

Infant Baptism Allows Us to Act Like Jesus to Our Children

By Rev. David Krommninga

A friend of mine from a church that baptizes only adults was talking to me about his teenage son. “Well, the jury is still out on him.” He said. I knew his son had not been arrested—at least not literally. My friend meant that his son had not yet made his “decision for Christ,” so the boy’s eternal destiny was still very much in question.

My friend and I have a lot in common, but all of a sudden I realized that we had a major difference in Christian perspective. At the heart of our difference was baptism.

Though I have no doubt about my friend’s love as a parent, I felt sorry for his son. I’m glad that I can’t imagine my parents ever having said something like that about me—not because I was such a saintly kid, but because they brought me up as God’s child. They treated me as someone for whom Christ died and was raised to life. I grew up believing it. I’m convinced that their attitude toward me was a powerful result of my baptism as an infant.

Baptism Makes a Big Difference

My friend and I share the same faith, and we even have much in common in regard to baptism. We agree that baptism is a sacrament that the Lord entrusted to the church. “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” commanded Jesus (Matt. 28:19). The church must baptize.

We also agree that baptism itself does not save a person—neither infant nor adult, no matter how or when or by whom it’s done, no matter how much water is used. We agree that baptism doesn’t save anyone, but we also agree that what it points to—union with Christ—does. While we remain divided on who should be baptized, we are one in Christ. As important as baptism is, it is not a matter of life-or-death importance.

Finally, we fully agree that faith must play a role in baptism. We disagree about who expresses that faith when, but we both believe that faith is crucial.

These significant beliefs about baptism are common to most Christians. Yet we can easily forget what we have in common if we get embroiled in our differences on this issue. We must not forget that there is more that unites us than divides us—even in regard to baptism.

Christians do have differences over baptism, though, and those differences are significant. They are so significant that if I were to become a member of my friend’s church, I would have to be re-baptized. His church regards my baptism as an infant as wrong. Not all churches who baptize only adults see things this way, but my friend’s church certainly does. And while I don’t appreciate my baptism being called into question, this difference does remind me that attitudes toward baptism reflect more than some little tiff among theologians. The differences are real, and they matter.

Children Do Belong in the Church

My friend's attitude toward his son comes close to the heart of the difference. And the difference boils down to this: how do we regard children in the community of faith? Should they be treated as sons and daughters of God and followers of Jesus Christ? Or should they be treated as those for whom the balances of heaven have not yet graciously tipped because they haven't made their decision for Christ? Are they in Christ's church or not?

My answer, as a Reformed Christian, is that children are indeed part of the community of faith. Membership in the faith community is more a result of what God does for us than of what we do for ourselves. Infant baptism reminds us of that and promises God's faithfulness to us.

Yet my friend's perspective needs to challenge us as well. We must be careful about baptism. Baptism can be subject to abuse. We in the Christian Reformed community abuse it when we blithely assume it guarantees faith. And our culture abuses baptism when people view it superstitiously, using baptism in a vague attempt to help their children out. We end up living in a tension between having to work to cultivate the promise in baptism and yielding in awe to the grace of a God who can cultivate faith in barren soil.

Jesus Put Children in the Church

One of the most powerful reasons to include children in the community of faith is that Jesus did. Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these, Jesus says in Mark 10:14. What makes children natural for the kingdom is not their alleged innocence or their you've-just-got-to-love-them cuteness or even their childlike faith. The quality that makes the kingdom theirs is their ability simply to take. Kids are marvellous little takers. Adults aren't. Jesus holds up a child as a model for all who want in: "I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it" (1:15).

I imagine that had Jesus only said those words, the adults in his audience would have nudged each other, winked, and said, "He said 'like a little child.' Jesus doesn't really mean the kingdom is for little children!" But Jesus took the lesson one step further: "He took the children in his arms, put his hand on them and blessed them" (v.16). Jesus not only said they belonged; he acted like it. I think the church should do so too. Infant baptism is acting like Jesus toward children.

Its All About Grace

Water on the head of a baby who cannot say a blessed thing is a picture of grace. It's the picture of a sovereign, covenant God who claims people as his own before they are even able to claim God as their own, a God who out of nothing forms a people for himself. This has everything to do with God's covenant. Reformed Christians see baptism mainly in the light of that covenant. Baptist and other Christians don't. It's a big difference.

Reformed Christians believe that baptism identifies a person with God's own people and with God's saving work on their behalf. We see a link between circumcision in the Old Testament and baptism in the New. We believe that both acts identify people as belonging to the community that belongs to God. Circumcision and baptism signify and seal the covenant between God and his people. In Colossians 2:9-15, Paul

links the two together explicitly: “In [Christ] also you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision, by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ; when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead” (NRSV). Although this passage by no means proves the necessity of infant baptism, it at least suggests that baptism is the New Covenant counterpart of circumcision.

Children were included in the Old Covenant and received the sign of being included (at least the boys did!). How much more, then, should children be included in the New Covenant, with its superior expression of grace in Christ. And how much more should they receive the sign of being included (both boys and girls!). If the Old Covenant included children as full covenant partners, how could it be that the New doesn't?

If it doesn't, perhaps that's because children, especially infants, lack faith. And as even the Heidelberg Catechism acknowledges, faith is what grafts us into Christ (Q&A 20-23). But if they don't have faith, how can children have a chance of being connected?

Let's first remember what faith is. Faith is not a work. Faith is not achieving; faith is in Jesus' words, “receiving the kingdom of God like a little child.” Who better to receive it than one who actually is a little child? So perhaps children maybe even infants, have more faith than we adults think—perhaps even more than we do!

Faith Is A Group Thing

The New Testament gives us other reasons to believe that faith isn't something we accomplish. One person's faith can, for example, stand in for the faith of other people. In Acts, Paul tells the Philippian jailer, “Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household” (16:31, NRSV). The word for *household* might even include the children of the jailer's slaves. Somehow his faith counts for all in his house.

Paul, like Jesus, doesn't just say so; he also acts like it: “Then [the jailer] and his entire family were baptized without delay” (16:33) I don't believe that every single member of the jailer's household could give a mature profession of faith in Jesus Christ before being baptized. After all, these earth-shaking events happen in a single night! Rather, I think that the jailer's household became a believing household because of the jailer's commitment. His faith stood in for that of his household.

The people of the Bible thought communally about such things. They thought in terms of the many. We modern people don't. We think individually, in terms of the isolated one. Covenant thinking came naturally to people of the Bible. It doesn't to us. That's one reason infant baptism is often such a tough sell in the modern world. It demands a different way of thinking—a more biblical way of thinking.

How Baptism Relates to Faith

What do Reformed Christians say about the relationship of faith and baptism? Three things:

- *In the baptism of children, the faith of the parents stands in for the faith of the child.* Though the child may be unable to give a mature testimony to his or

her faith, the parents promise to surround that child with all the promises of God that his or her baptism signifies.

- *Baptizing children demands faith-nurture in the covenant community.* God's claiming of an infant or a young child through baptism looks forward to another day when that child publicly owns God as his or her own. On that day, the person will affirm the promises made to him or her by God in his or her baptism. Baptizing children commits us to providing everything we can to make that day and that profession a reality in the life of that child.
- *Personal faith matters.* So do personal repentance and personal discipleship and a personal testimony of one's faith. Reformed Christians just believe that these are not prerequisites for baptizing the children of believers. In their case, baptism looks forward to personal commitment and faith not backward.

It's important to recognize, though, that neglecting personal faith is a real danger in churches that stress God's covenant. The false security of Old Covenant Israel is our characteristic temptation as well. Time and time again, the prophets warned Israel that mere membership in the covenant community was no substitute for being faithful to the God of covenant and no security against God's judgement.

The apostle Paul issues the same kind of warning to the baptized members of the church in Corinth (1Cor. 10:1-13). We would do well to take such warnings seriously too. The Christian Reformed Church watch out. Smugness does appear to be our particular brand of sin.

That's why evangelistic preaching, calls to conversion, prayer for renewal in the church, and public opportunities for committing or recommitting one's life to Christ provide, healthy, divine medicine for our covenantal complacency. These trends are not necessarily signs of denominational slippage. Our goal, after all, is not the covenant. Our goal is a living relationship of faith and trust in God.

It's interesting that as the young people of the Christian Reformed Church are asked to make commitments to Christ during the Life Challenge at Youth Unlimited conventions, infants in Baptist churches are being dedicated to the Lord. Reformed Christians are rediscovering personal faith and individual commitment just as Baptist Christians are beginning to emphasize the covenant. Is there some Spirit-led convergence here? Let's hope so.

The Danger of Superstition

About four times a year I get baptism phone calls. The caller will say, "I want to get my baby baptized." This person has no connection to a Christian community, and most often absolutely no desire for one. I know that, because when I explain the commitments involved in infant baptism and offer to meet with the person to discuss them, I detect a dramatic loss of interest. The parent simply wants to "get the kid done." I'm convinced that no Christian Reformed church would baptize that child.

Here's the problem: some church will. This parent will call every church in the phone book until she finds one that will baptize her child. You can count on it: the child will be baptized—for the worst and most superstitious reasons.

Now imagine that 20 years later, after absolutely no Christian upbringing, having never truly heard the gospel, that same child is converted to Christ through her believing roommate who tells her the good news. She who was dead but is now alive in Christ begins attending your church and wants to join. In fact, she wants to be baptized.

But she has already been baptized. “That wasn’t a baptism,” she claims. “That was a superstitious mother who happened to find an irresponsible minister when she wanted to get her kid ‘done.’” This new believer has no problem with infant baptism—except her own. An elder encourages her to see the grace of a sovereign God claiming her as his own, bending even the wrong decisions of a mother, a church, and a minister to his gracious purposes. But she just can’t see it. Even though I agree with the elder and wish this new believer would see things that way, I can’t blame her for her feelings about the matter. It is hard to see God in her baptism. What’s a church to do?

The older form for baptism used in the CRC includes a striking statement about baptizing “for the purpose God intended and not out of custom or superstition” (*Psalter Hymnal*, p.958). But what if baptism is done out of custom or superstition? Does acceptance of such indiscriminate baptism cheapen our own use of the sacrament?

It may—especially if we do not acknowledge that we’re accepting an indiscriminate baptism. If we did acknowledge it, though, we would open ourselves to appreciating the sovereign nature of God’s grace. We’d see that God can work his wonders despite a parent’s superstition, despite a minister’s spinelessness, and despite a church’s unfaithfulness. Parent, minister, and church may have been unfaithful, but God, who is still forming a people for himself out of nothing, was not. All human powers failed that child, but God still came through.

Of course, such divine faithfulness must never become an excuse for human unfaithfulness. To paraphrase Paul, we must not baptize indiscriminately so that grace may abound (cf. Rom. 6). But neither can we underestimate the power of that grace or refuse to recognize it when it comes through.

In such an atmosphere, we need to maintain our resolve about infant baptism. The ropes binding us to the practice have loosened some what. Some of this loosening could be the result of bad tethering on our part—making covenant the one main theme in Scripture, for example, or claiming that certain passages that imply infant baptism teach it explicitly.

It’s also difficult to know in which direction we’re most in danger of drifting. I’ve heard people who defend infant baptism sound as if mere membership in the covenant community ensures salvation. Claiming too much for baptism (“it saves”) could be as much as a danger as claiming too little (“It’s just a symbol”).

Maybe people like the young woman in my fictional example would be less interested in rebaptism, if the church made profession of faith a more meaningful event. As it is, profession of faith is a wordy business. The form for it is obviously tailored to people

whose faith was nurtured in the covenant community. By itself, it is ill-suited for the conversions of those whom God brings from complete unbelief to devotion to Jesus Christ. Let's dress them in white robes, lay hands on them, shout along with the heavenly hosts, kill the fatted calf—anything that fits the homecoming of a lost son or daughter.

Such notions are still new to us in the Christian Reformed Church. We don't quite know what to do with the heavenly Father's lost sons and daughters who come home. We're better at handling our elder brothers and sisters who, like most of us, stayed home with Dad on the farm. Lost children who come home challenge us and our practices—practices like baptism. They force us to rethink why we do the things we do and what those things say about the God who owns all of us as his children. But it's a healthy challenge, if we're faithful. And if we refuse to embrace it, we're likely to miss the celebration.

“The Banner,” April 8, 1996.