

Household Baptisms

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Editorial Note: Some years ago I contributed a number of articles on baptism to the *British Reformed Journal* and correctly took the covenant line with respect to believer's children. Subsequently I encountered the work of an American, Dr. Gregg Strawbridge, and realised that in addition the exegetical base for the baptisms of households was much firmer than I had realised. We are grateful to the author for permission to publish this extract from "Infant Baptism: Does the Bible Teach It?"

Does the Bible teach that the infant children of Christians are to be baptized? Or, was baptism only to be given to "believers" who consciously profess allegiance to Christ? In this short study I will argue that the Bible does indeed teach that the infant children of Christians are to be baptized.¹

—Let us reason together according to the Scriptures—

Where I am on the Map

The view of baptism I will be defending is that which flows from Reformed theology as expressed in the great evangelical creeds and confessions in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. I hold to those doctrines of grace which are expressed in the great Reformation confessions (Genevan, Helvetic, Belgic, Westminster, etc.) and catechisms (Heidelberg, Westminster Larger & Shorter). Many of the greatest minds of the Christian church have written and defended these confessions, including John Calvin, Francis Turretin, Samuel Rutherford, Thomas Goodwin, John Owen, Jonathan Edwards, Archibald Alexander, Charles Hodge, Robert L. Dabney, Benjamin B. Warfield, J. Gresham Machen and many, many others to this very day. I find my place here on the theological map, too. Surely, it need not be said that these confessional statements and the great defenders of them stand in opposition to Roman Catholicism's understanding and practice of baptism.² These documents and their writers and defenders teach

¹I will contrast the "baptist" position (believer's, professor's, or confessor's baptism) with the "paedobaptist" or infant baptism position (*paidion* in Greek means "child" or "infant"). I will use the lower case (baptist) rather than the upper case "Baptist," since I have in mind the baptismal practice of many denominations, not a particular denomination.

²Roman Catholicism teaches that baptism by the Roman Church regenerates *in and of itself* and apart from faith. See the Council of Trent (1546), 5th Session, decrees 4-5.

that according to the Scriptures *salvation is by the grace of God, through faith alone, in Christ alone, for the glory of God alone—sola Scriptura, sola gratia, sola fide, solo Christo, soli Deo gloria!*

Just like Romanism, there are some baptistic churches (e.g., the “Church of Christ”), which deny *sola fide* and *sola gratia* by teaching baptismal regeneration. Though there are those who believe this error, it would be most unfair for evangelical paedobaptists to associate evangelical baptists with (“believer”) baptismal regeneration. It would be a violation of the ninth commandment to imply that the reason why baptists require believers’ baptism is because *they really, deep down* believe in baptismal regeneration. In the same way, it is most unfair (and fallacious) when baptists assault Reformed paedobaptists with the Romanism charge. For example, one thinks of works like John Gill’s, *Infant-Baptism: A Part and Pillar Of Popery*, or John Q. Adam’s, *Baptists the Only Thorough Religious Reformers*, in which it is said that infant baptism is “human invention” and that it is one of the traditions which the Protestant Reformers brought from Rome. On the contrary, the Reformed faith repudiates Romanism’s errors, that’s precisely why it’s “Reformed” and “Protestant.”

As B. B. Warfield wrote

When it is urged that infant baptism puts “into the place of Christ’s command a commandment of men, [which is] the essential principle of all heresy, schism, and false religion”—a good, round, railing charge to bring against one’s brethren: but as an argument against infant baptism, drawn from its effects, somewhat of a *petitio principii* [assuming what is to be proven]. If true, it is serious enough ... One or the other of us is wrong, no doubt; but do we not break an undoubted command of Christ when we speak thus harshly of our brethren, His children, whom we should love? Were it not better to judge, each the other mistaken, and recognize, each the other’s desire to please Christ and follow His commandments? Certainly I believe that our Baptist brethren omit to fulfill an ordinance of Christ’s house, sufficiently plainly revealed as His will, when they exclude the infant children of believers from baptism. But I know they do this unwittingly in ignorance; and I cannot refuse them the right hand of fellowship on that account.³

³Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Polemics of Infant Baptism* in his *Works*, 9:408.

Where is Infant Baptism in the Bible?

One baptist writer, surely representative of many more such writers, says that “baptizing babies is an unscriptural and anti-scriptural innovation, and an abomination of untold enormity.”⁴ Well, I do not have any trouble admitting that in the Bible the words “infant” and “baptism” are not found together. But, that is a long way from accepting the claim that such a practice is “unscriptural and anti-scriptural innovation, and an abomination of untold enormity.”

There is no *explicit* statement about the “infant baptism” of a Christian’s child. *But neither is there an explicit case of a Christian’s child who grows up and is baptized as a believer.* In both cases we must think beyond a surface scan of the words of the Bible. I would not want to limit the authority of the Word of God to only its explicit declarations. Is abortion permissible because the word “abortion” is not in the text of the Bible? Of course not. The God-breathed Word is fully authoritative “for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness” both explicitly and implicitly (II Tim. 3:16). If the Scripture was given “for teaching,” the question should be whether the Word *teaches* that the children of believers are to be baptized by virtue of their covenantal relationship to a believing parent. (When the term “infant baptism” is used it is just shorthand to express this.) It is true that there is no statement of “infant baptism” in just those terms. However, let us ask another question of the text of Bible: Is there any evidence of believers’ households being baptized because of the faith of the head of the household? Considering this question, the Bible student is forced to conclude that there are clear statements about households being baptized. What do these passages *teach*?

Examples of Baptism in the New Testament

Those who deny the validity of infant baptism are usually quick to cite the examples of baptism (often selected examples) in the New Testament to support the contention that “only believers were baptized.” Let’s consider *all* of the examples of Christian baptism recorded throughout the apostolic history of the church, beginning in Acts. Does it teach that *only self-conscious, professing believers are to be baptized* or does it teach that the *households of believers are to be baptized* because of the head of household’s faith? The outline of the book of Acts is indicated in the first chapter, that the gospel of Messiah Jesus was to expand from Jerusa-

⁴T. E. Watson, *Should Babies Be Baptized?* (London: Grace Publications, 1995), p. 115. For more, see my critical review at <http://members.olsusa.com/reformation/baptism.htm>.

lem to the remotest part of the earth (1:8). As we will see, the patterns of baptism are quite similar to this expansion because the Great Commission of Christ is that in Him “all the *families of the earth* shall be blessed” (3:25).

First, we find that the initial occasion of baptism in Acts was the Jews at Pentecost in Jerusalem. We are told that this festival gathering was of “devout men” (2:5), “men of Judea” (2:14), “men of Israel” (2:22), etc. Hence, it appears that only men were baptized on this occasion—“So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and there were added that day about three thousand souls” (Acts 2:41).⁵ This event was in fulfillment of the promised coming of the Spirit of God. Such a promise was given “for you and your children, and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God shall call to Himself” (2:39).

Second, we find that the gospel crossed into Samaria, following the pattern of expansion (1:8). Philip was “preaching the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ” and “they were being baptized, men and women alike” (8:12). This is the first passage in which the baptism of women is explicitly mentioned. Luke seems to emphasize that not only men were being baptized, but women, too. Perhaps this emphasis is because only men were baptized at the first new covenant baptism event at the Jewish Pentecostal feast. The Samaritan passage, however, is focused on the evil intent of Simon the Sorcerer who offered the apostles money to receive the miraculous powers they had by the Holy Spirit. The text says that “even Simon himself believed; and after being baptized, he continued on with Philip” (8:13). According to Justin Martyr and others, Simon became a great heretic and an opponent of Christianity.⁶

Third, the next person connected to baptism is a (Jewish) proselyte eunuch from Ethiopia who had “come to Jerusalem to worship” (8:27). He was reading the passage around Isaiah 53:7, “Like a lamb that is led to slaughter ...” “Beginning from this Scripture he [Philip] preached Jesus to him” (8:35). The eunuch said, “Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?” (8:36). Perhaps the eunuch’s emphatic request is because Philip explained the new covenant sign—a sign, not only for all nations, but for eunuchs, too. Only a few verses

⁵Luke’s use of 3000 “souls” (*psyche*) need not be taken as a generic term for both genders, since he often uses this term to emphasize the spiritual nature of what is happening to the person(s) involved, e.g., 2:27, 2:43, 3:23, 14:22, 15:24.

⁶Justin’s (A.D. 110-165) reference to this is in the *First Apology*, chapter 26; however, some historians question whether Justin was right about this.

before the text Philip explained, we read, “Thus He will sprinkle many nations, Kings will shut their mouths on account of Him” (Isa. 52:15). And only a few chapters later we read a new covenant prophecy, “Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the LORD say, ‘The LORD will surely separate me from His people.’ Neither let the eunuch say, ‘Behold, I am a dry tree’” (Isa. 56:3). This entire baptismal episode takes on more significance when it is remembered that eunuchs were shut out of the old covenant assembly (Deut. 23:1) and in many cases may not have received the sign of covenant inclusion, circumcision.

Fourth, in Acts 9 we are told of the conversion of the Apostle to the Gentiles. Paul, after falling to the ground and being temporarily blinded, “arose and was baptized” (9:18). The Lord told the timid Ananias, the one who apparently baptized Paul, “Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name’s sake” (9:15-16).

Fifth, the gospel first crossed to pure Gentile territory with the episode regarding Cornelius in chapter ten. The household of Cornelius was baptized (10:48). The text of Acts tells us regarding the God-fearer Cornelius, “you will be saved, you and all your household” (11:14). The emphasis of the text is that the Gentiles could be saved, just as the Jews. The “unclean” people could receive the *Holy Spirit* and also be saved by Messiah Jesus. Remember that because of Peter’s prejudice, God provided him with a vivid object lesson—an unclean buffet—to orient him to accept Gentile believers. The very voice of the Lord declared, “What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy” (10:15).

Sixth, “Lydia, from the city of Thyatira,” was saved by the grace of God, as “the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul” (16:14). Verse 15 tells us that “she and her household had been baptized.”

Seventh, in the same chapter, the Philippian jailer’s household was baptized. “He was baptized, he and all his household” (16:33). We are told that Paul and Silas were brought into the house of the jailer to eat and the jailer “rejoiced greatly, having believed in God with his whole household” (16:34).

Eighth, we find that many Corinthians were baptized. Acts 18:8 tells us that “Crispus, the leader of the synagogue, believed in the Lord with all his household, and many of the Corinthians when they heard were believing and being baptized.” In Acts we are not informed of any other person’s name who was baptized. But in I Corinthians, Paul says that he baptized Crispus, Gaius, and “the household of Stephanas” (1:14, 16). In Acts we find that Crispus “believed in the Lord with all his household” and since we learn that Crispus was baptized

in I Corinthians, it seems valid to infer that his household was baptized with him.

Ninth, and finally, we learn that there was a group of disciples acquainted with John's baptism, but not with the fulness of his message. These "disciples of John" were made up of "about twelve men" (19:7) in Ephesus who lacked an understanding of the coming of the Holy Spirit. These "were baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus" (19:5) after being instructed by Paul.

In summary we find the following: (1) At Pentecost it seems that only men were present, thus only men were baptized, some 3000 of them. Still, the new covenant promise was "to you and your children" (2:39). (2) In Samaria "men and women alike" (8:12) were baptized, including Simon (the apostate Sorcerer). (3) The eunuch (who had no household) was baptized (Acts 8:38). (4) Paul (who had no household) was baptized (9:18). (5) Cornelius' household was baptized (10:48; 11:14). (6) Lydia's household was baptized (16:15). (7) The Philippian jailer's household was baptized (16:33). (8) Many Corinthians were baptized, including Crispus' household, Stephanas' household, and Gaius (18:8; I Cor. 1:14, 16). (9) The disciples of John (adult men) were baptized (19:5).

These are the facts about those baptized. From this we learn that of the *nine narrative passages* on baptism, four are household baptisms, four other cases consisted of only adult men (Pentecost, eunuch, Paul, twelve disciples of John), and the other case is of Simon and the "men and women alike" in Samaria. In this case, consider carefully the phrase used by Luke in 8:12, "men and women alike" (*andres te kai gunaikes*). This is the first case in which females are explicitly said to be baptized. Hence, it is important for Luke to emphasize that "*both men and women*" were baptized (KJV, NKJV, ASV, RSV, NRS).⁷

Considering the *nine individuals* singled-out in the baptism narratives—*five had their households baptized* (Cornelius, the jailer, Lydia, Crispus, Stephanas), two had no household for obvious reasons (the eunuch and Paul). That leaves Simon, who actually turned out to be an unbeliever and Gaius, whom Paul baptized (I Cor. 1:14). As for Simon, I think it is reasonable to conclude that he was an *atypical case* and was not likely a head of household. Certainly, his case would be a less than ideal basis for the baptist view. As for Gaius, in Romans 16:23 we read that "Gaius [is] host to me and to the whole church." This implies that he was a man of some means. As such, he may have had at least household serv-

⁷Considering the use of the phrase itself, it is evidently employed to emphasize both genders in Luke-Acts, "male and female"—not adult males and females versus children (Acts 5:14; 8:3; 8:12; 9:2; 22:4).

ants, if not a familial household. Gaius is mentioned with Crispus, who was a household head. Crispus, “believed in the Lord with all his household,” thus it was undoubtedly baptized with him (Acts 18:8). Yet Paul said in no uncertain terms, “I baptized *none of you* except Crispus and Gaius” (I Cor. 1:14). Paul could name Crispus as head of the baptized household, just as he could have with Gaius. As would be perfectly intelligible to any first century Jew, it seems that Paul simply spoke of Crispus as representing the household in the administration of baptism. Therefore, if Gaius had a household, it is quite reasonable to believe that it was baptized, just like Crispus’ household.

So, it is not an overstatement to say that *virtually every person who had a household had it baptized!* And in the non-household baptism cases, we can validly infer that the recipients did not have households (the eunuch, Paul) or the households were not present (the men at Pentecost, the twelve men in Ephesus). The exception turns out to be the Samaritans—“both men and women” and perhaps Simon the Sorcerer, if one wants to press the issue. Still, I suppose that some baptists are happy to make the first explicit case of female baptism (“both men and women”) and the unbeliever Simon *the rule* rather than the exception to the pattern of the household baptism—but I am not.

Non-Household Baptisms	Household Baptisms
3000 (men) at Pentecost (no household present)	Cornelius and household
Samaritans: (“both men and women”) Simon the Sorcerer	Lydia and household
Ethiopian eunuch (no household)	Philippian jailer and household
Paul (no household)	Corinthians: Crispus (and household) Stephanas and household
Disciples of John (12 men) (no household present)	
Gaius (and household?)	

The Baptist Response to the Household Baptisms

These important Biblical facts regarding the household baptisms are often dismissed by those denying infant/household baptism. Recently, in pointing out these facts to a defender of “believer’s baptism,” he responded, “Since the New Testament teaches only believer’s baptism the only logical conclusion is that the

people in these households were all believers.” I would not fault the logic here; only the method. He is undoubtedly correct—if the New Testament teaches only believers are to be baptized. However, *a better method would be to consider the Biblical facts about who was baptized before determining what the New Testament teaches!* According to the above believer’s baptism defender, “the Bible does not teach ... household baptism.”

This is a quite predictable response—that everyone in these households must have believed (i.e., since *we already know* that *only* believers were baptized). But think for a moment what this response requires us to believe—that in the individual baptism narratives, their writers (Luke and Paul) intentionally include more irregular and anomalous cases of baptism (households), than “regular” cases. So, *it just so happened* that all these “believers” were in the same households. And *it just so happened* that every individual in these homes was not a little child. And *it just so happened* that in the non-household baptisms (excepting the Samaritans), there were only men present (Pentecost, eunuch, Paul, twelve disciples of John).

Now this “*just so*” story might be more convincing if the larger context of Acts were not considered. Remember the outline of Acts—the gospel was to go to Jerusalem, all of Judea, Samaria, and the remotest part of the earth. Surely Luke is instructing his readers about what Jesus *continued* doing in His church of all nations (Acts 1:1). When the gospel crossed to Gentile territory, beginning with Cornelius, *every baptism passage is a household baptism passage*—except where we are expressly told that those present were “twelve men,” who were Jews after all (Acts 19:7). The Gentile households of Cornelius, Lydia, the jailer, Stephanas, and possibly Gaius (see the previous discussion) were all baptized.

Those who deny the validity of household/infant baptism do not usually take these facts seriously. We must ask whether the impressive number of household baptisms, concentrated in the period of Gentile expansion was an unrepeatable oddity of apostolic Christianity? Was it coincidence that *virtually all* of the newly reached Gentile households were baptized? Acts is a *selective history* of thousands of examples of baptism over the first few decades of the church. It would be incredible to believe that Luke recorded the only household baptisms in the entire apostolic period! On the contrary, Luke does not present these household baptisms as though they were extraordinary just because they were household baptisms. Rather, this was the routine practice of the apostolic church as the gospel went to Gentile families. The gospel and its outward sign went *to families* because it was *families* that were to be saved. Most evangelicals

know the answer to the Biblical question, “What must I do to be saved?”—”Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you shall be saved.” But that’s not the answer in the Bible, rather, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you shall be saved, *you and your household*” (Act 16:31). Contrary to this, consider the *individualistic* practice of baptism in baptistic churches today. Those who deny the baptism of the children of believers *simply do not conform their practice to the facts of apostolic Christianity*.

Considering the pattern of household baptisms, the presumption of an individualistic baptist perspective is seriously called into question. The pattern is recognizable to the reader of the Scripture, if one begins with Genesis and moves forward. It might be easier to dismiss if this was the only information about households in the Bible. Baptist responses treat these cases as mere isolated “proof texts” which the paedobaptist grasps as straws in the wind—when in reality, Luke simply adds one more thread to the tapestry of God’s covenant redemption. The pattern of Gentile household baptisms, especially as it relates to Luke’s purpose in showing the expansion of the gospel, should not be so quickly dismissed by baptists. It is not as though we have a hundred cases of baptism and there are these exceptional, anomalous few household cases. *We have nine individuals identified*; five clearly have their households baptized; two do not have households (eunuch, Paul); one is dubious (Simon); and Gaius is left (I Cor. 1:14, see the above discussion). This is not a promising set of statistics for the baptists.

The oft-repeated reply, “but every member of the household believed,” will not be persuasive to one who considers the exegetical particulars of the two cases which include statements about the households believing (the jailer [16:31-34] and Crispus [18:8]). We should ask whether the exegetical nuances of these texts support the individualist (baptist) thesis (every member believed) or the covenant family thesis (household members followed the leader according to their capacity).

In the Philippian jailer passage (16:31-34) and the Corinthian passage with Crispus (18:8), the Greek texts use singular verbs, not the plural verbs, to describe the action of believing. These texts *do not say*, the jailer (or Crispus) “and (*καί*)” his household “believed” (with a plural verb). This would be one way Luke could have nuanced the text to indicate the equal action of each member in believing. This is something Luke surely would have said if he was seeking to correct the covenantal household concept established in the previous millennia of Biblical history. Instead, these texts teach what any Old Testament believer might have expected: the jailer, the household head, “rejoiced (singular verb)

greatly, with all his house (*panoikei*, an adverb), having believed (*pepisteukos*, participle, *singular*) in God” (16:34, ASV); and Crispus, the household head, “believed (*epistensen*, verb, *singular*) in the Lord with (*sun*) all his household” (18:8). However, observe Luke’s careful language indicating that baptism is administered to each member of the Jailer’s household: “he was baptized, he *and* (*kaí*) all his household” (16:33).

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Now it would be exceedingly unlikely in the “large-family-friendly” culture of the ancient world to find *five households* which did not include small children. Remember, the five cases of household baptism in the New Testament surely stand for thousands more (unless we suppose Luke and Paul give us the anomalies as the rule). However, it would be a mistake to think that the above argumentation rests on whether infants were in these five households. The importance of the household baptism line of argument does not depend so much on whether infants were in these households—as it does on whether households, *as households*, are to be baptized because of the believing head of a household. This pattern we have—which should not be lightly dismissed, considering the small number of baptisms expressly recorded and the lack of households in the others cases—stands on the shoulders of the whole of the prior Biblical revelation.

Editorial Discussion: The complete article is available as a pamphlet or can be viewed and downloaded from www.fivesolas.com/infbapt.htm and we would encourage interested readers to consider doing so as the above is only about 10% of the whole.

It may be worthwhile to consider why baptism was applied to both believers and their households. A good starting point might be Joshua’s remark “but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord” (Joshua 24:15). We do not know what God or gods Lydia or the jailor served but on conversion you did not leave your family behind in heathendom or Jewry! And precisely the same considerations apply in missionary work today.

Of course the baptist movement as we know it arose in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries inside the pale of Christendom where this consideration did not apply. But observation suggests that in fact unbaptized children exist in a sort of theological limbo in the local church. And obviously our understanding of their status affects the way we bring them up. On this point I would strongly recommend David Engelsma’s pamphlet “The Covenant of God and the Children of Believers.”

But the concluding consideration is surely this: Where are “household baptisms” amongst the baptists? On their principles they cannot exist! But they existed in the New Testament. Does that not clearly point to some deficiency in their theology?