

# Bishop Craig Bates on Infant Baptism

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The last few months I have been approached by several young Christians and asked to defend “infant baptism.” I am not sure, however, that as a Biblical Christian I need to defend a practice that has long been accepted by the vast majority of Christians, including most Evangelical Christians. The fact is that those who support the position of “believer’s baptism” as an act of obedience rather than as sacrament are in the minority. The position they take would ignore the reality that the early Church indeed baptized infants and that this practice was not only the norm but was universally practiced by all Christians until the late sixteenth century. Not only do they find themselves in disagreement with the Church Fathers like Athanasius and Augustine, who were most certainly men of Scripture, but also with the Reformers like Martin Luther and Calvin.

Those of who defend the Christian and Biblical practice of baptizing infants need merely offer the defense that this teaching and practice is not only Biblical but is the practice of the Church from Apostolic times. Those who hold to so called “believer’s baptism” are in the ones who need to defend their position. The fact is that their position originates in the post-Reformation Anabaptist movement of the sixteenth century. And, again their position has been rejected not only by Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox Christians, and Anglicans, but the vast majority of Churches that grew out of the Reformation.

It is correct that the Holy Scriptures does not specially command the baptism of infants nor are there any specific examples in the Book of Acts of an infant being baptized. Though we do find examples of “households” being baptized. The lack of evidence of infants being baptized can easily be explained. The Book of Acts is the record of first generation Christians all of whom were adults. It is not clear what these new converts did with their children.

The proponents of “believer’s baptism” would suggest that infants are excluded from receiving baptism since as an infant they cannot make a profession of faith. I wonder how they would deal with the text from the Psalmist, “For you are He who drew me from the mother’s womb, my hope from my mother’s breasts; I was cast upon You from the womb; from my mother’s womb you are My God.” (Psalm 21.10-11) It is clear that in the Covenant God made with Abraham – marked by circumcision – which infants not only could be in covenantal relationship with God but were in covenantal relationship with God. (Genesis 17.10-13) It would seem strange would it not that the same God who brings infants into relationship with himself in the covenant of Abraham would now withhold that relationship from those in the covenant of Christ Jesus who said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.” (Mark 10.14) The word for here for “children” is the Greek word “paidia” which can be translated “babes in arms” or “infants”.

Isn’t this the very reason that many who hold to “believer’s baptism” practice “baby dedications” which has little if any Scriptural support and was not practiced until late in the seventeenth century? If we want to obey Jesus and bring the “babes in arms” to Him then isn’t the way to do this baptism?

There are five specific references in Scripture to the baptism of entire households.

Peter baptized the household of Cornelius (Acts 11.14)

Paul baptized the household of Lydia and the household of the Jailer (Acts 16.15,33)

Paul baptized the household of Crispus, the ruler of the Synagogue in Corinth (Acts 18:8)

And Paul baptized the household of Stephanas. (1 Corinthians 1.16)

The Greek word for “household” is “oikon” and refers to all who abide in the household including wives, slaves, servants, infants, and children. If children were

excluded would not the text had read that only the adult members of the household were baptized? Would we be so naïve as to suggest that in the household of Cornelius, Lydia, the jailer, Crispus and Stephanas there were no children or infants?

From the beginnings the Church Fathers – those closest to the actual events of the Scriptures and often the disciples of the Apostles – related baptism to the covenantal act of circumcision. In Colossians 2.9-12, Paul compares the effect of baptism to the effect of circumcision, which took place at eight days old. And, we can see in reading the Father's that the practice of baptizing children and infants was a common practice as early as the later part of the first century – Apostolic times.

What about the text in Mark 16.16, "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved." Or, the text in Matthew 28.19-20, "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey all things that I have commanded you, and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

The proponents of "believer's baptism" would argue that these texts should be read chronologically. That is, they would suggest that one must first believe and then be baptized. They conclude, that since an infant is not able to "confess their faith", because they have not reach an age of reason, they cannot be baptized. Hence they are excluded until reaching a proper age. The problem is that these texts are not to be read chronologically since the verbs "believe" and "baptized" are participles. So, as a person who was baptized as an infant I can legitimately say, "I believe, and I have been baptized." Matthew 28, the Great Commission, says that we make disciples or followers of Jesus through "baptism" and "teaching". Does teaching necessarily follow baptism? Of course not! They are not chronological. If the issue were chronological, i.e., "believe, confess faith, be saved, and then be baptized", the text in Mark would have to read, "Whoever believes and is saved will be baptized."

Baptism is an act of grace that precedes faith. Ephesians 2.8-9 reads, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast." Salvation is not an act of man, certainly not of man's reason or intellectual consent, but an act of the love, mercy, and grace of God. Both faith and grace are works of God into the sinful, stubborn, and prideful heart of humanity. Can we deny that the God who gives the most arrogant and hardhearted man the faith and grace to be saved would deny that same grace to an infant? Faith is

a glorious gift of God given by the Holy Spirit. Certainly an infant who has been baptized will need to receive and respond to the grace given to them throughout their entire lives. And, for some that will be a “dramatic” or “profound spiritual awakening”. But the gift of grace always precedes the gift of faith.

I would suggest that those who hold to “believers baptism” have falsely placed the emphasis on the response of man rather than the grace of God. They will over and over again talk about how “they went forward”, “they made a decision” and “they got saved” rather than on the marvelous and life transforming grace of God found in Jesus. They falsely argue that we are “saved by faith through grace” not as Paul so clearly and accurately taught, “we are saved by grace through faith”. Should we not bring our infants under the grace of God? Then certainly we must face our parental responsibility to teach our children the truth and train them to “walk by faith.”

I do not deny the reality that many people, including myself, came to a transforming moment in their life when their relationship with Christ Jesus came alive. They went from having the faith of their parents and church family to having a faith of their own. For many, this moment in time so transformed them that they were set free from the bondages of alcohol, sexual promiscuity, drug addiction and other life controlling problems or sins. Indeed, every Christian should be in a personal relationship with Christ Jesus as their Lord. But is this a failure of their baptism? Or is this a failure of the Church and families to lead our children to such a personal relationship? Isn't the most powerful “testimony” of God's love a person who can say, “I have always known Christ as my Lord and Savior?” Yes, I believe the Church needs to be active in awakening people to the reality of the Risen Christ and a life lived in the power of the Holy Spirit. But this doesn't negate infant baptism.

There is no question that the Church has over the centuries misused the sacrament of baptism. There is no question that many have been baptized out of superstition. It is also sad that many parents fail to teach their children the things necessary to walk in the truth or nurture them in the knowledge and love of the Lord. It is a sad fact that there are “baptized persons” all around us that have never come to a living relationship with Jesus nor known the joy of being filled with the Holy Spirit. This is not because they were baptized as infants. How many have made “altar calls” or gone to crusades to “make a decision” and have fallen from the faith? We need remember the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 13.1-19,18-23.

The early Christians, who saw Scripture as their authority, were clear that infants were not to be excluded from baptism for to do so would exclude them from the grace of God in the sacrament as well as exclusion from initiation into the household of God, the family of God, the bride of Christ, and the Body of Christ.

The Supreme Court of the United States and now legislators around the world have declared that infants in the mother's womb are not persons. Therefore these precious infants, who are formed and created in the mind of God for His purpose and plan, are denied the basic God given rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. They are excluded from the community of man. Mothers and fathers have been deceived into believing that life begins at some man-determined time and therefore they can destroy the life of their child. It seems to me, now more than ever, that as the Church we continue to administer the Biblical and historic practice of baptism to infants and so affirm the truth that all life is sacred from fertilization to natural death. Baptism not only conveys the incredible and scandalous grace of God but also strengthens the family and the household of God.

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