

# Responding to Rejection of Infant Baptism

## Part 1: Basic Principles 1 and 2

The Rt. Rev. Patrick S. Fodor

“Then they also brought infants to Him that He might touch them; but when the disciples saw it, they rebuked them. But Jesus called them to Him and said, ‘Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of God. I swear to you the truth: whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will by no means enter it’” (Luke 18:15-17).

Responding to claims that infants shouldn’t be baptized requires careful unpacking; it will take several inserts. The usual reasons for rejecting the Church’s practice are the assertions that infants can’t believe or speak for themselves and the early Church didn’t baptize babies. We can say up front that all these assertions are demonstrably false. First, yes, infants *can* believe; and Jesus says so. Second, Baptism involves God as the primary actor, not us. It is a sacrament, not an action we do as some kind of empty sign. Third, yes, the early Church *did* baptize infants.

Starting with the last point, infant baptism has been practiced in the Christian Church as far back as we can trace. There appears to be no time in the history of the Church when infants were not baptized. In addition to this there is no trace in either the New Testament or the early Church of the Baptism of the older children of Christian parents who had been brought up in the faith. We’ll return to more about this later, but we have good reasons for stating that the Church has always taught that baptism is for everyone, including infants. We believe that Jesus wants babies to be baptized. We do so for the following reasons.

### I - Christ Has Commanded Us

Many raise the objection: “There’s not a single example of infant baptism in the New Testament, nor is there any command to do so. Therefore Christians should not baptize babies.”

But Jesus commanded infant baptism. In Matthew 28:19 He says, "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit..." The Lord commanded us to baptize “all nations,” and the Church has always understood this to mean everyone, without exception. Matthew 25:31-32 also uses the phrase “all nations” in this way. All nations are to be baptized, regardless of race, color, sex, age, class, education or IQ. Jesus makes no exceptions. He doesn't say, “Baptize all nations, except ...” Everyone is to be baptized, including infants.

If we say that babies are not to be included in Christ's Great Commission, then where will it stop? What other people will we exclude?

It is true that there is no example in Scripture of a baby explicitly or by name being baptized. However, to conclude from this that babies are not to be baptized is absurd. Neither are there any specific examples of the elderly being baptized, or teenagers, or little children. Instead we read that men (Acts 2:41; 8:35), women (Acts 16:14-15), and entire households are baptized (Acts 10:24,47-48; 16:14-15; 16:30-33; 1 Co. 1:16). The authors of the New Testament documents didn't feel compelled to give examples of every age group or category being baptized. Why should they? They understood that “all nations” is all-inclusive.

### II - Babies Need Forgiveness

The Bible teaches that infants are born with Original Sin and are in need of forgiveness. Scripture says nothing about an “Age of Accountability” that begins at the “age of reason.” David confesses in Psalm 51:5, “Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me.” The Bible teaches Original Sin, that the results of Adam's sin are passed on to every human being. Jesus affirms this teaching when He says, “Flesh gives birth to flesh” (John 3:5). Paul takes it up in Romans 5:18: “So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men.”

Jesus said, “He who believes and is baptized shall be saved; he who believes not shall be damned” (Mark 16:16). According to Jesus, ANYONE who does not believe in Him will be damned. Jesus makes no exception for infants, or for anyone else. While God can act directly to apply Jesus’ work to persons the Church is bound to follow His commands. There is no justification for parents “placing their children under God's grace” by “dedicating” them. This would be the parents’ action. But even though we must cooperate with Jesus, Baptism is primarily and fundamentally God’s action, not ours. Like everyone else, infants need forgiveness and new birth. They, like everyone else, need to be baptized so that they can be born again from above. Jesus said, "Unless a man is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (John 3:5). Baptism is God's Means of Grace by which He causes human persons to be born again. To keep children from baptism is to keep them from forgiveness, healing, and certain identification as part of God’s adopted family.

### Suggested Reading:

Das, A. Andrew. *Baptized Into God's Family: The Doctrine of Infant Baptism for Today*. 2nd Ed. Northwestern Publishing House, 2007.

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## Part 2: Basic Principles 3 and 4

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“In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God [or "through the faithfulness of God's working"], who raised Him from the dead. And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses, having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it” (Col. 2: 11-15).

Baptism applies to us the work of Christ. Yes, this means we grasp Jesus' work by faith. But that faith and baptism go together. Faith grasps Christ, Who is Present and acts in baptism. We'll continue our earlier treatment with two more major elements.

### III - Baptism Replaces Circumcision

God's covenant with Abraham (Genesis 17:10-14) demanded that every male child was to be circumcised when eight days old. By circumcision, the baby entered into a covenant relationship with the true God. St. Paul teaches us that in the New Testament, baptism has replaced circumcision. "In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, buried with Him in baptism . . ." (Col. 2:11-12).

Given this fact, it would have been natural for first century Jewish believers to baptize infants, since they were accustomed to circumcise their male children at eight days old. It is also logical that if God regarded eight-day-old male babies as members of His covenant people through circumcision, He will also regard newborn babies to be members of His kingdom through baptism, the “circumcision made without hands.”

### IV - Infants Can Believe

The most frequent objection to infant baptism is that babies cannot believe. They do not, says the objection, have the intellect necessary to repent and believe in Jesus. But Jesus says differently. Luke 18 tells us that certain parents were bringing infants (Greek - *brephe*) to Jesus, that He might bless them. The disciples rebuked those who brought the babies. Jesus' response is

well known: "Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of God. Assuredly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will by no means enter it" (Luke 18:15-17). Some have objected that it is "little children" and not infants that Jesus speaks of here. Yet the very little children that the disciples were forbidding were infants. The infants are the focus of the passage. The word indicates this clearly: βρέφος *brephe* is the word is for unborn children or newborn infants. Clearly on this occasion Jesus had babies in mind. Jesus also says infants believe in Matthew 18:6, where He says that μικρός (*mikros*, those still nursing) believe in Him and He warns those who would cause one of these to stumble (to *not* believe in Him). Better to be thrown in the sea with a millstone around your neck!

Does this passage speak about infant baptism? Not directly. But it shows that Jesus did not raise the objection that so many do today about babies not being able to believe. According to Jesus, these babies had what it took to be members of the kingdom of God, feeble intellect and all! "Do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of God." Their receptivity is a model for us.

Jesus does not contradict Himself. The central message of His ministry (the Gospel) is that there is only way to enter God's kingdom. There is only one way to be saved. “He who believes and is baptized shall be saved” (Mark 16:16). Repeatedly Christ teaches that faith in Him is needed to become a member of God's kingdom (cf. John 3:16-18). Therefore, when He says about babies, “for of such is the kingdom of God,” He is telling us that babies can believe. How else could they enter the kingdom?

So if Jesus states that babies can believe (can recognize Him, just as they can recognize and tell apart their mother from everyone else), who are we to deny it? And who are we to deny baptism to those who can believe? For those still stumbling over infant faith, remember it is purely by God's grace that *any* person, adult or child, can believe. Faith is a gift of the Holy Spirit as much for the adult as for children (see John 6:44; 1 Cor. 12:3; Eph. 2:1-4). When an adult believes in Christ, it is only because the Holy Spirit, working through the Gospel, has worked the miracle of faith in his heart. So it is with infants. If faith, then, is always a miracle, why can we not believe that God would work such miraculous faith in an infant?

Someone might ask, “If infants *can* believe, then why do they need baptism?” That will lead us to our next insert.

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### Part 3: Baptism and Faith

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Some who reject infant baptism have said: “If infants can believe, then why do they need baptism?” Part of the answer, at least, is that it is through baptism that faith is created in the infant's heart. Baptism, far from being the empty symbol that many imagine it to be, is the visible, tangible Gospel, a powerful Means of Grace (*Media Salutis*, more literally, an *instrument of salvation*). According to Scripture, baptism “washes away sin” (Acts 22:16), “saves” (1 Peter 3:21; Mark 16:16); causes one to “die to sin, to be buried, and raised up with Christ” (Romans 6:3-4); causes one to be “clothed with Christ” (Galatians 3:27) and made a member of the body of Christ: “for by one Spirit, were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:13). Baptism is a miraculous tool of God's grace by which He gives faith, forgiveness, and salvation, to infants or anyone else. So, here we have to unpack some other basic aspects of the Church's teaching.

To have Christian faith is to possess Christ. “*In ipsa fide Christus adest*,” in faith Christ is present. This does not mean we possess a piece of Jesus, but rather that we cling to the whole Christ. Such possession is not based on cognitive ability, IQ, or education, but upon God's grace: His act of giving Himself to us through His Gospel. The infant has faith “poured into him” in baptism. The *fides infusa* is a defense of the Gospel as gift, where God gives not only gifts from Him, but communion with God Himself. To have faith is to have Christ, to fully possess Him, to dwell in Him and to be indwelt by Him. Such faith recognizes Him at the only level that ultimately matters. What happens in baptism is objective, though it is appropriated subjectively through faith. Baptism applies the death and resurrection of Christ to the person baptized, so that he or she is buried and raised with Christ, as St. Paul says in Romans 6:3-7. This is all part and parcel of baptismal regeneration. Finally, we should be reminded that it is the faith of infants, the implicit trust of the heart which knows the One in Whom salvation and life consists, which is consistently held up by Christ as a model for all His people (Matt. 18:4; Mark 10:15; Luke 18:16-17).

In dealing with the theology of baptism, then, certain questions are especially significant. What/Who is received in baptism? Is it/He received only in part or whole? If faith apprehends the whole Christ, what then is needed beyond such faith? If we respond, “confession of this faith,” what then is our understanding of such an act of confession, and what does this say about our understanding of the Gospel? And if our Lord tells us that “Out of the

mouths of babes and nursing infants” He brings forth “perfect praise” (Matthew 21:16; Psalm 8:2), is not all perfect praise, worship, adoration by nature confession? As Das put it:

People like to speak of an 'age of accountability' when the child is able to understand the things of the faith. Consider I Corinthians 2:14: 'The unspiritual man does not receive the gifts of the Spirit, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.' The Scripture says that mankind, by nature, whether infant or adult, is unable to 'accept' or welcome the things of God. Man, of himself, is even unable to understand the things of God ... The Gospels abound in proof that even babies can believe. In Luke 10:21, Christ says: 'I thank thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes; yea, Father, for such was thy gracious will.' The Greek word '*nepios*' here refers to babies and very, very small children, those 'not speaking' yet. This passage surely strains the present-day concept of an 'age of accountability.' *Nepios* can also be used figuratively in the sense of the 'simple-minded.' Such are those to whom the Father reveals his truth. Faith is not dependent on human wisdom or intelligence. Faith would then be a human action when the Word says that it is a work of God. ... God reveals the truth of his gospel to whomever he will, including the little children, by His Spirit (I Corinthians 2:14-16). God miraculously reveals his truth to even the little baby. Faith does not depend on an age when one can 'understand' the words of the gospel (Page 30).

Notice, too, Matt. 21:16, where Jesus speaks of babes and nursing infants giving perfect praise, which is not possible without faith (Hebrews 11:6; cf. I Cor. 12:3; I Jn. 4:15, etc.). Compare also Matt. 11:25. This is an inescapable deduction from the Church's whole body of teaching, the Deposit of Faith. Again, baptism and Christian faith go together. One may be brought to faith by preaching (even heard, we might note, *in utero*) or by baptism itself. But one who believes wants to be adopted, fully incorporated into God's Family, and baptism is where this takes place.

This teaching has then been held and acted upon throughout the history of Christ's Church. It is to that that we will turn more specifically in the next insert.

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Das, A. Andrew. *Baptized Into God's Family: The Doctrine of Infant Baptism for Today*. 2nd Ed. Northwestern Publishing House, 2007.

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### Part 4: The Practice of the Early Church

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Those who deny infant baptism have a problem. They must explain why the Fathers and other writers of the Church's first centuries speak of infant baptism as a universal custom. When we examine the writings of Irenaeus (†202), Tertullian (†240), Origen (†254), Cyprian (†258), and Augustine (†430), we see some examples. They all speak of infant baptism as accepted apostolic practice and Tradition. Tertullian, who went into schism from the Church, still admits the Church's universal practice. And even then, his disagreement was qualified and specific: He wanted to wait until the baby was three years old, but only for the children of pagan parents, not for those of Christian parents who could be relied upon to raise their children properly.

Irenaeus remarks, "For He came to save all through means of Himself all, I say, who through Him are born again to God, **infants, and children**, and boys, and youths, and old men" (*Against Heresies*, Book 1, Ch. 22.4).

In his commentary on Romans, Origen writes, "**The Church has received from the apostles the custom of administering baptism even to infants.** For those who have been entrusted with the secrets of divine mysteries, knew very well that all are tainted with the stain of original sin, which must be washed off by water and spirit" (Romans Commentary, 5.9).

Cyprian writes, "**In respect of the case of infants, which you say ought not to be baptized within the second or third day after birth**, and that the law of ancient circumcision should be regarded, so that you think that one who is just born should not be baptized and sanctified within the eighth day, **we all thought very differently in our council.** For in this course which you thought was to be taken, no one agreed; but we all rather judge that the mercy and grace of God is not to be refused to any one born of man... Spiritual circumcision ought not to be hindered by carnal circumcision... **we ought to shrink from hindering an infant**, who, being lately born, has not sinned, except in that, being born after the flesh according to Adam, he has contracted the contagion of the ancient death at its earliest birth, who approaches the more easily on this very account to the reception of the forgiveness of sins - that to him are remitted, not his own sins, but the sins of another" (Letter 58 to Fidus).

And in his *Enchiridion*, Augustine declares, "**For from the infant newly born to the old man bent with age, as there is none shut out from**

**baptism**, so there is none who in baptism does not die to sin" (*Enchiridion*, ch. 43).

The baptism of infants is a powerful witness to the fact that it is God Who saves us. That tiny child can do nothing for himself all alone. God gives the child the gift of salvation and membership in His Family and Kingdom. We must keep in mind that faith as trust in Christ is not a matter of the intellect but of the will. The discernment involved does not require a certain level of intellectual ability but simply of recognition and acceptance, just as an infant can tell his mother from all other people in the room and clings to his mother for protection and nourishment, though the infant can't explain in words what the difference is. Christ makes it very clear on several occasions that infants can and do believe. We must not deny them the appropriate means for receiving this faith.

Christian teaching from the beginning has included the following:

- All Christians are to be baptized. Baptism is not primarily man's act, but God's. God is the one doing the action of baptism. Baptism is not merely an act of human testimony, but an act of God to give new birth by joining persons to Jesus' death and resurrection.
- Baptism and faith belong together because baptism incorporates one into God's family, the Church. It is a re-birth "from above." The font is a tomb for the Old Adam and a womb from which Christians are born from above. The Easter Vigil service emphasizes this.
- Baptism is administered once and only once; just as biological birth happens only once. One is born into the Family of God, adopted by Him. This creates an indelible mark on the soul.
- A conscious, intentional rejection of baptism is a rejection of Christ, apart from whom one cannot be saved. Absence of baptism doesn't damn. We commend to God's mercy those who are not baptized, either out of ignorance or because they intended to but died before it was possible, because they died *in utero*, and so on. They have not acted blasphemously, treating holy things with contempt.
- People who are converted to Christianity but die before baptism, which they want to receive, are said to receive a "baptism of desire." Those who are martyred before they are able to be baptized receive a "baptism of blood." The classic example of someone who dies without Baptism and goes to heaven is the repentant thief ("Jesus said to him, 'I swear to you the truth: today you will be with Me in Paradise'" Luke 23:43).

For further investigation, see the language and ideas also in John 3:1-22; Rom.6:3-11; 1 Cor. 12:12-13; Gal. 3:26-29; 1 Peter 3:18-22.