

by George Day  
updated by CPAS Staff

# resource sheet 13

## infant baptism

To some people thinking about a call to ordained or authorised ministry, the topic of infant baptism raises questions, and this resource sheet is intended to deal with a number of issues relating to it.

### Preliminary points

In recent years, the practice of baptism has changed dramatically. In the middle of the 20th century, more than 70% of babies were baptised in the Church of England. This indiscriminate practice was regarded as the norm, yet often had no coherent baptismal theology or justification. Some clergy wished they could change the situation, but most did not want to risk creating controversy. The subject of infant baptism remained uncomfortable.

Today, the situation is quite different. In urban areas, the percentage of babies baptised varies from 5% to 25%; in rural areas it is a little higher. There are a variety of reasons for this change: parents who have never had contact with church see no reason to start; there are far fewer marriages,

so the progression from marriage to baptism has gone; and many clergy and congregations are no longer willing to watch baptismal promises being made by those who have little or no understanding of them.

Thus those parents who do bring children for baptism are often going against the flow, and not just coming to get little Jack 'done'. They want the best for their child, and are often open to hearing more about the Christian faith. At the same time, adults who become Christians through courses such as Alpha have often not been baptised as infants, so the baptism of adults (and confirmation) has become more normative. These changes, together with more coherent theological resources, and new baptismal liturgy, have removed some of the difficulties with infant baptism.

Nevertheless, infant baptism may still be a sticking point. If you are not happy with the idea of baptising infants at all (as distinct from having questions about the way infant

baptism is or should be practised), then ordained ministry in the Anglican Church is probably not for you. This is partly because you would have to baptise infants in the course of your ministry and partly because the theology behind infant baptism affects a number of other important issues that are part of the Anglican system. So if you do have difficulties with the theology of infant baptism, you should not just go ahead and ignore them.

### Points of agreement

Let us map out a number of generally agreed points before we get to the controversial areas.

First, baptism is very important. Although it is not an absolute essential for salvation (e.g. the thief on the cross) the New Testament speaks of it in very positive terms and views it as the norm for all Christians (e.g. Romans 6:1-4; Colossians 2:12; 1 Peter 3:21). The Great Commission at the end of Matthew's Gospel speaks of 'making disciples' and 'baptising' them.

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Second, baptism is the sign of being made one with Christ and becoming a member of his body. It is the act of Christian initiation.

Third, baptism is not simply a symbol, a kind of visual aid, but it is also a sacrament, an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace – the three texts above make that clear.

Fourth, both the acceptance and the rejection of infant baptism can raise practical problems, but the question of whether or not it is right rests on theological grounds, not on whether the results of adopting one policy or the other leads to tidiness. Accepting infant baptism means that one has to try to maintain a consistent baptismal policy, but that in no way argues against the rightness of infant baptism.

Fifth, 're-baptism' is impossible, and if somebody is baptised as an infant and then undergoes a second baptism ceremony later, only one of these could be baptism in the sense that the New Testament understands it. (There is now a practical solution for those who ask for 're-baptism', renewal of baptismal vows, which is part of the *Common Worship* baptism provision.)

## Objections

Let us turn now to the objections to infant baptism. Broadly speaking there are two main ones, the first theological and the second to do with personal experience.

The **theological** objection claims that baptism in the New Testament is inextricably linked with faith: it is only those who open their hearts in faith to Christ who are baptised. So time after time in the book of Acts people come to faith in Christ and are baptised (e.g. Acts 18:8). The assumption that people are baptised when they believe and can testify to their faith is, of course, the view taken by those in the Baptist and Anabaptist traditions, many churches associated with

Pentecostalism, plus many other free churches.

But it can be argued that the link between a person's own faith and his/her baptism is irrelevant to the question as to whether children should be baptised. The references in Acts to baptism involve adults, where we must expect faith before baptism is appropriate. But in the case of infants we cannot expect faith before the baptism, precisely because they are infants. The situation of children is therefore different and so has to be decided on its own merits. Verses speaking of adults cannot be applied directly to the very different situation of children.

The other objection to infant baptism is the **experiential** one: 'Although my parents had me baptised as a baby, I want to pass through the waters of baptism as a sign of my new-found faith.' To some extent this shows a misunderstanding of baptism as being a witness to faith: it may serve as that, but that is not what it means. Nevertheless, there is a real psychological and spiritual need for people to nail their colours to the mast and make a meaningful public commitment. It is now possible to give a testimony during a confirmation service, or to renew one's baptismal vows (if one has come to faith after being baptised and confirmed!), so this objection now has little weight.

## Positive arguments

We now turn to the arguments for infant baptism. There are three main approaches to consider: early practice of infant baptism, 'covenant theology' and the question of the standing of the children of Christian parents.

Recently there has been quite a lot of progress in research into early initiation practices. One view is that infant baptism did not become normative practice in the Western church until the fifth to seventh centuries, but there is

some evidence to suggest that it began earlier. The earliest hard evidence for the baptism of infants (in the case of Christian parents) is in the writings of Tertullian, around 190-200, where he was trying to change current practice by urging that infants should not be baptised. So it clearly began earlier than this. Origen, one of the great early theologians, says that the church received from the apostles the tradition of baptising infants; Hippolytus, writing in the third century, gives instruction on infant baptism: 'baptise the little ones... for those who cannot speak, their parents should speak, or another who belongs to the family'. However, this may have been about baptising those in danger of death, rather than those who had recently been born.

There are New Testament references to 'households' being baptised: (Acts 16:15, 16:33, 1 Corinthians 1:16). These do not say that infants were present, but the word for household does not imply any division of age or rule out any groups within the 'household.' It is also possible that the children of proselytes (converts to Judaism) were baptised along with their parents. If the children had been baptised into Judaism, it is unlikely that the children were not included in Christian baptism (see Acts 2:38-39: 'the promise is for you and your children').

At the Reformation, infant baptism was retained by the emerging protestant churches on the basis of '**covenant theology**'. This involves not just one or two Bible verses, but the whole of God's dealings with his people, and makes the case that the children of believers are included in the covenant and therefore ought to receive the sign of the covenant, baptism.

In Genesis 12, God makes various promises to Abraham which are then ratified by the covenant ceremony of Genesis 15. In Genesis 17 circumcision is instituted as the sign of the covenant and is to be carried out in infancy. The

most prominent feature of the covenant is God's promise, i.e. his grace.

Several centuries later there is the covenant with Moses, a covenant based on the people's side on obedience, and it is this which Jeremiah 31:31-34 says will be replaced by a new covenant. This finds its fulfilment in Jesus in the new covenant in his blood (referred to in 1 Corinthians 11:25).

Although there is therefore considerable discontinuity between the old and new covenants, we find in Paul's writings an absolutely fundamental stress on continuity (Romans 4 and particularly Galatians 3:15-20). The new covenant in Jesus makes us children of Abraham and so fulfils God's covenant with him. The law and covenant given to Moses overlaid the covenant with Abraham, but in no way abolished it, and with the coming of Jesus we find the Abrahamic covenant comes to the fore once more, but now available for Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female as it was originally indicated it should ultimately be (Galatians 3:28; also Genesis 12:3).

What does this say about the subject of infant baptism? Abraham was justified by faith, as are all those who are part of that covenant (including Christians), and received the sign of being in the covenant. But so too did his children, although they could not exercise faith. The reason for this is that circumcision was primarily a sign of what God was doing, of his grace, and was not a sign of human faith, even though in an adult it was closely linked with faith. So in the Old Testament situation we have clear reference to the position of children: they are in the covenant in spite of the fact that they cannot exercise faith and they are given the sign of being in. The intention was that later on these children should come to personal faith in God. Some did and some didn't: the Old Testament story is littered with those who although marked as being in the covenant, broke faith with God.

When we come to the New Testament, we can draw an exact parallel between this situation and that of the children of Christian parents. In both cases, the covenant is one of grace, in both cases the parents exercise their faith, and that faith is the means by which they themselves are saved. In the Abrahamic covenant it is also the means whereby the children are counted as in the covenant; so should not the same be true of the new covenant? It would be a very odd thing indeed if the 'better covenant' of Hebrews 8:6 turned out to be drastically worse for the children by their being regarded as outside the covenant people of God. If then (some) children can be regarded as being within the new covenant, clearly they should receive the sign of the covenant, baptism. They are baptised in the hope that they will come to personal faith in God but, like those who fell away in the Old Testament period, this will not necessarily happen.

This may all seem very unconvincing to those who like to be able to back every conclusion by a specific verse or by an argument that can be expressed in just a couple of sentences. But to make deductions from the overall sweep of what God is doing with people, rather than just quoting a verse or two to settle the argument, is often better theology. If one could quote a verse that said do (or don't) baptise infants, that would settle the argument: but there is no such verse. Hence we need to rely on theological deductions in order to seek to determine the mind of God.

The *standing of children of Christian parents* is the other point to consider. Some traditions which do not practise infant baptism maintain that there is a state of innocency from birth to accountability, while others may regard their children as not being Christians until they have professed faith. In the meantime some parents choose a rite of 'dedication', in which they dedicate the child to God and vow to raise him

or her in a God-fearing home. The idea of dedicating a child, is, however, without any biblical warrant. The example of Samuel is sometimes cited, but he would have been circumcised long before he was 'dedicated'. The idea of dedicating a child who is not a member of the covenant makes no sense.

In practice, most Christian parents treat their children as Christians. They probably teach them the Lord's Prayer, which of course starts 'Our Father'; they will encourage them to say other prayers; they probably speak of their family as being a Christian family. But if they believe their children are not in the covenant then technically they should not do any of these things. Either the children are in (in which case they can be baptised) or they are out. If they are out, one cannot treat them as Christians and speak of a 'Christian family'.

So to baptise a child of Christian parents is as much a declaration of the child's standing in the covenant people of God as was circumcision in the Old Testament. In both cases this is no guarantee of eventual faith in God and obedience to his will, but in both cases the child is given the sign of God's grace – and who are we to refuse that to children?

### **Some practical issues**

This resource sheet has dealt mainly with the theological question of whether or not infant baptism is right. If we accept that it is right, there then arises the practical question of how to form a satisfactory approach to those parents who appear not to be Christians, but who request baptism for their children. It is easy to criticise approaches that seem too 'soft' (so watering down the truth and reducing baptism to something totally undemanding) or too 'hard' (so appearing to reject these parents and their children, and tending to make baptism into something you can

only get if you clear enough hurdles, rather than being the sign of God's welcoming love).

The baptism service now sees faith in terms of a journey, rather than in terms of either-you-have-it-or-you-don't. It therefore stresses the need for growth and development in faith, and this can be very helpful when parents ask about baptism but only have a very vague belief in God. Canon Law states that baptism can be delayed for the purposes of preparing the parents or godparents, and many churches now ask parents to attend sessions of preparation, which can be excellent evangelistic opportunities. Some offer the service of *Thanksgiving for the Gift of a Child*, either as an alternative, or a prelude, to baptism.

Further dilemmas can be raised when the parents are other than a married, at least nominally Christian, couple: for example, a cohabiting couple, a single parent, a couple who are in a civil partnership or other committed homosexual relationship, a couple where one comes from another faith background. Each of these situations presents its own different and unique challenges.

For example, if the parents are cohabiting, does the minister ignore this, or take some stronger line in connection with what the service says about repentance? Should children be denied God's grace because of their parents? Some have seen the damage caused by refusal, and by providing

a welcome with a gentle challenge may encourage parents to commit themselves in marriage (occasionally with the baptism in the same service!).

The Civil Partnerships Act has introduced further practical issues. Again one can argue for an unconditional welcome, or at the other extreme one can insist on delay for preparation and for godparents to be confirmed, and expect the parents to be regular worshippers - thus baptising very few infants. Whatever our response we need to bear in mind the Bishops' Pastoral Statement, which refers to Canon B 22.4 (baptism can be delayed for the purpose of instruction) and adds the following: 'The responsibility for taking vows on behalf of the infant rests with the parents and godparents. Provided there is a willingness, following a period of instruction, to give those vows, priests cannot refuse baptism simply because those caring for the infant are not, in their view, living in accordance with the Church's teaching.'

In all these cases, if we impose too many hurdles, parents may simply ask at other churches (these days there is little comprehension of parish boundaries), and find one where they will be welcomed.

Some of the resources below cover these and other practical issues very helpfully. There are no easy answers, but there are resources available to help ministers and congregations to establish a workable baptism policy.

## Further reading

*Baptism: Its Purpose, Practice and Power*, Michael Green, (Authentic Media). An excellent, readable guide.

*Infant Baptism in Historical Perspective*, David F Wright, (Paternoster).

*The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*, Gregg Strawbridge (P & R Publishing).

*Baptism Matters*, Nick and Hazel Whitehead, (CHP). Policies and practicalities.

*Connecting with Baptism: A Practical Guide to Christian Initiation Today*, Mark Earey, Trevor Lloyd and Ian Tarrant, (CHP).

Colin Buchanan has written a number of helpful booklets in the Grove Worship series, available from Grove Books ([www.grovebooks.co.uk](http://www.grovebooks.co.uk)):

*One Baptism Once*, (W61) Looks at 're-baptism'.

*The Renewal of Baptismal Vows*, (W124)

*Infant Baptism in 'Common Worship'*, (W163)

*Thanksgiving for the Gift of a Child*, (W165), Trevor Lloyd

## [www.baptism.org.uk](http://www.baptism.org.uk)

The website of Baptismal Integrity, formerly the Movement for the Reform of Infant Baptism, which focuses on issues of theology and practice of baptism in the Church of England, with many resources to read or download.

## resource sheets

Download sheets free of charge from [www.cpas.org.uk/vocationresources](http://www.cpas.org.uk/vocationresources) or buy a complete set of printed sheets at [www.cpas.org.uk/shop](http://www.cpas.org.uk/shop). For bulk copies of individual sheets, phone 01926 458461 or email [mnorris@cpas.org.uk](mailto:mnorris@cpas.org.uk).

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