

## BELIEVERS' CHILDREN AND BAPTISM

The Lord Jesus Christ gave the sacrament of baptism to move us to faith. In a previous sermon on baptism we saw that the Lord does that by reminding us of what God's Word says *at* baptism and *about* baptism. But then this question comes up: if baptism is meant to move us to faith, why then do we baptise infants who are too young to believe?

The Heidelberg Catechism also asks that question: Should infants, too, be baptised? The authors of the catechism did not ask this question as though baptism of infants was a new practice, something which had not been done before. On the contrary, the Christian church had been baptising children of believing adults from the first century AD onwards, believing it to be biblical. But around the time of the Reformation some Christian radicals became dissatisfied with the baptism practice of the Roman Catholic Church. In those days everyone was a member of the church, even those whose lives were consistently un-Christian. Many Christians were unhappy that the church baptised all children without making sure that the parents were believers. The Reformers tried to correct this abuse by insisting that only children of believing parents should be baptised. But the radicals rejected the baptism of infants altogether. Those who joined them and had been baptised as infants were required to be re-baptised.

We who treasure the Reformed faith are often challenged to defend the biblical basis of infant baptism because many Christians of Baptist and Pentecostal persuasion say that it's wrong to baptise children of believers. Just about all of us have carefully looked at the Scriptural basis given in the Reformed Confessions which teach infant baptism [HC LD27b; BC 34b; CD I.17; WC 28.4-6]. Especially our young people often ask where in the Bible do we find evidence for baptising children

As we give our attention to this matter then please remember that the issue is not whether all infants may be baptised. The issue concerns only those children of believers, not the children of unbelievers.

We are dealing then with **BELIEVERS' CHILDREN AND BAPTISM**.

### **1. How does God see the children of believers?**

This is the crux of the matter - how does God see the children of believers? What does the Bible have to say about that? Does God see these children as also belonging to His church and who are to be nurtured in the faith? If He doesn't, then does God see them as unbelievers who don't belong to Him and are therefore lost and who in time need to be evangelised? Among those who reject infant baptism there are differences as to how to see children of believers. Some believe they are saved. Others are unsure. A number will dedicate them to God and pray and hope they will be believers later on. Even among those who believe that God regards believers' children as belonging to the church, there are different ideas. Some think that baptism itself saves you. It doesn't. Only through Christ is a sinner saved, not through baptism. Some speak of baptismal regeneration. By this they mean that we have to assume that believer's children are already born again. But there is nothing in the Bible that supports that view. Others say that believers' children are born with a dormant faith, a faith that will begin to show in time. But there is no hint in the Bible about that either. Again others have the view that the faith of the parents is a ground for the baptism of their children. But the Bible does not teach that either. The Bible is silent about all these kinds of things. In fact, the Bible says nothing about the child except for one important thing - children of believers also belong to the covenant that God has drawn up with His people who are the church. All other scriptural support that is relevant to infant baptism flows out of this. So what does the Word of God say about the covenant?

Well, we read earlier from Genesis 17 and there God said to Abraham, "*I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you*" [vs.7].

From the New Testament we know that God was not only talking about Abraham's physical descendants but also about his spiritual descendants. Romans 4 makes it clear that Abraham's descendants are those who have a faith like Abraham did. Abraham received righteousness from God through faith [vs. 9] and so also those who believe in God like Abraham did [vs.11].

God said to Abraham that His covenant is with all who keep the terms of His covenant. The terms consisted of a promise and a condition. God promised to be God to them and that meant He would give them His grace and salvation. The condition was a response to God's promise of grace and salvation. Abraham and his descendants had to walk in God's ways. No one could do this perfectly but God gave His own Son to forgive the

sins of His covenant people. That's why the covenant is a covenant of grace. But Abraham and his descendants would remain in the covenant only if they responded with faith and trust in the Saviour Jesus Christ. We are Abraham's spiritual descendants and members of the covenant only if we believe and trust in Jesus as Saviour and Lord.

Another thing we should note about this covenant of grace is its emphasis on the many and not so much on the individual. God said that Abraham's descendants would be a multitude, "*as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore*" [Gen. 22:17]. That obviously meant Abraham's physical descendants but already in Old Testament times it was not enough to have Abraham as your ancestor. You also had to love the Lord and your neighbour which you would when you obeyed God's laws. Later on, after Israel's rejection of the Saviour, Abraham's descendants referred only to Abraham's spiritual children. The New Testament in Hebrews<sup>11</sup> still speaks of Abraham's descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore [vs.12] but it's clear that these are Abraham's spiritual descendants, those who have a faith like Abraham did.

Of course, God also deals with individuals. Think of God's many personal dealings with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and with many other individuals in both Old and New Testaments. But always these individual relationships with God were against the wider background of God's people as a nation. The apostle Peter, for example, calls New Testament believers a chosen people and a holy nation [1 Pet. 2:9]. The emphasis is still on the many. And just as the children of Old Testament believers belonged to Israel as a nation, so also do the children of New Testament believers belong to the church.

Believers' children, therefore, are born inside the covenant that consists of the 'many'. Believers' children are not born outside the church but in it. In his sermon on Pentecost day the apostle Peter said to those who believingly responded to his preaching about forgiveness of sin and the gift of the Holy Spirit, "*The promise is for you and your children*" [Acts 2:39]. God sees all those inside the covenant, the single, the parents and the children, as a whole and not as just individuals, although God wants each one to have a personal relationship with Him.

Now when God says to His people, "*I will be God to you and to your descendants.*" did He have in mind only believers, those living now and those who will be believers sometime in the future? Is that how we should understand the words, "*The promise is for you and your children*"? That believers' children will also receive the promise *when* they themselves become believers in the future?

Or is God saying that right now He is the God of grace and salvation of both believers *and* their children? Peter even said that God's promise is "*for all who are far off - for all whom the Lord our God will call*" [v.39]. Is God promising salvation now already to those yet to be born as children of believers?

How you answer all this depends on when God begins a covenant relationship with those who come to faith. Does God begin this covenant relationship with you when you believe, or long before that? Does not the Bible speak of God having chosen His people *before* the creation of the world? [Eph.1:4] And does not the Bible speak of God *foreknowing* those whom He calls according to His purpose of salvation? [Rom. 8:28-30].

Through His prophet Isaiah God says this about His chosen people, "*This is what the Lord says - He who made you, who formed you in the womb, ... I will pour out my Spirit on your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants*" [44:2,3]. According to this the believer can say that God knew him already in the womb of his mother. The blessing of God's covenant of grace was already with him long before he became a believer. As it says in Ephesians 1:4, God already knew of him "*before the creation of the world.*"

So the believer may say: God knew of me before I was born. He therefore caused me to be born of believing parents. Or, God includes a child in His covenant before the child is born of unbelieving parents but in time causes these parents to become believers. We can say all these things because God is sovereign and knows all things and brings all things to pass in accordance with His will.

David said as a believing adult, "*From birth I was cast upon you; from my mother's womb you have been my God*" [Ps.22:10]. In Psalm 139 the same David says, "*All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be*" [vs.13-16]. God said to Jeremiah, "*Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart*" [Jer.1:5]. God set him apart as a member of the covenant of grace and as a prophet as well. God tells Ezekiel to say to His covenant people that they and their children, and their children's children, will receive the outworking of His promises [37:25-27].

Now all this surely shows that the expression from Genesis 17:7, "*I will be your God and the God of your descendants*" can only mean that God's promise of grace and salvation is already on believers' children even before they are conceived

Did not the Lord Jesus Himself confirm all this when He said, "*Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these*" [Mat.19:14]. Jesus did not say that the kingdom of heaven belongs to little children because He thought they were so cute and innocent. Jesus knew very well that little children have sinful natures from the moment of conception and are lost unless saved by faith through Christ. Nevertheless, Jesus picked up these children, held them in His arms, and blessed them [Mk.10:16]. They were not big children with a personal faith but little children, the descendants of Abraham.

Let us further note that the New Testament also speaks of "households". It does that four times in the book of Acts [11:14; 16:15,33; 18:8] and one time in Paul's letters [1 Cor. 1:16]. The word for 'household' can also be translated 'family'. When the Philippian jailer came to faith then it says he was baptised together with all those who were his [15:33]. The word household is not even used but clearly it means his family. Do we know how old the children in these households were? We don't, the Bible does not say. But when Isaac was born into Abraham's household then he was circumcised when he was eight days old, as God commanded [Gen.21:4]. At eight days he was incapable of faith, yet he belonged to the covenant.

The apostle Paul even refers to children of believers as holy [1 Cor. 7:14]. Here the word 'holy' cannot mean holy by nature because all children, including covenant children, are born with a sinful nature. The primary meaning of the word 'holy' is set apart for God. Believers' children are set apart from the world. They are part of the body, the church, the holy nation of God. In that sense believers' children are holy.

In Old Testament times these covenant children were circumcised. That was the sign and seal of belonging to the covenant. In the New Testament baptism replaced circumcision [Col. 2:11,12]. Jesus commanded the New Testament church to baptise. The sign changed but not the covenant.

## **2. What promises has God given to children of believers?**

Exactly the same as what is promised to believing parents. God does not give one kind of promise to parents and another to their children. There is not one kind of baptism for adult believers and another kind for their children. Whether you are a believing adult in the covenant, or a little child, God says, 'I am your God. You belong to me.' I will show you My grace and salvation.

To those outside the covenant, He is the God of judgment and condemnation, until such time that they also call on God for mercy and forgiveness. God promises salvation to whoever calls on Him in repentance and faith, even when they are not in the covenant to begin with. But to know about God who promises salvation one must hear the gospel. That is far more likely to happen to children of believers than to children of unbelievers.

Let's just think about this for a bit. The church is commanded to bring the gospel to all people everywhere. But many outside the covenant live and die without them ever hearing of salvation in Christ. Communist and Islamic nations, for example, deliberately prevent the gospel from coming in. And even in Australia there are many individuals who never get to hear what the gospel of Christ is really all about. That number is in fact increasing as the nation becomes more secular and the gospel is resisted more. Christians must continue to be fishers of men but we have no certainty that God will cause all people in the community to swim into the net of the gospel.

Believers, however, have no such uncertainty with regard to their children. God has specifically said that His promise of grace and salvation is also for their children. And baptism is a sign and seal of God's promise, of what He will be for believers' children. What God is for believing parents is what He will also be for their children.

Sometimes people mistakenly think that baptism is a sign of one's faith. Like - I believe and therefore I qualify for baptism. Infants can't believe as yet so how can you baptise them? But God did not intend baptism to be a confirmation that we have a faith. You believe because you believe. Baptism was not given by God to be a sign of something in us. Baptism was given by God to point to something that God does. To confirm what He has promised. I was baptised as a child of believing parents and through my baptism God still tells me today that I am included in the covenant and church of God, and that both redemption from sin and the gift of the Holy Spirit, have been promised me. I did not believe that as a small child because I was too young. But I increasingly believed it as I matured. All of my life I need to believe the things God has promised me in my baptism. The things that God has said to me at my baptism and about baptism continues to move me to faith.

### **3. What response must believing parents and their children give to God?**

Covenant children, as they grow up, are to hear about God's promises from their believing parents. This is the way God makes Himself known to the generations in the covenant of grace. God commands Christian parents to tell their children about Him and holds those responsible who do not nurture their children in the Christian faith. Believing parents who fail here are guilty of terrible sin. How can they neglect the wonderful task of bringing their children to Jesus?

But what about that difficult question - why do some covenant children not walk in the way of the Lord when the believing parents have tried to bring all their children to Jesus? Why do some covenant children leave the church and in the process grieve the Holy Spirit and bring sorrow to their believing parents? Adam and Eve had that sorrow when Cain turned away from God. Abraham experienced that sorrow when he saw his son Ishmael not believe like Isaac. Isaac and Rebecca had that sorrow when Esau remain indifferent about God. David knew of that grief when his son Absalom died as a rebel against God.

In their pain believing parents might despairingly begin to think - what if God has not elected my children? What if my child is destined to be like Cain, or Ishmael, or Esau, or Absalom? But when we look at our covenant children then we must not wonder whom God has elected. We simply don't know. God has not revealed that to us. When there is living faith and obedience to God, then we see the outworking of God's election. As far as your children are concerned, just stick with God's calling. Through Christian upbringing God is calling all covenant children to come to Christ for mercy and forgiveness. Keep telling your children that they must respond to God's call with faith and obedience. Remind them not to harden their hearts or turn to false gods.

Believing parents must also make their home an environment of love and service to God, where repentance, obedience, discipline and respect, are consistently taught and practised. It is through all this that God calls our children to faith. All parents will have to confess to being a stumbling block to our children at times. We can be destructively critical, bad examples, and just plain sinful. Children pick this up very quickly and it can cause them to become indifferent to God's calling. So in the upbringing of their children, parents should humbly ask God to forgive them their sins over against their children. And let your children see that you as parents also need the grace of God.

There is also a task for the Christian church. Because we all belong to the covenant community, to the church as a body, we promise at baptisms to lead Christian lives and be examples to the children among us. Let's try really hard to fulfil those promises. Let's live out the blessings of being God's people. Be careful as a church community to not always be complaining and criticising because we are teaching our children to do the same. Positive attitudes are much better.

And you who are children of believers, you should respond to the calling of God by repenting of your sin and believing in Christ. He is no stranger to you. Your believing parents have taught you about God from when you were very young. They told you to obey God, to love Him and serve Him from the heart

So you have to turn away from sin and follow Christ. You cannot hide behind the sins of your parents. If you are using your parents' mistakes as an excuse for your rebellion, then you must stop doing that. Nor can you keep on blaming the church for your lack of commitment. Of course the church is imperfect. It's made up of imperfect people like you and me. You must accept responsibility for your own sinful actions. God says to you, you are mine, and you can never get away from that. The Lord wants you to respond to Him in faith and follow Christ, and not turn your back to God. God is a wonderful God to you because He has promised to save you from eternal death. Your baptism tells you that. For you, now is the day of salvation. Now is the time to give your heart to the Lord. For some of you it may be a struggle because may be you love the world more than you love God. May be you want to be your own master and not have Christ and your parents tell you what to do. But why die in your sins, when God is still saying, turn to me and live! Amen.

M P Geluk

Gosnells, 27 June 2004