

INFANT BAPTISM



Luke 6:27 "Jesus said, 'I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.'"

As many of you know, I studied Philosophy as an undergraduate at Baylor in Waco, Texas, which just so happens to be the world's largest Southern Baptist University. At the end of my senior year, many of my Baptist friends were greatly distressed to learn that I was going on to an 'Episcopal' seminary after graduation. One friend cautioned me that the Episcopal Church had just authorized the ordination of 'women'! What a scandal! Another friend came up to me and asked with great incredulity, "You don't believe in infant Baptism then, do

you? "Yes," I responded somewhat defensively, continuing, "Why I not only believe in it, I've seen it." My friend was not at all amused by my response and proceeded to resolutely educate me about how the Bible clearly states that one must 'believe' in order to be baptized, and how the Bible does not recognize the practice of baptizing young children who do not yet 'know' Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Savior. So, as I anticipate baptizing Callaway this morning, I am reminded of my friend's concerns.

For my friend, I knew, was half right. There is no explicit mention of infant Baptism in the New Testament. This realization during the time of the Protestant Reformation led some Reformers to conclude then that infant Baptism was not consistent with either the practice or the theology of the New Testament Church. These Reformers, who became known as Anabaptists, required what they called "believers' Baptism" of their members and developed into the Baptist tradition in this country and elsewhere, currently our largest Christian denomination, whose most distinctive feature is still their refusal to baptize infants.

Yet while there is no explicit reference to infant Baptism in the New Testament, there are numerous implicit ones. Remember that most of the cases of Baptism reported in the Scriptures refer to new adult converts, and thus not surprisingly do indeed note that Baptismal candidates first declared their belief, as they were wishing to be baptized. But there are several

instances in the New Testament where entire "households" are said to have been baptized with the new converts. The Philippian jailer and his household is one such example (Acts. 16:33), as is Lydia the seller of purple goods in Macedonia and her household (Acts. 16:15). The households of Stephanus (1 Cor. 1:16) and Crispus in Corinth (Acts. 18:8) are other examples. Such biblical references suggest that not only were the new adult converts baptized, but so were their spouses and their children and probably even their slaves and their slave's families and children. For this had been the Jewish practice at that time with proselytes.

Moreover, St. Paul repeatedly declared Baptism as the Christian equivalent of Jewish circumcision (cf. Col. 2:11-2, Acts 21:21), a rite which was generally administered on the eighth day after birth. The assumption, therefore, is that newborn infants of Christian parents were in a similar way baptized when only a few days old. Paul himself often addresses children as being "in the Lord" (Col. 3:20, Eph. 6:1) or as "holy" (1 Cor. 7:14), phrases which suggest that they are part of the body of Christ, to which according to Pauline teaching, Baptism was the only rite of entry.

Now while the New Testament evidence for infant Baptism may be oblique, the witness of the early Church Fathers is more definitive and conclusive. St. Polycarp, for example, declared at the time of his martyrdom around 150 C.E. that he had been a

Christian for 86 years, which would date his Baptism not only to his infancy, but also to about the time the Gospels were being written. Justin Martyr about the same time (c. 150) referred to men and women of sixty or seventy years of age who "were made disciples in their childhood," which also would date their Baptisms before the time of the last New Testament writings. At the end of the second century, Polycrates of Ephesus says that he "had lived 65 years in the Lord," while Irenaeus at the same time specifically mentioned Christ as giving salvation to "infants and little children." Half a century later the Church Patristic scholar Origen clearly declares that infant Baptism was the established tradition of the Church, a tradition which had been handed down "from the apostles." Thus, there is ample evidence to demonstrate that infant baptism was the uncontested practice of the Church from its earliest days at least until some of the Reformers of the seventeenth century.

Moreover, while the New Testament does not explicitly mention infant Baptism, it should also be noted that the New Testament does not explicitly contest infant Baptism either. If the practice of the early church was indeed to postpone Baptism until the later years of discretion, it would be remarkable that the New Testament has left no trace of such a teaching in documents written over a period of at least three generations.

But more important than the historical questions are the theological implications of calling for a postponement of

Baptism until a child reaches some predetermined age of insight and finally "understands" enough about the meaning of salvation, and thus 'believes'. Such a postponement, a practice that is unknown until the seventeenth century, would in my mind, suggest a church where our comprehension of faith is of primary importance, where what we think and what we believe is what really matters most. It might result in a church full of intelligent and articulate believers, but it would also result in a church where those who cannot clearly communicate or articulate their faith, like the uneducated, like the pious farmer or laborer, like young children, or the mentally handicapped, or the senile, where they couldn't be considered as full members of the Church. The emphasis in that kind of church, it seems to me, would be upon us, rather than upon God. The emphasis would be upon our abilities to individually understand and comprehend something, a post-Enlightenment fascination, rather than the tradition of the Church. The question is what must come first in the process of Salvation, our ability to understand and believe, or God's free gift of grace? If one says that we must first believe or reach a certain age or a certain understanding, then God's gift is not free, but is purchased with our beliefs or our maturity. And that kind of thinking overturns two thousand years of Christian understanding.

The ancient church always received the young, the old, and the simple minded into their midst, to grow up nurtured by the

people of God. We share our faith and our life in Christ with one another, as was done for us by others before us, generation after generation after generation. In such a way God receives us all, just as we are, even as children. It is God's activity in Baptism, not ours which matters, and there is nothing we can do, nor nothing that we can be, to merit God's free gift of grace. Just as we are, without one plea, God accepts us and builds within us a new creation. God through Jesus gives us new life. In the end, we are really all just children in the Lord, hopefully growing ever still, hopefully all of us learning ever more, hopefully transforming ourselves little by little into mature believers. This is the life we share together, and one which we share with our children.

In the Gospels, Jesus once took a small child into his arms to illustrate to his disciples the necessity of innocence and humility in those who sought to follow Him. In Matthew's version of the story, Jesus went on to say that "unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Mt. 18:3-4). We should not wait to baptize our children until they grow up and become like us. We should instead become more like them, if we wish to become true citizens of God's kingdom. Our children need not only learn from us, but as Jesus so clearly reminds us, we must also learn from them.

In one place in Mark's Gospel, the writer recorded that "People were bringing little children to (Jesus) that he might

lay his hands on them and pray for them, and the disciples rebuked those who did so. But when Jesus saw it he was indignant, and said to the disciples, 'Let the little children come to me, do not hinder them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs" (Mk. 10:13-6). Thus, then let us joyfully and confidently welcome Callaway into the community of faith this morning. AMEN