

Is There Historical Support for the Doctrine of Infant Baptism?
Systematic Theology
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In his discussion of Baptism in *Christian Theology*, Millard Erickson, a Baptist theologian, makes this assertion regarding the historical practice of infant baptism, “One of the most significant considerations is the lack of any positive indication that infants were baptized.”¹ He places the onus on those who confess and practice infant baptism to defend their action in view of what he considers a lack of evidence for it. This doctrine is certainly worth defending. God promises that Baptism both creates faith and bestows grace. From first to last, these are things that we need, things that we cannot live without. To deny them to anyone, whether young or old, is a practice for which there is no defense. In this paper then it is my intent to point out from Scripture and the history of the early church that Erickson’s statement is false; that there are, indeed, many indications that infants were baptized. I will treat the title question, “*Is there historical support for the doctrine of infant baptism*” by citing the strongest support from Scripture and history, addressing the objections that have been raised against this evidence and pointing out that the best answer to this question is simply “yes”.

What does God’s Word Say?

Since we are dealing with infants; we must first look at what Scripture clearly teaches about them. First of all, Scripture points out their sinfulness and thus their need for Baptism. David writes, “Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother

¹ Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, p.1111

conceived me.” (Psalm 51:5) To those that view this inherited sin that David describes as something less than serious, God’s assessment of man’s heart, even from childhood, should change their mind: “every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood.” (Genesis 8:21) A literal translation of “childhood” here would read “from his youth.” The word God chooses is used to describe children from birth through the teenage years, discounting any argument that these evil inclinations begin only later in life.² So when God explains what sin’s wages are in Romans, it is clear that this is a wage that all, even infants have earned. The need, then, for what God promises in baptism; forgiveness, deliverance from death and the devil, and salvation, is a need that all infants have.

These things that God promises in baptism are received by faith. Opponents of infant baptism object here as well, arguing that “infants cannot exercise faith.”³ Hodge does seem to allow for infant baptism in the case of those children who have believing parents, but in this case it is based on the faith of the parent, not the child. As to the statements that preclude infants from having faith, Scripture again clearly refutes these. On several occasions, Jesus refers to little children as those who have faith in him, as those to whom the Kingdom of God belongs.⁴ In these statements that Jesus makes regarding the faith of little children, no less than three different Greek words are used to refer to these same children. In Matthew 18 Jesus uses the word *παιδία*, which means child, but does not specify the age of the child. In this same context, Jesus also uses *μικρῶν*, which means little or young, to refer to these children. In the passage from Luke cited below, Jesus uses the word *βρέφη* which the lexicons define as “a baby, infant or

² Brown-Driver-Briggs *Hebrew and English Lexicon* p.654-655

³ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, III, p.546,547

⁴ Matthew 18:2,6, Luke 18:15-16, et al

fetus”, “a very small child, even one still unborn.”⁵ The variety of terms that Jesus uses points out the inclusiveness of those who are able to have and exercise faith; infants are clearly not excepted from these terms. Therefore they are able by faith, which God gives at Baptism, to lay hold of the grace and blessings that God offers here as well.

Now, if the opponents of infant baptism grant that infants can believe, they still will not acknowledge that baptism has the power to grant such things as faith, forgiveness and salvation. Millard Erickson puts it this way in his *Christian Theology*:

We note that the case for baptism of infants rests on either the view that baptism is a means of saving grace or on the view that baptism, like Old Testament circumcision, is a sign and seal of entrance into the covenant. Since both views were found to be inadequate, we must conclude that infant baptism is untenable.⁶

His argument is that since baptism is not a means of grace, nor even a sign of that grace, it would follow then that baptism should not be administered to infants; it profits them nothing. His premise however is wrong. Baptism is a means of grace as Scripture clearly teaches. Peter announces on the Day of Pentecost, “Repent and be baptized, *every one* of you, in the name of Jesus Christ *for the forgiveness of sins.*” (Acts 2:38) In his first epistle, Peter is just as clear when he refers to baptism “which now saves you.” (I Peter 3:21) Scripture is clear about the power of Baptism.

So, who then should benefit from this powerful means of grace? Jesus says, “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” (Matthew 28:19) After his exhortation to the crowd on Pentecost to repent and be baptized, Peter explains that this promise is “for you and your children and for all who are far off.” (Acts 2:39) No, Scripture does not specifically command

⁵ Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, Johannes Louw and Eugene Nida 9.45

⁶ Erickson, *Christian Theology* p.1112,1113

that infants be baptized; however, it also does not make the specific command that men or women be baptized. Instead, the all inclusive all nations is used, and further defined by Peter with the reminder that this promise is also for your children.

What Scripture says then regarding infants and whether to baptize them can be summed up in four points. First, because of inherited and actual sin, infants have a great need for baptism. Second, infants have the capacity for faith as Jesus clearly points out. Third, baptism is a means through which God both creates faith and offers his grace, even to infants. Fourth, baptism as instituted by our Savior is intended for all nations, young and old.

Further Evidence from Scripture:

Based on the clear language of Scripture alone, there would be sufficient support for the doctrine of infant baptism. However, we also have additional evidence within the pages of Scripture that lends still more support to this teaching. The parallel between the Old Testament rite of circumcision and the sacrament of baptism is one example of this additional evidence. God instituted circumcision as the sign of his covenant with Abraham. “You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised.” (Genesis 17:11-12a) With circumcision there is no question that infants were included. In his letter to the Colossians, the Apostle Paul draws the parallel between circumcision and baptism by explaining that having been baptized; we have been circumcised by Christ.

“In him (Christ) you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead”

(Colossians 2:11-12)

Still, the argument may be raised that in baptism, God requires faith while circumcision is nothing but an external sign and thus does not; therefore infants can be included. In Romans however, Paul states that “A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code.”

(Romans 2:28-29) When Paul speaks of the inward things of the heart, what else can he mean but faith? Even if circumcision is not a direct parallel to the sacrament of baptism, we see that in the Old Testament God brought infants into a relationship with him through a ceremony performed on the eighth day which also had faith as a requisite if this sign would be of any value. To think that God would operate in similar fashion in the New Testament era is certainly no stretch.

Another piece of additional evidence often cited for the practice of infant baptism already in Apostolic times is the baptism of houses. These are references within the New Testament that speak of entire households being baptized. In common usage, households certainly could have and in many cases would have included children, even infants; and there are no cases in New Testament usage where infants are explicitly excepted when this term is used. Some examples here include Paul’s mention of baptizing the household of Stephanus in I Corinthians 1:16, the baptism of Lydia and her house in Acts 16:15 and also the report by Luke in Acts 16:33 that Paul baptized the jailer at Philippi, “he and all his family.” Arguments against the possibility of infants being included in these houses are weak and usually follow one of the following lines of reasoning. One approach is the claim that the term household included only the slaves in the house, not

the children; yet there is no support for this.⁷ Another approach is the claim that additional context information that we gain about the various “households” mentioned will show that these individual households could not have included young children.⁸ In addition to these arguments against the inclusion of children in these households, opponents also point to textual variants to undermine the certainty that these households were baptized at all.⁹ For our part, we cannot say with certainty that in all or any of the individual cases of households being baptized, that infants were included. Nor can the opponents say with certainty that they were excluded. So the mention of these serves to add yet another element of support to the doctrine of infant baptism.

Evidence from the Early Church:

Extra-biblical support for the doctrine of infant baptism begins immediately in the Post-Apostolic Age and grows gradually stronger to the point that around 400AD, Augustine refers to this doctrine as something the “church universal hold to.”¹⁰ The earliest evidence comes from Polycarp (69-156AD), a disciple of the Apostle John, who made this confession, "Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He never did me any injury: how then can I blaspheme my King and my Saviour?"¹¹ A similar statement comes from Justin Martyr (100-165AD) when he speaks of “many, both men and women, who have been Christ’s disciples from childhood.”¹² In both cases we see support for infant baptism in the fact that discipleship includes being baptized and these mentioned above were disciples from early on. Those who argue against these statements as support

⁷ Jeremias, *The Origins of Infant Baptism*, p. 12

⁸ Aland, *Did the Early Church Baptize Infants*, p. 88-90

⁹ *ibid*, p. 89

¹⁰ Martin Chemnitz (translated by J.A.O. Preus), *Loci Theologi*, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1989), vol. 2, p727.

¹¹ Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, Ed., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1885, Reprinted 1973), Vol. 1, p. 41

for infant baptism say that baptism is not explicitly mentioned; instead, they say, what is being spoken of is that from childhood these people were instructed in Christianity.¹³

This too, however, is not explicitly stated. Again, another element of support is added by these statements.

A clearer statement of support for infant baptism comes from Irenaeus (130-200AD), bishop of Lyons. In his work *Against Heresies*, he writes, “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.”¹⁴ With the words born again we can see a clear reference to baptism and what follows these words makes clear that there was no age limit. Kurt Aland argues against this interpretation saying that it disregards the context.¹⁵ He’s right to the extent that the context of this passage is speaking of Jesus as a Savior for people of all ages, yet with the mention of being born again, baptism is clearly on Irenaeus’ mind as the means by which Jesus brings salvation, even to infants. Again, the support for this doctrine grows.

The next piece of evidence from the early church comes from Tertullian (155-220AD), a theologian from Carthage, who argued against the practice of infant baptism. Tertullian writes:

And so, according to the circumstances and disposition, and even age, of each individual, the delay of baptism is preferable; principally, however, in the case of little children. Let them "come," then, while they are growing up; let them "come" while they are learning, while they are learning whither to come; let them become Christians when they have become able to know Christ. Why does the innocent period of life hasten to the "remission of sins? "More caution will be exercised in worldly matters: so that one who is *not* trusted with earthly substance *is* trusted

¹² Roberts and Donaldson, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1, p.167

¹³ Jeremias, *The Origins of Infant Baptism*, p. 55

¹⁴ Roberts and Donaldson, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*

¹⁵ Aland, *Did the Early Church Baptize Infants*, p. 58

with divine! Let them know how to "ask" for salvation, that you may seem (at least) to have given "to him that asketh."¹⁶

The date of this writing is about 203AD; and the fact that Tertullian speaks against baptism here has been interpreted in two different ways. Those opposed to infant baptism say that Tertullian is trying to ward off an unorthodox practice that had been creeping into the church up to this time. However, as you read his statement, it becomes apparent that he speaks against infant baptism because it does not fall in line with his own unorthodox thinking about the "innocence" of children as well as the need to ask for salvation. His false doctrine is the innovation, not infant baptism. Those who support the practice of infant baptism point out that the very fact that Tertullian argues against the practice, shows that it was in fact commonplace within the early church. Tertullian's statements against infant baptism then serve to strengthen the case for infant baptism rather than weaken it.

From this point forward, the support for infant baptism becomes clearer and clearer. In a sermon on Luke 14:5, the theologian Origen (185-254) makes these statements regarding infant baptism:

"Infants are baptized for the remission of sins. Of what kinds? Or when did they sin? But since, 'No one is exempt from stain,' the stain is removed by the mystery of baptism. For this reason infants are baptized. For 'Unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter the kingdom of heaven.'¹⁷

"The church had a tradition from the apostles, to give baptism even to infants. For they...knew that there is in everyone the natural stains of sin which must be washed away by the water and the Spirit. Because of these stains the body itself is called the body of sin."¹⁸

¹⁶ Roberts and Donaldson, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*

¹⁷ From Origen's Sermon on Luke 14, <http://www.ccs-hk.org/DM/fathers.html#Origen>

¹⁸ From Origen's commentary on Romans, 5:9, <http://www.ccs-hk.org/DM/fathers.html#Origen>

These statements clearly take a different view than Tertullian had concerning a child's need for baptism. We also note here that Origen refers to infant baptism as something handed down from the Apostles. It is at this point in history where the opponents of infant baptism give up trying to explain away the historical support. Instead, they say that following 200AD, infant baptism moved from being innovation to common practice. When we take a look at some of the statements that flow from the early church during this period from 200 to 400AD, we see that the opponents have no choice in the matter.

Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage, (200-258) writes the following regarding the matter of infant baptism.

“In respect of the case of the infants, which you say ought not to be baptized within the second or third day after their 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.¹⁹

Cyprian assumes baptism will take place on or about the eighth day and even supports doing it sooner. A little more than 100 years later, Augustine points out that infant baptism was the universal practice in the church.²⁰ The Synod of Carthage in 419AD confirms this in Canon LX:

Likewise it seemed good that whosoever denies that infants newly from their mother's wombs should be baptized, or says that baptism is for remission of sins, but that they derive from Adam no original sin, which needs to be removed by the layer of regeneration, from whence the conclusion follows, that in them the form of baptism for the remission of sins, is to be understood as false and not true, let him be anathema.

¹⁹ From Cyprian's Epistle 58, *To Fidus, On the Baptism of Infants*”, <http://www.stjohndc.org/Mysteries/9904p.htm>

²⁰ Martin Chemnitz (translated by J.A.O. Preus), *Loci Theologi*, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1989), vol. 2, p727

For no otherwise can be understood what the Apostle says, "By one man sin is come into the world, and death through sin, and so death passed upon all men in that all have "sinned," than the Catholic Church everywhere diffused has always understood it. For on account of this rule of faith (regulam fidei) even infants, who could have committed as yet no sin themselves, therefore are truly baptized for the remission of sins, in order that what in them is the result of generation may be cleansed by regeneration.²¹

Conclusions:

When you consider the parallel with circumcision, the baptism of houses, the witness of Polycarp and Justin Martyr, and the testimonies of the church fathers from 100-419AD, it is clear that there is historical evidence for the doctrine of infant baptism. But this is not the strongest evidence. The inspired Word of God which explains the infant's need for baptism and capacity for faith is stronger. The inspired Word of God which includes Jesus' command to baptize all nations and records the promises that he connects to baptism is stronger. Scripture makes a solid case for the doctrine of infant baptism. The historical evidence of this practice that we find in the early church simply shows that these early believers were also convinced by the Word of God that baptism was to include infants.

It is important to recognize that those who oppose the doctrine of infant baptism do so in most cases in order to be consistent with other false doctrines that they have espoused. They deny that infants are guilty before God and so they see no need to baptize them. They deny that infants have the capacity for faith; and since they make faith a prerequisite for baptism rather than a requisite, they conclude, infants should not be baptized. They believe baptism is not so important in and of itself, rather what it symbolizes, namely salvation, this is what truly counts. On that basis, they ask, why

²¹ Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, Ed., *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, Reprinted 1971), Vol. XIV, p. 496-497

make a big deal about infant baptism? Essentially, they call into question what God's Word clearly says about this doctrine, and reform it with their own views.

This challenge to God's Word that opponents of infant baptism bring to the table is one reason that we need to maintain the true confession in this matter. Additionally, because those who continue to deny and withhold infant baptism to this day are in fact denying and withholding this means of grace from children who desperately need it, we should be all the more committed not only to maintain our confession of this doctrine, but also to publish and promote it to the end that those who are in error may see the truth and no longer deny the life-giving water of baptism to infants.

*Word Count – 3,258

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