rather than to circumcise them (Matt. 28:19). Thus, Jesus put baptism in the place of circumcision.

Second, God’s Word teaches that circumcision and baptism share the same basic spiritual meaning. Our baptistic brethren say that circumcision was a *national* sign, while, in contrast, baptism is a *spiritual* sign. But what does God say?

Deuteronomy 30:6—“The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live.” In other words, circumcision symbolized regeneration—the new birth!

Jeremiah 4:4 tells us that it was also a sign of conversion—repentance and faith: “Circumcise yourselves to the LORD, circumcise your hearts, you men of Judah and people of Jerusalem, or my wrath will break out and burn like fire because of the evil you have done—burn with no one to quench it.”

In *Romans 2:28–29*, we read, “A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man’s praise is not from men, but from God.” Again, circumcision was a sign of regeneration—the new birth. It did not automatically save. Personal faith in God’s salvation was required in the Old Testament, just like it is in the New.

Speaking of Abraham, *Romans 4:11* says, “And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. So then, he is the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised, in order that righteousness might be credited to them.” Here we see that circumcision was a sign and seal of salvation—of justification through faith.

Thus, Paul wrote in *Philippians 3:3*—“For it is we who are the circumcision, we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh.” Those who are resting in Christ as their Savior have the reality that was symbolized by circumcision, so that, now that the New Testament era has begun, only they may be regarded as those who are truly circumcised.

And so, first, our Lord Jesus put baptism in the place of circumcision as the rite marking one’s entrance into the church. Second, the Bible teaches that circumcision and baptism share the same basic spiritual meaning. Third, the New Testament explicitly parallels circumcision and baptism; it even uses them interchangeably!

For example, *Colossians 2:11–12* so strongly links circumcision and baptism that it actually *identifies* them—“In [Christ] 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.” In other words, your baptism was your Christian circumcision. The Berkeley Version clarifies the literal meaning of this verse: it says that you received the circumcision of Christ “*when you were buried with Him in baptism.*” The New Testament inseparably links circumcision and baptism. And what God has joined together, let no man put asunder.

What this boils down to is that baptism is to the New Testament what circumcision was to the Old Testament. This means that the very same objections that our baptistic brethren often raise against infant baptism being a proper New Testament practice also apply against infant circumcision being a proper Old Testament practice. And yet, God himself commanded infant circumcision! We should not imagine ourselves to be wiser than God.

Step 5

**Therefore, in the New Testament era,
the children of believers,
because they are church members,
are to be given the sign of baptism.**

Because (1) the church of the Old Testament and the church of the New Testament are in essence the same church, and because (2) God regards the children of believers as members of this church, and because (3) in the Old Testament, the children of believers, since they were church members, were given the sign of circumcision, and because (4) in the New Testament era, God has taken the sign of circumcision and changed it to baptism, it follows logically that (5) today, in the New Testament era, the children of believers, because they are church members, are to be given the sign of baptism.

“This argument *seems* to make sense,” someone might object, “but doesn’t our Lord clearly invalidate it in Mark 16:16—‘Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved’? Doesn’t he teach that faith has to come before baptism? Since infants are incapable of exercising faith, they should not be baptized.”

Well, we do believe that Mark 16:16 is God’s Word (although most modern translations omit it because it is not found in the earliest extant manuscripts) and that we must submit to all of God’s words. Why then doesn’t this objection persuade us?

First, note that this objection would also militate against infant circumcision. In effect, God told Abraham to believe and be circumcised. Personal faith was just as necessary for salvation in the Old Testament as it is in the New. Adult converts to Judaism had to believe first and then be circumcised. And yet, God himself commanded infant circumcision!

Second, we can see that this objection must be wrong because it proves too much. The fundamental argument is that because infants

cannot believe, they cannot be baptized. If, however, we apply the same logic to the rest of the verse, we are forced to conclude that because infants cannot believe, they cannot be saved, either. If this objection were true, it would not only keep infants from baptism, but also keep them from heaven. But that would be unscriptural.

Third, we can see that this objection is mistaken because it amounts to works-righteousness. By making baptism depend on human ability, it assumes that saving faith is a product of the flesh and not a work of God's sovereign grace. But the Bible insists instead that *no one*, but no one—whether an infant or an adult—is able to trust Christ until the Holy Spirit supernaturally enables him to do so (Eph. 2:1ff.). We should be thankful that God is not bound by our inability, for if he were, every last one of us would be without hope! But what is impossible with man, is possible with God! God can work faith even in an infant. We see this in *Psalm 22:9*—“You made me trust in you even at my mother's breast.” In fact, God can work faith even in an unborn child. That was the case with John the Baptist (see *Luke 1:41*). He was born again before he was born! This is all possible because of the amazing grace of God. And that's part of what baptism says: “You did not choose me, but I chose you” (*John 15:16*).

Fourth, we can see the fallacy in this objection if we apply the same logic to other verses. Look at *2 Thessalonians 3:10*—“If a man will not work, he shall not eat.” If the reasoning of our objector were valid, then we would have to say that infants cannot work, and therefore they may not eat. But to apply *2 Thessalonians 3:10* to infants is clearly to take it out of context. And that's precisely what our objector has done with *Mark 16:16*. *Mark 16:16* is a command for evangelizing unbaptized adults—and we follow that command. An unbaptized adult must profess faith in Christ before we will administer baptism to him. That was true in the Old Testament with circumcision, and it's true in the New Testament with baptism.

Others still might object: there's no direct or explicit command in the Bible to baptize the children of believers. Well, that's true. But even so, God's “you and your children” principle speaks loud

and clear. It proclaims an indirect or implied command to baptize the children of believers. If the children of believers are not to be baptized, what we really need to see is instruction that children are *no longer* to receive the covenant sign. There is no such instruction in the New Testament!

Instead, as we've seen, the New Testament assumes the "you and your children" principle. In light of this assumption, consider these examples of baptism in the New Testament:

Acts 16:15—“She *and the members of her household* were baptized.”

Acts 16:33—“At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he *and all his family* were baptized.”

1 Corinthians 1:16—“I also baptized *the household* of Stephanas.”

How would the early Christians—mostly Jews steeped in the Old Testament Scriptures—have understood these verses? God's Word nowhere says that these households consisted only of adults. Indeed, a Jewish mind would instantly assume that most, if not all, of them did include children! If covenant children were no longer to receive the covenant sign, why didn't this cause tremendous confusion in the early church? Wouldn't the early believers have needed instruction to the contrary, as they did about so many other problems? Why then can't we find even a hint of such? This doesn't make any sense—unless God actually did continue his method of relating both to believers and their children!

Further, there's no example in the whole New Testament of the "believer's baptism" of someone who grew up in a Christian home. On baptistic assumptions, there must have been thousands of such cases before the New Testament Scriptures were completed. Yet there's not a single example of it in the Bible! There's not a shred of teaching about it. Why not? This doesn't make sense either—unless God actually did continue his method of relating both to believers and their children!

You see, baptistic arguments generally try to shift the burden of proof to the paedobaptist. They keep saying, “Show me an explicit

command or example of infant baptism in the New Testament.” However, when we approach the issue in light of the whole system of truth unfolded in God’s Word, we see that the burden of proof is really on our baptistic brother. He is the one who is going against the grain of God’s revealed method of relating to his people. He is the one who has yet to show where the Bible teaches that God has rescinded the “you and your children” principle established in Genesis and reaffirmed all through the Bible. He is the one who has yet to show where God’s Word teaches that God no longer deals with both individuals and families as he always has. And that’s precisely what he cannot do.

Conclusion

In light of the cumulative evidence of Scripture, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church is persuaded—as historic Christianity has been persuaded—that the answer to the question, “Is infant baptism biblical?” is a resounding “YES!” God reveals that he wants to extend his church both through *space* (by the conversion of pagans) and through *time* (by the covenant nurture of children, so that generation after generation grows up trusting and serving the Lord).

God deals with *individuals* as well as with *families*. This means that conversion isn’t automatic. And baptism isn’t magic. Baptism doesn’t guarantee salvation any more than circumcision did. Salvation is by grace through faith in Christ alone. We can legitimately apply Romans 2:28–29 in this way: “You are not a Christian if you are only one outwardly, nor is baptism merely outward and physical. No, you are a Christian if you are one inwardly; and baptism is baptism of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code.”

Christian parents, this means that you must actively nurture your children in the Christian faith. You may not treat your children

in a supposedly neutral fashion until they are “old enough to make their own decision.” In baptism, the living God himself claims your child. Thus, you must train your children to respond with faith and obedience to the Christ of the covenant.

On the other hand, covenant children, this means that you must respond with faith and obedience to the Christ of the covenant. You must personally entrust yourself to Jesus as your Savior. If you don't, then you'll go to hell. And let me caution you: the Bible warns that the hottest spots in hell are reserved for those who have tasted the heavenly gift and have turned away from it! But I hope for better things for you! In your baptism, the Lord says to you, “My child, you belong to me. Give me your heart.” Make sure that you respond, “Lord, I do give you my heart, promptly and sincerely.”

God has initiated, planned, and established salvation for his people. Through his Word and Spirit, Christ is building his church. And he has given baptism as a sign, a seal, and a means of confirming his gospel promises. It's a tremendous privilege both for you and for your children. God graciously binds himself to the promises of his Word. And he calls you and your children and your children's children to keep his covenant and to experience his blessing from generation to generation.

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