

Should Babies Be Baptized?

Infant Baptism, the Covenant, and What the Water Does

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I. A Baby at the Font

Few sights divide Christians as quietly as a baby at a font. To a Catholic—and to a Lutheran, an Anglican, or a Presbyterian—it is the most natural scene in the Church: grace given to a child of the covenant, as circumcision was given to eight-day-old sons of Israel. To a Baptist or evangelical Christian it is close to a contradiction in terms: baptism is the believer's public confession of a faith already alive, and an infant can confess nothing. Behind the two instincts stand two answers to a prior question—is baptism something God does to us, or something we testify about ourselves?—and behind that, two theologies of grace. This essay argues that Scripture, covenant history, and the earliest Church all answer with the font.

II. The Credobaptist Case, Fairly Stated

The believer's-baptism argument is simple and scriptural, and it deserves its full strength. In the New Testament, faith comes first. "Repent, and be baptized" (Acts 2:38)—repentance first, water second. The Ethiopian official hears the gospel, believes, and then asks for baptism; the Philippian jailer believes and is baptized the same night. Every baptism the New Testament narrates is the baptism of someone who has heard, believed, and chosen. An infant can do none of those things.¹

Baptism, on this view, is an ordinance rather than a sacrament in the Catholic sense: an act of obedience testifying to a salvation already received by faith alone, picturing the believer's death and resurrection with Christ without conveying what it pictures. The Baptist Faith and Message calls it "an act of obedience symbolizing the believer's faith," and Peter himself seems to guard against the mechanical reading: baptism saves "not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a clear conscience" (1 Pet. 3:21)—and an appeal requires an appellant. If the apostles baptized infants, Scripture forgot to mention it; and history, on this reading, shows the practice growing in the late second and third centuries rather than beginning with the apostles—Tertullian, around the year 200, explicitly counseled delaying the baptism of little children.²

III. Who Is on Which Side

Before answering, notice who is on which side, because the lines do not run where "Catholic versus Protestant" suggests. Luther baptized infants and defended the practice hotly; so did Calvin, Cranmer, and Wesley; Lutherans, Anglicans, Presbyterians, and Methodists baptize infants still. The believer's-baptism position entered history as the Anabaptist conviction of the sixteenth century, opposed on this exact point by every magisterial Reformer. When the Baptist argues that baptism must wait for profession, his first opponents are Wittenberg and Geneva, not Rome. The case that follows is, on most of its points, theirs as well as the Catholic Church's.³

IV. What the New Testament Says Baptism Does

The credobaptist case rests everything on the order believe, then be baptized—which is indeed the order for converts, then and now: a Catholic adult entering the Church tonight would believe first and be baptized after. The question is not the order for converts but what baptism does when it comes. And there the New Testament's language is not the language of testimony. "Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (John 3:5). "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins" (Acts 2:38). "Rise and be baptized, and wash away your sins" (Acts 22:16). "Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you" (1 Pet.

3:21). Paul does not say baptism pictures dying with Christ; he says “we were buried with him by baptism into death” (Rom. 6:4), and calls the washing itself “the washing of regeneration” (Titus 3:5).⁴

Peter’s qualifier—“not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a clear conscience”—guards against superstition, not against efficacy: the water works no magic on skin; it saves as God’s appointed instrument, “through the resurrection of Jesus Christ,” in the same sentence that says it saves. A symbol announces something already true. These texts say baptism effects what it signifies—forgiveness, new birth, union with Christ’s death and resurrection. The Catholic doctrine of baptism is simply the sum of the verbs.

V. The Promise Is to Your Children

Then comes the question of who may receive it, and Peter answers it in the very Pentecost sermon the credobaptist quotes for the believe-first order: “For the promise is to you and to your children and to all that are far off, every one whom the Lord our God calls to him” (Acts 2:39). That is covenant language, and every Jew in the crowd knew it, because for two thousand years God’s covenant sign had been given to infants. Circumcision was commanded for the eight-day-old (Gen. 17:12), who believed nothing, chose nothing, and received everything. Paul draws the line between the signs straight: in baptism “you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands... the circumcision of Christ; and you were buried with him in baptism” (Col. 2:11–12).⁵

The argument, then, is not from silence but from continuity. If the sign of the old covenant belonged to children by God’s explicit command, and the new covenant is “better” (Heb. 8:6) and wider—“to you and to your children and to all that are far off”—then the burden of proof falls entirely on whoever would now exclude the children. Excluding them would have been the innovation, the kind of rupture Jewish converts would have contested loudly; and the New Testament records no such contest, no command to exclude, and no trace of a generation of covenant children waiting unbaptized. What it records instead is the Lord indignant when little ones were kept from Him: “Let the children come to me, do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of God” (Mark 10:14).

VI. The Households, and the Missing Babies

The household baptisms belong in this covenant frame. Lydia “was baptized, with her household”; the jailer “was baptized at once, with all his family”; Paul baptized “the household of Stephanas” (Acts 16:15, 33; 1 Cor. 1:16). In the ancient world a household meant everyone under the roof—children, infants, dependents, servants—and the narratives baptize it as a unit on the faith of its head, exactly as covenant households had

always entered covenant. Were there infants in those particular houses? The texts do not say; neither side can count the cribs. But the credobaptist needs every household in the record to have contained no small children, and needs the apostles' covenant-formed converts to have assumed, without being told, that the ancient pattern was abolished. The paedobaptist needs only what the texts show: God's promise spoken over households, and households baptized whole.⁶

VII. The Only Ancient Debate Was About Which Day

History then testifies with one voice and one famous exception. Origen—born to Christian parents about the year 185, a generation from the apostolic age—states the pedigree plainly: “the Church received from the apostles the tradition of giving baptism even to infants.” In 253, a bishop named Fidus proposed that baptism should wait until the eighth day of life, on the analogy of circumcision. Cyprian and a council of sixty-six bishops answered that the mercy and grace of God are to be refused to no one born of man—the newborn need not wait even a week. That is the only recorded ancient controversy over infant baptism: not whether, but how soon.⁷

The exception is Tertullian, and honesty keeps him on the table. Around 200 he counseled delay—“let them come, then, while they are growing up”—but notice what his advice presupposes: a practice already common enough to argue against, and grounds that are prudential (fear of post-baptismal sin), not a claim that the apostles forbade it. A church-wide practice that no council imposed, no father remembers beginning, whose only recorded debate concerned the newborn's first week, and whose lone critic argues prudence rather than apostolic command, is not a third-century innovation. It is what receiving something from the apostles looks like in the historical record. Augustine, arguing with the Pelagians a century and a half later, could appeal to the universal baptism of infants as a fact his opponents dared not deny—evidence, he argued, of what the whole Church believed about grace and original sin.⁸

VIII. What an Infant Can Receive

The deepest objection is the theological one: the infant can contribute nothing. The Catholic answer is that this is not the objection to the practice; it is the meaning of it. Baptism is not the believer's gift to God but God's gift to the believer—and a gift is precisely what a newborn can receive. The infant at the font contributes exactly what the eight-day-old contributed to his circumcision, what the paralytic's friends contributed when Jesus, “seeing their faith,” forgave his sins (Mark 2:5), and what any of us contributed to being born the first time: nothing but need.

Faith is not bypassed. The parents and the whole Church profess it at the font, and the child is raised inside it to make it his own—which is why the Church confirms, catechizes, and hears the grown child’s own profession, and why a baptized child who never embraces the faith has received a grace he must still answer for. But a theology in which grace waits upon achievement—even the achievement of believing—has quietly made salvation begin with us. The font says otherwise, and says it best over a child who can do nothing at all. That is why the Church has carried her children to the water from the beginning: not in spite of their helplessness, but because helplessness is the one qualification grace requires.⁹

Endnotes

1. Acts 2:38; 8:26–39; 16:30–34; Matthew 28:19. Scripture quotations in this essay are from the Revised Standard Version.
2. Baptist Faith and Message 2000, Article VII; 1 Peter 3:21; Tertullian, *On Baptism* 18.
3. Luther, *Large Catechism*, on Baptism; Calvin, *Institutes* IV.16; the Anabaptist controversy from the 1520s onward.
4. John 3:5; Acts 2:38; 22:16; 1 Peter 3:21; Romans 6:3–4; Titus 3:5.
5. Acts 2:39; Genesis 17:12; Colossians 2:11–12.
6. Acts 16:15, 33; 1 Corinthians 1:16; cf. Acts 18:8.
7. Origen, *Commentary on Romans* 5.9 (c. 248); Cyprian, Letter 64 (To Fidus), with the council of 253.
8. Tertullian, *On Baptism* 18; Augustine, e.g. *On Merit and the Forgiveness of Sins* I.
9. Mark 2:1–5; Mark 10:13–16; *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §§1250–1252, 1282.

For Further Reading

Catechism of the Catholic Church, “The Sacrament of Baptism”—what the Church actually teaches baptism is and does. Free online at https://www.vatican.va/content/catechism/en/part_two/section_two/chapter_one/article_1/the_sacrament_of_baptism.html.

Infant Baptism in the Church Fathers—the early testimony collected: Origen, Cyprian, Hippolytus, Augustine. Free online at <https://www.churchfathers.org/infant-baptism>.

Symbols, or Sacraments?—the prior question: does God act through the sacraments, or do we merely testify? Free online at <https://richwhiting.com/weft/sacraments/sacraments.php>.

Is Sola Fide True?—the doctrine of justification behind the two views of the font. Free online at https://richwhiting.com/weft/sola_fide/sola_fide.php.

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“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.” — John 3:5

*Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit,
as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be,
world without end. Amen.*

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A Note on Authority

This essay represents the author’s articulation of *the Catholic doctrine of baptism, including the baptism of infants*, drawing on Scripture, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the Church Fathers, and the major theological tradition. It is offered as a personal defense, not as an official statement of the Church’s teaching. Where this defense is fortunate enough to align with the magisterial teaching of the Church, the credit belongs to the tradition that formed it. Where it falls short, the responsibility is the author’s alone.