

Baptism: God's promise to us
Acts 2:37-41

So, why do we baptize children, anyway? I know, we've always done it that way, and that is generally a sufficient answer in Presbyterian circles. But why? And how does today's passage support the practice of infant baptism?

Well, look at verse 39. Here, Peter says the promise of God is for you and for your children. That means there is a sense in which all these promises of God also apply to the children of believers.

Now, Peter's Jewish listeners would have understood this a bit more instinctively than we individualistic Americans do. After all, most of them had become part of God's covenant community by being born into it. The boys had received the mark of covenant membership, circumcision, when they were eight days old. They knew that they were part of God's chosen people because God had chosen them, not because they had chosen to be Jewish.

And just as God promised His Old Testament people that their children would be included in the covenant, just so we Christians believe that God will include our children in His covenant family as well. And just as God's Old Testament people marked their children with the sign of circumcision, so Christians mark their children with the sign of baptism.

No, this doesn't mean that our children are exempt from the need to express their own faith in Christ. This doesn't mean we believe you are saved because you have gotten wet in church.

But it does mean that we promise to keep our children clean from much of the cultural dirt that we find in this world, rearing them in a Christian way, and expecting them to behave differently than the children of the world. It does mean that we expect God to bring our children to faith in due time, because of the promise He has made to us. We expect God to honor the covenant promises He has made to the whole covenant community, the promises that Peter says are for us and for our children.

But wouldn't it be better to wait to baptize children until they can outwardly profess their faith in Christ? After all, we can't deny that some children who are brought up in Christian homes do in fact go astray. Wouldn't reserving baptism for professing believers be a more accurate way to ensure that everyone who has received the outward sign of baptism is actually living in union with Christ?

After all, since baptism is a washing with water, doesn't it first require an admission that someone does in fact need to be washed? Doesn't it thus require a confession of sin? Yes, but true repentance goes much deeper than that. For repentance is more radical than just turning away from some things that we know are wrong to do. No, we must turn away from our old lives, from our very selves and turn toward God in all things, dying to self and living solely for God and His glory. And that, in turn, means that the primary motivating factor in our lives must be that God would be glorified, not that we would be happy, or even that we would be saved from hell. True repentance thus requires us to change that the whole direction of our lives.

And the engine of this change is our union with Christ, the main truth to which baptism points. For we are baptized literally into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.

And the result of our union with Christ is that our sins are forgiven. With Christ in us, we have already died with Him, so the guilt of sin can no longer hang over us. With Christ in us, we have already died to the power of sin, so we can no longer be compelled to break God's law. It is this new freedom from sin that the washing of baptism illustrates. Union with Christ washes us clean of our sins.

But better still, union with Christ brings along with it the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the amazing truth is that everyone who is in Christ has the Holy Spirit living within him. And that means that the power of God is not just with us. It is not just available to us.

No, the amazing truth is that for all Christians, God Himself is living within us, empowering us to hear the gospel, empowering us to confess our sins, empowering us to repent, empowering us to put our old self to death and to live for Jesus. It is the outpouring of the Holy Spirit to which the water of baptism also points.

Wow. The need for repentance, turning away from our sins and turning to Christ in faith, the promise that God would unite us to Himself, washing us clean and giving us His Holy Spirit. That's a lot of meaning packed into baptism.

"But, preacher, all that makes it sound like we should wait to baptize people until after they do all this: until after they repent, profess their faith in Christ, and thus after they are filled with the Holy Spirit. How does any of this fit with baptizing infants?"

Wait a minute, and think again. How do you know that the person who is making the public profession of faith is really repentant? How do you know that the person who is stating his faith in Jesus is really filled with the Holy Spirit? What makes you think that the professing Christian should receive baptism, the outward sign of a spiritual union with Christ?

You believe those things because of the promise of God, the promise contained in verse 38. Here we have the promise that those who repent are connected to Christ and His Spirit, and should thus receive the sign of baptism. We thus baptize professing believers because of the promise of God.

Because it's not as though the action of making a public profession of faith actually saves someone, any more than the action of baptism with water does. In fact, no matter how strange it may seem, it's also true that the action of repentance doesn't initiate the process of salvation.

Think about what happens in this very passage. The men of Jerusalem were encouraged to repent in verse 39, but by that time, something had already happened to them. Look back at verse 37. They were listening to Peter's sermon, and they were pricked in their heart. Who did that? Who cut them to the heart, convicting them of their sin and giving them a desire to repent?

Remember, these were the men of Jerusalem. Peter says that they were the very same people who a few months earlier had been standing in the same streets, shouting for Pilate to crucify Jesus. Many of them therefore must have heard at least some of Jesus' preaching in the temple. All of them had to have known about the many amazing miracles He had done.

But somehow it was only at this moment, only after Peter's Pentecost sermon that they were cut to the heart. Somehow, even though they hadn't listened to Jesus, they listened to Peter. So something must have happened to Peter's listeners before they were able to accept the gospel and really hear what he had to say. Someone had to pierce their hearts, cracking through the hard outer shell, bringing them to true repentance. Someone had to cut them to the heart.

That someone was God. That pricking of their hearts was only possible because God had already begun a work in the lives of those men, removing their hearts of stone, and giving them hearts of flesh, hearts that were able to respond to the gospel in faith. God had thus already brought them back to life in verse 37, before they even heard Peter's challenge to repent.

Is that really right? Well, think about what we read responsively from Ephesians 2 this morning. We read that we were dead in sin, but God made us alive in Christ. Thus, it is only after we have been given new life that we can trust Jesus to save us.

And that makes sense if you think about it. For we don't have evangelistic rallies in cemeteries, do we? Everyone knows that dead men can't hear or understand the gospel. Just so, God is the One Who takes the initiative in salvation. God is the one who first gives us new life and thus God is the One Who enables us to respond to the gospel with repentance and faith.

And all of that means that repentance isn't the cause of new life. No, repentance is instead the response to the new life that already exists within a Christian. Our outward confession of sin and our outward profession of faith in Christ are thus evidences of a prior, inner, invisible work of God's Holy Spirit.

And Peter recognizes this in verse 39 as well, when he says that the promise of God is for "as many as the Lord our God shall call." For it is only those who God calls out of death and into newness of life who can respond to Him in faith. Only those who God calls can thus demonstrate the outward profession of faith that is in turn the evidence of that new life that He has already given them.

So, why do we baptize infants? For the same reason that we baptize professing believers: because we trust the promises of God.

In verse 38, God promises that those who demonstrate repentance and thus profess faith are joined to Christ. Because we take God's word for this, we baptize professing believers, administering an outward and visible sign of the inner reality that we trust is present and real. Just so, in verse 39, God says that this promise is also for the children of believers, and so we administer the outward sign of union with Christ to them as well, trusting God's promise that it reflects an inward reality.

Now, this inward reality may not be manifested in words or deeds for some years to come, just as professing Christians don't always outwardly demonstrate the inner reality of their new life in Christ. But the good news of the gospel is that we don't save ourselves by our good words or our good works any more than those Jerusalem sinners saved themselves by their repentance. It is God who pricks the conscience of sinners, not us. It is God Who brings new life to the dead, not us.

And it is our supremely passive role in salvation that is so eloquently expressed in the baptism of infants. After all, who could be more helpless than an infant? But in reality all baptism is passive – we have water poured or sprinkled on us – we cannot baptize ourselves.

So, let's rejoice in the promises of God. For God promises nothing less than Himself to the recipients of baptism. By His grace alone He promises that He will be our God and we will be His covenant people. That is the good news of the gospel. That is the good news of baptism.