

Why We Baptize Infants

John Murray (1898-1975)

BAPTISM is one of the two ordinances of the New Testament that we call sacraments. Baptism is administered in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Baptism "in the name of" means "into union with" or "into the discipleship of." Baptism in the one name of the triune God means baptism into subjection and devotion to the one living and true God. It means that the mark of the triune God is placed upon the recipients of it.

The placing of the mark of God upon us in baptism does not, however, mean that it is the authentication or seal of an ownership on the part of God or of discipleship on our part that is naturally and natively a fact. It is true that there is a natural ownership on the part of God and an inalienable devotion that we as His creatures owe to Him. But baptism is not the mark of an ownership that is natively and properly God's nor of the devotion on our part that we naturally owe to Him. It is the mark of an ownership that is constituted, and of a devotion that is created, by redemptive action and relation. In other words, it is the mark of the Covenant of Grace. In it, and bearing it, we profess to renounce every other lordship but that of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost in all the manifold relations that we come to sustain to each Person in the terms of the Covenant of Grace.

More specifically, baptism signifies washing or purification, washing from the defilement or pollution of sin by regeneration of the Holy Spirit, and washing from the guilt of sin by the sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ. Manifestly, it is only in and through Christ and His work that these blessings can be enjoyed. Union with Christ, therefore, is the bond that unites us to the participation of these blessings. Our Shorter Catechism gives a rather succinct and comprehensive definition when it says that "Baptism is a Sacrament, wherein the washing with water, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, doth signify and seal our engrafting into Christ, and partaking of the benefits of the covenant of grace, and our engagement to be the Lord's."

We believe that Scripture warrants the dispensing of this ordinance of baptism to infants. Just as infants were circumcised under the Old Testament - and circumcision meant fundamentally the same thing as baptism, namely, the removal of the filth of sin and the imputation of the righteousness which is by faith - so children who stand in a similar covenant relation with God should be baptized under the New Testament. What, we may ask, does this precisely mean?

It means that children, even newly-born infants, stand in need of cleansing from sin both in its defilement and in its guilt. Children do not become sinful after they grow up or in the process of growing up. They are sinful from the very outset. They are conceived in sin and brought forth in iniquity. They go astray from the very womb. No one who is truly convinced of sin remembers when he became sinful. He knows that it was not by some deliberate decision or act on his part that he became sinful. He knows that he was always sinful. Truly he recognizes that that innate and inherent sinfulness has been aggravated, and has repeatedly come to expression, in his voluntary acts of sin. But it was sinfulness already inherent that was aggravated, and came to expression, in his voluntary acts of sin. Furthermore, no one who is truly observant of the growth and development of others from infancy to adulthood remembers any point when sin first began to take possession of their heart and interest and purpose.

The disposition is always with us, and is at the present time particularly prevalent, to minimize the seriousness of this fact. There is the tendency to think and act in terms of the innocence of little children. The consequences of such an attitude are disastrous to all true nurture and instruction. For to eliminate from our attitude and conduct so basic and far-reaching a fact as the innate pollution of fallen human nature is to eliminate a fact without which nurture and direction must lead on to a perversion and falsehood manifoldly more desperate than that with which it began. Infant baptism is a perpetual reminder that infants need what baptism represents and there can be no escape from, or amelioration of, that awful fact.

But baptism is after all a sacrament of grace. And therefore it means more than the fact of need. It means that by the grace of God infants may enjoy precisely and fully what baptism represents. They may be regenerated by the Spirit and justified in the blood of Christ. They may be united to Christ in all the perfection of His mediatorial offices and in all the efficacy of His finished work.

We should pause to consider the preciousness of these truths. Truly we shall have no appreciation of their preciousness unless we are persuaded of that awful fact to which we have already made reference, namely, that of original sin. But if we sincerely face the fact of the dismal pollution of human nature in its present state, no human words can adequately express the joy we experience in the contemplation of that which baptism means for infants. We may briefly reflect on the preciousness of these truths for two considerations.

First, children may and often do die at a very early age. If they should die without regeneration and justification, they would be lost just as surely as others dying in an unregenerate state are finally lost. The baptism of children, then, means that the grace of God takes hold of children at a very early age, even from the very womb. That is to say, in other words, we must not exclude the operations of God's efficacious and saving grace from the sphere or realm of earliest infancy. It

is to this truth our Lord gave His most insistent and emphatic testimony when He said, "Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not, for of such is the kingdom of God."

We would not, of course, be misunderstood when we assert this principle. We do not say that the operations of God's saving grace are present in the heart of every infant. The fact is only too apparent that multitudes grow up to years of discretion and intelligence and show that the saving grace of God did not take hold of their hearts and minds in the days of their infancy. Neither are we taking the position necessarily that all who die in infancy are the recipients of the saving grace of God. For ourselves we must leave that question in the realm to which it belongs, namely, the unrevealed counsel of God. But it is nevertheless true - and that is the point we are now interested in stressing - that the grace of God is operative in the realm of the infant heart and mind. "Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings thou hast perfected praise." What a blessed thought and hope and confidence is extended to believing parents when in baptism they commit their children to the regenerating and sanctifying grace of the Holy Spirit and to the purging efficacy of the blood of Christ, so that, if perchance the Lord is pleased to remove them in infancy, they - believing parents - can plead and rest upon the promises of the Covenant of Grace on their behalf. It can surely be said of them that they have no need to mourn as those that have no hope.

But secondly we should appreciate the preciousness of these truths for the reason that children do not need to grow up to the years of discretion and intelligence before they become the Lord's. Just as children are sinful before they come to the years of discretion and understanding, so by the sovereign grace of God they do not need to grow up before they become partakers of saving grace. They may grow up not only in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, but also in His favor and sanctifying grace. They may in their tenderest years be introduced into the family and household of the heavenly father. When believing parents present their children for baptism they are confessing that their children are innately sinful, they are confessing their need of regeneration and justification, but they are also pleading on the behalf of their children the regenerating and justifying grace of God. In reliance upon the promise that "the mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting upon them that fear him, and his righteousness unto children's children; to such as keep his covenant, and to those that remember his commandments to do them," they are entertaining the encouragement and the hope that "those that be planted in the house of the Lord shall flourish in the courts of our God. They shall still bring forth fruit in old age; they shall be fat and flourishing; to shew that the Lord is upright; he is my rock and there is no unrighteousness in him."

Baptism is the ordinance that initiates into the fellowship of the visible church. The visible church is a divine institution. It is the house and family of God. It is a divine sanctuary where God's glory is made known. It is the channel along which normally the current of God's saving grace flows. What a privilege it is for parents by divine authority in the reception of the ordinance of baptism to introduce their children into this blessed fellowship.

If infant baptism has the divine warrant, then what dishonor is offered to Christ and what irretrievable damage is done to the church and to the souls of children by refusing to introduce children into this glorious fellowship. No argument from apparent expediency, no seeming evangelistic fervor will counteract that dishonor to our Lord and that damage done to the souls of men.

In concluding this brief study of the meaning and privilege of infant baptism, there are two warnings that must be given. The first is that against the doctrine of baptismal regeneration. We must not look upon baptism as having some semi-magical effect. Baptism derives all its efficacy from the sovereign grace of the Holy Spirit. We do well to remind ourselves of the words of our Shorter Catechism, "The Sacraments become effectual means of salvation, not from any virtue in them, or in him that doth administer them; but only by the blessing of Christ, and the working of his Spirit in them that by faith receive them." We must never take for granted that the infant who is baptized is by that mere fact assured of eternal life. Baptism is certainly a means of grace which God has, in accordance with His appointment, abundantly honored and blessed throughout the whole history of the Christian church. But we must ever preserve the true evangelicalism of our Christian faith that, in the last analysis, we are not saved by any external rite or ordinance, but by the sovereign grace of God that works mysteriously, directly and efficaciously in the heart and soul of each individual whom He has appointed to salvation.

The second is that infant baptism does not relieve parents or guardians, as the case may be, of that solemn responsibility to instruct, warn, exhort, direct and protect the infant members of the Christian church committed to their care. we must repeat again the text we have already quoted, "The mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting upon them that fear him and his righteousness unto children's children, to such as keep his covenant and to those that remember his commandments to do them." The encouragement derived from a divine promise must never be divorced from the discharge of the obligations involved. It is only in the atmosphere of obligation discharged, in a word, in the atmosphere of obedience to divine commandments, that faith in the divine promise can live and grow. Faith divorced from obedience is mockery and presumption.

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