

New Article on Justification by Faith



I regularly teach a course entitled *The Anglican Way of Theology* at an “Evangelical seminary in the Anglican tradition.” We begin the course with the English Reformation, and I am repeatedly surprised when I discover every year as I grade student papers that the Reformation doctrine of “justification by grace alone through faith alone” is frequently misunderstood and causes no end of trouble for my students to get their heads around. There seems to be a lot of confusion about just what the doctrine is, and I find that, in their papers, students either regularly defend, or criticize as troublesome or incoherent, something that they call “justification by faith alone” which is not the Reformation doctrine.

The above is the beginning of a rather lengthy article I have just written about the doctrine of “justification by faith.” The rest of the article can be found in my Pages Section to the left and is entitled [“Anglican Reflections on Justification by Faith”](#).

A Question About Infant Baptism

I received the following email:

Dr. Witt,

I've greatly appreciated many of your posts (your series on the development of doctrine was particularly helpful for understanding what Newman was trying to accomplish and the underlying assumptions of modern Roman Catholic apologists when they try to use it on unsuspecting evangelicals). I also found your summary of the modern debate about normative infant baptism to be helpful in articulating the direction that I have been heading. However, as I read through your article, I could not help but still ask the question: why baptize infants? I'm open (though I had using that term) to infant baptism even though I was reared Baptist and still attend a Baptist church. My frustration with adult-only baptism is that it seems inconsistent with the fact that I was reared (for all intents and purposes) as a Christian even though I hadn't been baptized. Yet, as you noted in your article, adult baptism is the norm in the NT and the Early Church (Everett Ferguson cemented that fact in my mind). I don't want to ramble on, but I hope that helps explain my question. Thanks for your time.

-Ryan

My response follows:

Dear Ryan,

This is a really good question.



I would suggest that the question of infant baptism is a classic question of hermeneutics, as opposed to exegesis. That is, how do we appropriate the teaching of Scripture in a different time and cultural setting, to respond to an issue not explicitly addressed by Scripture? In some ways, I would suggest that infant baptism is the classic case of a hermeneutical question in that the very nature of the question raised presupposes a setting different from that of the apostles. That is, baptism in the New Testament presupposes a missionary setting for the church. It presupposes a setting in which the recipients of the Good News were either Jews who had to consider the question of whether Jesus was the promised Messiah and fulfillment of biblical (not yet Old Testament) promise, or pagan Gentiles, and thus, with very few exceptions, all the members of the church would be converts. The practice of infant baptism presupposes a different cultural setting, a setting in which there is now a second (or even a third) generation of Christians who are the children or perhaps even grandchildren of such converts, and perhaps do not even remember a time when family members were not Christians. What is to be done with the infant children of Christians after this first generation? Should they wait until they have reached an age of sufficient maturity to understand the significance of baptism as discipleship and then be baptized, thus preserving the normative model of believer baptism presupposed in the theology of the New Testament (the Baptist model)? Or should they be baptized as infants, recognizing that, as the children of Christian parents, they do not fit into the category of converts (either from Judaism or from paganism), that as children of Christian believers, they in some sense are certainly members of the Christian

community from birth, and should thus be initiated into the church as the Body of Christ as soon as possible, understanding baptism to be an initiation into the covenant community in analogy with circumcision in the Old Testament (the paedobaptist model)? The problem arises as a hermeneutical one because the New Testament simply does not address the question, "What is to be done with the infants of Christian converts?"

It seems obvious that the early church at some point must have had to address this question, and, the eventually prevailing practice of infant baptism in the patristic church indicates that it was addressed at some point in the early history of the church, which unanimously embraced the practice of infant baptism. We have no records of when such a discussion took place, nor how it was decided. Nor is there any evidence that the decision to baptize infants was controversial. We do have occasional historical references: Tertullian's ambiguous comment, which might suggest that he was challenging an established practice of infant baptism, but could also suggest that he was challenging a new practice; Augustine's indications that he was not baptized as an infant, and that it was common practice in his day to delay baptism, combined with Augustine's arguments against Pelagius in favor of original sin based on the church's universal practice of infant baptism. Was infant baptism universal (as Augustine claims against Pelagius) or was it delayed (as he describes in *The Confessions*); patristic literature describing baptismal rites and catechesis (Cyril of Jerusalem), which describe the baptism of adult converts. The historical evidence simply does not answer the question of when and how the patristic church resolved the question not addressed in the New Testament about what the church should do with the infant children of Christian parents.

That there was a hermeneutical decision made by the church (and not addressed specifically in Scripture) means that the

decision was not necessarily an infallible one, nor necessarily the correct one. (I am neither Roman Catholic nor Eastern Orthodox nor a certain kind of Anglo-Catholic on matters of church tradition.) At the same time, that the decision was made universally with no surviving record of dissent, that it was the universal practice in both East and West until the Reformation, and continues to be practiced by most Reformation churches perhaps says something in its favor. The theological question that has to be addressed is whether the practice of infant baptism so departs from the theological normativity of adult baptism in the New Testament that it indicates not a legitimate hermeneutical appropriation in a new situation, but actually marks an unfaithful departure from New Testament practice.

I grew up in a Baptist church (where believer baptism) was normative, and infant baptism was certainly an obstacle to my joining a church in which infant baptism is the usual practice. Infant baptism is subject to tremendous abuses, and, as we enter into a post-Christian setting, the theological arguments for the church to practice Christian initiation in a manner that makes clear the distinction between the church and the surrounding culture, the necessity of faith and Christian discipleship, makes a lot of sense. I do not think there would be any great harm if the paedobaptist churches would adopt a model of believer baptism. At the same time, I have no illusions that a practice that has been almost universal (with the exception of Mennonites, Baptists, and their theological heirs) is simply going to go away.

I think the strongest theological arguments in favor of infant baptism are: 1) the Reformed emphasis on the continuity between the Old Testament covenant and the New Testament covenant and baptism as corresponding to circumcision as the rite of initiation into the covenant community. As infants were circumcised, so they should be baptized. 2) the Augustinian/Thomist/Anglican emphasis on baptism as the

sacramental initiation into the church as the body of Christ, and baptism as the mediating sacrament by which Christians are first united with Christ in his death and resurrection as the Eucharist is the mediating sacrament by which Christians are continually united to Christ's risen humanity (fed with Christ's body and blood). The ontological reality of baptism as a sacrament indicates that it is appropriate for children of Christians to also be members of Christ's body (and thus the church); 3) the Lutheran emphasis on baptism as the sacrament of justification by faith, and infant baptism as particularly illustrating the prevenient nature of grace.

All three of these positions are subject to abuse: 1) the Reformed position has been stuck with the question of the status of those grown adults baptized as infants who are members of the covenant and yet never show subsequent signs of conversion or faith; are they covenant members or not? 2) the Augustinian/Thomist/Anglican model is subject to viewing baptism as a "magic," a rite that guarantees salvation in such a manner that faith is irrelevant; the "magical" understanding of the covenant is the one most subject to the abuse of indiscriminate baptism; 3) the Lutheran emphasis on baptism as prevenient grace is somewhat at odds with the Lutheran emphasis on justification by faith; how can baptism be a sign of a faith that infants do not have?

The worst theological argument in favor of infant baptism is the contemporary liberal Protestant "inclusiveness" position, which, in my opinion is a kind of fun-house mirror distorted theology of the sacrament. Baptism is not about including as many people as possible into the church. As the sacrament of initiation into the church, baptism marks the boundary between the church and the world, between those who are disciples of Christ, and those who are not. "Inclusiveness" is a heretical theology of baptism.

I think it important in churches that practice paedobaptism that they emphasize a kind of "incompleteness" to infant

baptism in comparison to adult baptism. Infant baptism is a sacrament that points to its completion in an adult exercise of faith that embraces the promises made by one's sponsors when one is baptized as an infant. Thomas Aquinas has an interesting discussion of the question of how regeneration takes place in infant baptism. He ends up embracing a model something along the lines of baptismal conception rather than baptismal regeneration. When infants are baptized, a new life genuinely begins, but, until the child grows to exercise faith as an adult, the promise of baptism points to something future, not yet fully actualized. If the adult never has faith, infant baptism is something like the equivalent of a still-born birth. Without adult faith, the "new birth" associated with baptism never takes place. This "incompleteness" of infant baptism points to the need for a strong catechumenate and taking seriously the necessity of a rite like confirmation as a mature appropriation of one's baptismal promises and a sign of the faith of which baptism is the external sign.

In contrast, in churches that continue to practice exclusive believer (adult) baptism, I think it important to emphasize both the objectivity of and the once for all nature of baptism. Baptism is the sacrament of initiation into the church and the body of Christ, not the altar call. Believer baptism churches have their own way of abusing baptism – reducing it to a mere symbol, and sometimes even practicing rebaptism, a practice that makes baptism a mere confirmation of a subjective conversion experience rather than the sacrament of Christian initiation.

I hope that helps.

Grace and Peace,
Bill Witt