

## Infant Baptism at Church of the Holy Spirit

It is the regular practice at Church of the Holy Spirit to baptize two groups of people. The first group consists of men, women, and children who demonstrate both a genuine faith in Jesus Christ and a desire to join the church family (i.e., "believer's baptism"). The second group consists of the infants and children of Church of the Holy Spirit members.

*"Why do you baptize infants and children who have not yet made a public profession of faith in Christ?"*

The simple answer to this question is that (1) while we firmly believe this is *not* an issue over which Christians should divide, yet (2) we are convinced that both the Bible and early church history support the practice of household baptism, which includes infants and young children. Following are some of the factors that have led us to this conclusion.

### **Biblical Rationale**

It is the belief of The Anglican Church of Rwanda and of Church of the Holy Spirit that God's covenant of grace (His promise to be our God and have us as His people), in a mysterious way that we cannot quite grasp, extends to the children of believers. Such children, we believe, therefore have a right to the covenant sign, which in the New Testament is baptism (in the Old Testament the sign was circumcision). Following is a detailed reasoning of why we, at the request of those who share our beliefs on this matter, will baptize infants, as well as other children in a believing household who have not yet made a profession of faith.

### **In the New Testament, baptism replaces circumcision as the sign of the covenant.**

- Colossians 2:11-12 teaches that baptism is the full expression of circumcision. The covenant of circumcision required that the infant male be circumcised as a newborn infant (Genesis 17:12), and this covenant was to be an *everlasting* covenant (Genesis 17:13). Physical circumcision is clearly no longer in effect (Galatians 6:11-18), but the covenant it represents *is* still in effect (Romans 2:29). The new outward sign of this "everlasting" covenant with believers and their children is baptism (Colossians 2:11-12). Therefore, we believe it follows, then, that baptism is to be administered to the children of believing parents.
- Acts 2:38-39 describes baptism with virtually the same language and terms with which Genesis 17:9-14 describes circumcision. The promise connected with baptism in Acts 2:38-39 explicitly includes the children of believers, as did the promise connected with circumcision in Genesis 17:9-14. No mention of a required age or profession of faith is made with respect to such children.
- As circumcision was a requirement for the Old Testament household (Genesis 17:10, 12-13), so, we believe, was baptism for the New Testament household (Acts 16:15, 31-33; 1 Corinthians 1:16). Never once are children said to be excluded from a household baptism, except in the case of the Ethiopian eunuch, who obviously had no children.
- There is no biblical command given for believers to cease the application of the covenant sign with their children.

### **In the New Testament, believers' children were regarded as members of the covenant community.**

- In Luke 18:15-17, Jesus said that God's Kingdom belongs to little children (from the Greek *brephe*, which literally means "baby" or "infant").
- In Ephesians 6:1-4 and Colossians 3:20-21 Paul addresses children (from the Greek *tekna*, meaning "child") as believers in Christ. He speaks to them as he would any saint, regardless of age.
- In 1 Corinthians 7:14 Paul refers to the children (*tekna*) of believers as "holy" (meaning set apart for God). The word translated "holy" (*hagia*) is the exact same word used elsewhere by the apostles in reference to believers (translated "saints" – see Ephesians 1:1, for example). The New Testament assumption, then, is that

children of believers should be *regarded* and *treated* as believers unless or until they prove themselves to be covenant breakers.

- In 2 Timothy 3:15, Timothy is said to have known the Scriptures from infancy (*brephe*).
- In Luke 1:15, John the Baptist is said to have been filled with the Spirit, "even from his mother's womb."
- The New Testament suggests nowhere that the sign of the covenant (previously circumcision, now baptism) is to be withheld from the children of believers until they make an informed profession of faith in Christ.

**Our position on infant baptism does not reflect a belief that baptism itself saves a child.** In order to be saved, a child must possess his / her own personal faith in Jesus as Savior and Lord. The initial seeds of faith may or may not be in chronological union with the time of baptism. When a child professes faith at some point after baptism, that is the time in which the baptism and all that it signifies takes full effect. Until that time, the child's baptism is regarded as the sign of the child's inclusion in the church community (and all its benefits, except the Lord's Supper) by virtue of his / her parents' faith and the promise of God to be "their God and the God of their children."

## Historical Rationale

While the Scripture does not speak specifically to the baptism of infants in the early church, there is Biblical suggestion as well as historical evidence that household baptism was practiced at that time.

- Irenaeus (a disciple of Polycarp, who was a disciple of the apostle John) speaks of infant baptism as a universal practice in the early church.
- Tertullian (end of 2<sup>nd</sup> century) acknowledged the universal practice of infant baptism.
- Origen (2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries) spoke of infant baptism as the common practice of the early church.
- These things being the case, were household (and consequently infant) baptism *not* the New Testament church practice, then the conclusion must be made that a full reversal of the early church's practice occurred immediately following the death of the last apostle. Because there is neither biblical nor extra-biblical evidence indicating so much as a debate about this issue in the first or second centuries, such a reversal is extremely unlikely. We conclude this in large part because there is a wealth of documentation about virtually every other theological debate and/or alleged "heresy" in the early church.

## Our Attitude about Household Baptism

We encourage household baptism at Church of the Holy Spirit, but *do not require it* of those who cannot accept it. To us the biblical and supporting historical teaching seems clear, so we do encourage Church of the Holy Spirit parents to have their children baptized. However, parents who are not convinced of our position are *not* required to have their children baptized in order to be fully active and fully received church members, and will not in any way be pressured to do so. This is an issue about which we are happy to disagree without it being any hindrance at all to full Christian fellowship. We will under no circumstance make this "non-essential" issue an essential one.

## Summary:

### What does child baptism signify?

- *An outward sign of God's promises to the children of believers.* According to Scripture, baptism signifies the promise of God that He will give His Spirit to believers and their children. We take this to mean two things: First, that the child will be exposed to the work of the Spirit as he / she is raised in a Christian home and church where the Word of God is taught and lived. Second, that the child's parents can look expectantly to God for the salvation of their child, as the child is brought up in the ways of God.
- *An outward sign of the child's inclusion in the community of faith.* Like circumcision, in Scripture baptism represented the child's inclusion in the church community. By virtue of his / her baptism, the child becomes a "non-communing member" of the church, and is entitled to all the benefits of a full church member, except (1) the right to receive the Lord's Supper, which first requires a credible profession of faith in Christ, and (2) the right to vote as a church member.
- *An outward sign of Jesus' heart for children.* Through child baptism the entire church community acknowledges Jesus' statement that the kingdom of God belongs to little ones. Jesus regularly included little children and babies in His fellowship.

### What child baptism does not signify.

Baptism does *not* signify that the child is instantaneously saved upon baptism. There is no "magic" that takes place in this sacrament. The child's salvation will be secured, as far as his / her parents and church are concerned, at the moment in which the child is converted to Christ through faith and repentance, not at the moment of baptism.

### Parental promises at covenant baptism.

At Church of the Holy Spirit, we encourage parents to study and take very seriously the promises they make at the baptism of their child. Along with the sacrament comes a solemn responsibility for parents, as well as the entire church family, to cooperate with the Spirit of God in the child's spiritual upbringing. Following are the promises parents will take at baptism, along with explanations of each promise. Before bringing their child before the congregation for baptism, parents are asked to examine each promise to make certain they can assent to it with a clear conscience.

**Promise 1: "Do you acknowledge your child's need of the cleansing blood of Jesus Christ, and the renewing grace of the Holy Spirit?"** In saying "yes" to this question, parents acknowledge that their child can only be saved by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ. The child is not a "Christian" by virtue of having Christian parents, or by virtue of being active at the church. The child must possess his / her own faith, something that will occur only when the Holy Spirit draws the child to God through faith in Christ.

**Promise 2: "Do you claim God's covenant promises in your child's behalf, and do you look in faith to the Lord Jesus Christ for his / her salvation, as you do for your own?"** In saying "yes" to this question, parents acknowledge that God has made specific promises to them as Christian parents regarding their child, and they will claim these promises with reasonable hope that their child will be given the gift of faith, and in so doing will turn from sin and to Jesus.

**Promise 3: “Do you now unreservedly dedicate your child to God, and promise, in humble reliance upon divine grace, that you will endeavor to set before him / her a godly example, that you will pray with and for him / her, that you will teach him / her the doctrines of the Christian faith, and that you will strive, by all the means of God’s appointment, to bring him / her up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord?”** In saying “yes” to this question, parents commit themselves, in reliance upon the grace of God, to give their child to the Lord,<sup>1</sup> and raise their child according to God’s instruction. This means first that they will be careful to live a godly and upright life, according to the teaching of Scripture, as an ongoing example to their child.<sup>2</sup> Second, this means that they will regularly pray for their child’s salvation and Christian growth, and that they will teach their child how to pray beginning at infancy and continuing throughout life. Third, this means that parents will teach their child the Scriptures and the truths of the Christian faith in the home, and will not view the church as the chief means for their child’s spiritual training, but merely as a reinforcement to the training that they will do in the home. Parents also commit to creating a home environment that breathes the air of the Gospel. One of the most significant practices parents can model for their children is that of regular confession and repentance within the family.

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<sup>1</sup> **1 Samuel 1:27-28** <sup>27</sup>I prayed for this child, and the LORD has granted me what I asked of him. <sup>28</sup> So now I give him to the LORD. For his whole life he will be given over to the LORD.” And he worshiped the LORD there.

<sup>2</sup> **1 Timothy 4:16** Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers. (This command is directed toward church leaders, but it applies to those who lead their children in the home also.)