

## Children in the Church

Under the Abrahamic covenant, those who were born within the covenant community received the sign of the covenant as infants. Because the Abrahamic covenant remains in effect, but with the sign of it having been changed, it follows that those who are born within the covenant community should be baptized as infants, just as they were formerly circumcised as infants. They should be baptized at the start of the discipling process, as outlined by Jesus.

## Faith and Baptism

As we have seen, circumcision under the Abrahamic covenant was applied to infants on the basis of parental faith (Gen. 17; Rom. 4:11). Since we today are part of that covenant through faith in Christ, the new sign of the covenant, water baptism, should likewise be applied to infants on the basis of parental faith.

That theological conclusion is confirmed by the accounts in the book of Acts which reveal that whole households were commonly baptized on the basis of the faith of the head of the household.

The most detailed and informative account for this conclusion is that of the Philippian jailer (Acts 16:30–34). “Believe in the Lord Jesus,” he was told, “and thou shalt be saved, and thy house.” (vs. 31; cf. 11:14). Accordingly, the gospel was preached “to him and to all that were in his house.” (vs. 32). In response, he “believing God with all his house.” (vs. 34), whereupon “was baptized, and all his house immediately.” (vs. 33). The key word in this passage is “with.” (vs 34) It signifies accompaniment.

When Luke says that the jailer heard the gospel and believed with his household, the implication is that everyone in his household went along with him. Any older household members, such as his wife, evidently became believers, too. But any young children went along with their father, following his lead with whatever limited understanding that they had.

This crucial distinction between “with” and “and” is clear in similar passages in Acts: 1:14; 3:4; 4:27; 5:1; 10:2; 14:13; 15:22; 21:5. In each case, “with” introduces those who follow the lead of others and join with them in their activity, however actively or passively. In Acts 21:5, for example, Paul is escorted to the harbor by all the men in the church at Tyre, “with wives and children,” which no doubt included a number of small

infants.

In the household baptism passages, the head of the house always believes “with” his household, but he and they are baptized. Just as the heads of households escorted Paul to the harbor “with” infants who were only passive participants, so also heads of households were baptized “with” whatever infants were in their families.

Some would argue that there may not have been any infants in these households mentioned in Acts. However, household baptism was evidently a common practice in the apostolic church (see also 1 Cor. 1:16). It must have happened thousands of times, often including infants.

## You and Your Children

Paul’s promise to the Philippian jailer, that salvation would come to his whole house if he believed in Jesus, was no different from what Peter told three thousand adult converts at Pentecost. The promise of the Holy Spirit, Peter said, was “to you, and to your children, and to all that are far off, whomsoever the Lord our God shall call.” (Acts 2:39).

These converts had just been called by the Lord into fellowship with himself, and many other adults (them that are “far off”) would be called in the future, but the children of these converts formed a third category: they were called into fellowship with Christ together with their parents (or even merely one parent: see 1 Cor. 7:14). Such is the grace of God to the children of believers! We can only infer that the children of the first Christian converts were baptized, brought up in the Christian faith (see Eph. 6:1–4; Col. 3:20–21), and, at some point were confirmed.



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## Is Infant Baptism Christian?

The practice of infant baptism has no explicit biblical support. There is no example of anyone born to Christian parents being baptized in the New Testament at any age, and no precept addresses their specific situation. The time and circumstances that are appropriate for baptizing such children must be inferred from general biblical teaching concerning baptism.

There are many good people who insist that infant baptism is not baptism at all. This is because they have a different understanding of baptism. In their view, baptism is principally a testimony given by the person baptized, first in word and then symbolically in water. Since an infant cannot give a testimony, a genuine infant baptism is an impossibility.

However, the Bible nowhere portrays baptism as the testimony of the person baptized. Passages that link faith to baptism (such as Acts 8:12; 18:8) simply show that faith, publicly professed, is a necessary condition for baptism. Indeed, it is appropriate to include a statement of faith in the baptismal ceremony. However, a baptism itself (the application of water, with accompanying words) is a statement by God (through the Church) to and about the person being baptized, not a statement by that person. The person baptized, under the norm, is the recipient of baptism from a Priest of Jesus Christ, acting in his name (Matt. 28:18–20; cf. Acts 2:37–42; 8:16; 35–38).

Once we recognize that faith is a condition for baptism, and that baptism itself is not a demonstration of faith by the person baptized, the question can be asked, Whose faith is required? As we look now at the relevant biblical teaching, we will see that the faith of parents fully suffices for the baptism of their children.

## Baptism and Discipleship

When Jesus instituted Christian baptism, he instructed his disciples to “teach ye all nations; baptizing ... [and] Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you.” (Matt. 28:19–20). Baptism, then, begins the discipling process, which continues throughout one’s life. Everyone recognizes that the children of believers should “obey their parents in the Lord” (Eph. 6:1–3, 4). But this passage indicates that they should be baptized first.

On the Day of Pentecost, those who received and were converted by the Word preached by Peter “were baptized; and there were added (to the Church) in that day about three thousand souls.” (Acts 2:41). They then received instruction “in the apostles’ doctrines” and participated fully in the Holy Eucharist and in prayer (vs. 42). Again we see that baptism marks one’s entrance into the church, into the fellowship of the saints. But what about the children of these converts? Were they baptized and included in the church fellowship? There are those who want to leave children unbaptized but include them in the life of the church, but that is not the pattern that God has handed down to us.

### Children of Abraham

In order to understand the proper place of children in the Church, it is necessary to understand that the Church consists of those who have received the promise of spiritual blessing that was given to Abraham. The third chapter of Galatians spells this out carefully, concluding, “And if you be Christ’s, then are you the seed of Abraham, heirs according to the promise.” (Galatians 3:29).

This means that the covenant that God made with Abraham remains in effect today. Otherwise, we could not be Abraham’s offspring, receiving what was promised to him and his descendants.

After Abraham believed God and exercised faith in God’s covenant promises, it was reputed to him unto justice (Gen. 15:6), the Lord added the rite of circumcision to the covenant arrangement (Gen. 17:9–14). He received “the sign of circumcision, a seal of the justice of the faith, which he [already] had, being uncircumcised” (Rom. 4:11). Because Abraham was made justice as the result of his faith, he was circumcised as a sign given by God that sealed that justification. Physical, outward circumcision signified spiritual, inward cleansing of the heart, a spiritual reality for Abraham and all his true, believing descendants. “For he is not a Jew, who is so outwardly; nor is that circumcision which is outwardly in the flesh: But he is a Jew, that is one inwardly; and the circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God. (Romans 2:28–29) Also read Ezekiel 44:7.

Not only Abraham, but henceforth all males that were eight days old was to be circumcised among them. throughout all generations (Gen. 17:12–13).

Circumcision marked one’s entrance into the covenant community; without it, that soul shall be cut off from his people: because he hath broken my covenant.” (vs. 14).

This was God’s way of signifying that the promises given to faithful Abraham extended also to his children (and anyone else who came under and accepted his authority).

### A New Covenant Sign

Into the circumcised community was born Jesus, in whom the promise of the Spirit by faith for all peoples of the world, not just Jews, would come. (Gal. 3:8–9, 14). The line of physical descent from Abraham reached its climax in the person of Jesus (Galatians 16, 19). After him, only spiritual descent mattered (vss. 7–9, 25–26). Converts would no longer be incorporated into the nation of Israel.

Consequently, a covenant sign that focused on physical descent through the male line was no longer appropriate. A new sign of the covenant was needed—one that all people, whether Jew or Gentile, male or female, could receive. As we have seen, water baptism was instituted by Jesus as the new sign of entrance into the community of faith. Essentially, then, baptism replaced circumcision.

The change from circumcision to baptism is reflected in Acts 8:12, where we read that Samaritans were being baptized, “both men and women” There is no reason to point out that people of both genders were now receiving the sign of the covenant, except to contrast it with the old sign of the covenant. Implied in this contrast is the fact that baptism had replaced circumcision.

### Spiritual Circumcision

There were Judaizers in the church who wanted Gentile converts to be circumcised and to follow the whole Mosaic law. But in various epistles, Paul insisted that Christians not only had nothing to gain from circumcision and Judaism, but actually had everything to lose! Writing to the Colossians, he declared that Christians were complete in Christ and should not look to Judaism or any other religion to supplement their faith (Col. 2:8–23). His statements specifically about circumcision and baptism, in verses 11–12, deserve close attention. In these verses we read, “ In whom also ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without

hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ: Buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with him through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him from the dead.”

Christians have no need for physical circumcision, Paul indicates, because “in Him”—that is, as part of their spiritual union with Christ—they have already been “circumcised with a circumcision made without hands” (vs. 11). That is, they have already received that inward circumcision, that spiritual cleansing of the heart, that is effected by the Holy Spirit. In Romans 2:28–29, Paul refers to this as inward circumcision, “of the heart, in the spirit, not in the letter.”

This circumcision of Christ, Paul continues, consists of “putting off, disposing of the body of the sins of the flesh” (Col. 2:11). In other words, physical circumcision removes a small piece of flesh. But spiritual circumcision, removes or puts off the whole body of sinful flesh, that is, “our old man”, (our old self), “that the body of sin (the desires of the old self or the oldman) may be destroyed”.

This spiritual cleansing, Paul continues, is effected in “the circumcision of Christ” (Col. 2:11). Since this verse has all along been speaking of the spiritual experience of the sinner, “the circumcision of Christ” must likewise be something in Christian experience, not something in the life of Jesus (as some suppose). It is the spiritual circumcising that belongs to Christ—“the circumcision done by Christ” or simply “Christian circumcision.”

Christians have been “you were raised to life because you had faith in the power of God, who raised Christ from death” (Col. 2:12). “For we are buried together with him by baptism into death, that as Christ is risen from the dead...so we also may walk in newness of life.” (Rom. 6:4).

It is part of the teaching of Colossians 2:11–12, then, that baptism has replaced circumcision for the covenant community. The Abrahamic covenant is fulfilled in the new covenant, and circumcision has been replaced by baptism as the sign and seal of the righteousness of faith.