Jesus loves the little children

why we baptize children

Daniel R. Hyde
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Introduction

Jesus loves the little children,
all the children of the world.
Red and yellow, black and white,
they are precious in his sight.
Jesus loves the little children
of the world.

I can still remember singing those words as a young child growing up in something of a Christian home, albeit a broken home. For those who grew up even in the most nominal of Christian homes where these words were present, strong feelings of love for the Lord and confidence in his providential care come to mind when they hear them again.

So what if I said to you that by singing and believing this chorus you believe in infant baptism? Or, if you believe in baby dedication then you believe in infant baptism, but you just don’t know it? You’d probably question my sanity. After all, you may reason, the Bible never uses the words “infant baptism,” but it does use “dedication.” Or you may be thinking, “Infants cannot believe in Jesus, so they shouldn’t be baptized.”

Of all the doctrines and practices of historic Christian churches, whether Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Lutheran, or Reformed, the baptism of children can be one of the most difficult to wrestle with by those who grew up in non-denominational Protestant churches that did not practice infant baptism. As a Reformed pastor, I’ve experienced this struggle alongside many of my parishioners and would-be parishioners who either grew up in nondenominational types of churches or were converted in them before they found their way to a Reformed church. Many of them had to endure criticism from family and friends when they became Calvinists. But at least then their families and friends still considered them Christians. But when these parishioners invited their family and friends to witness the baptism of their children
in a worship service, they began to question their beliefs and wonder if Reformed churches were really just Roman Catholic churches in disguise. Unfortunately this is all too often the case. Misunderstanding and false assumptions about infant baptism abound.

Most today would most likely agree with the great Prince of Preachers, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, who once said that the practice of infant baptism was nothing more than “Popery.”¹ His remark implies that infant baptism is nothing more than a superstitious and man-made doctrine invented by the Roman Catholic Church; as a result, all who perform infant baptism are guilty by association with the pope—even if they call themselves Protestants.

What do you think? Is the practice of infant baptism unbiblical? Is it done because of superstition? Was it invented by the Roman Catholic Church? The purpose of this book is to give you a clear and concise guide through belief and practice of infant baptism written in a conversational way. The goal in doing so is to demonstrate to you that infant baptism is a biblical practice that is not nor should be done “out of custom or superstition.”² As we consider this “hot button” issue, we will look at the Scriptures first and foremost, as they are our ultimate authority. We will also look at some basic biblical and theological principles, the testimony of church history, and finally, some practical matters for the answer to why Reformed churches baptize the children of believers—the children Jesus loves.

². These words come from the “Address to the Parents” just before their child is baptized in the traditional Reformed baptismal liturgy of Petrus Dathenus’ Psalter, first published in 1566. The entire liturgy can be found in “Baptism of Infants: Form Number 1” in 1934, 1959, or 1976 editions of the Psalter Hymnal (Grand Rapids: Christian Reformed Church) and as “Baptism of Children” in the 1987 edition. See appendix 2 for the full text.
Opening Matters

Biblical Presuppositions

Before we tackle the thorny issue of infant baptism, let me first set the stage, so to speak, by examining some basic Christian and Protestant presuppositions. “Presuppositions” are beliefs we assume before we even think about a certain subject. They are the basic “givens” in our mind.

During that great period of church history we call the Protestant Reformation, the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments were again given the central place in the life of the church. The Reformers protested against the Church of Rome and its doctrine that tradition was an equal authority with Scripture by proclaiming the doctrine of sola scriptura. Sola scriptura means the inspired Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the only sufficient and clear rule, guide, and norm of the church’s doctrine and practice, its theology and life.

As the inheritors of this heritage, two of the basic presuppositions all Bible-believing Protestants hold in common, whether they are members of historic Protestant churches or modern-day nondenominational churches, are the doctrines of the sufficiency and perspicuity of Scripture.

The Sufficiency of Scripture

Many today say things like, “Infant baptism is never taught in the Bible. In fact, the words aren’t even in the Bible.” While it is true that the term “infant baptism” or an account of parents bringing their child before a church to be baptized are not explicitly found in any specific chapter and verse that says “Baptize your children,” this does not mean infant
baptism is therefore an unbiblical doctrine. Infant baptism is a biblical doctrine because it is a “good and necessary consequence” of the entirety of scriptural teaching. This means that the Scriptures are like a jigsaw puzzle. One piece by itself does not give a picture of the whole puzzle, yet when many individual pieces are put together, a doctrine is necessarily taught.

“But I thought you said the Bible was sufficient,” you protest. We have to understand what that term means. When the Protestant Reformers spoke of the Scriptures being sufficient, they intended this to mean that Scripture teaches all that we need to believe and to live as Christians in the world, whether a doctrine is taught in an unambiguous, explicit way, or by deducing it from several texts and general Christian doctrines. The great Reformed theologian Francis Turretin reflected this understanding of the sufficiency of Scripture when he said, “We acknowledge that many things are to be deduced by legitimate inference and to be considered as the word of God.”

The fact that something we believe comes from a “good and necessary consequence” does not make it any less true than if it were spelled out explicitly. The best example of this is the doctrine of the Trinity. While there is no verse in Scripture that says, “God is a Trinity and exists as one God in three Persons,” we can deduce it from texts that say God is one, as well as those that say the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Spirit is God. Another would be the practice of worshiping on Sunday. There is no explicit command in the New Testament to worship on Sunday, yet we do so because this is a good and necessary inference from Scripture (e.g., 1 Cor. 16:2; Rev. 1:10), as well as the practice of the church in the book of Acts.

Historic Protestantism defines this doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture in no better way than in the words of the Westminster Confession of Faith, written in 1647 by the

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Reformed ministers and theologians in Great Britain. This confession of faith says,

The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men. (1.6; emphasis added)\(^4\)

In an even more succinct way, article 7 of the Belgic Confession of Faith, written in 1561 by Guy de Brès, says, “We believe that these Holy Scriptures fully contain the will of God, and that whatsoever man ought to believe unto salvation, is sufficiently taught therein.”\(^5\)

As God’s Word, the Bible is sufficient for our belief and practice about baptism, especially that of infants, because of what it says explicitly and what it says implicitly.

**The Perspicuity of Scripture**

The second Protestant Reformation presupposition we all hold to is the *perspicuity*, or, clarity, of Scripture. Again, the Westminster Confession says,

All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all; yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed, for salvation, are so clearly propounded, and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them (1:7).\(^6\)

What the perspicuity of Scripture means is that it is absolutely clear with regard to salvation: “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved” (Acts 16:31). Yet not every biblical text or biblical doctrine in the Scriptures is as clear, but


takes much more study, exegesis, and patience to understand. From the outset of this book, I will say that one such doctrine is infant baptism—yet I hope to show that it is not as unclear or mysterious as a doctrine such as the Trinity or a book of the Bible such as Ezekiel or Revelation.

Together, then, we confess the *sufficiency* of Scripture as well as the *perspicuity* of Scripture. You should have noticed that understanding these presuppositions as the Reformers did, and not how they are popularly explained, means that we do not believe a “me and my Bible” type of religion. For while we believe *sola scriptura*—Scripture alone—the Scriptures take great study and patience as well as gifted teachers to explain in many parts. This means that we do not approach God’s Word as if we were the first people to read and interpret it. In fact, we draw upon two thousand years of study, exegesis, reflection, and interpretation that testify to the truths of Scripture. And so the history of the church is a valuable tool for us to look to in confirming biblical study as well as keeping our interpretation of Scripture from deviating from the historic consensus of churches, learned pastors, teachers, and theologians.

**Christian Charity**

One final matter that we must presuppose is that of communication. We must communicate to each other well and not talk past one another. The is not only necessary as men and women, but as *Christians*. As we discuss infant baptism, we are mindful that it is our responsibility as Christians to be “eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:3). The peace that we have been given by God we are to pass to each other. Notice how Paul goes on to explain what this unity and peace look like when he says,

> There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one *baptism*, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all (Eph. 4:4–6).
It is this one baptism that unites the members of Christ’s church and that we are to be eager to understand and apply to our lives.

So how do we strive for unity as Christians on this vital subject? Paul goes on in another place about the church having one mouth, with one voice. In Romans 15:5–6 he prays for the Christians in Rome, saying,

May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In these words Paul bases our like-mindedness, our harmony, with each other upon God’s attribute of long-suffering. He is patient; therefore we ought to be patient with each other.

Paul elsewhere passionately pleads for this like-mindedness among Christians, saying,

So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others (Phil. 2:1–4).

As those who have been encouraged in Christ, comforted by his love for us and the love of the family of God for us, and united together by the same Spirit, we are to defer to others as we fulfill the apostle’s joy by being like-minded.

In this book we are seeking to do precisely what the Word of God calls us to do—be united. Here we are not trying to find out who is right and who is wrong simply to win a debate or an argument, but we are by the power of the Spirit seeking to become one in Christ and to express that visibly in the biblical act of unity, baptism.
Defining Our Terms

As Christians who are seeking the truth of God’s Word together in genuine charity, as a means to become one in heart, will, and voice, let us begin to do that by coming to a consensus on certain words and phrases that will be used in this book. This is imperative if we are to avoid the potential misunderstandings inherent in a discussion of infant baptism. For us to be able to discuss infant baptism and all that it entails, we must first speak the same language.

Baptism
The first and most obvious term we need to define and understand together is the subject of this book, “baptism.” Historically speaking, Christians and the Protestant Reformers understood baptism as the visible initiation into the church of Jesus Christ by means of the outward sign of water. Jesus instituted baptism after his resurrection and just before his ascension into heaven in Matthew 28. Along with teaching the nations, baptism was to be a perpetual ordinance, as Jesus promised to be with his church “to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:20). It was given for the benefit of his New Covenant people, just as circumcision had been given to the people of God in the Old Testament (Gen. 17). Like circumcision, baptism is the visible sign of initiation into a covenant relationship with the Lord. Notice how this is shown in Matthew 28:19, as “making disciples” is defined with two verbs, “baptizing” and “teaching.” One is made a disciple, that is, a follower of Christ, by baptism and instruction.7
Paul says that by baptism we are incorporated into the body of Christ, the church:

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit (1 Cor. 12:12–13).

Baptism, then, has been understood as the rite (outward ceremonial action\(^8\)) of passage distinguishing the children of God from the unbelieving world by graciously incorporating them into Christ’s covenant community. This is why article 34 of the aforementioned Belgic Confession of Faith says that by baptism “we are received into the Church of God, and separated from all other people and strange religions, that we may wholly belong to him whose ensign and banner we bear.”\(^9\)

Baptism by water, then, is the means by which God “put[s] a visible difference between those that belong unto the Church and the rest of the world” (Westminster Confession of Faith, 27.1).

**Sacraments**

Baptism, along with the Lord’s Supper, has also been called by the historic Christian church a “sacrament.” Before thinking that

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8. The Second Helvetic Confession, written in 1566 by Heinrich Bullinger, calls the sacraments “mystical symbols, or holy rites, or sacred actions” (ch. 19.1). *The Creeds of Christendom*, 3:884. Peter J. Leithart speaks of baptism as “a rite of entry that expresses the character of the church—that it is a community where racial, economic, and sexual divisions are dissolved (1 Cor. 12:12–13; Gal. 3:27–29).” *Calvin Theological Journal* 40:1 (April 2005):18.

this is a Roman Catholic idea, listen to how the great Heidelberg Catechism\textsuperscript{10} explains what a sacrament is. This catechism was published in 1563 in the Protestant region of Germany known as the Palatinate in order to explain the Christian faith in a time of political and theological chaos. It answers the question of what the sacraments are, saying,

The Sacraments are visible, holy signs and seals, appointed of God for this end, that by the use thereof he may the more fully declare and seal to us the promise of the Gospel; namely, that he grants us out of free grace the forgiveness of sins and everlasting life, for the sake of the one sacrifice of Christ accomplished on the cross (Q&A 66).\textsuperscript{11}

The original use of the Latin term \textit{sacramentum} was as an oath of allegiance by Roman soldiers. Yet what is so amazing about the above answer is that it explains the oath as God’s oath to us: “\textit{he} may the more fully declare and seal to us the promise of the Gospel.” The two sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper,\textsuperscript{12} then, are the visible \textit{signs} in which God shows us his grace in a tangible way. They are also \textit{seals}, that is, the official stamp of God’s promise that he is our God and we are his people. This language of “sign” and “seal” as God’s oath to us comes directly from Paul’s description of circumcision in Romans 4:10, where he speaks of the “sign of circumcision” being “a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith.” God gave the outward picture as a confirmation of what Abraham had by faith—the righteousness of Jesus Christ.

Another way to think of the sacraments is that they are visible signs of an invisible reality. The Belgic Confession,

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\textsuperscript{10} “Catechism” is the English word for the Greek word \textit{katecheo}, which simply means “oral teaching/instruction.” From the ancient church until now, God’s people have been instructed in the faith by way of question and answer (Ex. 12:26–27; 13:14–16; Josh. 4:21–24; Luke 1:4).

\textsuperscript{11} The Creeds of Christendom, 3:328; cf. Westminster Confession of Faith, 27.1.

\textsuperscript{12} Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 68; Belgic Confession of Faith, art. 33; Westminster Confession of Faith, 27.4.
article 33, defines a sacrament by saying, “For they are visible signs and seals of an inward and invisible thing.” Sacraments have a “sign” and a “thing signified.” In defining sacraments in this way, the Reformation tradition was following the definition of St. Augustine (AD 354–430), who called the sacraments “visible words.”

To illustrate this, think about love. Can you touch, taste, or see it? No, but a groom gives his wife a wedding ring as a visible sign that he loves her and is committed to her. This symbolism applies to the doctrine of baptism. The children of believing parents are a part of God’s covenant family. This is the invisible reality, or truth. The outward sign of baptism visibly shows that this invisible reality is true.

Although many of us hear the word “sacrament” and immediately think of Roman Catholicism, it is not “Catholic” to believe there are sacraments. Roman Catholicism teaches that baptism washes away all sins, original and actual, while giving the sanctifying grace of justification which enables the baptized to believe and live a life in the Spirit. This is accomplished ex opere operato; that is, by simply performing the act the work of washing away sin is done. As Protestants we reject this teaching because we believe we are justified through faith alone, by God’s grace alone, because of Christ’s work alone. Infant baptism, like adult baptism, does not wash away sins or justify a person. The Heidelberg Catechism speaks to this when it says,

Is, then, the outward washing of water itself the washing away of sins?

No; for only the blood of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit cleanse us from all sin (Q&A 72).

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15. Reply to Faustus the Manichaean, ch. 19; Tractates on John, LXXX.3.
As a sacrament, baptism visually signifies and seals the promise of the gospel—which must be received by faith. Therefore we speak of the preaching of the gospel and sacraments as the “means of grace.” It is by these means that the Holy Spirit communicates to us the grace of God for the creation (preaching of the gospel) and confirmation (sacraments) of our faith.\textsuperscript{18}

**Grace**

If baptism is a sacrament that visibly portrays and promises grace, what is grace? The grace of God is his favorable attitude toward sinners despite their having done nothing to earn it (unmerited favor) and despite their having done everything to forfeit it (de-merited favor). This is why Paul says, “For by grace you have been saved” (Eph. 2:8). We have done nothing to earn it, for it is “not a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Eph. 2:8). We have done everything to forfeit it, as we followed “the course of this world,” we followed “the prince of the power of the air,” and we lived “in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind” (Eph. 2:2–3).

We can say grace is like the love we show to our children. We love them from the time we find out they have been conceived, even though at that point in time they have done nothing to deserve or earn our love. As they grow, they may openly disobey us and forfeit all right to be loved, yet we still love them regardless.

**Covenant**

This grace of God does not come to us out of the clear blue sky, though. It comes to us within a certain context. This context is what we call a covenant relationship. As Paul says, the Gentiles were at one time “strangers to the covenants of promise” (Eph. 2:12). To be in such a state meant to be unloved and outside the grace of God. Let us consider what the word “covenant” means.

\textsuperscript{18.} See Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 65.
A covenant is a solemn bond initiated by one party with another party. To illustrate this, think of how the president covenants, or solemnly agrees, to increase federal funding for public schools. He makes this agreement (covenant), and then to show his solemn agreement to do so he signs the bill into law and confirms it by placing the official seal of the office of the president (sacrament). This official seal (sacrament) signifies to all that read this bill that the president has agreed (covenanted) to do this. God promises to save all who believe in Jesus Christ; this is his covenant. He confirms this with his official seals—his sacraments.

A covenant is a bond or a promise. God made his covenant with Abraham by promising that his descendants would be as the sand of the sea and the stars of the sky (Gen. 15:5). The covenant sign of circumcision (sacrament), then, showed him that the Lord’s word was as good as gold.

**The Covenant of Grace**

Believers through all ages have received this grace and are thereby members of the covenant of grace. Remember that we said a covenant is a solemn bond initiated by one party with another party and that grace is God’s attitude toward sinners despite their having done nothing to earn it (unmerited favor) and despite having done everything to forfeit it (de-merited favor). The covenant of grace, then, is the grace of God, which he began unfolding to his people in the garden, and will continue to unfold until the dawn of the new heavens and new earth. God’s one plan of salvation, his covenant, is progressively revealed and unfolded through many individual covenant arrangements. All these we call the one covenant of grace.

This covenant of grace began in the garden and will continue until our Lord returns. Our gracious God first made this covenant of grace with our fallen parents in the garden when he spoke of the promise of a seed. He told Adam and Eve, “I will put enmity between you [the serpent] and the woman,
and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel” (Gen. 3:15). He later elaborated upon it in the form of covenants with Noah, then with the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, then with Moses, and to all his people until the Lord Jesus Christ came. In a sense we can speak of the covenants, or the one all-encompassing covenant of grace, as the process by which the LORD watered this “seed” promise until it became a full-grown tree in the new covenant brought by Jesus Christ.

Our Heidelberg Catechism summarizes this great history of God’s covenant of grace by saying that it was

first revealed in Paradise, afterwards proclaimed by the holy Patriarchs and Prophets, and foreshadowed by the sacrifices and other ceremonies of the law, and finally fulfilled by his well-beloved Son (Q&A 19). 19

The Westminster Confession of Faith also summarizes this history of salvation in these words:

Although the work of redemption was not actually wrought by Christ till after his incarnation, yet the virtue, efficacy, and benefits thereof were communicated into the elect, in all ages successively from the beginning of the world, in and by those promises, types, and sacrifices, wherein he was revealed, and signified to be the seed of the woman, which should bruise the serpent’s head, and the lamb slain from the beginning of the world, being yesterday and today the same and forever (8.6). 20

In summary, then, when we approach the biblical topic of baptism, we must have a common vocabulary. We speak with one voice when we understand and say that baptism is the sacramental sign and seal of God’s wonderful, covenantal grace in which our loving Father has revealed his Son to his people.

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