

infants and young children were unsuited to Baptism.

Infant baptism in the early Church

Fundamentalists do not pay much attention to historical evidence, yet early Christian practice clearly shows that infants were baptized. Origen, for instance, in the 3rd century, wrote: “The Church received from the apostles the practice of giving baptism also to infants, though they do not have sins of their own: so that there may be given to them holiness, righteousness, adoption, inheritance, brotherhood with Christ and that they be His members”. This and other quotes from centuries, such as Origen and John Chrysostom, in their writings “Commentarii in Romanos 5:9” and “Catechesis ad illuminandos”, cannot go unheeded.

The Ecumenical Council of Carthage in the year 252 AD debated the fact, not that infants should not be baptized, but that it should not be withheld from them until the eighth day of birth, as with circumcision, with the Jews. There was no record in the early Church of anyone condemning infant baptism, showing that it was common practice.

Other outstanding leaders in the early Church testifying to the Church’s practice of infant baptism are Polycarp of Smyrna (167/8 AD), Justin Martyr (died 165 AD), Cyprian of Carthage (C. 249 AD), and Hippolytus of Rome (170-236 AD), Irenaeus of Lyons (120-202 AD). St. Augustine of Hippo in the 4th century taught strongly of the necessity of Baptism for wiping away “original sin” – the sin of our first parents, which we all inherit. The 16th Synod of Carthage (418 AD) definitely condemned those who denied baptism to new born babies.

The most common question about infant Baptism is: “How can a parent’s or guardian’s faith substitute for the faith of a child?” It is noteworthy that Jesus did not pose this question. When Jairus

asked Jesus to raise his young daughter from the dead (Mk 5:22-43) or another father asked Jesus to expel a demon from his son (Mk 9:17-27), Jesus acted with power because of their faith, not the faith of their children.

How much more would Jesus desire to free children from an even worse bondage, the bondage of sin, and raise them to eternal life, in response to the faith of their parents and of the whole Christian community? But the Catholic Church also teaches that the parents of the baptized child must provide a faith environment that will prepare the child to make a personal commitment to Jesus Christ on reaching maturity.

CONFIRMATION

Confirmation is the sacrament of the Church for the full outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the life of a baptized Christian. The Holy Spirit first comes into a person at baptism (Acts 2:38) but the Acts of the Apostles also speaks of the prayer for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:15-17). “When Paul laid hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them and they spoke with tongues and prophesied”. (Acts 19:6).

Later on, an anointing with oil was also added to the Sacrament. Through the Sacrament, the Holy Spirit empowers God’s people to proclaim the Good News with power, to live the message and to continue Jesus’ mission and ministry in the world. Expectant faith is necessary to experience and receive the full power of the Spirit. Many today have come to know this power in a fuller way through the “baptism (or release) of the Spirit.”

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Baptism and Infant Baptism

The Bible attests that baptism is the way a person becomes part of the “Body of Christ”, the Church. At the end of his speech at Pentecost, Peter told his hearers what they had to do to be saved: “*Repent and be baptized everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit*” (Acts 2:38). Note that Peter said “*everyone*”, not just adults.

In Catholic belief, the Latin term “*ex opere operato*”, which literally means “from the work performed”, expresses the essentially objective mode of operation of grace imparted in the seven sacraments, by God’s Spirit, (of which baptism is the first) and its independence of the subjective attitude of either the minister or the recipient. Thus, even though infants are too young to understand and accept baptism, they can nevertheless be baptized.

Without baptism you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven

Through baptism, converts to Jesus Christ first received forgiveness of their sins, the gift of the Holy Spirit, and became members of the community of Christians, the Church. Does baptism have anything to do with salvation? Jesus said: “*He who believes and is baptized will be saved*” (Mk 16:16). He told Nicodemus that “*unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God*” (Jn 3:5).

The Church of New Testament times responded to this teaching by immediately baptizing all new converts (See Acts 2:38, 41; 18, 8; 19:5; 22:16). Paul explained that baptism unites believers to Jesus in His death so that they will also share in His resurrection (Rom 6:35). Baptism then is also a “means” to salvation.

Baptism starts the process of salvation

From the earliest Christian centuries, the Church has baptized either by immersing or by “pouring” the water over the head of the person while praying the Trinitarian formula (Mt 28:19). Nowhere does the Bible say how much water is to be used (see Acts 9:36:37), otherwise we would be seeking salvation “by works”, and not by the grace imparted in the sacrament of Baptism. *“The Church does not know of any means other than baptism that assures entry into eternal beatitude; this is why she takes care not to neglect the mission she has received from the Lord to see that all who can be baptized are ‘reborn of water and the Spirit’. God has bound salvation to the sacrament of Baptism, but He himself is not bound by His sacraments” (Catechism of the Church §1257)*

The evidence that water Baptism starts the process of salvation is overwhelming in the Bible. However, a common evangelical bias, or prejudice, can be stated like this “Nothing we do with our bodies in the physical realm has anything whatever to do with God’s dealings with our eternal souls in the spiritual realm”.

This bias has its roots in an ancient Gnostic heresy called Manichaeism, which the Catholic Church dealt with centuries ago. This evangelical notion that we should worship like angels, without the aid of our bodies, leads evangelicals to reject not only the Eucharist and Baptism, which they style “ordinances” but these are Sacraments of the New and eternal Covenant.

Living in a personal relationship with God

Evangelicals and fundamentalists are under the erroneous impression that Catholics do not believe in “having a personal relationship with the Lord”. The Catechism of the Catholic Church clearly states: *“The mystery of the faith requires that the faithful live in a vital and personal relationship with the living and true God” (§2558)*. Most Catholics pray to this effect when receiving their First Communion, at Confirmation or on a daily basis or whenever they receive the Body and Blood of Christ in Communion during the Catholic worship service, the Mass.

The expression, however, is not found in the Bible. It is a product of our present cultural way of thinking. A more Biblical expression is: *“following Christ”*.

INFANT BAPTISM

Circumcision and Baptism are both rites by which people come into a special Covenant (not “ordinance”) relationship with God (see Exodus 12:48).

“Repent and be baptized, everyone of you This promise is for you and your children, and for all those”, Peter tells us in Acts 2:38-39. Jesus also said that no one can enter heaven unless born again of water and the Holy Spirit (Baptism) (*Jn 3:5*). In Mt 19:14, Jesus urged: *“Let the children be, do not keep them back from me, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these”*. The fundamentalists’ argument that this does not apply to infants since the children referred to are able to approach Christ on their own, is incorrect, since the parallel texts (Lk 18:15) and the original Greek texts use the word for “infants in arms” (little children who are unable to approach Christ on their own).

More importantly, Paul likens baptism to circumcision, and it was mainly infants who were circumcised under the Old Law (see Col 2:11-12). Circumcision of adults in Judaism was rare, there being few converts. If Paul, in making this

parallel, meant to exclude infants from Baptism, it is strange that he did not say so.

In everyday life people use water for cleanliness and hygiene as a precaution against dirt and disease. Water in one form or another is also an absolute necessity if a person is to stay alive. Among the Jews of Palestine ritual cleansing with water was a common practice. It was this ritual cleansing to which Jesus gave a deeper spiritual meaning. He did this by connecting the Holy Spirit’s working in the believer’s life in a particular way with water. It is by the Holy Spirit’s working in the water of baptism that the spiritual corruption of sin is washed away and a new life with God is begun (*Jn 3:5, Titus 3:5, Jn 7:37-38*).

Naturally enough, the people we read about being baptized in Scripture, are adults because they were converted as adults. This makes sense because Christianity was just starting out and there were no “cradle Christians”, no people brought up from childhood in Christian homes.

Infant baptism in the New Testament

Does the Bible say that infants and young people can be baptized? There are some good indications. Lydia was converted with all her household (Acts 16:15). The expression *“with all one’s household”* in Jewish usage meant the inclusion, not only of children but of servants.

The jailer of Paul and Silas was converted by them. We are told that *“without delay, he and all his household were baptized”* (Acts 16:33). And in his greetings to the Corinthians, Paul recalled that, “Yes, and I did baptize the household of Stephanas” (1 Cor 1:16). In the case of the jailer, “He and all his” must refer to himself and at least two others. If it were just the jailer and his wife it would read *“he and his wife”*, but it says *“He and all his”*, which must include children, as well. The scripture evidence here leans in favor of infant baptism. There is nothing in the Bible that says