

## **Baptism of Sleeping or Deaf Infants: A Consistent and Biblical Practice**

Infant baptism is an amazing miracle. To the human eye, the infant understands little if any of baptism's significance. Still baptism gives an infant a death-defying trust in Jesus Christ. Baptism saves the apparently oblivious, sub-reasonable, and passive babe.

This paper's topic highlights further the miraculous nature of infant baptism. Eph. 5:26 calls baptism "a washing with water through the word." Here Saint Paul asserts that God's Word gives the water of baptism its power to cleanse. In the case of a conscious infant, the infant hears that powerful Word. One marvels because one sees no sign that the infant understands. In the case of the sleeping or deaf infant, we see no sign that the infant even hears the Word, much less has a chance to understand it.

It is consistent with Biblical teaching to baptize such unheeding infants. The Bible asserts that infants receive a real baptism and receive baptism's benefits.<sup>1</sup> The Bible does not say that an infant's sleepiness or hearing impairment hinder such reception in baptism.

### **I. Reality of Baptism for a Sleeping or Deaf Infant**

The Bible does not say that whether the infant is asleep or deaf affects the reality of the infant's baptism. Rather, as far as the recipient goes, the only requirement for "real" baptism is that he or she be a living, unbaptized human being. Below are six objections to this position:

1. An infant is not capable of making the decision to be baptized. Neither is it capable of willful repentance. This repentance, this change of heart, is the essence of baptism. Thus no infant can have a real baptism. In every biblical baptism narrative, the recipient has already heard the Gospel and come to faith. As Karl Barth wrote, "In the sphere of the New Testament one is not brought to baptism; one comes to baptism."<sup>2</sup> He cites Ac. 8:28ff; 10:44ff; 16:13ff; and 18:8ff.
2. The Holy Spirit does not act like a mole. He does not bury himself secretly inside a person, only to reveal himself at a later date.<sup>3</sup> In a real baptism, one will see right away that the baptized person has received the Holy Spirit. This will be evident as the recipient displays charismatic gifts.
3. Christ's "baptismal commandment" was a later addition to Matthew and Mark. The original documents contained neither Mt. 28:19 nor Mk. 16:15-16.<sup>4</sup>
4. Through its practice, the Church shows that "all nations" in Mt. 28:19 does not mean everyone. The Church frowns upon forcing baptism on the unwilling or the children of unwilling parents. Since "all nations" doesn't mean everyone, it does not have to mean "infants, too." The skeptic rightfully asks, "If baptism is powerful for everyone, should we not simply go out in the street and 'hose people down' in the name of the triune God?"<sup>5</sup>
5. God must not desire infant baptism. He wants us to trust him and his Word, not trust fallible human testimony. But the infant will not remember its baptism. The only way he or she can be sure of his or her infant baptism is to trust the human, fallible word of witnesses or of a baptismal certificate. This is no solid rock for faith.<sup>6</sup>
6. A baptism in which the officiant only spoke the words mentally would not be a real baptism. This is evident from Christ's words of institution. He commands the Church to baptize, "in the name of..." History tells of various washings and baptisms belonging to various world religions. The officiant must make explicit his intentions and whom he

represents.<sup>7</sup> However, for a deaf or sleeping infant, the officiant may as well be speaking the words silently. His intentions are not made clear to the infant.

The first five of these objections call into question infant baptism in general. The sixth question deals specifically with deaf or sleeping infants. Each objection is invalid, as seen below:

1. “Infants cannot repent” – Infants must be capable of repentance, because Jesus says they can have faith (see Mk. 10:14-15 & Mt. 18:6, “these little ones who believe in me”).<sup>8</sup> Repentance is a part of true faith. Secondly, it is not true that the recipient’s decision to repent is the essence of baptism. God’s action, not human action, is at the center of baptism. Baptism gives life where there was death (Ro. 6:4, “baptism into death in order that...we too may live a new life”). Baptism brings one into the Church (1 Co. 12:13, “baptized...into one body”). Baptism gives birth to a new person (Jn. 3:3-5, “born of water and the Spirit,” and Ti. 3:5, “washing of rebirth and renewal”). In baptism, God washes away sins (Ac. 22:16, “What are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away,” and Eph. 5:26-27, “cleansing [the church] by the washing with water through the word...to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless”).<sup>9</sup>

2. “The Holy Spirit is not a mole” – Water baptism is different from the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Unless rejected, the Holy Spirit enters the baptized person’s heart. Not every person who has the Holy Spirit has charismatic gifts. Saint Paul expects a “no” answer in 1 Co. 12:30, “Do all speak in tongues?” Rather the Spirit often works invisibly. Saint Augustine describes how baptism affected his best friend.<sup>10</sup> This friend was an apostate from the Church, but he fell into a coma. While he was comatose, his family had him baptized. When he came out of the coma, he was a strong Christian again. But who could have seen the Holy Spirit in him before he “came to”?

3. “Mt. 28:19 is spurious” – For the claim that Mark 16:9ff is not original, the evidence is inconclusive. Regarding the “Great Commission,” to doubt that the Lord Jesus said those words casts doubt on his resurrection, described in the same chapter.<sup>11</sup>

4. “All nations’ does not include the unwilling, so why include infants” – That modern Christendom does not baptize the unwilling is not because such a baptism would not be “real” baptism.<sup>12</sup> Rather the Church has judged such a practice incompatible with baptism’s purpose. Jesus said (Mt. 28:19) the purpose of baptism is to make disciples. A “fire-hose baptism” is not very inviting to the unbeliever who is thus baptized by force. Would the baptized person then also be forced into a Bible Information Class?

5. “God would not have us trust a baptismal certificate or witness” – God has so ordained that we only hear him speak through the word of fallible humans. Compare, for example, 2 Ti. 3:14, “Continue in what you have learned... because you know those from whom you learned it.” Paul urged Timothy, in one sense, to put his faith in human beings. Believing one’s baptismal witnesses is no different from believing the pastor as he preaches his sermon. In both cases, to believe the human is to believe God, who is offering reassurance through the person’s words.<sup>13</sup>

6. “The officiant might as well be speaking the baptismal formula silently” – Despite the critic’s “might as well,” the officiant is in fact not speaking silently. Christ prescribed simply the speaking and what meaning is to spoken (“baptizing in the name of...”). He did not command that the recipient has to hear the words spoken.

All of these rebuttals only show that one *may* baptize a sleeping or deaf infant. They show it can be a real baptism. Does that mean one *should* baptize such infants, or that one *must* do so? Does that mean the infants will necessarily receive the benefits of a baptism which they do not hear?

## **II. Benefits of Baptism for a Sleeping or Deaf Infant**

The Bible does not exclude an infant from receiving the benefits of baptism simply because the infant is asleep or deaf. Rather the infant's desperate need for these benefits compels us to baptize it. Here are five objections to this position:

1. Infants have no desperate need for baptism, because God does not hold them accountable for sin. He does not declare infants guilty either of actual sins or so-called original sin. According to Is. 7:15, before a certain age children do not know "enough to reject the wrong and choose the right."
2. Infants have no desperate need for baptism, because God can save them apart from baptism (i.e., through the Word and/or through believing prayer). Orthodox theologians agree that one may call baptism "necessary" but not "absolutely necessary."<sup>14</sup>
3. Infants cannot receive the benefits of baptism. It benefits only in so far as it is a sign and testimony to Christ's saving work. A candidate, such as an infant, who does not understand the meaning of the sign, receives no benefit from it.<sup>15</sup>
4. The baptized person receives the benefits of baptism through faith. As Paul says in Eph. 4:5 there is "one faith." Infant faith is the same faith as adult faith. Hermann Sasse wrote, "When you examine it closely, even the most heroic faith, even the faith of an Athanasius and a Luther is no more than the faith of a little child."<sup>16</sup> Faith is that by which one understands and apprehends for oneself Christ's meritorious life, death, resurrection, and imminent return. This faith understands the facts of the Gospel. God miraculously allows the baptized infant to understand the words of the baptismal formula. But in the case of a sleeping or deaf infant, it does not hear the Gospel in the baptismal formula. It cannot understand a Gospel it has not heard and so it cannot have faith.
5. Paul says in Ro. 10:17, "Faith comes from hearing the message." Whether or not the infant needs to understand the Gospel to believe in Jesus, the baby needs to come into contact with the Gospel through its physical senses.<sup>17</sup> The deaf or sleeping infant does not hear the spoken "message" at baptism. It does not receive faith.

Again, most of these objections apply to infant baptism in general. Only the fourth and fifth apply specifically to the sleeping or deaf infant. As with the objections refuted in part one, these five are riddled with false assumptions. Below are Scriptural replies to each charge:

1. "Infants are not accountable" – Our holy God does hold infants accountable for sin.<sup>18</sup> This is why some infants die, because infants have sin. Ro. 5:12 says, "Death came to all men, because all sinned." Secondly, the Bible makes no distinction between those whom God sees as having sin and those whom God holds accountable for the sin he sees they have. As Paul says in Eph. 2:3, all people are "by nature objects of wrath." Therefore infants need rescue from the punishment they have earned through sin.
2. "Infants are saved apart from baptism" – This is false logic: Pastor Joe has multiple means at his disposal to try to bring an infant to faith, so he can pick and choose, that is, he need not do all he can to save the infant.<sup>19</sup> Baptism also saves. This compels the Church to use it as *one* of its tools in ministering to infants.

3. “Baptism is only a sign, which an infant cannot ‘read’” – Baptism is more than a sign or a reminder. It actually confers grace and forgiveness to the recipient. It does not depend on the infants’ ability to understand but on God’s ability and promise to give.<sup>20</sup> Compare the rebuttal of point one in part one.

4. “Faith involves understanding: They don’t hear, so they don’t understand” – The Bible does not specifically say that infant faith includes *scientia*. Several Lutheran writers emphasize the *fiducia* aspect of infant faith.<sup>21</sup> Hoffmann elaborates, “When a newborn child is placed on its mother’s breast and perceives her heartbeat, it knows its mother even though it lacks the knowledge that she has a particular shape, lives in a particular town, was born on a particular day and has experienced a particular destiny... In a similar way, a child below the age of reason can also stand in a relationship to God and Christ,...being ignorant of the detailed features of [Christ’s] Person and Work.”<sup>22</sup> One must not define infant faith more narrowly than the Word has defined it for us. Secondly, “one faith” does not mean “one level of spiritual maturity.” Christian X can have a stronger or a more mature faith than Christian Y.<sup>23</sup> The faith of every Christian has the same foundation and cornerstone, but not necessarily the same “depth.”

5. “How can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard?”<sup>24</sup> – Paul here is speaking about how conversion normally comes about, not how it always must occur. Not everyone comes to faith aurally. Some come to faith visually, by reading the Bible. To take Ro. 10:17 over-literally would be to consign all deaf people to hell. For example, who says God cannot do through the unhearing infant’s sense of touch what he does through the hearing, awake infant’s ears? Surely the sound-waves strike the baby’s tiny frame.

To summarize, infants by nature stand under God’s wrath. He holds them accountable for sin. Baptism saves. It offers forgiveness and eternal life to all people on earth. The Bible does not exclude anyone from baptism, as, for example, it excludes the unworthy or unprepared from the Lord’s Supper.<sup>25</sup> Infants need what baptism offers. Christians have no compelling reason to withhold baptism from them, even if they are unconscious or cannot hear. As Professor Gerhard Forde wrote about infant baptism, “We do not need to protect the Lord from his own generosity.”<sup>26</sup> Rather Christendom would do well to share in Christ’s indignation toward those who would keep any children from coming to him (Mk. 10:14).

### **Application and Conclusion**

How can one apply these truths? It may seem that the pastor as officiant at an infant’s baptism knows the infant only on a very impersonal level. Rather, in baptizing, the officiant communicates with the infant better than its closest family can. In the case of the deaf infant, for example, a mother’s many words of maternal affection would effect little. In contrast, the pastor’s saving words of baptism somehow pierce to the infant’s, yea, even the deaf infant’s, heart.

In the end, the Christian can rightly echo St. Augustine’s words, when he discussed baptism’s effects on his comatose friend, “How can I plumb the unfathomable depth of your judgment?”<sup>27</sup> The grace of baptism is a gift from God. All people are passive in baptism. The “grown-up” heart is by nature no more receptive to the Gospel than are a deaf infant’s ears. That God works faith in anyone – deaf or hearing, young or old, conscious or unconscious – is a dazzling mark of his compassion on us. May the Church fix her eyes on that mark!

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<sup>1</sup> This paper will first discuss the reality of baptism for such infants and then the benefits of baptism. This distinction between reality and benefit has been around for centuries (e.g., Aquinas, p.105).

<sup>2</sup> Barth, pp.42-43 – Wright also points to this pattern (pp.26, 38 & 46). Discussing the baptism of whole households, he concludes, "The evidence is strongly against... [the supposition] that any members [of the household] were baptized without first making an act of faith."

<sup>3</sup> For this simile, see Wright, p.40 – He makes the same point on pp.38-39, claiming that in the New Testament the Holy Spirit was always accompanied by an "immediate, observable change."

<sup>4</sup> Oberman, p.231 – Barth also realized he had to deal with Mt. 28:19. On p.43, he provided his own fanciful exegesis, that it refers to baptism's "universality in space." I.e., it did not exclude people from other parts of the world. And so he turned the direct object "all nations" in to an adverbial phrase, "throughout all nations."

<sup>5</sup> Forde, p.238 – This is not his view. He imagines it for the sake of his argument.

<sup>6</sup> Pelikan, pp.206ff – He presents this as one of the Anabaptists' objections to infant baptism in Martin Luther's day.

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<sup>7</sup> Pieper, pp.257-258

<sup>8</sup> On infant faith, see Pieper, p.277, and Pelikan, pp.204-205. Rome evades the “problem” of infant faith through its teaching that the Church believes for the child (e.g., Aquinas, pp.109, 111, 119, 121, 141). Both Wright (p.21, good Scripture references) and Barth (p.45) come down bluntly opposing this view.

<sup>9</sup> On God’s action in baptism, see Pieper, p.264; Chemnitz, pp.112, 117ff; Vogt, pp.4-5; and even Aquinas, p.139. Chemnitz is unique in that he has Old Testament proof-texts, incl. Eze. 47:9 (“where the river flows everything will live”) & Zch. 14:8 (“On that day living water will flow out from Jerusalem, half to the eastern sea and half to the western sea, in summer and in winter.”).

<sup>10</sup> Augustine, pp.75-76 – On the invisibility of baptism’s effects, see Pieper, p.272, and Aquinas, p.141. For more evidence of the Holy Spirit’s work through infant baptism, see Pelikan, pp.210-211.

<sup>11</sup> Pieper, pp.254-255

<sup>12</sup> Forde, pp.238-239 – He observes that many in the Church today might not be Christians were it not for forced mass-baptisms in ages past.

<sup>13</sup> Pelikan, pp.207-208

<sup>14</sup> For orthodox views, see Pieper, p.280; Chemnitz, p.120; and Vogt, p.9. For similar, but heterodox, views, see Aquinas, pp.83, 85 (refers to “baptism of desire” and Old Testament believers), & Barth, p.43 (“[Christ’s] kingdom is in fact greater than His Church”).

<sup>15</sup> Barth, pp. 9, 11-14, 16, 26

<sup>16</sup> Sasse, p.7 – Similarly, Hoffmann (p.85) uses Mk. 10:15 to show the equation adult faith = infant faith.

<sup>17</sup> Forde, p.235 – He quotes Luther from the Large Catechism, “The gospel promise ‘must be external so that it can be perceived and grasped by the senses and thus brought into the heart.’”

<sup>18</sup> On the accountability of infants, see Vogt, pp.1-2; Chemnitz, p.117; and Aquinas, p.109.

<sup>19</sup> In this context, Forde discusses a “gospel necessity” to baptize infants, pp.231ff.

<sup>20</sup> Pieper, p.267

<sup>21</sup> Compare Chemnitz, p.119; Vogt, pp.2-4; and especially Hoffmann, pp.85ff.

<sup>22</sup> Hoffmann, p.90

<sup>23</sup> Compare, for example, Eph. 4:13-16; Lu. 17:5; Ro. 15:1; and 1 Co. 13:9-11.

<sup>24</sup> Ro. 10:14b

<sup>25</sup> For an example, cf. 1 Co. 11:27-29

<sup>26</sup> Forde, p.240

<sup>27</sup> Augustine, p.75