



168 DISCIPLESHIP: “WHO IS BAPTISM FOR?”

Believer’s Baptism

The Mennonite Brethren Confession of Faith states that...

Historically known as re-baptizers (“Anabaptists”) is deeply rooted in the belief that baptism is a necessary response to faith in Jesus Christ accomplished by those who can understand who Jesus is, their need for repentance and to follow Jesus as his disciple wholeheartedly.

The New Testament Pattern

John the Baptist

The precursor to the baptism commanded by Jesus was practiced by John and his disciples. It was a baptism that acknowledged repentance.

The Command of Jesus

Jesus’ “great commission” to his disciples made baptism a priority.

19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Matthew 28:19-20 (ESV)

The people they are specifically called to baptize are those who are disciples, ie. they are learners (Greek: mathetes ... translated ‘disciple’), followers of Christ. The concept of the 1st century disciple was a person that committed themselves to their teacher, denying all other paths of life in order to follow.

The Life of the Early Church

Acts chapter 2 is pivotal in the life of the church as God's Spirit is poured out on his small group of followers. Peter preaches to others in order to explain what is happening and as he does they are convicted by God. They ask how they should respond...

37 Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" 38 And Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. 39 For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself."

Acts 2:37-39 (ESV)

Notice that Peter's answer to the question "What shall we do?" is to repent and **be baptized**. This follows the model of John the Baptist in that repentance precedes immersion into the waters of baptism. The baptism differs from John's in that baptism is now an identification with Jesus. (see Acts 19).

Those who accepted Peter's message were baptized. (Acts 2:40)

From there, the history of the early church as we have recorded in the book of Acts repeatedly demonstrates the pattern of repentance/faith followed by baptism.

When persecution broke out in Jerusalem in the disciples scattered from there 2 different regions, Philip went down to Samaria and proclaimed Christ there. Luke records the following:

Sometimes Luke records repentance as the act that precedes baptism, sometimes he speaks of faith. Both are elements of the same activity expressing the rejection (repentance) of the previous way of life in order to embrace (faith) another (see Acts 8:12).

The pattern of baptism soon following after repentance/faith is consistent throughout the book of Acts. The Ethiopian eunuch upon understanding the good news about Jesus is immediately baptized (Acts 8:34-38). Paul is soon baptized after his radical conversion (Acts 9:18). So also Cornelius (Acts 10:44-48) Lydia (Acts 16:15), the Philippian jailor (Acts 16:31-34) etc.

The Household Promise

There is no explicit command in Scripture to baptize anyone who has not repented and believed in Jesus.

However, as you read through some of the accounts of baptism there is mention of promise to "households" and to "households" being baptized. For some, while acknowledging that

repentance and faith is necessary for adults who are first-generation believers as the early church believers would have been, still these household promises become a basis to believe in infant baptism as well.

Let's look again at some of the texts:

Acts 2:38-39 (ESV)

38 And Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. 39 For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself."

The promise Peter proclaims is universal - it includes adults, (you) their children, and also the Gentiles (all who are far off) ... all whom the Lord God will call. But note that the promise is made to those who repent. Children and Gentiles could experience the gift of the Spirit in the same way if they would do so.... if they repent and believe in Jesus. There is nothing in this promise to indicate infant baptism.

Acts 2:41 (ESV)

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

Peter speaks of baptism as something that reflects a repentance and faith that has already occurred. It is never spoken of as anticipating repentance and faith (as would be the case with an infant).

Acts 8:12 (ESV)

But when they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women.

Note that Luke specifically mentions that men and women are baptized. There is no mention of infants.

Acts 10:43-48 (ESV)

44 While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. 45 And the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles. 46 For they were hearing them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter declared, 47 "Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" 48 And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to remain for some days.

Acts 11:18 (ESV)

When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, "Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life."

The conversion of the household of Cornelius is attributed to those who listened to the message, repented, and were given the gift of the Holy Spirit so that they spoke in tongues and exalted God. Luke records that “all” present experienced this.

When the church heard this they understood that the “all” referred to those who had repented. This is in line with the promise that Peter proclaimed in Acts chapter 2. It would be applicable to children when they are at the point they can repent and believe. There is nothing in this text to indicate that infants participated in what happened and were baptized.

Acts 16:30-34

30 Then he brought them out and said, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” 31 And they said, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.” 32 And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. 33 And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds; and he was baptized at once, he and all his family. 34 Then he brought them up into his house and set food before them. And he rejoiced along with his entire household that he had believed in God.

In this “household” baptism, it is important to note to whom which members of the household are said to have been baptized. It is those who heard the word of the Lord and believed. This household baptism clearly follows the pattern outlined in Peter’s first message in Acts 2.

In a similar manner, the baptism spoken of to households such as that of Crispus (Acts 18:8), Stephanus (1 Cor 1:16-17, 16:15) indicate those who are baptized within the household were those who believed. The account of Lydia does not mention the repentance/faith of her household but neither do we know Lydia’s marital status and whether children would have been there (Acts 16:13-15).

To summarize a survey of early church activity in regards to baptism two important things stand out:

- 1 - There is no explicit command in Scripture to baptize anyone who has not repented and believed in Jesus.
- 2 - There is not a single instance in which it is clearly stated that children incapable of repenting and believing (ie. infants were baptized).

The Covenant of Grace and Circumcision

Many who believe in infant baptism will acknowledge the two points that have just been stated. Therefore, the argument for infant baptism must come from somewhere else and is drawn from the broad category of covenant and using baptism as the sign of covenant today in parallel with circumcision as the sign of covenant in the past.

In the Old Covenant male children were circumcised to indicate they were members of God's covenant people. This was a physical identification. So should infants be baptized to indicate they are members of God's New Covenant people?

The key to the answer of this question is how you see people becoming members of the covenant in the New Testament. In alignment with Peter's Pentecost message, the answer to that would be when we repent and believe.

In Israel, one was a participant of the Old Covenant merely by being born to Israelite parents. Under the New Covenant, a person gains entrance through the new birth which happens when a person repents, believes and is born from above by the Holy Spirit just as Peter preached.

Nowhere in the New Testament are we told that baptism has replaced circumcision. The only passage that mentions circumcision and baptism together (Colossians 2:11-12), speaks of a metaphorical circumcision of the heart. It has nothing to do with physical circumcision. Rather, Paul speaks about the Colossian church undergoing both heart circumcision and baptism through faith.

Arguments from silence can sometimes be suspect but it does seem that the apostles never considered baptism as a replacement for circumcision. In Acts chapter 15, the Judaizers wanted to compel the Gentiles to be circumcised in order to be saved. It would have been easy to settle the argument if infant baptism was the practice of the day. The apostles could have simply said that baptism has replaced circumcision. But they never did so.

