

Baptism

by Sebastian R. Fama

Some Christians consider baptism to be a mere ordinance, a symbol of one's commitment to Christ. As a result, they only baptize adults who have made such a commitment. To their way of thinking, baptizing infants would serve no purpose. Catholics see baptism a little differently. We see it as one of the sacraments of Initiation. We believe that its reception imparts both actual and sanctifying grace.

In Acts 2:38-39, Peter says, "**Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children** and to all that are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to Him."

Why would Peter mention children if it only applied to adults? I suppose someone could say that it would apply to them in the future. But isn't that a given? If something is for adults it obviously would be for your children once they became adults. I think Peter mentions children here because he meant that it applied to them at that very moment. Given the nature of baptism, that actually makes a lot of sense. Peter said we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit in baptism. Through the Holy Spirit we receive grace. And it is grace that enables us to be who God wants us to be.

So why would an infant need grace? Because their entire existence is a learning experience. We teach them how to eat, how to communicate, how to behave and a thousand other things. And if we are Christians, we teach them about Jesus. First Corinthians 12:3 tells us that "no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except by the Holy Spirit." If an adult needs the Holy Spirit to recognize his need for God, then so does a child. At Baptism there is an infusion of grace. If the grace an infant receives at Baptism is nourished (in a Christian atmosphere) it grows; if not, it dies. Grace enables us to hear and accept the Gospel not only as adults but also as children hearing it for the first time. Does that mean that our small children are supposed to be little theologians? No, of course not. But they do need to understand God on their own level. That He is a loving Father who they can cry out to. A God who wants them to be happy forever.

In his book "The Faith of Millions," Fr. John O'Brien writes: "While there is no explicit mention of the baptizing of infants in the New Testament, it is highly probable that there were some babes among the families of Lydia, Stephanas, and the Jailer at Philippi, where in each instance St. Paul baptized the whole family" (Acts 16:14-15, Acts 16:29-34 and 1 Corinthians 1:16).

In Colossians 2:11-12 Paul alludes to infant baptism when he tells us that Baptism has replaced circumcision. Circumcision took place on the eighth day after birth (Genesis 17:12). We know that the early Christians baptized their infants on the eighth day after birth because the third Council of Carthage decreed in the year 252, that baptism of children need not be deferred until the eighth day after birth as some maintained, but might be administered as soon as possible (Cyprian of Carthage, *Epistle 64:2* [A.D. 253]). When someone became a Jew, they were circumcised. And when someone became a Christian, they were baptized: "For by one Spirit we were all **baptized into one body**" (1 Corinthians 12:13).

That infants can benefit spiritually is clearly seen in Luke 18:15-16: "Now they were bringing even infants to Him that He might touch them. And when the disciples saw it they rebuked them. But Jesus called them to Him saying, 'Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God.'" Mark finishes the story in his account, "And He took them in His arms and blessed them, laying His hands upon them" (Mark 10:16).

The Waldenses and the Cathari were the first to raise objections to infant Baptism (12th century). Modern day objections can be traced back to the Anabaptists who were a part of the Protestant Reformation (16th century). However, there are no early Christian writers who condemn the practice. In fact, there is much written in support of it. Irenaeus was a disciple of Polycarp who was a disciple of the Apostle John, he wrote: "**Christ came to save all who through Him are born again unto God, infants and children, boys and youths, and aged persons**" (*Against Heresies 2, 22:4* [A.D. 189]). Origen wrote: "**Baptism is given even to infants**" (*Homilies in Leviticus 8:3* [A.D. 248]).

When we make a personal commitment to Christ (post baptism) it is our conscious decision to keep and maintain what God has already given us. Baptism doesn't guarantee one's salvation; rather one is saved as a result of responding positively to the grace we receive.

People are sometimes asked by friends or even strangers if they have been born again? What the questioner usually means by that is "have you accepted Christ as your personal Lord and Savior." If you have, they would consider you to be born again and on your way to heaven. This is all based on John 3:3-5. While committing your life to Christ is a good thing to do, this passage is actually speaking about baptism. In verse 3 Jesus tells Nicodemus that he must be born again in order to see the kingdom of God. But Nicodemus does not understand what He means. So, Jesus gives him a fuller explanation in verse 5. Listen to what He says: "Unless one is born of water and spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God." That is baptism. Water cleanses our souls and the Holy Spirit bestows grace (see Acts 2:38-39 above).

Of course, there is a sense in which the other interpretation is true. If someone truly gives their life to Christ, there is a rebirth. As we read in 2 Corinthians 5:17: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come." But John is talking about something different here. He doesn't disagree with Paul; he is just talking about something else.

The Greek word rendered as "again" is *anōthen* (ἀνωθεν). *Anōthen* is a word that can mean one of two things. It can mean again as in to repeat something. And that is the way that Nicodemus seems to understand it. But it can also mean "from above." And judging by His comments to Nicodemus that is exactly the way Jesus meant it. And that is exactly the way the early church saw it. Justin Martyr described baptism this way:

Then they are brought by us where there is water and are regenerated in the same manner in which we were ourselves regenerated. For, in the name of God, the Father... and of our Savior Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit [Matt. 28:19], they then receive the washing with water. For Christ also said, "Unless you are born again, you shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven" (*First Apology* 61 [A.D. 151]).

Being born from above is another way of saying being born of the Spirit. Remember what John the Baptist said of **Jesus**: "This is **He who baptizes with the Holy Spirit**" (John 1:33). And that is exactly what Jesus does in the sacrament of baptism.

Some maintain that only baptism by total immersion is valid. However, the Early Church administered baptism in three ways. Some were baptized by total immersion and some were baptized by having water poured or sprinkled over the head. Cyprian of Carthage confirms this in one of his letters:

In the saving sacraments, when necessity compels and when God bestows His pardon, divine benefits are bestowed fully upon believers, nor ought anyone be disturbed because the sick are poured upon or sprinkled when they receive the Lord's grace (*Letter to a Certain Magnus* 69 [A.D. 254]).

There are three types of baptism. Aside from water baptism there is baptism of desire. If a person comes to believe in Jesus but does not know that baptism is required or else dies before it could be administered, his honest desire for Christ would be enough. Likewise, water baptism is not a requirement for those who are martyred upon conversion. The Church refers to this as Baptism of Blood. While water Baptism is normative, God is not legalistic. What is most important to Him is the condition of one's heart (1 Samuel 16:7, 1 Corinthians 4:5). Thus, all those who truly desire God shall have Him.