

# Baptism: Believers' or Infant?

## A. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

### NT Evidence for Believers' Baptism

The Apostles themselves had received the command from Jesus to “*go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit*”. They therefore went out preaching about Jesus, and calling people to repent, believed the good news, and to be baptized. Baptism was offered as a sign of accepting faith in Jesus, as a free and conscious decision. Most accounts of baptisms in the NT, are of people who believe first, and then receive baptism eg St. Paul, the Samaritans, Lydia, the Ethiopian eunuch, Cornelius and his household, John Baptist's disciples. (Acts 2:38-39, 2:41, 8:12, 8:35-38, 9:18, 10:47, 16:14, 16:32, 18:8, 19:3-5, 22:16)

Receiving baptism was associated not only with **publically proclaiming repentance and faith** in Christ, but with receiving the **gift of the Holy Spirit** (Acts 2:38) which enables believers to live a new life (Rom 6:4, Tit.3:5, Gal.3:27) but the OT prophets, and both Jesus and John the Baptist were filled with the Holy Spirit, even while in their mothers' womb. In the NT, there are account of people receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit before they were baptized, (Acts 10:44-45, 10:47, 11:17, 15:8) So baptism by itself does not determine if the Holy Spirit is given, or make someone realize if they have received it (Acts 8:16, 19:2) So if the faith in Christ and the HS are received outside of baptism, what does Baptism itself do?

### NT Evidence for Infant Baptism

The first Christians became believers in Jesus' saving death. They publically declared that they were willing to renounce sin, and put their faith in Jesus – then they received “**believers baptism**”. However, in the NT the Apostles baptised whole households, which would have included infants (Acts 16:32). Paul writes that one believing parent in the family makes the children “holy”. During Jesus' life, people were bringing infants to Jesus for him to bless them, and Jesus told his disciples not to stop them (Mt 28:19). Jesus said, to Nicodemus, that **no-one** can enter the Kingdom of Heaven without being reborn of water and the Holy Spirit (Jn 3:5). There is in fact no instruction in the NT that baptism should be delayed until someone is old enough to understand. Baptising infants was also seen as being **in continuity with the Jewish practice** of infant circumcision, in being a rite of initiation, and new belonging to the People of God.

### Early Church practice

Adults seeking to become Christians would be encouraged to undergo a period of spiritual preparation and reflection about the meaning of becoming a Christian, but infant baptism was also widely practiced. All the Church Fathers supported infant baptism. Only Tertullian, 160AD protests against infant baptism, arguing that it should be delayed until the person can appreciate what their baptism in the Christian faith means. Cyprian of Carthage (200AD) says no hindrance should prevent infants from being baptized. He advises that baptism should be administered as early as possible, **to strengthen the growing infant against sin and help them persevere in God's grace**. Baptism washes away not their personal sins (they don't have any) but the **original sin inherited** from Adam. St. Augustine (C4<sup>th</sup>) affirms that infant baptism was handed down by “apostolic authority” ie by the Apostle's own example and practice, and that without it “*it is impossible for anyone to enter the Kingdom of God or attain salvation and life eternal*”.

**Infant baptisms growing in popularity:** as Christianity developed, there was a growing belief in the “sacramentality” of baptism – that baptism is not just a sign of repentance and faith in Christ, but is also effective in itself as a way of removing sin, and giving entry to the Kingdom of God. People were therefore keen to seek baptism even for their infants, especially if they were at risk of death, in case they would otherwise be excluded from heaven. The **Council of Mileum** 416AD, and the **Council of Carthage** 418AD both asserted that in baptism infants truly receive forgiveness of sin, which they have “contracted from generation” by being reborn in the Spirit.

**A practice in search of a rationale:** although infant baptism was a well established Church practice, with **Apostolic authority** behind it, there was no clear instruction on whether infants should be baptized. Nobody really knew why it was acceptable to baptize babies: infants do not consciously “believe” in the faith, they do not have personal sins to be forgiven for – Jesus’ commission to the disciples was to baptize those who believe, and preach repentance. The **early Church Fathers** supported baptism as a means of strengthening the infant to grow up in God’s grace, but it was only with **Augustine** in the 4th century, that the belief in baptism washing away Original Sin became clearly defined and accepted (implied by Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus).

## B. AUGUSTINE’S DEFENSE OF INFANT BAPTISM

St. Augustine of Hippo 4th

**Doctor of the Church**, known also as the “Doctor of Grace” because of his teachings on God’s grace. He helped formulate the **Doctrine of Original Sin**. He is also considered by Protestants to be one of the Fathers of the Reformation, due to his teachings on **salvation by divine grace**, and not human effort.

### Objection 1: infants have no sins to be forgiven for, so how can they be baptised?

#### Augustine replies:

Augustine has a strong view of Original Sin, that was taken up by the Reformers.

*Original Sin is the guilt inherited from Adam, and the corruption of our human nature.* Original sin is an “injury” and a “taint” which puts our desires at odds with God. Original sin began by an act of disobedient desire, and all who are born of Adam are characterised by this disobedient, egoistic desire. *“Adam was created by God, but when he consented to the devil, he was born of the devil, and all whom he begot were like himself”*. The rite of exorcism, which is part of any baptism, assumes this belonging to the devil.

Augustine taught that baptism **washes away the guilt of Original Sin**, but does not take away our corrupted nature. Baptism removes all personal sins, and the guilt of Original Sin but it does not undo the corruption of our human nature. We must struggle against this corruption all our life long, working out our salvation in co-operation with God’s grace which alone can save us, through faith, prayer, good works and receiving the Sacraments (Baptism, Eucharist and Reconciliation).

#### Unbaptised infants are corrupt:

- The newborn child receives from his parents a corrupt human nature. Augustine does not see infants as “little innocents” - they are infected with the disease of original sin.
- Infants are innocent only in the sense that they have not yet been able to commit any personal sins. As soon as they are able to will and desire, this corruption makes itself known in sinful actions.
- every created human nature derived from Adam belongs to the “**mass of perdition**”, separated from God, and under His wrath. They are justly punished with everlasting condemnation as they share in the guilt of Original sin. They only suffer the mildest of condemnation, but they are excluded from the Kingdom of God.

#### It is impossible for anyone to enter the Kingdom of Heaven without the grace of Christ:

- No-one by their own efforts, or lack of effort (in the case of an infant), can enter the Kingdom of God, since **no human nature can by itself attain to what properly belongs to God** – eternal life.
- If anyone could do this, then Christ’s death would not have been necessary. *“neither salvation nor eternal life can be hoped for by any man without baptism and the Lord’s body and blood, it is vain to promise those blessings without them”*.

Therefore infants are baptized to wash them from the guilt of original sin, that they may be sanctified in Christ, and not for the remission of any personal sins, of which they have none.

## **Objection 2: Infants have no conscious faith, but scripture teaches that only believers will be saved. So how can infants be baptized?**

**Augustine replies:**

**1. It is God himself who saves; it does not depend on us – not even on us having faith.** No-one, infants included, can enter the Kingdom of God because of their own merits or innocence, but only because of God giving them His Holy Spirit and promise of eternal life. This is God's free gift. No one can deserve it, and baptizing infants is a beautiful picture of how God saves us as helpless sinners, as a parent has to carry their infant in their arms up to the font. Why some infants are fortunate to be born to Christian parents and baptized, and so have sin forgiven, but others are not, is a mystery of God's free grace: just like the problem of why some die young, but others survive. Augustine believed that there is no other valid means of remitting sins, except by becoming a believer in Christ through the Sacrament of Baptism.

**2. Faith in Christ is present, in the faith of their parents and in the faith of the Church community, that they are becoming part of**

- To be accepted for baptism, parents must be believing Christians, and promise to bring up the child in the Christian faith. So faith and belief **will** be given to the child, through the promise the parents and godparents make to bring them up in faith.
- Augustine sees the parents and the infants as being in a "community of the Holy Spirit" - the Holy Spirit is "common property" between them. So those offering the child to God in faith, communicate this faith and this Spirit to the infant as their property as well. The faith of the parents is imputed to them as their own, The whole baptism is done in faith, and in love.
- The parents bestowed a "corrupted" sinful nature on their infant, through Original Sin, against their infant's will/ interests. But equally they can therefore bestow a better, godly nature on their infant, through their faith by baptizing them, even though this is also not of their infant's choosing.

## **C. IS BAPTISM A SACRAMENT?**

Anabaptists are a group of radical reformed Christians, who, at the time of the Reformation, noted that the NT examples of baptism were mostly examples of believers' baptism. They therefore thought that that baptism is only valid if a person can publically proclaim repentance and faith in Christ. Radical reformers such as Zwingli and some theologians such as Karl Barth, support this view, by arguing that baptism is only ever **a sign and a seal** of conscious faith in Christ. In contrast, Catholics and Protestants believe that baptism is **a Sacrament** – it is in itself **effective in itself** as a means of giving gifts of the Holy Spirit, removing the guilt of Original Sin, and incorporating a person into the Body of Christ (1 Cor 2:12), whether or not they are conscious of what is happening, because the necessary faith is expressed through the faith of the parents and the Church community. The Anabaptist and Reformed position, is that baptism is not a sacrament – the Catholic/ Protestant tradition is that it is.

**Augustine** – see above. Taught the corruption of human nature, and that baptism is effective as a means of removing the guilt of Original Sin. Baptism is a marvelous example of God's free grace in saving helpless humanity – it does not depend on conditions such as our ability to profess faith, but the Church's faith makes it effective.

**Council of Trent & Catechism of Catholic Church** – replying to the challenge of the Anabaptists, Trent stated that it was "anathema" to claim that a child must be re-baptised at a time when they can make their own profession of faith, because their infant baptism was not properly valid. Baptism is a sacrament, and works *ex opere operato* ("by the work worked by Christ) – God's grace is guaranteed by the merits of the victory Christ won for us and not by the quality of our faith, although it must take place in a faith context. The Catechism teaches that baptism stamps an indelible mark on the character of the baptized person at the deepest level of their being – an **ontological change** (CCC1317). The

baptized person is “a new creation” in Christ (St Paul, 2 Cor 5:17)

**Zwingli** – Swiss Reformer, c. 16<sup>th</sup>, military chaplain, made an analogy with the way that soldiers swear an oath of allegiance to serve their country – he thought of baptism as a person’s pledge to prove to the Church that the person intends to be a soldier of Christ, because they have come to faith in Christ. Baptism in this sense is a **public sign and badge** of their new commitment, and a **reminder** to themselves of God’s promises to them (of salvation). Zwingli split from Luther on this, as Luther remained convinced of Baptism as a Sacrament – effective in itself, and more than just a sign and pledge (Reformed vs. Protestant Churches).

**Karl Barth** (1886 – 1968) considered to be the greatest Protestant theologian of the 20th century. After World War II, Barth became very disillusioned with how “nominal” Christians in Nazi Germany, had behaved. He concluded that **just to be born and baptized** into a Christian society or family does not make a person truly Christian. It is not like the Jewish rite of circumcision, which made a person automatically Jewish in faith and in identity. Baptism, and true Christianity, must be a **free, personal, faith response to show** that a person has been moved by the Holy Spirit and now truly believes and accepts Christ in their life, and wishes to live in obedience to him. It is their **faith response** to the Spirit working in their life. Barth opposed infant baptism because:

- Infant baptism is not a faith response, freely given. It is coercive and therefore subjectively invalid: *“it is not done in obedience, it is not administered according to proper order (ie faith first), and therefore it is necessarily clouded baptism”*.
- Barth believed that God cannot be compelled by any human action, therefore baptism by water cannot bestow the Holy Spirit. It cannot force God to give grace, and it cannot give the reality of salvation to that person. God can act earlier or later in the life of that person. God is not bound by the rite of the Church.
- Baptism only represents Jesus’ saving death and resurrection in a **symbolic way**. Jesus is the only Sacrament of God – only through Jesus do we receive God’s grace and saving help. Baptism is only an image of his saving death, not the reality.

### Problems with Barth’s view

1. If baptism is just a human act of commitment, then it looks like God doesn’t want to commit himself to being present in any physical reality. But God did so commit himself - in being incarnated in Jesus, to be touched and seen. But according to Barth, Jesus is the only Sacrament, and God is not now to be found in any physical reality. Barth’s view seems to contradict the way that God himself acts in the world.

2. If God is not reliably present in physical reality, then it is difficult to know where He is at all. If he only has a spiritual reality, known only to faith, then he is a stranger to his own creation – since we only know things if they have some physical substance and duration. Our own human faith responses are very subjective. This view leads to a spiritual/ physical dichotomy, where God is only in the spiritual, and we are only in the physical, yet Jesus united both in himself.

3. A Church rite does not claim to “compel” the grace of God – since it is God himself who puts himself in our hands, to be used or abused: Jesus himself makes the commitment to be body and blood in our hands, and to save those who are baptized in his name. God himself freely decides to commit Himself to us, and give his grace, in the sacraments which He himself instituted.

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