



Can infants be baptized?

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Introduction

This article examines the view of infant baptism that is held by some of our brothers and sisters in Christ (e.g. Presbyterian, CSI...). This work does not deal with the Roman Catholic version of infant baptism. The writer holds on to the believer's baptism.

Defining the terms:

Credo-Baptists: those who believe that only those who exercise faith in Christ Jesus should be baptized.

Paedo-Baptists: those who believe that the infants of the believing parents should be baptized.

Starting on the common ground

First of all, both agree in the principle of sola scriptura and that the Scripture is the standard for all our actions and beliefs. The question we are discussing will be

“according to the Scripture, should infants be baptized?” Secondly, both believe that everyone who believes in Christ should be baptized. Therefore, the question is not primarily about the importance of baptism. Further, both are one in asserting that a person, who is a child of unbelieving parents, should be baptized once he believes in Christ. The difference comes only when one of the parents of the infant is a believer. The specific question under discussion is “according to the Scripture, should the infants of believing parents be baptized?”

Understanding paedo-baptists and their arguments

Reformed infant baptists do not hold on to the Roman Catholic view of infant baptism. They don't believe that baptism regenerates a sinner. Many paedo-baptists even admit that there is no clear New Testament example of an infant being baptized.

Reformed infant baptists argue for their position on the basis of the rite of circumcision. They say that since infants were circumcised in the Old Testament, likewise infants should be baptized in the New Testament. That is, since infants were circumcised members of God's Israel in the Old Testament, they should be baptized members of God's Israel in the New Testament (the Church).

Before responding to this, let me list some characteristics of their argument:

1. They argue for the position of infant baptism by pointing to the unity between the Old and New Covenants.
2. They answer “who should be baptized under the new covenant” by “who should be circumcised under the old covenant”. They model baptism based on circumcision.

What is circumcision?

Genesis 17:10-14: *“This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. 11 You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and **it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you.** 12 He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised. Every male throughout your generations, whether born in your house or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring, 13 both he who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money, shall surely be circumcised. So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. 14 Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.”*

Circumcision was the sign of the Old Covenant. And all who were circumcised were part of the covenant people of God in the Old Testament. Even a foreigner could become a citizen of Israel if he is circumcised (Genesis 17:12, 13; Exodus 12:48). A physical descendant from Israel was cut off from the covenant people if he is not circumcised (Genesis 17:14; Exodus 12:43-49). Therefore, circumcision was the sign of a person's covenant status with God and indicates whether he is a citizen of God's covenant people (God's nation).

The sign of circumcision also signified the reality that God required from his people, i.e., the circumcision of the heart. Just as only the physically circumcised can be citizens of the Old Covenant people of God, likewise, only the "heart circumcised" can be the citizens of heavenly Jerusalem (Romans 2:28, 29; Deuteronomy 30:6; Revelation 22:15). In this sense, circumcision pointed to a reality that those who are united with Christ enjoys, namely, the circumcision of the heart.

In the Old Testament times, physical circumcision did not guarantee "heart circumcision". Therefore, the Old Covenant people of God were a mixed community, consisting of both believers and unbelievers. Even the unbelievers were part of God's covenant people. That is the reason why they were punished with covenant judgments when they sinned. God saw them as his covenant people because they were joined to his covenant people and were administered the sign of the covenant, i.e., circumcision. Therefore, they were the citizens of Old Covenant Israel. At the early age of eight days male infants were circumcised into official membership into that physical nation.

Arguments against Infant Baptism

#1: Dissimilarity between the New Covenant and the Old Covenant

The foundational difference is the way the covenant people are defined under both covenants. This can be seen from **Jeremiah 31:31-34**: *"Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, 32 not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. 33 For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. 34 And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the*

greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."

The two covenants are contrasted in certain ways. It is stated that the new covenant is "not like" the old covenant. Under the new covenant, "they shall all know me" (verse 34). All the citizens of the new covenant are believers. That was not the case with the old covenant. Under the old covenant, the covenant people were a mixed community and even the unbelievers were legally and properly circumcised into Israel, God's covenant nation. But, believers and only believers constitute God's Israel under the New Covenant. Therefore, unregenerate infants cannot be baptized into the covenant people of God. That will violate the basic definition of God's people under the New Covenant as defined in Jeremiah 31:31-34. That will contradict the foundational difference between the old and new covenant.

That is why, the New Testament connects baptism with "heart circumcision", which the physical circumcision pointed to.

Colossians 2:11, 12: *"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."*

This demands that only those who are circumcised in the heart could be baptized. If not, the connection will be invalid and the whole procedure of baptism would be meaningless.

Baptism is the sign of membership, the badge of participation in the New Covenant. Only those who know God are members of the New Covenant (Jeremiah 31:34). Therefore, until there is biblical reason to know that someone knows the Lord, there is no biblical ground to baptize them.

#2: Paedo-Baptists should prove their position from the New Testament.

We have seen that it is erroneous to model the sign of the new covenant from the sign of the old covenant. It is because the citizenship criteria under both covenants are different.

Citizenship criteria under Old Covenant: Foreigners and physical descendants of Israel who were circumcised (Genesis 17:9-14; Exodus 12:43-39)

Citizenship under New Covenant: only those who know the Lord (Jeremiah 31:34), all those whose hearts are "circumcised" (Romans 2:28, 29; Colossians 2:11, 12).

Therefore, it is false and deceiving to transfer all the characteristics of circumcision and apply them to baptism. This implies that we cannot assume (by default) that baptism and circumcision correspond in every aspect. Rather it has to be proved from the Scripture. The sign of the new covenant has to be modeled according to the new covenant itself. **Therefore the proponents of infant baptism should prove from the New Testament that God requires and commands the infants of believers to receive the covenant rite of baptism.** And that is missing in the whole New Testament.

Recommended Readings:

Samuel E. Waldron with Richard C. Barcellos. *A Reformed Baptist Manifesto, The New Covenant Constitution of the Church*. Reformed Baptist Academic Press. Palmdale, CA. 2004

Shawn D. Wright, Thomas R. Schreiner. *Believer's Baptism, Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*. B&H Academic, Nashville, TN. 2006