

Baptism: What's the point?
Sermon 5: Baptism and Children

Passages: Col 2:8–15
Mark 10:13–16

The Anglican Church baptizes babies. So does the Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian and Reformed Church. And this is not a new thing, either! In fact, infant baptism has had a very long history. From at least the **3rd century**, infant baptism was a standard practice throughout the churches of Europe and the Middle East. Some writings of the **2nd century** indicate that infant baptism was already a common practice in some Christian communities.

This fact, however, creates a huge dilemma! You see, **many churches** (including the Baptists, Missionary Alliance, Disciples of Christ, Churches of Christ, Mennonite, Amish, Brethren, Seventh–Day Adventists, some Methodists and most Pentecostal Churches) **oppose infant baptism**. So do groups like the Christadelphians, the Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Mormons. Indeed, all these groups believe that **the ancient church got it wrong!** They believe that, for the past 1800 years, these churches have **misread** the Scriptures and **mistakenly** included children in the ceremony of baptism!

And here's the nexus of the problem: You see, in the end, we need to recognize that **not everyone reads the Bible in the same way!**

- The churches who believe in infant baptism (**paedo–baptists**) read the Scriptures collectively. These are the ancient churches.
- Those who are opposed to infant baptism (**credo–baptists**) read it individualistically. These are the modern churches.

I call one group ancient and the other modern simply to identify the great upheaval in people's thinking caused by the Renaissance which started in the 14th century! Prior to the Renaissance, all churches baptized infants! That's basically because people generally identified themselves within the social context of **family and village**. But the Renaissance brought a new way of seeing oneself—it taught people to see themselves as **individuals**, separate from their social environment. In this way, it initiated a whole new way of reading the Bible—From an individualistic point of view!

Of course, one of the biggest doctrines of the 16th century Reformation, “justification by faith”, is a product of this Renaissance individualism. When the reformers talked about “justification by faith”, they were talking about the personal, individual decision to receive Christ as Lord and Saviour.

So, when these modern Renaissance Christians started to apply these ideas to baptism, they said, “Baptism is about individual choice. No one can make that choice for you!” Hence, they challenged the age-old practice of infant baptism, saying, “Neither parents nor the village can make the decision of faith on a child’s behalf! Every person must make their own choice as an adult!”

But here’s where the tensions begin! Although these “modern” churches were becoming popular, most of the “original” Reformation churches (Lutherans, Anglicans, Presbyterians, Reformed) weren’t willing to “throw the baby out with the bath water”! That is, they still held to the pre-Renaissance idea of **community**. That’s why they continued to baptize infants. Although they were persuaded by the Renaissance ideas of individualism in terms of “justification by faith”, **they refused to dismiss the importance of community in the formation of that individual faith.** They recognized, for example, that a parent’s faith does have an impact on their children. They saw how “it takes a village to raise a child”! And so, they baptized babies, while recognizing that a child also needs to make up its own mind when it’s old enough to understand! (This is what confirmation is all about.)

Do you see? Because of the Renaissance, two types of Reformation churches came into being with two different ways of reading the Scriptures. The modern churches, in the spirit of individualism, argued for credo-baptism. The ancient churches, on the other hand, argued for paedo-baptism. Sadly, these two groups refused to accept each other as Christian brothers and sisters. Calvin (Reformed) and Luther (Lutheran), both paedo-baptists, had no patience with the credo-baptists. And so they said to their Baptist opponents, “We’ll show you what adult baptism looks like!”, as they drowned them in the Limlat River.

It’s a very sad episode in church history! And the dispute still goes on today!

As I read the Scriptures, however, I believe there is scope for both paedo-baptism and credo-baptism. As I said last week, when Paul said (in Ephesians 4) that there’s only “**one baptism**”, he was talking in ultimate and inclusive terms, gathering up all types of water baptism and Spirit baptism into the One Baptism of union with the triune God. So, why can’t we be inclusive and generous, accepting every baptism that God has in store for us, whether it be as infants or adults; the baptism of the flesh or the baptism of the Spirit. Let us welcome them all?

To argue my point on how paedo and credo-baptism can be brought together as one, I want us to spend some time reflecting on **Genesis 17**—Although it’s a text that says nothing about baptism, it speaks a great deal about the nature of a covenant. This is where our understanding of paedo baptism and credo baptism must start.

In Genesis 17, God appeared to Abram for the purpose of establishing His covenant with him and his descendants.

¹ When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said, “I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless. ² I will confirm my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers.” ³ Abram fell face down, and God said to him, ⁴ “As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. ⁵ No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. ⁶ I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. ⁷ I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. ⁸ The whole land of Canaan, where you are now an alien, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God.”

The wording is very interesting here. God doesn't simply ask that there be a covenant between Him and Abram. Rather, God says, **“I will establish My covenant between Me and you”** (17:2). It is God's covenant. It is God who comes to Abraham and unilaterally sets out the terms of the covenant. It is then God who rewards Abram as he accepts God's grace. (See vv 3–9).

Now we come to verse 10, where God introduces **the sign** of the covenant. What is the covenant sign? Look at verses 10–14. God tells Abraham,

“ This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. ¹¹ You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. ¹² For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised, including those born in your household or bought with money from a foreigner— those who are not your offspring. ¹³ Whether born in your household or bought with your money, they must be circumcised. My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant. ¹⁴ Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.

By accepting the sign of circumcision, Abraham made an individual choice...a credo choice... to willingly be embraced by God's covenant love.

Now, there are **three aspects** of this covenant sign of circumcision that are essential to keep in mind:

- First, Abraham couldn't circumcise himself. That would be impossible. He needed help from someone else. It was a community event!

- Secondly, this covenant sign was not only for Abraham but for “**every male**” in his community. Although Abraham willingly entered into the covenant through an individual credo choice, not everyone else did! Many would have only been circumcised because Abraham made the choice for them—Abraham had them “done”! I’m particularly speaking about the male children. Although they made no credo consent, they were included as paedo members of Abraham’s faith.
- Thirdly, although these children were included in the covenant through paedo circumcision, as they got older they would need to make a credo choice to stay in the covenant. Clearly, the outward rite of circumcision did not mystically change a person’s heart. Every individual would need to have their own personal encounter with God.

But what does this OT covenant of circumcision have to do with baptism? In **Colossians 2**, Paul seems to say that, in Christ, the OT covenant of circumcision has been replaced by the NT covenant of baptism. Paul says...

¹¹ In him (Christ) you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, ¹² having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.

The continuity of ideas between OT circumcision and NT baptism is fascinating! First, when Paul says that circumcision was “**done by the hands of men**”, he is referring to the fact that it was a corporate activity of inclusion into the covenant community. No one did it to themselves. In fact, in retrospect, Paul says that it was done by Christ! This idea leads us to a second point: circumcision put you in a place of helplessness before God. Someone else held the knife over you! A third point follows on: Circumcision was always meant to remind God’s people of Abraham’s stupidity and impatience! If you remember the story, God’s command for Abraham to be circumcised came after he had a child through Hagar, Sarah’s slave-girl. Even though God had promised to give him a son through Sarah, Abraham went ahead and trusted in his own schemes. The circumcision of his foreskin was obviously meant to be a continual reminder to him (and his descendants) of how stupid he was. God was saying, “No longer trust in yourself—trust in me!”

Now, isn’t that also what **baptism** is all about? First, baptism is done in community. It speaks of our inclusion in the covenant community of God’s people— It is something that you cannot do to yourself. Ultimately, it is done by Christ. Second, baptism is a sign of our helplessness before God. We are helpless in the waters of baptism! Drowning is a real possibility! Third, baptism is a reminder not to trust in your own efforts and schemes. You cannot save yourself! So, baptism signifies death to self and new life in

reliance on God's Spirit. God alone is our salvation. He alone is the resurrection and the life!

The continuity between these two covenant symbols is amazing!

Of course, there is also a lot of **discontinuity** as well. Instead of a bloody foreskin, we now have water. (A lot less pain!) Instead of the covenant sign being applied only to males, it can now be applied to both males and females. Instead of being extended only to the people of Israel, the new covenant sign of baptism is extended to every nation, race, tribe and tongue. It's no wonder why this new covenant is described by the author of Hebrews as a "**a better covenant**" (Heb. 8:6). **It is better because it is so inclusive!**

Getting back to the continuity idea, clearly the one inclusive thing about circumcision that continues on into baptism is the way God's covenant is still being extended to children... all children that is; the baptism of children (paedo) is inclusive of those who cannot understand or make a credo profession of faith! In the same way, we can also baptize those people who have an intellectual disability! That's because God's love has no barriers—it is inclusive of all who come...even those who are carried by others! (Remember the four men who lowered the paralytic down to Jesus through the a hole in the roof? It was their credo faith that carried this man to Jesus!)

Admittedly, in the Book of Acts we see countless individuals who are baptized after responding to the preaching of the Gospel. Credo! But we also see occasions where entire households are baptized, even when only one member of the household is explicitly said to have come to faith in Christ.

- In Acts 2:39, Peter proclaims, "**The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off— for all whom the Lord our God will call.**" That is God's inclusive love!
- In Acts 16:15, we're told that Lydia "**...and the members of her household were baptised.**" That is God's inclusive love!
- In Acts 16:33, we see the Philippian jailer "**...and all his family were baptised.**" That is God's inclusive love!
- In 1 Corinthians 1:16, Paul says that he baptised "**the household of Stephanos.**" That is God's inclusive love!

What I am saying is that both baptisms are valid: Paedo and credo baptisms are both part of the "one baptism" Paul talks about in Ephesians 4. Both, along with Spirit baptism, speak about our union with the Triune God.

That's why I want to finish today's sermon with the reading from **Mark 10:13–16**. Why did Jesus bless the little children? Did he bless them because they were able to fully understand what he was on about? Did he bless them because they were able to put their faith in him and follow him? **Of course not!** But neither did he bless them simply because they were nice kids and he felt a warm feeling towards them.

Why did Jesus bless the little children? These were children of the covenant! Their parents were exhibiting **credo** faith—that's why they brought their children to Jesus to have him touch them! Jesus blesses these little Jewish children (paedo) because he sees them as an integral part of the community of faith, even though they don't understand it. They are full members of the community of faith in which their parents have made a profession.

What this story shows us is that Jesus is gathering together a community of people. Those who join Him out of a **credo** choice are also invited to bring their paedo children along too (despite what the disciples might think)! In fact, in **verse 14** Jesus adds, **“for the Kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these!”** Jesus is not only saying that these children are co-members with their parents of God's covenant community. More than that, they are exemplary members of that community! Why exemplary members? Because, **in the end, we all must be carried into Jesus' community! We must all become like little children, accepting our inability to “get it” or to understand the mysteries of faith.** In the end, we all need to be picked up like babies and brought to Jesus for His blessing!

As the man said who came to Jesus; **“Lord, I believe...Help me unbelief!”**

Credo baptism and **Paedo-baptism** go together!

Let's pray.