

## **Justifying Infants are Appropriate Candidates for Baptism – Rev. Nishantha Fernando**

### **Infants are appropriate candidates for baptism**

When God created the world God's wish was, let the man and the woman have children and multiply and spread over the earth (Genesis 1: 28), From that day to now God blessed the family, and the main bond of love between husband and wife in addition to the fulfilment of family life is having children. According to the Bible children are a gift from God, so that to look after them, nourish them, protect and guide them, and lead them in God's path is a significant responsibility of parents. It is like serving God the Creator. Therefore the responsibility of the parents or guardians to children is a spiritual task, It is also a duty to God as Christians because by having children we are co-creators in God's Creation.

The ultimate goal of every parent for their children is to direct them to the best position. To provide them with a good education, environment and health is the parents dream. If I asked from a Sri Lankan parent about their children, the definite answer will be: we live for our children's betterment. As Christians our ultimate goal is to be with God. For this to keep our faith in God is essential and it is also a must for experiencing God. In Church circles the basic requirement for a person to become a Christian is baptism and the most popular method is infant baptism. According to Dr. C .Ryder Smith, "through baptism grace is given to a child and by this grace it becomes a child of God"<sup>1</sup>. Another interpretation is: it is a special work of selection by holy grace<sup>2</sup>, baptism is regarding grace and on the other hand it is answer to God's grace<sup>3</sup>, and it is not only God's grace but also a gift from God<sup>4</sup>.The most suitable people to receive that grace and gift are the infants because they are new to the world and through that grace they can live as children of God. Another reason is that infants are fresh and clean so that through baptism they can be a real Temple of God.

### **Biblical evidence for infant baptism**

Although the most suitable people for baptism are infants or children unfortunately they were not properly highlighted in the Bible. There is no direct provable detail about infant baptism in the

---

<sup>1</sup>Arthur Yates. *Why Baptize Infant?* (Norwich, Canterbury press, 1993). p.122.

<sup>2</sup>Arthur Yates. *Why Baptize Infant.* P.141.

<sup>3</sup>Mark Earey. "Worship that Cares" *An Introduction to Pastoral Liturgy*' (London, SCM press, 2012).p.79.

<sup>4</sup> World Councils of Churches. *Baptism Eucharist and Ministry*(Geneva, WCC publication, 1982). P.3.

New Testament but it was a universal practise in mid third century<sup>5</sup>. It is similar to the evidence for the influence of women in the Bible. Because it was a patriarchal tradition the activities of women and children were not more included in the Bible. The question may be asked by those who do not accept pedo-baptism whether Jesus or John the Baptist baptized children. For that we need to understand the meaning of baptism at that time. John the Baptist's baptism was a "baptism of repentance" (Luke 3: 3) and Jesus' disciples baptism was a baptism of 'New Life' (John 4:2). This means that the baptisms referred to are significantly adult oriented. But the historical evidence of baptisms in the New Testament and of the early church is that infants and children were always included in baptisms. When people came to know Jesus Christ they were baptized as a household. Baptising as a household was common in the New Testament<sup>6</sup>. For instance, people who had received the Holy Spirit (Acts 10:47-48, 11:14), Lydia's house (Acts 16:15), Crispus' house (Acts 18:8), Philippian jailors' family (Acts 16:33).Also, baptising people of all ages was an accepted custom in the early church<sup>7</sup>. There is further evidence from the historian Jeremiah's who refers to five instances complete families receiving baptism<sup>8</sup> and of small children being included in baptisms<sup>9</sup>. The disciples believed that everybody should belong to the faith. And it is consistent with apostolic practice that infants in the family would have been baptised when a family became followers of Christ<sup>10</sup>.

When Paul tells children to respect their parents (Colossian 3:20, Ephesians 6:1) it means that in the early apostolic church children were baptized members<sup>11</sup>. Also "As Ephesians 6:1-3, Colossians 3:20 and 1 John 2:12-14 mention children's were tied by Lord's guidance in same way in Ephesians 4:4, Colossians 2:12 one baptism received by all, this is indirect strong point for infant baptism"<sup>12</sup>giving special concern to children means that they were recognised and accepted members of the church because the Apostles only accepted people as Christians through the baptism as well as members, that means these children were baptized as infants. Therefore infant baptism was a practiced and a reality in the Bible though infants names was not mention.

---

<sup>5</sup>John McKenna. "Infant Baptism" *Theological Reflection* 'Worship vol. 70 no. 3, May (1996), p.195.

<sup>6</sup>Colin Buchanan. *A Case for Infant Baptism* (Grove Worship series 20, new edition, 2009). P.17.

<sup>7</sup>Colin Buchanan. *A Case for Infant Baptism*. p.18.

<sup>8</sup>Arthur Yates. *Why Baptized Infant?* (Norwich, Canterbury press,1993).p.24.

<sup>9</sup> Arthur Yates. *Why Baptized Infant*. ?p.18.

<sup>10</sup> Colin Buchanan. *Infant Baptism in Common Worship* (Cambridge, Grover Worship series, 2001).p.6.

<sup>11</sup> Arthur Yates, *Why Baptize Infant?*(Norwich, Canterbury press,1993).p.25.

<sup>12</sup>Colin Buchanan, *A Case for Infant Baptism* (Grover Worship series 20, new edition,2009).p.15.

## **Jesus and children**

Jesus' attitude towards the children was very much positive and he took them as models for entering into God's kingdom (Mark 10: 15). In the same way He taught a lesson to the disciples about the importance of being like a child (Mark 10: 14). Also He was unhappy when the disciples prevented the children from being taken to Him and he rebuked them and blessed the children (Mark 10:16). Jesus gave the highest place to children in His ministry, which means He had a significant love for them and they were highly accepted. If any ceremony was introduced at that time as part of belonging to Jesus' community, definitely His first preference would be for children to be included, because the significant teaching were always connected to children (Matthew 18:1- 5). Therefore if baptism is the sign of being a child of God, He would have included children or infants first.

According to Calvin, by welcoming children (Matthew 19: 13), Jesus testified that they were part of His flock<sup>13</sup>. Also it is important to note that Jesus openly accepted the salvation of children even though they cannot express their faith in God<sup>14</sup>. Therefore whether a person is an adult, is born again, confesses, repentant, expresses their faith their salvation is in God's hand.

## **Theological reasons for infant baptism**

Infant baptism was identified as a new covenant with God. In the first covenant made with Abraham the sign of the covenant was circumcision. That was the old covenant but in the New Testament it is not circumcision but baptism. The sign of the new covenant made through Jesus Christ is baptism. Therefore as Hebrew children were circumcised in the Old Testament in the New Testament infants were baptized. Christian baptism originated in Jesus' ministry, death and resurrection. It is connected to Christ's crucifixion and risen Lordship and it is the entry to the new covenant with God and His/Her people. According to St. Paul, baptism is spiritual circumcision and by being buried in baptism we are raised with him (Colossians 2:11-13). Paul says (Romans 3:9) we all are under the power of the sin of our ancestors and therefore we "all die in Adam" (1 Corinthians 15:22). The "all" includes infants<sup>15</sup>. According to Paul's argument infants must be

---

<sup>13</sup> Arthur Yates. *Why Baptized Infant?*(Norwich, Canterbury press, 1993).p.31.

<sup>14</sup> James Brownson. "*The Promise of Baptism*" *An Introduction to Baptism in Scripture and Reformation Tradition* (Michigan, William B Edmonds, 2007).p.131.

<sup>15</sup> James Brownson. "*The Promise of Baptism*" *An Introduction to Baptism in Scripture and Reformation Tradition* (Michigan, William B Edmonds,2007).p.131.

baptized because they are by nature sinful and baptism represents washing away the sin. Therefore paedobaptism is a must for infants for their salvation. In baptism Christians are dipped in the salvific death of Jesus where people's sins are buried and the "Old Adam" is crucified with Jesus and the authority of sin is defeated<sup>16</sup>.

Baptism symbolises and represents a sinless life in Jesus. For that the sinful nature inherited from Adam should be buried and that is the reason new born children are eligible for baptism. Otherwise they are not part of the God's community. In addition to belonging to Christ baptism is also a washing away of sin<sup>17</sup>. In this context baptism is an inter-connection between being in Jesus and a sinless life which helps people to live a life that is a witness to Jesus. Infant baptism starts this at an early age of life and is very much positive for humankind. Baptism in adulthood can, wrongly, lead people to lead a sinful life until baptism. For instance Emperor Constantine received baptism in his later life in the belief that his sins would be forgiven when he was baptised. As psychologists have shown it is difficult for a person to change their behaviour from their childhood. This is true for adults who are baptised because though they are born again and repent they are tempted to go back to their old ways of living. Having worked for 17 years as a clergyman in God's vineyard I have seen lots of adults who were converted to Christianity and were in the position described above. But a person who from childhood practices as a Christian, has a religious background, grows up with Christian values and education is nourished spiritually. As I have baptized infants through my personal spiritual journey I know the value of that and how that childhood experience is important for our future life and how genuine and strong it is. It is like a man who built a house on a proper foundation (Luke 6: 48). A childhood lived in closer relationship with God and Jesus is valuable for leading a Christian life. For that infant baptism is the most suitable way for a person to grow up to be a real witnessing Christian.

## **Ecclesiastical Evidence for Infant Baptism**

The end of the Jesus' earthly ministry is the beginning of apostolic leadership. In the early Church when people accepted Jesus as their personal saviour the Apostles and leaders baptized them as well as their families including children. This led to a sharing of faith between parents and

---

<sup>16</sup>World Councils of Churches. *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*(Geneva, WCC Publication,1982),p.2.

<sup>17</sup>Jams Brownson. "*The promise of Baptism*" *An Introduction to Baptism in Scripture and the Reformed Tradition* '(Michigan, William B Edmonds, 2007),p.58.

children<sup>18</sup>. It was the practice of the first Christians and there was no boundaries between adults and children and all were members of the body of Christ. According to Jeremiahs the faith of the head of the family was the faith of the whole household including children<sup>19</sup>. As the Church grew new theologies were introduced by the new leaders and the emphasis on baptism also changed. These changes in theology can be seen throughout the history of the church. The significant feature of infant baptism is that beginning from the early church up to the 21<sup>st</sup> century it predominantly continues without a break. The evidence is that up to 500 AD adults and infants were baptised; then from 500 – 1500 AD infants were the dominant candidates for baptism; after the reformation though the Anabaptist movement was strong it did not change this; in the 20<sup>th</sup> century though challenged infant baptism is still strong<sup>20</sup>. This shows how much infant baptism is connected to Christian spirituality. Though from time to time it faced challenges infant baptism and the church are like “husband and wife” and will never be divorced and live together till the second coming of Jesus.

In the first two centuries theological emphasis of peado-baptism was significant especially in connection with ‘original sin’. Infant baptism can be understood in the background of the new concept of original sin<sup>21</sup>. It was more emphasised by the early church fathers. Tertullian was the first to use the term original sin<sup>22</sup>. Iranians, Tertullian, and Clement of Alexandria believed the fall of Adam and Eve to be a historical event<sup>23</sup>. Psalms 51:5 and 58:3 supported the belief that children were born sinful and the earliest possible baptism of infants reinforces this view<sup>24</sup>. The main person who promoted the concept of ‘original sin’ was Augustine<sup>25</sup>. With this theological emphasis on original sin parents were keen to have their child baptized because of the belief that without baptism the child would go to a place of natural happiness called “limbo” but not to heaven<sup>26</sup>. In this environment parents quickly baptized their infants and this practice gained worldwide acceptance in Christendom. During Christendom in the West infant baptism meant membership of the church as well as membership of the wider community; and because of high levels of infant mortality infants were baptized immediately after birth<sup>27</sup>. It is interesting to see that in the Eastern

---

<sup>18</sup> World Councils of Churches. Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry(Geneva ,WCC Publication,1982).p.5.

<sup>19</sup> Arthur Yates. *Why Baptized Infant* (Norwich, Canterbury press, 1993).p.19.

<sup>20</sup> Mark Earey. *Baptism: Week 5 Lecture Notes*(Birmingham. Queens’ Foundation), accessed 15 Jan.2013.

<sup>21</sup> John H. McKenna. “*Infant Baptism*” *theological reflection*’ Worship vol.70 no 3, May (1996).p.208.

<sup>22</sup> Arthur Yates. *Why Baptized Infant?*(Norwich, Canterbury press, 1993).p.102.

<sup>23</sup> Arthur Yates. *Why Baptized Infant ?*.p.103.

<sup>24</sup> Arthur Yates. *Why Baptized Infant ?*.p.103.

<sup>25</sup> John H. McKenna, “*Infant Baptism*” *Theological Reflection*’ Worship vol.70 no 3, May(1996).p.197.

<sup>26</sup> John H. McKenna, “*Infant Baptism*” *Theological Reflection*’ .p.197.

<sup>27</sup>Mark Earey. “*Worship that Cares*” *An Introduction to Pastoral Liturgy*’ (London, SCM press, 2012).p.79.

church reason for the emphasis on infant baptism was completely opposite to Augustinian Western tradition. It was protection against future sin<sup>28</sup>. This shows that on the issue of infants baptism, as in other matters, the West and East were theologically divided.

The lesson shown throughout the history of the church is that infant baptism was the backbone to the expansion of Christianity all over the world. Therefore the role of the infants in the Christian circle had a prominent place and is proof of Jesus' love and concern about children as is witnessed in the Gospel stories.

### **Community aspect of infant baptism**

Through baptism infants enter in to Gods' family which is the Holy Catholic Church. This family can be identified in stages, the first is family of the child, the second godparents (Anglican tradition), third mother church (congregation), finally the wider church. When a child is baptized the main responsibility is on the parents or guardians. Their role is to bring up the children in a Christian environment and to nourish them with Christian values. It is not an easy task but it should be done by parents because it is a duty of Christian parents. As a clergyman I used two methods in preparing parents and godparents for the baptism of their infant. Because I noticed that it becoming a just ritual to some Christians and for others infant baptism as a qualification to enter the Christian schools. The first for regular church goers there was a short reflection about the duty of the parents and godparents during the baptism service. The second for parents who came to church only occasionally there were especial classes for them before the baptism day about their Christian duty. When I look back this attempt was successful and most of people appreciated about the methodology which I used.

The second important task belongs to godparents because they take a vow in front of God on behalf of the child. Godparents taking vows on behalf of an infant has a long tradition<sup>29</sup>. They must be responsible and faithful practising Christians because they are bound with vows. They answer yes when the priest asks them whether they will be an example in prayer, exemplary life and action<sup>30</sup>. I still remember my vicar all ways saying during a baptism service that his godparents

---

<sup>28</sup>John H. McKenna. "Infant Baptism" *Theological Reflection* 'Worship vol. 70 no. 3, May (1996).p.199.

<sup>29</sup>Colin Buchanan. *A Case for Infant Baptism*(Grover Worship series 20, New edition, 2009).p.25.

<sup>30</sup>Diocese of Kurunagale. *Baptism Service* (Kandy, KII press, 1998).p.3.

were concerned about him although he was now a priest. That kind of spirituality should be there in sponsors.

The third responsibility is on whole congregation, when a child grows up spiritual guidance and love is essential. Fulfilling that need is a responsibility of the whole Christian community. Then the child will grow up with Christian principles. With the community aspect, infant baptism becomes more practical because the child grows up with the support of the community and this gives more strength to the child to understand his/her Christian responsibility. That loving support reminds them to be a living model of Christ in this world. Still I remember how the congregation of my mother Church guide me and support me to develop my spiritual journey as a Christian child and a youth. Finally when a child grow up he/she understood that they are not alone and they belong to wider Christian community.

The significant feature of infant baptism in the history of the church was that it was the most visible form of the expansion of Christianity throughout the world. Though people converted to Christianity as adults the following generations always continued as infant baptism. Therefore without an infant, it is difficult to think about Jesus' disciples in this cosmos. As Jesus' parents dedicated Him to God in the Temple as an infant according to Jewish custom He studied Judaism from the beginning and saw the wrong doing of Jewish religious practice and introduced the real Gods' message to society. As Jesus did in His earthly ministry in this world, throughout the history the people who introduced new fruitful contributions and changes to society were the Christians who were baptised as infants. Their lives and the glory that they get is due to God Almighty that is Gods' plan and wish. Therefore infant baptism too is Gods' plan and wish.

## **Conclusion**

As I sum up my argument for infant baptism, they are most appropriate candidates for baptism. Through baptism they are committed to Gods' mighty hand for protection. As Christians being committed to Gods' holy hand is the most significant thing and receiving that gift at an early age in life as a infant through baptism is an uncountable blessing. According to my understanding the good traditions which exist in society for the betterment of all of creation are blessed by God. And those blessings are Gods' plan. Infant baptism too as a positive tradition within the Christian community is Gods' blessing and Gods' will. Therefore as Christians we should surrender to His judgement which cannot be measured by human knowledge.

