

Baptism

by Sebastian R. Fama

Some Protestants see baptism as 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.

A question frequently asked by some Protestants is: "Have you been born again?" What they mean by this is "Have you accepted Christ as your Lord and Savior?" If you have then you are said to be "born again." In actuality it is through Baptism that we are born again. As the Scriptures tell us: "Unless one is **born of water and spirit**, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God" (John 3:3).

Of course, there is a sense in which the Protestant 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. Reading the verse in context illustrates the point. The NIV translates it this way:

Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him." Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, **no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.**"

"How can someone be born when they are old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!" Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, **no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit.** Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit." (John 3:1-6).

The Greek word rendered as "again" is another (*ἄνωθεν*). Another 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.

Being born from above is another way of saying born of the Spirit. And Jesus describes how that will happen when He says, "no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit." **Water and the Spirit**, Jesus is talking about Baptism. Remember that 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. The "*Didache*" was written between 70 and 150 AD. It was a handbook of Christian practice. It tells us that those being baptized could be immersed in water, but if it wasn't practical, "**sprinkle water three times on the head**" (2:7). Tertullian, writing in the second century, describes Baptism as, "**a sprinkling of any kind of water**" (*Baptism* 6:1). So when would immersion be impractical? Immersion would be impractical for those converted in colder climates or in prison. Total immersion would also be impractical for the sick and the dying.

There are three types of baptism. Aside from water baptism there is baptism of desire. If a person comes to believe in Jesus but doesn't 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). All those who truly desire God shall have Him.