

7-1-1939

Infant Baptism

E. W. Koehler

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm>



Part of the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Koehler, E. W. (1939) "Infant Baptism," *Concordia Theological Monthly*. Vol. 10 , Article 49.

Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm/vol10/iss1/49>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Print Publications at Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in Concordia Theological Monthly by an authorized editor of Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. For more information, please contact seitzw@csl.edu.

Concordia

Theological Monthly

Vol. X

JULY, 1939

No. 7

Infant Baptism

Ever since the days of the Anabaptists, in the early part of the sixteenth century, infant baptism has been a controverted question in the Church. Also in our day there are those who reject pedobaptism, because there is no text in the Bible which explicitly commands that also infants should be baptized, as they were commanded to be circumcised in the Old Testament.

The words of our Savior "Go ye therefore and disciple all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost," though brief and concise, are sufficiently clear and plain to cover this point. Still it may be worth our while to study the historic setting and background of these words to determine their implication, and also the consequent practise of the Church to learn in which sense those nearest to the times of Christ understood these words; in other words, whether there was anything in the prevailing usages of the time when these words were spoken and in the later practises of the Church that will throw some light on the question whether or not infants are to be baptized.

When Jesus commanded to baptize the nations, He did not introduce a rite the like of which had never been heard of before and concerning the scope of which the disciples may have had a reasonable doubt whether or not it was also to be applied to children. Not only had John baptized in the wilderness, but even among the Jews it had long been a practise to baptize people. For when the priests and Levites inquired of John, who he was, they found nothing strange and new in the rite of baptism itself, but they questioned his authority to baptize. "Why baptizest thou, then, if thou be not that Christ, nor Elias, neither that prophet?" John 1:25. From Heb. 9:10 we learn that the Jews had "divers baptisms," which were prescribed by the Levitical Law, Num. 19. These were baptisms for uncleanness and were

repeated as occasion demanded. However, the priests and Levites did not have these baptisms in mind when they interviewed John. His was a different baptism, a baptism for discipleship. Had he baptized Gentiles to make them proselytes, they might have let it pass; but John was baptizing Jews, the children of Abraham, the disciples of Moses, and for such a baptism, so they believed, he had no authority unless he be "that Christ, or Elias, or that prophet."

All Jews, men, women, and children, regarded themselves as having been baptized unto Moses, 1 Cor. 10:1, 2. Jewish writers speak of their baptism as having taken place in the wilderness. Maimonides says: "By three things did Israel enter into covenant, by circumcision and baptism and sacrifice. Circumcision was in Egypt, as it is written: 'No uncircumcised person shall eat thereof.' Baptism was in the wilderness just before the giving of the Law, as it is written: 'Sanctify them today and tomorrow, and let them wash their clothes [washing of garments was understood to mean the washing of the whole body]. And sacrifice, as it is written Ex. 24:5.'" It is irrelevant to our present purpose to show whether or not this baptism was a divine institution; suffice it to say that the Jews believed that in the wilderness all the people, including the children, were baptized. They furthermore held that this baptism availed for all their descendants; *filius baptizati habetur pro baptizato*. Hence, the natural Jew did not believe himself or his children to be in need of baptism, which may somewhat explain the attitude of the Pharisees and lawyers to the Baptism of John, Luke 7:30.

However, the case was quite different with proselytes, whose forebears had not been baptized unto Moses. Maimonides writes: "And so in all ages when an Ethnic is willing to enter into the covenant and gather himself under the wings of the majesty of God and take upon himself the yoke of the Law, he must be circumcised and baptized and bring a sacrifice; or if it be a woman, be baptized and bring a sacrifice. As it is written, 'As you are, so shall the stranger be,' Num. 15:15. How are you? By circumcision and baptism and bringing of a sacrifice. So likewise the stranger through all generations; by circumcision and baptism and bringing of sacrifice. . . . A stranger that is circumcised and not baptized or baptized and not circumcised, he is not a proselyte till he both be circumcised and baptized. And he must be baptized in the presence of three." The Babylonian Talmud has this: "When a proselyte is received, he must be circumcised; and when he is cured [of the wound of circumcision], they baptize him in the presence of two wise men, saying, 'Behold, he is an Israelite in all things.'" It is evident, then, that the custom of the Jews before

our Savior's time, and, they themselves affirm, from the beginning of their Law, was to baptize as well as circumcise any proselyte that came over to them from the nations.

As in the wilderness the Jews were baptized and also their children, so the baptism for proselytism was not limited to adult persons, but it included also little children. The Gemara Babylon has this: "If with a proselyte his sons and his daughters be made proselytes, that which is done by their father redounds to their good." "They are wont to baptize such a proselyte in infancy upon the profession of the House of Judgment." The Mishna, both of the Babylonian and the Jerusalem Talmud, speaks of children over or under the age of three years being made proselytes by baptism. It is not our purpose to examine the institution, the validity, and the efficacy of this baptism for proselytism, we merely wish to establish the fact that according to Jewish writers it was a common practise among the Jews to baptize proselytes and that it was just as common a practise to baptize the children of proselytes and that this practise dates back to the giving of the Law and must have been in vogue at the time of our Savior.

Now, it is true, the question whether or not the Baptism which Christ instituted should also be administered to children may not be determined by what the Jews did with the children of proselytes but must be answered from the words of institution. However, if it had been the intention of Christ to limit His Baptism to adult persons only, excluding infants, then we should expect that in the face of the prevailing Jewish custom of baptizing also infants He should have forewarned His disciples, telling them very plainly that they should disciple or proselyte for Him only adult persons. Whenever a custom is continued, nothing need be said; but if a radical change is made, then those who have grown up under the old custom must be told. It is therefore no point against infant baptism that in the command of Christ infants are not expressly mentioned; it was not necessary to do this. Only in the case that they were to be excluded from Baptism special mention of them would have been necessary. The disciples knew that under Jewish custom Gentile children were baptized to become disciples, or proselytes, of Moses; if the Savior did not want children to be made His disciples by Baptism, then He certainly would have so informed His disciples.

But what do we find? As the Jews made proselytes of the Gentiles, including their children, so Christ tells His disciples to disciple all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. In view of the prevailing custom of the Jews we cannot help thinking that, nothing being said to the contrary, the Baptism of Christ in this point continued

the common practise and was intended for both adults and infants. There is indeed a vast difference between the Jewish baptism unto proselytism and Christ's Baptism unto discipleship, as may be seen from what the Bible teaches concerning the benefit and power of Christian Baptism. But in this point as to who is to be baptized there is no indication that any change was intended. "Christ took into His hands baptism as He found it, adding only this, that He exalted it to a nobler purpose and to a larger use." (Lightfoot.)

Now, what do we learn concerning infant baptism from the New Testament? Of the Baptism of John we read, Matt. 3:5, 6: "Then went out to him Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region round about Jordan and were baptized of him in Jordan, confessing their sins." Children are not expressly mentioned, but in view of the commonness of the thing for people that came to be baptized to bring their children along with them, even as they brought young children to Jesus that He should touch them, Mark 10:13, it is very probable that also children were baptized of John.

In John 3:3 we read: "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." Some have questioned whether Christ really had Baptism in mind when He spoke these words. But our Savior here uses an expression that was a current phrase in His day and which all Jews understood to refer to baptism. The Jews called the baptism of a Gentile his new birth, his regeneration, being born again. In the Gemara we read: "If any one become a proselyte, he is like a child new born." And in Maimonides: "The Gentile that is made a proselyte, and the slave that is made free, behold, he is like a child new-born." In the Jewish mind the idea of a new birth was associated with baptism. Christ uses this term, and in v. 5 adds the words "of water and of the Spirit," thereby clearly indicating that He was speaking of Baptism. To be sure, the new birth Christ had in mind and the new birth of the Jewish baptism were by no means the same; but the words "born again of water and the Spirit" could by Nicodemus not have been understood otherwise than referring to Baptism.

However, Christ did say something that ran contrary to Jewish opinion. The Jews did not exclude the children of the Gentiles from their baptism; however, they exempted themselves and their children, believing that they were to be accounted baptized because of the baptism of their fathers in the wilderness and therefore also reborn. And now Jesus tells this master in Israel that whoever is to enter the kingdom of God must be born again, not only the Gentiles but also the Jews, also Nicodemus. Christ did not expressly mention children, but they are certainly included

in the word $\tau\acute{\iota}\varsigma$, any one. And in order that no one may think that a child is in the kingdom of God by virtue of the baptism and new birth of its parents, He adds: "That which is born of the flesh is flesh," v. 6. What Christ wishes to impress upon Nicodemus is that all men, Jews and Gentiles, men and women, adults and children, are by reason of their natural birth flesh born of flesh and that they cannot enter the kingdom of God unless they are born again of water and the Spirit. Christ could not have spoken as He did if children were not to be admitted to Baptism or if "the infant of the believer obtains the regenerating grace by virtue of his birth and descent from a believer in covenant with God" (Shedd, according to *Pop. Sym.*, § 261).

The words of our Savior, Matt. 28:19, are just as plain. "Go ye therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost." By no trick of interpretation can we exclude children and infants from the concept "nations, $\xi\theta\nu\eta$, peoples." Speaking of the American people, or nation, no sane person would ever think of excluding our children. What right, then, has any one to exclude them from the nations which by Baptism are to be made disciples of Christ?

The Jewish practise throws some light on these words. Gentiles were initiated into the Jewish religion by circumcision, baptism, and sacrifice, and in the case of women, by baptism and sacrifice. But such baptism was by no means denied to infants. "An Israelite that takes a little heathen child or finds a heathen infant and baptizes him for a proselyte, behold, he is a proselyte," Maimonides. Thus it was common usage to make Gentiles and their children disciples of Moses by baptism. If Christ had contemplated a change so as to exclude little children, a definite statement to that effect would have been necessary for the guidance of His disciples. But He throws the world open to them, and it is their commission to proselyte, to disciple, all nations.

But for the fact that again and again the argument against infant baptism is made that, before a person is baptized, he must according to the words of Christ be taught, and that, because infants cannot be taught, their baptism must therefore be deferred until such instruction is possible, it would hardly seem necessary to make answer thereto. For Christ does not say that we must first teach, then baptize, and then teach again, but He says: $\text{Μαθητεύσατε πάντα τὰ ἔθνη}$, disciple all nations, and then, using participles, He tells us how this is to be done, namely, by baptizing and by teaching them. The word μαθητεύσατε shows us what is to be accomplished by Baptism and by teaching: all nations are to be made proselytes, disciples, of Christ; they are to

be made Christians. These words of our Savior contain not only the command to baptize the nations, but they also show the blessings of Baptism, communion with the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Ghost, and the power of Baptism to make us disciples of Christ, to work faith.

Let us also look at Col. 2:11, 12: "In whom also ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of sin by the circumcision of Christ; buried with Him in Baptism, wherein also ye are risen with Him through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised Him from the dead." Paul is addressing Christians and tells them that they also were circumcised, not, indeed, with the circumcision made with hands, as the Jews were circumcised in the flesh, but with the circumcision of Christ, which consisted in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh. And this inward, this spiritual circumcision took place when they were buried with Christ in Baptism. Paul does not mean to say that the outward rite of Baptism has taken the place of the outward rite of circumcision. Nevertheless, there is a certain resemblance between the carnal circumcision of the Jews and the spiritual circumcision of the Christians in Baptism. It is therefore not doing violence to the sense of the text to say that even as the circumcision of the flesh, which was symbolical of the circumcision of the heart (Num. 10:16), was performed on infants, so Baptism, which also signifies an inward circumcision, should likewise be administered to children.

What was the practise of the apostles? It is true no express mention is made of children that were baptized. This we can well understand, for the apostles could not reach the children except through the parents, who had authority over them. But when they had won the parents, it is very likely that these would follow the established Jewish custom of baptizing the children of the proselytes at the request of their fathers or mothers, and would therefore bring also their children to be made disciples of Christ by Baptism. Thus we read of the jailer at Philippi that he and all his were baptized (Acts 16:33), and of Lydia we read that she was baptized and her household (v. 15). There is no instance on record where the baptism of any child was deferred just because he was still a child. If the Christian practise in this respect was to differ from the prevailing Jewish practise, we should expect some mention of this fact. In the matter of circumcision there was a difference. When the Judaizing Christians insisted that the Gentiles must needs be circumcised, the apostles took a definite stand against it. If the Church had not baptized the children of the Gentiles that were received into its communion, would not the same Jews have pointed to the custom of the Jewish Church,

which baptized the children of the proselytes, and have insisted that the children of the Gentiles should also be baptized? But there is no indication of any such question confronting the Church; hence its practise must have conformed to the Jewish practise in this respect. The Judaizing brethren raised an issue on practically every point on which there was a departure in the Christian Church from their former customs; but no issue was raised on infant baptism. Hence we must conclude that the practise of the Jews, who baptized the children of proselytes, was continued by the Christians and that they baptized also children for discipleship of Christ. "If baptism and baptizing of infants had been a new thing and unheard of till John Baptist came, as circumcision was till God appointed it to Abraham, there would have been, no doubt, an express command for baptizing infants, as there was for circumcision. But when the baptizing of infants was a thing commonly known and used, as appears by uncontested evidence from their (Jews') writers, there need not be express assertion that such and such persons were to be the object of baptism, when it was well known, before the Gospel began, that men, women, and children were baptized." (Lightfoot.)

One of the oldest postapostolic testimonies for infant baptism we find in Justin Martyr's *Apology*. Speaking of the manner in which men were made new by Christ and dedicated themselves to God, he says of those who were persuaded and believed the things taught among them: "Then they are led by us to where there is water, and according to the regeneration according to which we ourselves were regenerated they are regenerated." According to the usage of the times the words "regeneration" and "regenerated" stand for "baptism" and "baptized" (see Tit. 3:5), even as the Jews called their baptism a regeneration. In another place he says: "Several persons, male and female, of sixty and seventy years, who were made disciples to Christ in their childhood [οἱ ἐκ παιδῶν ἐμαθητεύθησαν τῷ Χριστῷ] do continue uncorrupted." Here Justin Martyr tells us that there were among them some men and women who in their childhood ἐμαθητεύθησαν, were made disciples to Christ. Let us note that he uses the same word, ἐμαθητεύθησαν, which we find in Matt. 28:19, μαθητεύσατε, and shows us that these people were in their childhood made disciples, regenerated, baptized. Now, it is assumed that Justin Martyr wrote about ninety years after Matthew, who wrote several decades after the ascension of Christ. Hence the people who at the writing of Justin Martyr were about seventy years old must have been made disciples of Christ some thirty or thirty-five years after the ascension, that is, in the midst of the apostolic times, within a generation after Matthew's writing.

Another witness is Irenaeus, the most eminent teacher of the Church in the second half of the second century. He likewise uses the term "regeneration" to signify "baptism." In his book *Adversus Haereses* he writes: "And again, when He gave His disciples the commission of regenerating unto God, He said unto them: 'Go and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.'" Here the commission of regenerating simply means the commission of baptizing. In another place Irenaeus says: "For He came to save all persons by Himself; all, I mean, who by Him are regenerated unto God—infants and little ones and children and youths and elder persons. Therefore He went through the several ages, for infants being made an infant, sanctifying infants; to the little ones He was made a little one, sanctifying those of that age and also giving them an example of godliness, justice, and dutifulness; for youths He was a youth," etc. When Irenaeus speaks of infants regenerated, it is plain enough that these are not capable of regeneration in any other sense of the word than as it is wrought by Baptism, i. e., the outward act of baptism accompanied with that grace of God whereby He regenerates their hearts.

Origen, 185—254, in his *Comments on Romans*, translated into Latin by Rufinus, has this: "For this also it was that the Church had from the apostles a tradition to give Baptism even to infants. For they to whom the divine mysteries were committed knew that there is in all persons a natural pollution of sin, which must be done away by water and the Spirit, by reason of which the body itself is also called the body of sin."

In the writings of Augustine, 354—430, we find copious references to infant baptism. In a letter to Boniface he writes: "Let not that disturb you that some people do not bring their infants to Baptism with the faith [purpose] that they may by spiritual grace be regenerated to eternal life, but because they think they do procure or preserve their bodily health by this remedy. For the children do not therefore fail of being regenerated because they are not brought by others with this intention."

Many other writers might be quoted, who all show that infant baptism was a universal practise in the Church from the day of the apostles down to the rise of the Anabaptists in the sixteenth century.*

At the present time infant baptism is consistently practised in the Lutheran and Catholic churches. In some Reformed bodies it has been entirely discarded, and where still observed, it is not

* For a comprehensive treatment of the history of infant baptism we would refer to *History of Infant Baptism*, by Dr. W. Wall, Vicar of Shoreham in Kent, 1675—1728, from which book was taken much of the information offered in this article.

held to be necessary. Generally speaking, the objections to infant baptism are of two kinds; one pertains to the infant, the other to Baptism itself.

One objection to infant baptism is based on the seeming inability of the child to understand and to appreciate what is being done with it. For this reason it is held that Baptism is absolutely useless to the child. It is true, as we look upon the infants we baptize, we observe that sometimes they sleep, sometimes they cry, or appear altogether unconcerned as to what is being said and done. And it is quite natural that the thought comes to us, How can this baptism be of any benefit to the infant, and what is the use of baptizing him? These rationalistic considerations are perhaps the chief reason why some defer the baptism of their children until they have reached the age of assent.

However, the same line of reasoning might have been advanced against circumcision. Still, it was definitely commanded that a child eight days old was to be circumcised, Gen. 17:12. Besides, parents do not follow that rule otherwise with their children in temporal affairs. They will do for their children what they believe to be good for them, even though these do not assent or are vehemently opposed to it. Where there is a question whether or not a thing is beneficial, the concerns of the child are not lightly to be disposed of by another; but in Baptism the benefit is evident and unquestionable: the child enters into communion with God and is made the recipient of His grace. In every case it is for the good of the child to be baptized; therefore children should be brought to baptism even though, as it may seem to us, they do not consciously assent. One may privilege a person though he be incapable of knowing it. The argument that by infant baptism we predetermine the religion of the child has as little force as the argument that by the schooling and education we give a child we predetermine his career in life. We do the one; why not the other?

In Baptism large benefits and privileges are bestowed upon the child. It is a means of grace, through which God's grace and forgiveness is not only offered but through which also the Holy Ghost is given, who so operates on the heart of the child that by faith he accepts the proffered gifts. How this is done is a profound mystery to us. But for the fact that it is done, we have the authority of God, who tells us that by water and the Spirit we are born again (John 3:5) and who calls Baptism a washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Ghost (Tit. 3:5). Children, who by their natural birth are flesh born of flesh, are by Baptism reborn unto God and become partakers of all His blessings in Christ.

This benefit and power of Baptism is denied by many. And this is the other reason why they object to infant baptism. Reformed theology holds that the Word and the Sacraments are not means by which God imparts His Spirit and grace. With respect to Baptism the Reformed confessions state that it merely symbolizes regeneration and forgiveness of sins and is an outward token and seal that regeneration and purification has been effected by the Holy Ghost. "Baptism is not a means of regeneration. . . . It does not confer the Holy Ghost as a regenerating Spirit, but is the authentic token that the Holy Spirit has been, or will be, conferred, that regeneration has been, or will be, effected." (*Pop. Sym.*, §§ 260, 261.) According to this idea it is not the Holy Ghost who acts and operates through Baptism, but rather it is man who does something; namely, by submitting to baptism he shows that in some other mysterious way the Holy Ghost has regenerated him, or will yet regenerate him.

If this were so, there would certainly be no reason why children should be baptized, because there is no way we know of in which God might have imparted His Spirit and grace to little children for their regeneration, and therefore their baptism could not symbolize this regeneration unless it be assumed, and it is assumed, that "the infant of the believer obtains the regenerating grace by virtue of his birth and descent from a believer in covenant with God" (*Pop. Sym.*, § 261). This idea harks back to the old Jewish opinion that membership in the covenant of God is transmitted by natural birth from a believing parent and flatly contradicts the statement of Christ: "That which is born of the flesh is flesh," John 3:6. If Baptism is not a means through which the Holy Ghost effects regeneration but only a token that in some other way it has been effected, then we can well understand that it should be deferred until such a time when a person can give articulate confession of the regeneration that was wrought in him.

The indifference towards, and the neglect of, infant baptism which we find in many churches of our day have their root in the denial that Baptism is indeed a means of grace, through which God's Spirit is shed upon us abundantly to bestow on us grace and forgiveness and to work in the soul that faith whereby we accept these gifts and thus are regenerated. To convince them of their error, we must point to the command of Christ which tells us to disciple all nations, which certainly includes infants and children. We must show that all children are flesh born of flesh and do not inherit from their parents membership in the covenant of grace, but must themselves be born again of water and the Spirit if they are to enter the kingdom of God. Finally, they

must learn from the Bible that Baptism is the means through which God bestows grace and works regeneration in the heart. Whoever understands the Biblical teaching of the natural depravity of children and of the benefit and power of Baptism will not hesitate to have his children baptized.

River Forest, Ill.

E. W. A. KOEHLER

Holy Scripture or Christ?

In his *History of Christian Doctrine* G. P. Fisher points out that "among Protestants and Roman Catholics the old question respecting the seat of authority in religion is once more eagerly disputed. Since Coleridge and Schleiermacher insisted that the primary object of faith is not the Bible but Christ, there has been a growing tendency to regard the Scriptures less as an authoritative manual of revealed tenets in theology and morals than as the medium of disclosing to us the personal Christ and the import of His mission and teaching. The absolute inerrancy of Scriptural statements, especially in the narrative portions of the Bible, is no longer maintained in England and America by numerous theologians who are firmly attached to the principal doctrines of the Evangelical system" (p. 547). Is Christ the primary authority in religion, or is it Holy Scripture? In other words, is the source and fountain of the Christian faith (*fides quae creditur*), of the Christian doctrine, the Bible, or Christ? And that means, Is saving faith (*fides quae creditur*) based on the word of Scripture or on the word of Christ?

1

Christ is the sole authority in religion. That goes without saying, among Christians. Only His Word counts, only His Word gives life. Christ Himself declared that "one is your Master, even Christ" (Matt. 23:10), and the Father's voice spoke out of the cloud: "This is My beloved Son; hear ye Him," Matt. 17:5. There can be no other authority: "No man hath seen God at any time; the only-begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, He hath declared Him," John 1:18. And these words of Christ are the source of life. They offer us the life eternal, gained for us by Christ; they create faith, and faith relies upon them. "The words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life," John 6:63. They give us confidence and assurance. We are sure of the forgiveness of our sins, because we have Christ's word for it.—There is but one authority in religion, so that "if any man teach otherwise and consent not to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, he is proud, knowing nothing,"