

# A Brief Defense of Infant Baptism

March 12, 2015 | [Kevin DeYoung](#)

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It sounds like the beginning of a joke or a support group introduction, but it's true: some of my best friends are Baptists. I speak at conferences with and to Baptists. I read books by Baptists (both the dead and the living). I love the Baptist brothers I know—near and far—who preach God's word and minister faithfully in Christ's church. I went to a Baptist church while in college and know that there are many folks of more credobaptist persuasion in my own church. I imagine the majority of my blog readers are Baptist. You get the picture. I have thousands of reasons to be thankful for my brothers and sisters in Christ who do not believe in baptizing infants.

And yet, I do. Gladly. Wholeheartedly. Because of what I see in Scripture.

One of the best things I get to do as a pastor is to administer the sacrament of infant baptism to the covenant children in my congregation. Before each baptism, I take a few minutes to explain why we practice infant baptism in our church. My explanation always includes some—but rarely is there time for all—of the following:

It our great privilege this morning to administer that sacrament of baptism to one of our little infants. We do not believe that there is anything magical about the water we apply to the child. The water does not wash away original sin or save the child. We do not presume that this child is regenerate (though he may be), nor do we believe that every child who gets baptized will automatically go to heaven. We baptize infants not out of superstition or tradition or because we like cute babies. We baptize infants because they are covenant children and should receive the sign of the covenant.

In Genesis 15 God made a covenant with Abraham. This covenant was sealed with the sign of circumcision in Genesis 17. God promised to bless Abraham. For Abraham this meant two things in particular, offspring and land. But at the heart of the covenant was God's promise that he would be a God to Abraham and his children ([Gen. 17:7, 8](#)).

Circumcision was not just a physical thing, marking out ethnic Jews. Circumcision was full of spiritual meaning. The circumcision of the flesh was always meant to correspond with circumcision of the heart ([Rom. 2:25-29](#)). It pointed to humility, new birth, and a new way of life ([Lev. 26:40-42](#); [Deut. 10:16](#); [30:6](#); [Jer. 4:4](#); [6:10](#); [9:25](#)). In short, circumcision was a sign of justification. Paul says in [Romans 4:11](#) that Abraham “received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised.” God's own interpretation of circumcision is that it was much more than just a physical sign for national Israel.

Remarkably, though, this deeply spiritual sign was given to Ishmael as well as Isaac, even though only Isaac was the continuation of the promised line. The spiritual sign was not just for those who already embraced the spiritual reality. It was to be administered to Abraham and his

sons. Circumcision was not a simple equation. It didn't automatically mean the recipient of the sign was in possession of the thing signified. Circumcision, like baptism, also pointed to belonging, discipleship, covenant obligations, and allowed for future faith that would take hold of the realities symbolized. Just as there were some in Paul's day who were circumcised but not really circumcised ([Rom. 2:25-29](#)), some children of Abraham who were not truly children of Abraham ([Rom. 9:6-8](#)), so in our day there are some who are baptized who are not truly baptized. Children should be marked as belonging to the covenant, but unless they exercise saving faith, they will not grab hold of the covenant blessings.

Children today are baptized based on this same covenant with Abraham. Paul makes clear in Galatians 3 what Peter strongly suggests in Acts 2, namely that the Abrahamic covenant has not been annulled. It is still operational. In fact, we see the basic promise of the Abrahamic covenant running throughout the whole Bible, right up to the new heaven and new earth in Revelation 21.

Because sons were part of the Abrahamic covenant in the Old Testament and were circumcised, we see no reason why children should be excluded in the New Testament sign of baptism. Admittedly, there is no text that says "Hear ye, hear ye, circumcision replaces baptism." But we know from [Colossians 2:11-12](#) that baptism and circumcision carried the same spiritual import. The transition from one to the other was probably organic. As the Jews practiced proselyte baptism, that sign came to be seen as marking inclusion in the covenant people. For awhile circumcision existed along baptism, but as the early church became more Gentile, many of Jewish rites were rendered unnecessary, and sometimes even detrimental to the faith. Thus, baptism eclipsed circumcision as the sign renewal, rebirth, and covenant membership.

Although not conclusive all by themselves, there are several other arguments that corroborate a paedobaptist reading of the New Testament.

One, the burden of proof rests on those who would deny children a sign they had received for thousands of years. If children were suddenly outside the covenant, and were disallowed from receiving any "sacramental" sign, surely such a massive change, and the controversy that would have ensued, would be recorded in the New Testament. Moreover, it would be strange for children to be excluded from the covenant, when everything else moves in the direction of more inclusion from the Old Covenant to the New.

Two, the existence of household baptisms is evidence that God still deals with households as a unit and welcomes whole families into the church to come under the Lordship of Christ together ([Acts 16:13-15](#); [32-34](#); [1 Cor. 1:16](#); cf. [Joshua 24:15](#)).

Three, children are told to obey their parents in the Lord ([Eph. 6:1](#)). Children in the church are not treated as little pagans to be evangelized, but members of the covenant who owe their allegiance to Christ.

Four, within two centuries of the Apostles we have clear evidence that the church was practicing infant baptism. If this had been a change to long-standing tradition, we would have some record of the church arguing over this new practice. It wasn't until the sixteenth century that Christians began to question the legitimacy of infant baptism.

So we come to administer the sacrament of baptism to this child today with the weight of church history to encourage us and the example of redemptive history to confirm our practice. We baptize in obedience to Christ's command. The sacrament we are about to administer is a sign of inclusion in the covenant community as circumcision was, and the water we are about to sprinkle is a sign of cleansing from sin as the sprinkled blood of bulls and goats in the Old Testament was. We pray that this little one will take advantage of all his covenant privileges, acknowledge his Lord all the days of his life, and by faith make these promises his own.

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I doubt I've changed too many minds with this post, but maybe I've helped my Baptist friends understand what we mean (and don't mean) by infant baptism. Maybe I've clarified a couple misunderstandings. Maybe I've strengthened the convictions of a few paedobaptists who weren't sure why they believed what they said they believed. No matter where you fall on this issue, I encourage you think through the topic with an open Bible and some good resources in hand.

As a paedobaptist I recommend:

- John Murray, [\*Christian Baptism\*](#)
- [\*The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism\*](#), edited by Gregg Strawbridge.
- [\*Baptism: Three Views\*](#), edited by David F. Wright, with contributions from Sinclair Ferguson (infant baptism), Bruce Ware (believers only baptism), Anthony Lane (dual practice)
- Daniel R. Hyde, [\*Jesus Loves the Little Children: Why We Baptize Children\*](#)
- Bryan Chapell, [\*Why Do We Baptize Infants\*](#)

To understand how someone could come to embrace infant baptism, check out the "How I Changed My Mind" articles from:

- [Liam Goligher](#) (Tenth Presbyterian Church),
- [Sean Michael Lucas](#) (First Presbyterian Church – Hattiesburg, MS),
- [Dennis Johnson](#) (Westminster Theological Seminary – Escondido, CA).

We hand out Johnson's 14-page letter to his daughter (who was struggling with the doctrine of infant baptism) in our new members class.