

Case for Infant Baptism: The Historic Paedo-Baptist Position

Scripture: Matthew 28:19–20; Acts 2:38; Acts 16:15; Romans 6:3

Code: A361

The following message is a presentation of Ligonier Ministries, home of the radio program, *Renewing Your Mind* with R.C. Sproul. Copyright © 1998. Used by permission of Ligonier Ministries (www.ligonier.org). [Click Here](#) to purchase the complete debate from Ligonier Ministries.

R.C. Sproul: Just last week, somebody was talking with me and they had a copy of the brochure for this conference and they said, “I see that you and John MacArthur are going to be talking about baptism when whether it is to be administered to infants.” And I said yes. They said, “Well, I hope you go out there and change John’s mind on this subject.” And I said, “Let me tell you something about the John MacArthur that I know, that if you can prove your position to John MacArthur from the pages of sacred Scripture, he will change it in a heartbeat cause I’ve never met a man in my life who is more sold out to building his theology on the basis of Scripture alone than my brother John.” So that really is my burden, is to try to persuade him on the basis of Scripture. He won’t let me appeal to history or tradition or church authority, so....

But this is something that I hope and trust is true of the overwhelming majority of Christians who struggle with this question. My working assumption when this debate arises among believers and of those who are committed to the doctrine of Sola Scriptura from the Reformation, my working assumption is that both sides want to do what is pleasing to God and to be faithful to the Word of God. And unfortunately, those of us who disagree on this point, though we both desire to be pleasing to God and faithful to the Word of God, obviously this is one of those places where we both simply cannot be right. And, in fact, it’s one of those also where we both cannot be wrong. Somebody’s right and somebody’s wrong and we all know who that is, so we can take a break. (Laughter)

One of the things that John has made absolutely clear in his excellent presentation today is that there’s nowhere in the New Testament that explicitly commands the baptism of infants, or explicitly mentions the baptism of infants. And so he concludes it’s simply not in the New Testament. And from an explicit perspective, I agree with him completely. We also have stipulated and agreed that there’s no explicit prohibition against infant baptism to be found anywhere in the New Testament either.

So in the absence of explicit teaching, both sides in this controversy are forced to rely upon inferences drawn from what is explicit in Scripture, and that should by the very virtue of that fact force us to go the second mile in patience with one another when we recognize, I cannot prove to John MacArthur that Scripture commands the baptism of infants, and by not baptizing infants he is being disobedient to his Lord and at the same time he can’t point to a text in the Bible that explicitly prohibits infant baptism and say to you, “R.C., you have to stop doing what Scripture prohibits.” I think we all understand the absence of the explicit directives in either case and since we are both relying upon inferences, we have to be exceedingly patient and charitable with each other.

Now one of the most important things that John has already gone over is the classic defense in

Reformed Theology of infant baptism on the grounds of its relationship to the circumcision in the Old Testament, and obviously there are certain things about circumcision in the Old Testament that are not simply implicit but are clearly explicit.

Now what I want to do is take some time and look at the relationship between circumcision and New Testament baptism. And here's where it does get a little bit complicated because I often hear people say emphatically, "R.C., New Testament baptism is not circumcision. There is no equation between the two or identity between the two." And when I hear people say that, I'm impressed with their amazing grasp of the obvious. I don't know anybody in the history of the church who has argued that there is an identity between circumcision and baptism. On the one hand, Jewish people who were circumcised in the Old Testament were not circumcised with water. That's not the same thing, obviously.

Now, the issue, however, is not one of identity but one of relationship. And the question is...is there any continuity between circumcision in the Old Testament and baptism in the New Testament. If we're going to be careful and look at this in technical terms, we have to see, and I think we would all agree, that there is some continuity at least between circumcision in the Old Testament and baptism in the New Testament and yet at the same time there are serious and significant points of discontinuity. So we have elements of continuity where they are similar to each other, elements of discontinuity. Obvious element of discontinuity is circumcision is in the Old Testament, baptism's in the New Testament. That's obviously a difference, isn't it?

Now, in terms of the historical argument for infant baptism, here are the crucial points in terms of continuity that in the Old Testament it is almost universally agreed by scholars, I'm not sure I agree with John on this, or that he would agree with me, I sort of think he would, that circumcision, whatever else it was in the Old Testament, was the sign of the Old Covenant. Yes. A sign of the Old Covenant. And that baptism whatever else it is, is a sign of the New Covenant. That both sides tend to agree on. Now here we see they are different signs, one is circumcision, one is baptism. But both of them are signs of some kind of covenant that God makes with people. In the case of circumcision, we say it is a sign of the Covenant that God made with Abraham. Now in Reformed Theology we would argue that part of the terms of that Covenant that God makes with Abraham includes temporal, earthly blessings like descendants, like the possession of the land, real estate and so on. But that beyond those external matters of physical inheritance, ethnic and national, is communicated the Old Testament promise of redemption unless you want to argue that people were saved in the Old Testament in a manner radically different from how they are saved in the New Testament.

I'm going to say something I've never said before publicly, though I believe it, but basically out of response to John's passion and his years of faithful defense of the purity of the gospel, where he has been the strongest of allies and comrades alongside of me in the trenches. And when the issue becomes the gospel of Jesus Christ, I don't have to look very far to know who I want to call, stand next to me and be in my foxhole when there's something about the gospel. Who am I kidding, John? No sir, huh? All right, it's a tag team when that comes.

But here's what I want to say in a very real sense, beloved, circumcision in the Old Testament was a sign of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Why do I say that? Because whatever else circumcision was, circumcision was the sign of the covenant and the heart and soul of the covenant is the promise of God to provide redemption for His people. And that Abraham believed that promise and was counted just by God. Abraham rejoiced to see the fullest manifestation in history of the terms of that covenant in the appearance of the one who embodied Israel, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. I think it would

be a vast oversimplification to reduce the meaning of circumcision in the Old Testament simply to ethnic or national characteristics, a point which many Jews in fact did for which they received the scathing critique of the prophets and of the Apostle Paul himself in the book of Romans.

Now I don't believe that circumcision was a sign of faith exclusively. That is, that the only thing that circumcision indicated or signified was faith. It signified a whole lot more than that but no less than that. Let me say it again. The circumcision signified a lot more than faith but by no means less because the doctrine of justification by faith alone was taught throughout the Abrahamic Covenant as Paul labors in Romans 3 and chapter 4 of the New Testament.

Now when does Abraham receive the sign? Before he has faith? Or after he has faith? Before he realizes the content of the promises of the covenant, or after he actually realizes the content of the promises. Manifestly he receives the sign of the promise after he's received the substance of the promise, after he's believed, after he's repented, right? Then he is given the sign of circumcision. But not only is this sign of circumcision which indicates all that's contained in the promise of redemption is given to Abraham after he has faith and has been repentant and all the rest, and is regenerate and so on, God not only permits but explicitly commands the infant son of Abraham receive the sign of this same covenant. And not only is it commanded to Abraham and to Isaac and to Jacob, but when Moses delays it, God threatens to kill him for withholding the sign of the covenant from his infant son. That's very important because here in the Old Testament the sign of God's covenant of redemption is not only permitted to be given to the children of believers, it is commanded of God so to be done. And if faith has the remotest portion of the content, of the promise of Abraham, and if it does not, then we would have to say that Abraham is justified by some other means, or some other instrument than faith which I don't know any Baptists who would want to argue that. The point is, that if he has even the smallest portion of the content of the meaning of that sign of the Old Covenant, then we have to say that we have explicit biblical teaching that God Almighty, at least in one time in history, has explicitly commanded that a sign of faith be administered to a person who does not yet possess that which the sign signifies.

So the first point we have to see here that's emphatically taught in the Old Testament is that the sign of redemption is commanded of God to be given to infants, not to all infants indiscriminately, but only to those who are in the covenant community, to the visible household of faith which I'm going to take the liberty to call the Old Testament church.

Now there were people in the Old Testament who believed that the sign saved. Correct? And they lived on into the New Testament times when the Pharisees said, "We're the children of Abraham, we're circumcised." And Paul talks about how circumcision doesn't save anybody, only the person who is circumcised inwardly are saved. Only those who actually have faith are saved. You can have the sign without faith, but you can't have what the sign signifies without faith. So again, we don't want to ever get to the conclusion that a person is justified by circumcision in the Old Testament or by baptism in the New Testament.

There's one thing that my buddy, John, said that I have to speak out on in terms of my emphatic disagreement with him. Cause on this one point I am absolutely one thousand percent sure he couldn't possibly be more wrong. I know he's wrong, I'm positive he's wrong, and I'm going to prove to you right now beyond not a reasonable doubt, but a shout of a doubt that he's wrong. My dear brother stood up here in front of all these people and said that we had lunch and it was really brunch just a couple of hours ago. And the speakers got together, sat around a table. Did you hear him say that he's the only one there who believes in believer's baptism? Did you say that? All right. A little

cross examination. Was I there?

JOHN: You were there.

R.C.: Okay. This is how I can prove he is wrong because I believe in believer's baptism. And I was there and I'm positive that Bob Godfrey believes in believer's baptism and that Sinclair Ferguson believes in believer's baptism cause all Reformed people believe in believer's baptism. You want to get anecdotal, three weeks ago I had one of the most precious privileges a pastor, a minister of the gospel can ever have, baptized three adults at St. Andrew's Church. We only have 43 members and it was such a thrill to baptize those adults into the fellowship of Jesus Christ. And let me tell you what, not only do we baptize adults, but we will not baptize adults until they are...unless they first make a profession of faith and give evidence of repentance and of clinging in faith to Jesus Christ.

Now there's abundant evidence in both testaments for the adult reception of the sign of the Covenant in the Old Testament, as John has pointed out, we have the records of those who were strangers and foreigners of the Covenant from the Gentile world who come over and embrace Judaism and receive circumcision as adults. And before they can be circumcised as adults, they must make a profession of faith. And likewise we have abundant record in the New Testaments of adults being baptized which adults are called upon to profess faith and so on, of actual twelve references in the New Testament to actual baptisms, they're all adults. Four of those baptism accounts include the oikos formula that John referred to which is translated house or household which, by the way, in passing Oscar Cullmann, the Swiss New Testament scholar, argues that in antiquity that not only possibly included infants, but he believes that that word was used with specific reference to infants, but that's too much of a stretch for me. What it does indicate is some kind of continuity of the principle of corporate solidarity that we find clearly evident in the Old Testament. But I wouldn't care if the term oikos or the term household occurs or not in the New Testament because I think every single reference to adult baptism in the book of Acts is 100 percent utterly, completely and totally irrelevant to the question we're discussing here. As we've stipulated, we all believe in adult baptism. And we all believe in the case of adult baptism there is a prior requirement of a profession of faith. No argument about that whatsoever. There's no sense taking any time arguing over what we agree on.

Only one thing, the only evidence that that adult baptism has for this controversy in the New Testament is one that's somewhat secondary, not utterly insignificant but it has some significance, and that is that all of those who are baptized as adults are presumably first generation believers. If the opponent of infant baptism could point to one case of an adult baptism in the New Testament where the person who is being baptized as an adult was the child of Christian parents when that person was an infant, then they would have a relevant case to point to, in fact that would be all it would take to change me on that. But you don't have any such evidence whatsoever and all of the pointing to the evidence of adult believers is only obfuscating the issue because there's no debate about what are the requirements for believer's baptism....we all agree with that.

The question is simply if a child of a believer receives the sign of the Covenant in the New Testament as it clearly incontestably did in the Old Testament. Now again, we recognize that there is a difference between the New Testament and the Old Testament. John pointed out one, in the Old Testament economy the only person who received the sign of the Covenant were males, boys, little boys. The women didn't. And presumably in the New Testament the sign of the Covenant is administered not only to the males but to the females as well.

Now what does that tell you? One thing it tells you is that as the New Testament labors over and over and over again, the New Testament is a better Covenant than the Old Testament. And one of the ways in which it's better, or at least different is that it is obviously more inclusive rather than less inclusive than the Old Covenant. Now in the Old Covenant you didn't have to be a child of an Israelite parent to be saved. But one of the great mysteries in the history of redemption is the role that the Gentiles play and that there's a radical expansion of outreach and evangelism to the Gentile world in the New Covenant that is absent in the Old Covenant. It's a radical expansion. It's not like there's no outreach to the Gentiles in the Old Testament, there was some. But not nearly the degree to which you find it in the New Covenant.

Now it just seems strange to me that if in general terms, the New Covenant is more inclusive than the Old Covenant, why would a practice of including the children of believers in the reception of the sign of the Covenant of redemption that is in practice for two thousand years would suddenly be repealed and abrogated in the New Testament without a single word. I really think the burden of proof here is on those who say that at the point of including children of believers in the reception of the Covenant sign of the promise of God through redemption that the burden for that should be on those who want to argue that there is this radical change in the history of redemption. That a practice that is normal and normative for two thousand years suddenly stops without a word in the New Testament, not only without a word in the New Testament but as Yahoï Caramesis(????) pointed out, that we can't find anything in the literature of the first century apart from the Bible weren't too long into the second century and not much at all until the middle of the third century about the practice of infant baptism. And the first reference we have to it that has survived in antiquity in literature outside of the Bible, describes infant baptism as the universal practice of the church.

Now it's possible in a hundred or two hundred years that the whole Christian church could have departed from the apostolic practice without one word surviving in written complaint against that, despite the mountain of information that has survived from the first three centuries about a host of other theological controversies about which the Patristics were divided. And isn't it strange that this departure and deviation from the purity of the apostolic church took place to the extent that it captured the whole of Christendom and not one single word of protest survives from that period? Now that's an argument from silence. But it's a very screaming silence.

I'm saying the reason why there's no explicit command to baptize in the New Testament is that it would be clearly assumed by any Jewish or early Christian believer that this same practice and principle of including the children of believers in the reception of the covenant sign would continue unless God said, "Stop it."

Now, I'll try and do this real quick because I don't have much time, I want to, real quickly, point to a text that John pointed to that I thought was a very important text, I don't need to read it, he did. All those appeals to suffer the little children, all that I agree with John on those, we can stipulate those and you'll have to debate them. I don't think they have the tiniest significance for this discussion. But I do think the passage from 1 Corinthians regarding marriage and the unbelieving husband, all that, I think this passage does have special relevance, for this reason. We understand, as John rightly pointed out, that when it says that the unbelieving wife or the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the unbelieving husband, the unbelieving wife, etc., that the word there that is used to sanctify could be a little bit misleading to us because we normally use the term sanctification, or to sanctify to refer to that growth in holiness and progress and conformity to the image of Christ that immediately follows after our justification and presupposes justification.

Now obviously what John is right in pointing out is that that can't be the meaning of the text here unless we want to assume that the Bible teaches two different ways of justification, and, in fact, maybe even a third. On one hand, the New Testament teaches that we're justified by faith, our faith, not somebody else's faith, right? Paul says that the women are saved through the bearing of children and if we mean by saved in that context, be placed in a state of grace and in the case of justification then we could say the second way of salvation, the second way of justification is limited to women is by having babies, you can be justified. And if that doesn't work and then you're barren, or if you're a man and can't have babies and don't have any faith, the third way of salvation is to marry somebody that does because the unbeliever is sanctified.

Now I've tried to reduce this to absurdity and show you that this text cannot mean that the sanctification that is in view refers to that sanctification that follows from and flows out of necessarily immediately and so on justification exactly. So it can't be what John called the maximalist's view, it has to have a minimal thing. I don't think it's nearly as minimal as my brother John does. He means far more than to be put in a favorable environment with respect to the secular influences of the world. Understand what it does mean.

I want to call attention to the language. Call attention to the language as it is found in Scripture. If you look and see what it means to sanctify biblically, its primary meaning is to set apart, or to consecrate, to be placed in another or different setting or environment. It goes back to God's initial setting of Israel apart, saying, "Be ye holy even as I am holy and I will be your God and you will be My people." And God sanctified to Himself a nation. Now not everybody in that nation was sanctified inwardly. The whole nation was sanctified outwardly. Israel was given a holy vocation. They became the holy people, the chosen of God. God set them apart.

And so, I'm saying to you that the primary way in which the Bible uses the term to sanctify is to set apart or to consecrate so that when Paul says the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the believing husband, or the unbelieving husband...and so forth...means that they are set apart, not that they are saved. But they are set apart; they are set apart from something. They're placed in some kind of situation that differs from that which is ordinary or normal. And the reason for this that the Apostle gives is not with particular reference to the benefit of the unbelieving spouse but as John eloquently pointed out, the benefactor from this sanctifying or setting apart of the unbeliever is...whom? The children.

Now listen to this language. God says, "I'm going to set apart the unbelieving wife or the unbelieving husband for the benefit of the children who issue from this marriage." Cause He says, "Else would their children be unclean, but now are they holy."

Now here's what the Apostle Paul does say explicitly in the New Testament, namely that the offspring of at least one believing partner in a marriage, that's why for centuries churches that do practice infant baptism do not do it indiscriminately and will not baptize any infant but only if there is a profession of faith by at least one parent. But listen to the language. Doing this, Paul says, for the sake of the children, else would they be unclean.

Do you ever hear that word in the Bible...unclean? What is the primary reference of the concept of being unclean to a Jew? To be outside the covenant, to be numbered with the unbelievers, to be numbered with the Gentiles in Israel, to be a foreigner and a stranger to the covenant promises of God, that's what it meant to be unclean. To be outside the camp, outside the community where the grace of God is focused and Paul said I would not have the children of unbelievers be unclean

because now they are holy.

Now what I am submitting to you is that that is manifestly covenant language. It is the language that is used consistently throughout the Bible to refer to those who are in a covenant relationship with God. And my time's up, so I'm just going to say this in summary.

In the Old Testament, circumcision does not convey redemption, it's the sign of redemption. In the New Testament, baptism doesn't convey redemption and it's a sign of many things. It is the sign of our cleansing. It is a sign of our regeneration. It is the sign of our sanctification. It is a sign of our being baptized with the Holy Spirit. And as John eloquently pointed out, it is a sign of our being buried with Christ and raised with Christ. It is a sign of all of those things that are part of the content of salvation which sign does not automatically communicate the reality by the outward sign. What it does communicate is the reality of the promise of God to all who put their trust in Him that they would receive the fullness of redemption that is promised in the gospel.

In a word, the sacrament of Baptism is a dramatic object lesson, a visible sign of the spoken promise. We proclaim the Word of God in the presence of infants. They maybe don't understand the Word, and they don't understand the sign either until it's explained to them, that's why the it's the responsibility is for the parents and the church to say to this child, "You received a sign of the promise of God, you received the sign of the gospel of Jesus Christ. And let me tell you what that sign means." And you tell them what the sign means and you tell them, "If you trust in this promise of Christ, you will be saved." And as Calvin pointed out, that which a sign signifies in the Bible may be given before or after the sign is present, exhibit A, the sign that was given to Abraham after he had faith and Isaac before he has faith. And if you want to raise the principal objection about giving a sign that includes, among other thing, a sign of faith to people who are incapable of exercising faith at that time, if you want to raise that objection in principle, don't hesitate to object against God Himself because that's exactly what He did in the Old Testament.

I agree with Calvin that the preferred method of baptism is immersion. I disagree with Baptists who insist that the Greek word baptizo can only mean immersed because it is clearly used in the Septuagint, the translated text of Leviticus 14 where two birds are used in a sacrificial way and these two birds are killed, the one has its blood drained out of it and the other one has to be baptizo in the blood of the first one. There just ain't enough blood in the first one to immerse the second one. You dip it in there. But anyway, that's a secondary issue and not a primary issue. There's many, many more things to be said about this.

What I hope our discussion has done today is to get you to understand, if nothing else, that this is important to God. And we ought to try to dig at it, get down to it and try to work it through. And where we have reasoned improperly or failed to understand a nuance of the Scripture, we need to be willing to change on that.

I used to do this when I taught the sacraments at seminary level, I would have the students that were both from Reformed tradition, from the Baptist tradition and I would do this, I would make the students from the Reformed tradition write a term paper on the case against infant baptism. And I would make the Baptist guys write a paper on the case for infant baptism. And I wouldn't grade them on what they personally believe, I would grade them on how accurate they were in their articulation of the different positions because most of us, unfortunately, just follow our traditions, as John said, blindly accept the Christian subculturalist's view in which we have grown up and just carry it on when this is something we should search the Scriptures and understand what God wants us to do and then

do it. Let's pray.

Father, we thank You for Your words. We thank You for the outward signs that You give that demonstrate the truthfulness of Your Word. We pray that we may be faithful both to Your Word and to those signs that You've given to Your church. We ask it in Jesus name.

Part 1: [Case for Believer's Baptism: The Credo Baptist Position](#)

Available online at: <http://www.gty.org>

COPYRIGHT (C) 2026 Grace to You

You may reproduce this Grace to You content for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Grace to You's Copyright Policy (<https://www.gty.org/about#copyright>).