

Infant Baptism: What The Church Teaches

By Fr. John Hainsworth

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Every night my family gathers around the dinner table. We pray, dish out the food, laugh, argue, and ask and answer questions. The scene is sometimes chaotic, sometimes serious, sometimes silly, but this scene defines our family. This table becomes the heart of our family. My girls, when they come to the table, come as full members of the family. They are not invited to the table but excluded from the food. They belong by right to the household, and therefore belong at the dinner table. This right is never questioned, their status never challenged. Do they understand the significance of belonging to the family? Do they appreciate the blessings inherent in membership? Of course not, at least not yet. Will they ever reject this family? Will they break the holy fellowship of that dinner table? Probably not, but even if I worry that they will, I cannot keep from them the family status which they have as a birthright. On the contrary, honoring that status, rejoicing and raising them in it, will do more to preserve them as valuable family members than waiting to offer this membership until I am sure they truly appreciate it.

Why start at the dinner table to talk about the practice of baptizing children in the Orthodox Church? Because the family table, and the family itself, are biblically ideal images for the church altar and the church family. We are born into an earthly family, and born again (John 3:3) into the heavenly family. We eat together at the dinner table, and we feast together at the altar. With God our Father, and the Church our Mother (Revelation 12:1), we gather as children of a holy family, each of us enjoying the full privileges of membership by a baptismal birthright. Do we fathom the many blessings we receive just by virtue of belonging to this family? No, for to do so would be to fathom the depths of the riches of God. Does God still honor us, treat us as His children, still welcome us to His table, still call us His own? Always and forever. We may reject Him, rebel against Him, flee to a far off country. But if we return, we do not return as stewards of His Household, we return as His children, we return as prodigal members of His family. If we do not return, we know that God will never stop His vigil at the gates of our hearts, waiting for the return of His own.

Nevertheless, the ancient, apostolic and biblical practice of baptizing infants and children has been challenged by some in recent times. Let us look at the background and arguments of this debate before we turn to what it means for the Orthodox Church to baptize children. Background

Infant baptism was not controversial in the Church during the first two centuries after Christ. St. Polycarp described himself as having been in devoted service to Christ for 86 years in a manner that would clearly indicate a childhood baptism. Pliny describes with amazement that children belong to the Christian cult in just the same way as do the adults. St. Justin Martyr tells of the "many men and women who have been disciples of Christ from childhood." St. Irenaeus of Lyon wrote about "all who are born again in God, the infants, and the small children . . . and the mature." St. Hippolytus insisted that "first you should baptize the little ones . . . but for those who cannot speak, their parents should speak or another who belongs to their family."

The first recorded opposition to the practice comes from Tertullian in the third century. He objected to the practice of baptizing infants because of the heretical idea that sin after baptism was nearly unforgivable. His dissention should be understood within the larger debates of his day, centered around perceived laxity in church morals and government. Many of the greatest Fathers of the third and fourth centuries were not baptized until they were adults, despite having been born to Christian parents. Among them were St. Basil the Great, St. Augustine, and St. Jerome. The later baptism of these men reflects a larger crisis in the newly legalized Church under St. Constantine. One reason postponing baptism became popular was the desire of some Christians to counteract the new wave of baptisms of pagans wishing only to belong to the faith of their emperor. While not yet a requirement of Roman loyalty or citizenship, baptism ensured that one was on the right side of Rome. Postponing baptism emphasized the significance of the rite, and was an attempt to preserve the genuineness of the life for which baptism served as the initiation. Postponement had nothing to do with the validity of a child's baptism. Many of those Fathers whose baptism was postponed insisted later on that families baptize their new born children, notably St. John Chrysostom, St. Ambrose, and St. Cyril of Alexandria.

Controversy over infant baptism did not arise in its present form until after the Protestant Reformation. Even Martin Luther and John Calvin insisted on the practice. It was with Ulrich Zwingli (1484–1531), of the Swiss Reformed Church, that the first serious objections arose. Several of Zwingli's students re-baptized themselves, proclaiming that they did so because their infant baptisms were invalid since they were not accompanied by professions of faith. This ignited a debate in the early Reformed churches, which was heavily influenced by social and political dimensions as well as theology. Soon after, former Anglican minister John Smyth (1570–1612) and his followers re-baptized themselves and the Baptist Church was born. The 1644 London Confession of the Calvinist Particular Baptists stated, "Baptism is an ordinance of the New Testament, given by Christ, to be dispersed only upon persons professing faith." There are many million Baptists today, and this position on baptism is still among their foremost doctrines.

Protestant objections to baptizing children did not emerge from a vacuum-sealed objective reading of the Scriptures. Such objections arose from assumptions which were of recent origin and should not be retroactively applied to the Scriptures nor to the Church which arose within and around them. Is infant baptism biblical?

Yes, it is. While there is no description of an individual infant being baptized, the Bible describes five separate household baptisms:

- The Household of Cornelius, Acts 11:13–14: “Send men to Joppa, and call for Simon whose surname is Peter, who will tell you words by which you and all your household will be saved.”

- The Household of Lydia, Acts 16:15: “And when she and her household were baptized, she begged us, saying, ‘If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay.’ So she persuaded us.”

- The Philippian Jailor’s Household, Acts 16:33: “And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their stripes. And immediately he and all his family were baptized.”

- The Household of Crispus, Acts 18:8: “Then Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed on the Lord with all his household. And many of the Corinthians, hearing, believed and were baptized.”

- The Household of Stephanas, 1 Corinthians 1:16: “Yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas.”

Some have argued that while the Bible may say “household” or “family”; this does not have to include children. Maybe those households did not include children. While this may be the case, it is hard to imagine that at least one of these households did not include children. And given the fact that we have five explicit references to a whole household being baptized, we have to assume that many, many more such households were baptized. Surely some of them included children.

The word “household” for any Israelite of the day included everybody in the household, children included. We must remember that a household always included children throughout the Scriptures. Every time God established or spoke about His covenant with the House of Israel, it included the whole of Israel: men, women, and children. Noah’s whole “household” was taken into the ark with him (Genesis 7:1); Abraham had his whole household circumcised (Genesis 17:23), and specifically his son Isaac when he was eight days old (Genesis 21:4); the whole household of every family was taken out of Egypt, and God’s institution of the Passover specifically included the children (Exodus 12:24–28). If the Apostles had taught that children were to be excluded from full inclusion in the covenant, such an innovation would not have fit the prophetic covenants which preceded the fulfilled covenant enacted through Christ.

The pattern of the Old Testament covenants formed the framework for the apostolic understanding of the true covenant of Christ, and those covenants included children. They were covenants which were made with a nation, in which every household participated. This is what is expressed in the household baptisms of the New Testament. Even when an individual was baptized, this baptism placed him in a larger body. Individual adult baptisms occurred, but there were no individual covenants.

The Bible teaches us that under the Old Covenant, every male child was circumcised on the eighth day after birth. With his circumcision, the child became a full and complete member of the covenant and could eat of the Passover sacrifice. Baptism in Christ absorbed and fulfilled this rite, as it absorbed all initiation and cleansing rites of the day. Circumcision, we know from the first council in Jerusalem (Acts 15:5; Acts 21:21), was no longer necessary for the Gentile convert or his children. Nowhere in the Bible is it hinted that while absorbing the rite of circumcision, baptism would suddenly and without precedent exclude children. Jesus did not have a problem with children gaining full inclusion to the covenant: He Himself was circumcised as an infant (Luke 2:21), like John the Forerunner (Luke 1:59).

Here we need to introduce a statement by Jesus Himself on the subject of children and faith. In Luke 18, some children are brought to Him to receive a blessing. His disciples try to interfere. But Jesus immediately rebukes them, saying, “Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of God” (Luke 18:16). A sentimental reading of this passage tells us that Jesus loves children, and that we should not stop them from trying to ask questions about Him or wanting to pray to Him, or tell them that they are too young to get to know Him. While this is true, no one the Lord is talking to thought differently. These were people, we have to remember, who circumcised their children, included them in the Passover rituals and taught them from a young age about God, Israel and the Prophetic writings. The Jews were fanatical, by our modern standards, in their desire to raise their children in the faith. This is not a Hallmark moment in the Gospels.

Jesus is in fact including children in His Kingdom. And His inclusion of children in the Kingdom includes them in the covenant He establishes in His Name. There is no partial involvement in the Kingdom of Heaven, just as there is no

partial inclusion in the covenant. We are either members or not. Jesus is saying that children are in, and there is to be no argument about it. There is absolutely no room here to make an argument that children must wait until some magical age before they too can be included with full rights into the Church and at the altar table.

Jesus was once an infant Himself. And Jesus was never separate from God, even in His mother's womb. The heretical Nestorians claimed that Jesus's divinity only descended upon Him at baptism. But the Orthodox Church has always declared that He united God and man from the moment of His conception, and the Orthodox believe that His Kingdom belongs to children. Not only because the covenant is with the whole household; not only because a distinction of age was never introduced into the practice of baptism; not only because such a distinction would not have matched the Old Testament covenants which served as the prophetic model for the New Covenant; but because Christ Himself became incarnate as an infant child. In Him all ages, like all humanity, are sewn into the perfect union expressed in the eucharistic supper of the New Israel, which we join only through baptism. Christ makes both childhood and adulthood fully capable of expressing and participating in the Kingdom of Heaven. But children don't understand the faith!

The assumption behind this objection to infant baptism, one which did not exist in the early Church or in the centuries which followed, is that faith is a product of reason. That to truly believe, our minds must be capable of understanding why we believe, or at least able to provide intellectual consent. For the adult convert to the Orthodox Church, intellectual consent is crucial. Baptism is not magic. It is a voluntary act of submission to God, a consent to live in relationship with God within the covenant He has established through His Son with a larger body of baptized believers, the Church. But at the same time, faith falls flat if it does not go beyond individual reason. It falls flat because it is so individualized, exclusive, and self-centered. Tertullian said famously that "one Christian is no Christian." It is true that our faith must be personal, that we must have a personal relationship with God. But our faith must not be limited to that personal relationship alone. Our relationship with God is valid only if it is realized in communion with the whole Church.

I've spoken of the Church as family, and I want to return to that image. Children can break fellowship with the family if they consider themselves outside the family's fate. They are family members only in so much as they live as part of the family, accepting all the responsibilities and self-sacrifice that such family status demands. I don't have to explain this to my children. They understand from birth that they belong to a larger group, and belong in the most intimate way. They know who their father and mother are and where to go for help and for security. The concept of "family" is beyond them, but the reality of family life is not. In other words, children have a sense of belonging a dozen years or more before they understand what this belonging means.

The earthly family is an image of the heavenly family, the family of the Kingdom of God. Children born to a Christian family are born again into the heavenly family through baptism. A child baptized in the Orthodox Church belongs to a spiritual family. This family bridges both heaven and earth, stretches backward and forward in time and includes both saints and angels. Children belong to this family exactly as each of my daughters belongs to my family. They know in a profound way that they belong long before they have some kind of cerebral understanding of that belonging.

Our modern world so exalts reason and cerebralism that young children are sometimes treated as not fully human, or are at least treated less seriously than adults because they can't think like we do. The truth is that a child is a full human being. A child of any age is capable of expressing and participating in the glory of God. Christ Himself sanctified every age as God-bearing, since He was as much the perfect Word of God as an infant as when He was a grown man. We must remember that children are not second-class persons. Their baptisms are as significant to them and to God as adult baptisms. Even if they do not cognitively understand what that baptism means, they are certainly capable of intuitively understanding it. What if a child leaves or rejects Christ later in life?

This is a real concern, but not a reason to keep children from full membership in the New Covenant by denying them baptism and communion. We should rather accept them as the Lord commanded us to do, because raising them up in the life in Christ will give them a much better chance of carrying this life beyond our parental guardianship. If someone has no intention of raising a child in Christ—if they have no intention of attending church, praying as a family in the home, teaching the Bible, encouraging questions about the faith, and giving their children every opportunity to experience the life of the Church—then they should in no way bring their child to be baptized.

When we decide to baptize a child we make the most solemn of promises to God. We are promising to do everything in our power to bring that child to Christ, and this is a promise that we can only make if we are doing everything we can to draw near to Him ourselves. Children take seriously what we take seriously. If they grow up in a home in which conversations about Christ, prayer, and reading from the Bible and the lives of the saints are part of normal daily life, they will feed off this as much as the food we put on their plates at the dinner table. Children are deeply impressed by candlelight and incense, by flowers at Pascha, by late-night processions during Holy Week, by palm leaves on Palm Sunday, by icons, by lake blessings at Theophany, and by vestments and altar service. All of this fascinates them and draws them into Christ. As a priest, I see just how real the life of faith is to children when they approach the chalice to receive communion. It is in their eyes, and I am humbled. When they see that we are excited and involved, they will become excited and involved. Raising a child in Christ is simple. Just be a child yourself in Christ. Take it seriously. Children take faith very seriously, and we should either honor that faith ourselves or we shouldn't baptize them.

But what if they do leave Christ? What if we do all that we can do and they still walk away? Wouldn't it then have been better not to baptize them? Of course not! Would a responsible parent ever dream of keeping their child outside full family membership until they were sure that the child wants to be in the family? Peter Leithart, a Presbyterian and father of ten children himself, makes an excellent point in his book *Against Christianity: Romans normally excluded children from the dinner table until the age of fifteen or sixteen, at which age boys received the toga virilis that marked their entrance to manhood. Family dinner as we know it was a Christian invention, not some "natural" form of family life. The family dinner is a reflection of the eucharistic meal, the meal that welcomed all members of Christ to the table. Opposition to communion of children is pagan and seeks to reverse the revolutionary table fellowship established by the Church. It is an attempt to return to Egypt.*

The family that eats together should receive communion together, the one an image of the other. A child raised in the fullness of the faith has the greatest of foundations. Every human being is free to do God's will or not. He wants us to choose to do His will. But even when He knows that we won't, He still does not deny us food, clothing, or shelter. He does not deny us love, joy, long life, and children of our own. Will we be so afraid of what our children might do that we deny them the one thing everyone needs—communion in the Church and full membership in the life-giving covenant of Christ? Where is our faith? Where is our resolve? Where is our love for God and for our children? To whom is Christ speaking now, when He says, "Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them"? Will unbaptized children go to hell if they die?

No. The Orthodox Church does not believe that children are born guilty of Adam's sin and that unless freed of that guilt through baptism and communion they will die without God's mercy. Such a notion is pernicious both for its barbarism and for its distortion of God. Do we really think that God is so small that He is bound by our rites, the rites He has given us? God is sovereign, and He will have mercy on whom He has mercy and judgment on whom He has judgment (Romans 9:15).

We can talk about sin and guilt in three ways. First there is primordial sin, the sin of Adam. We understand this not in terms of inherited guilt, but in terms of a fallen world. Primordial sin introduced sickness, suffering, evil, and death into God's perfect creation (1 John 5:19; Romans 5:12). We are born into Adam's sin in that we are born into a fallen world. But without our participation, there is no guilt. Second, there is generational sin, which we see in terms of specific propensities to sin. A child of alcoholics, for example, will inherit not the guilt of his parents but the tendency to sin as they did, or other sins associated with this generational heritage. Again, we do not have to submit to this sinful heritage, we do not have to carry it on ourselves. Finally, there is personal sin, the stuff we do ourselves, whether as perpetuation of the general fallenness of this world, the generational fallenness of our parents or surroundings, or as the invention of sins of our own. A person becomes guilty when they personally sin. A child is not guilty until they make sin a personal decision, either consciously or unconsciously.

It is true that baptism is the washing away of sin, and one could say that it seems senseless to baptize a child if they have no inherited guilt to wash away. However, Christ's sacrifice, in to which we are baptized, was a sacrifice of His whole life as a submission to God— "not My will, but Yours, be done" (Luke 22:42)—and His death on the Cross not only washed away our sins, but also destroyed death itself. When we are baptized we are baptized into His life and death (Romans 6:4), and we become co-beneficiaries of a life which finally brought God and man into a union of love and a harmony of will. The infant is initiated into that union. This initiation will include the forgiveness of their sins, but is not limited to that forgiveness. The life and death of Christ, which reverses the primordial, generational, and personal fallenness of this world, is what the child enters through baptism. Is baptism just a sign?

Everything I have said assumes that baptism is more than just an outward expression of an inward acceptance of Christ. Of course, baptism is an outward expression in that physical hands are laid on a physical person and that the rites of baptism are tangible, visible, and physical. But the Orthodox embrace completely the Incarnation of Christ. For us, Christ's body was not just an outward expression. Christ's physical body was not an incidental part of His saving Incarnation. His body was indivisibly part of His whole person. So important is the body to God that the Christian promise is that we will be raised with our bodies.

Baptism effects a change in one's status with God. It is more than a mere sign. The views held by most Christians about marriage provide a useful comparison. Few Christians would say that a marriage ceremony is merely a "sign." A change clearly occurs. The man and the woman are separate before the ceremony, but they are "one flesh" after. This is a profound change, one which is effected by God through the ceremony itself. Baptism is no different. The rite of baptism has always been understood as a baptism into the death and resurrection of Christ, an entrance into the saving covenant, an enrollment in the Lamb's book of life, a union with the whole people of God, and the giving of a new citizenship in the Kingdom not of this world. Clearly, this is more than just a formality. What happens to a child when he or she is baptized?

First of all, children are baptized into a story. Christians are the people of a story. The Lord did not appear from nowhere with a message and language of His own invention. He came as the fulfillment of a promise made in the beginning to Abraham, in conformity to the prophecies concerning Him. The subsequent promises and prophecies, the peoples and the sins, the punishments and the mercies, these are our story. It is the story of Christ, and it is the duty and joy of every

Christian to know and teach this story. When children are baptized into this narrative, they become part of it. The stories of the patriarchs, the judges, the kings, the prophets, the apostles, the saints who followed them, and of Christ Himself, become their stories. This is clear in Exodus, when Moses and the Israelites are commanded to tell through a ritual re-enactment, the Passover Supper, the story of God's glorious and nation-making act in Egypt. Children are commanded to be part of the ritual, because this story is their birthright. The same is true of the fulfilled Passover of Christ, when the Lord again commanded us to "remember" what He accomplished for us on the Cross through the ritual remembrance of the Liturgy. We tell the story of God and His people because we are His people. And when we preach—as Peter did, as Stephen did, as Paul did—we preach our story. Our children are raised in this story, and by virtue of baptism this story becomes their own.

Second, children are baptized into a people. From the beginning God's covenant was made with a people, not with a person. The promise to Abraham was made to all nations, the covenant with Moses was made with the whole of Israel, and the New Covenant of Christ was made with the New Israel, the Church of God. We are a people called out of the nations, called out of the world, and through baptism we come to belong to a people who belong to God. We are made citizens of Heaven. We join a heavenly ethnicity. My daughters, through baptism, belong to this people more than they belong to Canada, their country of birth. We have our Kingdom culture of daily prayer, regular fasting, festal cycles, and biblical storytelling. We have oaths of allegiance in the form of the Creed. We have our national anthems in the hymns we sing. We have our national heroes in the saints and church fathers and mothers. Our king is God. This sounds cute to the modern ear, but it is true. And it is deeply Orthodox and fundamentally biblical, so much so that this alternative nationalism was the basis for the early Roman persecution of Christians.

Third, a child is baptized into life in Christ. "Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus," says St. Paul, "were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life." (Romans 6:3–4) This newness of life is what we all participate in through baptism, adult and child alike. Certainly children participate differently than adults, but no less authentically. Learning to pray, to read the Bible, to understand their inheritance, to walk in the way of the Lord, eating and drinking of the Eucharist, being trained in righteousness—this is as much walking in newness of life as anything in the spiritual life, and sometimes children are more engaged in these activities than adults in their church. And because they have been baptized into life in Christ they also receive the benefits of that life—the Grace, the forgiveness, the Fatherhood of God, the nourishment of the Body and Blood of Christ, and the presence of the Holy Spirit. The difference of twenty years and the ability to pay bills and stay up late does not make an adult more needful of these things than children, or more worthy of them. Children become full participants in Christ, as He ordained them to be and indeed as He became incarnate for them to be. This means as well that they are baptized into a promise. If they are buried with Christ in baptism, they will be raised with Him as well. They are raised with the promise of eternal life, with the expectation of the Resurrection. We do not hang this promise in front of them like a carrot (or a lollipop) to lead them to some future acceptance of Christ. By virtue of baptism, they participate in this promise now. They do so because they already experience life in Christ. Indeed, they grow up at His very knee.

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