

## **Baptism and Membership**

### **OUTLINE**

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Baptism and babies

### **INTRODUCTION**

This is our second sermon in our membership refresher series. We have dealt with the issue of why every believer ought to be a member in a local church. We attempted to show by 7 arguments that the modern notion of membership is very different to our modern opt in understanding of membership. The Bible paints a picture of de facto membership, in other words, it would be odd for us to talk about our membership in the country of New Zealand. If you are born here you are a 'member' of the nation. When you are born again you are automatically one with the Church and one with Christ. Formalised membership is like getting a passport. It is making official something that is already the case. Today we want to move from why every person should be a member to the question of who should be a member.

We are a Baptist church so we answer baptised believers, and what we mean is those who have made their own confession of faith, and made their own obedience to Christ's command to be baptised, not some man made ceremony of confirmation and only those are to be accepted as members. We base our view on the practice of the NT church in Acts. This brings us in confrontation with those who eschew baptism and think it unimportant and those who are baptised as infants.

Today I would like to make a case for believer's baptism. I want to do this by taking what I think is the best verse that infant baptism has going for it, Acts 2:38:39, and making an exposition of it, 'And Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself." The case for infant baptism, at least from a reformed background, I am not engaging with the Roman Catholic view, is a longstanding theologically informed argument. It has deep theological foundations and rests on many verses. I am not offering the insult of saying I can clear up every point of their argument in one message. But I think that their strongest arguments are found in Acts 2 and we will engage with these.

So I want to do two things today. I want to show the integral relation of baptism to membership and then secondly, show how Acts 2 teaches not a paedobaptist view but a believer's Baptist view of membership.

### **Baptism and membership**

In the church in Acts we see that baptism was the churches way of indicating membership in Christ. Those who had been born again, who had been united to Christ spiritually and had received the Spirit of Christ, it was baptism that marks visibly those who belong to the invisible church. It is the seal given by the church to those who profess faith that confirms they are indeed Christians. In Acts 2:41 it says, 'So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.' Those who believed and were baptized were numbered with the church.

Baptism, the Lord's Supper and church discipline are all linked. Baptism is the entrance ordinance that announces your identity as a disciple of Christ, it is a word with three voices, God is saying I have caused you to die and be raised with Christ in eternal life. You are saying I have decided to follow Jesus and submit myself to His teachings and identify myself with and submit myself to His people, and the church is saying we have heard your confession of faith and admit you. This is what we mean when we talk about the church having the keys of the kingdom, that what they bind or loose on earth is the same in heaven. It is a sign of salvation, commitment, and belonging, and if any one of these are missing then the baptism is deficient.

There are many who partake of the Lord's Table who have never been baptised. But this is to get things backwards. You become a disciple by baptism and you renew your covenant commitment and revel in the covenant promises at the Lord's Table. Baptism is an entrance ordinance and the Lord's Supper is an ordinance of continuing fellowship. Technically speaking from a Baptist point of view, no paedobaptist has been baptised therefore no paedobaptist should partake of the Lord's Supper. There are Baptists who practice what is called a close or closed table that only admit those who have received baptism as believers to the table. We see the logic in this and choose to make a concession because the spiritual realities of the gospel cannot be overlooked. So we make for a happy inconsistency in our practice where we allow those who have after consideration of our own case for baptism, and who remain unconvinced of our arguments and feel in their consciences that they have obeyed the command to be baptised by owning their baby baptism. We readily and happily admit them. You will know that we ask that the children who have been baptised as babies not partake and this is because, if they have not confessed their own faith, and worked through the issues, we would feel that we are irresponsibly admitting them. We fight for the right for our paedobaptist brethren who are theologically convinced and conscience bound to celebrate our joint salvation in Christ.

Someone might ask me then. Nick if you are ready to admit conscience convinced paedobaptist brethren to the table then why can't you just admit them to membership? It would seem inconsistent on your part to give them the sign of participation and unity but deny them the formal fact of that.' Here is why! Christ gave the command to believe and be baptised as the way of defining the visible church, I cannot change that, I dare not. It is not my right to decide that believer's baptism is not a good grounds to define the membership of the church by. I am convinced that this is the teaching of the Bible and insist upon it. I admit I am inconsistent in admitting conscience convinced infant baptisers to the table, but even in this concession there is not a disregard for baptism but someone thinks that they have been legitimately baptised. I can admit them to the table but not the membership because baptism defines the visible church and I cannot and dare not impose my ideas.

Church discipline consists in cutting someone off from table fellowship as a sign that they are in sin and denying their confession of faith. Another reason we inconsistently admit our convinced paedobaptist brethren to the table is because we do not see them as under discipline, and feel we cannot communicate that to them by denying them access. Some would argue they are in disobedience and need to obey the command to believe and be baptised, but in many of their hearts they believe they have obeyed. A closed table is simpler and more consistent, but not necessarily with the spiritual realities of their inclusion in the invisible church and their regeneration.

### **Baptism and babies**

Lets turn our attention to Acts 2. Try and appreciate the shock that Pentecost would have held for the Jews who were listening to Peter. They taught of themselves as the people of God, the children of Abraham, the practitioners of true religion, and the expected recipients of the promised Spirit. They would have expected that the Spirit would fall on them and not the Romans, the promise was after all to God's people. Yet on the day that the promise of fulfilled, the Spirit was not given to all Jews, so far only a small group, the disciples of Jesus have received it. The question they ask in v37, 'Brothers, what shall we do?' must be filled with their amazement that they as Jews were not the recipients. They had not received their promised saviour nor the Spirit. They want to know how they can remedy the situation in order that they can receive the Spirit they should have received.

Peter has clear instructions for them, "'Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ.' Salvation we know is an Act of the Spirit who brings us to faith and repentance. Repentance is clearly mentioned, and the sins that Peter is calling these Jews to turn their backs on would be the rejection of Christ as Messiah, and the self-righteousness which led them to reject Him in the first place. One cannot become a Christian and cling to Christ unless they also let go of their sins. Turning to Christ as saviour includes a turning from sin. A taking of Christ as Lord includes a dethroning of self as the ruler of our lives. Faith is implied in the fact that a person was baptised into the name of Jesus Christ. This act of being baptised into Jesus name would have included confessing Him as Lord and Saviour. Being identified with Christ in baptism is an action that speaks of our dependence upon His death and resurrection as necessary for our salvation. It also amounts to an act of swearing fealty to a new King. This casting ourselves upon Christ and casting away of sin are the conditions to being part of the Messiah's Kingdom and receiving the gift of the Spirit. This faith and repentance was ordinarily expressed through baptism which in the first century was closely tied to conversion.

Peter outlines for us next the benefits that are part of the promise that come to those who meet the conditions of faith and repentance, 'for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.' These few words hold more blessing then we can imagine. The sin that God covers in our lives is innumerable. We are sinful in our natures, like black ink on our finger tips what we are colours what we do, there is no deed that is not tainted by our sinfulness. Our thoughts, our words, our actions, our attitudes, our desires, our emotions, our hopes, etc., we taint all that we do by what we are. But God in His grace because of His love for us has not treated us as our sins deserve. He is a God who is loving towards His enemies and He provides a full forgiveness to cover every single one of our sins so that He no longer has to judge us for our sin. One sin is enough to disqualify us but we have sins upon sins, infinite upon infinite, an unending living fountain of filth, but God covers them all. He provides a forgiveness so perfect that all that every sin of past, present and future deserves, it is paid in full by Christ's death. He provides a forgiveness so perfect that we are not only seen as sinless in His sight but as holy as Christ as His righteousness is imputed to us. This forgiveness is so amazing that our judgement day verdicts are brought forward, there is a certainty to our hope for there is no longer and can be no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. God has ruled in our favour, Christ has died; we are fully and freely forgiven.

But it gets better, God has also given us the Spirit of Christ. It is by the Spirit that we are sealed and adopted, it is by the Spirit that we are sanctified into the image of Christ, it the Spirit who imparts the benefits of Christ's resurrection to us now, it is the Spirit who teaches and illuminates us, who blesses the means of grace, who keeps us and who is all that we need for our journey home.

These gifts did not come to the Jews automatically by virtue of their birth, their relation to Abraham did not automatically entitle them to them. No God had to call them, they had to believe and repent, this was expressed in their baptism and they then received these gifts. Their birth to Abraham did not automatically translate into membership in the Messiah's kingdom.

V39 is the verse that is key to the issue we are investigating, Peter tells us of the recipients of the Spirit. 'For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.' Those who hold to infant baptism tell us that Peter speaks naturally in the ways of the Abrahamic covenant when he includes the believer and his children, just as the Jew and his children were included in Israel. By extension they say that because Peter is assuming a continuity with the OT practice of covenant we should assume a continuation of the OT practice of applying the sign of the covenant to the parent and their offspring. Baptism then should be applied in the place of circumcision. It is stressed that because we are witnessing the earliest sermon preached after Pentecost and this has been implied upfront we should assume it was practiced throughout the rest of Acts as well. It is argued that we should assume continuity and the practice of applying the sign of the covenant to the children of believers because there is no fuss made as we would expect from the Jews who would ordinarily have included their children. In other words the great silence about a lack of change from including children to excluding children argues in favour of continuity not discontinuity. The way that this verse is often quoted in the various theological works to support this view makes the case appear strong. We often find that in the discussion the words, 'to you and your children' are quoted alone apart from the rest of the verse that follows, 'and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God will call.' The question is, is Peter speaking in this fashion because he is assuming the covenantal practice of including children with their believing parents, and if not why then does he speak of children?

It is our contention that when this verse is read primarily through its context and not with the theological baggage of infant baptism that the true reason for why Peter the way that he does becomes obvious and is seen to in no way support infant baptism. Firstly, we must realise that 'the promise' being spoken of is not the promise that baptism is said to represent to those sealed by it as infants, it is the promise of the outpouring of the Spirit in Joel 2. If we read earlier in Peter's sermon in 2:16-21 we see that he quotes at length the prophet Joel to explain the phenomena of tongues the crowd was witnessing. In verse 17 we see that there is a mention made of the offspring of the Israelites receiving the Spirit and that this would be manifest in prophesying and visions, 'and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions.' So, in answer to the question, 'Is Peter speaking of the children of believers because he is thinking in terms of the Abrahamic covenant?' The answer is no, Peter is thinking in terms of the promise of Joel which promised the outpouring of the Spirit upon the Jews and their sons and daughters. To assume a continuity of the covenant practice of sealing the children of believers with the sign of the covenant is without foundation. The fact that Peter is thinking in terms of Joel's promise is strengthened by the fact that Peter extends the promise to 'all who are far off,' this is in keeping with what Joel meant when he is quoted as saying, 'I will pour out My Spirit on all flesh.' Peter is stressing the universal blessing of the Spirit not the structure of the covenant.

Secondly, we should point out that the children of Joel's prophecy which provide the intellectual content for Peter's words when he refers to children paint a picture of older children and not infants. Peter speaks about sons and daughters who speak intelligibly in prophecy not 8 day old infants. To insert the notion of infant baptism when Peter's frame of reference is to children who can speak intelligibly is unfair to the context of Acts 2.

Thirdly, we cannot separate the inclusion of children in receiving the promise from the conditions of faith and repentance laid down by Peter in Acts 2:38. If adults must first repent and call on the name of Christ in their baptisms in order to receive the Spirit and forgiveness, does Peter anywhere infer that things are different for children to receive these blessings?

Fourthly, v39 if not read as a whole can be misleading, but if we include the second half of the verse often left unquoted, 'and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to Himself,' we can see that God's call not baptism is the theological emphasis being made. Peter's point is that all who believe and repent, of the Jews, of the children of these Jews, or of any from any nation, they will receive the promise of the Spirit.

Many object to what I have said arguing that if the apostles changed the covenant practice of including children surely we would see more of a fuss about this in the early years after Pentecost and yet there is silence. They hope to infer from this silence that the practice of applying the covenant sign to infants is therefore assumed to be continued. I believe that the answer to this silence is easily cleared up by understanding the relationship of John the Baptist's baptism to the one the apostles practiced.

The first mention of baptism in the NT is John's baptism. John came preaching a message of repentance and baptism. The nation of Israel were sinful and if the Messiah came He would judge Israel not save her, John's ministry prepared Israel to meet the Christ. John preached that being a child of Abraham was not enough, one had to repent of their sins, and this was portrayed in baptism. The act of baptising a Jew was an alien concept as you only baptised Gentiles who converted to Judaism. John was making a clear statement in preparation for the Christ, being born a child of Abraham does not entitle you to the promises of the Messiah. In fact John was so set upon this that when those who were outwardly children of Abraham through circumcision and other religious observances came to him but were not repentant, John called them a 'brood of vipers.' In other words, children of the devil. Matthew 3:7-10, 'But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8 Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. 9 And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. 10 Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.' When Christ comes He comes to remove every fruitless branch. Every branch that is tied on but not grafted in, any branch that is outwardly part of the covenant but not inwardly. This baptism of repentance excluded children by its very nature. John's baptism was so important and integral to the apostles that when it came to choosing a replacement for Judas one of the conditions was that he had been with Christ, from the baptism of John. Being baptised by John's baptism was a baptism into his message that Jesus is the lamb of God come to take away the sin of the world. Many of the apostles were originally disciples of John and when Jesus came he submitted to John's baptism in identification with us and then repeated John's message and baptism of repentance with only a slight adjustment, that the kingdom of heaven is here not near. The disciples did all the baptising during Jesus ministry following this baptism of repentance, it was established early on that repentance and baptism go together. The baptism that was preparation for the Messiah and practiced by the Messiah was one of repentance. This practice of repentance and baptism went on for the time of Christ's earthly ministry. This was plenty of time for the disciples to grow accustomed to acknowledging disciples of the messiah not by birth but by repentance and baptism. In fact we see some awkward moments when parents attempted to being children to Jesus, the disciples drove them off. Now tell me, if the disciples were automatically thinking in terms of the Abrahamic covenant and very comfortable with the notion of infant

baptism would they have acted so harshly to the parents and children that sought Him to bless their children? We see Christ blessing the children but not baptising them, but we do not see the disciples comfortable with a so called theology of covenant children. So by the time of Pentecost it is easily understood why the apostles were not suddenly wrestling with a new problem of including children and keeping silent assuming continuity, they had dealt with that issue during the ministry of Christ. We see them continuing that same baptism of repentance begun by John and continued by Christ.

There is no command in the scriptures to baptise an infant and there is not one recorded baptism of an infant in the bible. The clear teachings of repentance and faith accompanying baptism are the only pattern we have. And having been baptised are added to the number.

Friends I do not believe that I have wasted our time getting involved in this old argument. I believe that a clear preaching of the gospel is at stake in the infant baptism question. We tell the world that they need to be born again and united to Christ by faith in order to be part of the church and community of heaven, but then we tell our children that they can be part of the body of Christ apart from faith and the new birth. We tell the world that they need to be adopted by faith because being born in Adam our father is the devil; but then we tell our children that they are adopted and can call God Father even though they have not been adopted by faith. We tell the world that our baptism speaks of the truth of our participation in the death and resurrection of Christ, but then we tell our children that you can have the sign without the reality needing to be true. We preach our baptisms to ourselves reminding ourselves that we have died and resurrected with Christ and all our sins are paid for, but we tell our children that they have been baptised without having died and been resurrected. We see in our baptism the truth that we have died to the power of sin and can make progress in holiness, but our children are dead in sin and told to keep God's law without the Spirit. The gospel must be clearly presented and we deny our children a clear presentation of the gospel if we uphold the practice. Unmarried people don't wear wedding rings, living people don't have tombstones, and unbelieving infants should not be baptised. The only way to be saved is not by baptism but by faith and repentance in Christ, and then we should be baptised.