

Infant Faith A List of Scriptures

“Will you have your baby baptized?” I asked a friend who is also a pastor of a non-denominational church in town.

“No, _____,” he responded, “You know we believe in believer's baptism.”

Such was the conversation that provoked this short essay, for suddenly, and with profound clarity, did the connection between rejecting infant baptism and rejecting infant faith become apparent. The thinking is this, “If we only baptize believers, then of course we don't baptize babies, because babies do not and can not believe.”¹ Baptizing an infant is understood to be an “unbelievers baptism.” It is this thought which I propose to contradict with the Holy Scriptures by showing not only the possibility but also the reality of infant faith.

Infant Faith, Old Testament and New

Do babies have faith? While we might be tempted to answer this question with reason or by experience, there is only one trustworthy place to find the answer: the Holy Scriptures. What, then, does the Bible say?

Psalm 71:5-6 (NKJV) LOOK UP TEXT TO READ

⁵ For You are my hope, O Lord GOD;
You are my trust from my youth.

⁶ By You I have been upheld from my birth;

1 It is interesting to note that most (if not all) of the official statements of the Baptist church do not explicitly make the connection between believer's baptism and the lack of infant baptism; it is, I suppose, assumed. I could find no official, “Therefore we do not baptize babies.” Here are a few examples:

The Baptist Confession of 1688, Of Baptism

“1. Baptism is an ordinance of the New Testament ordained by Jesus Christ to be unto the party baptized a sign of his fellowship with him in his death and resurrection; of his being engrafted into him; of remission of sins; and of his giving up unto God, through Jesus Christ, to live and walk in newness of life.

2. Those who do actually profess repentance toward God, faith in and obedience to our Lord Jesus, are the only proper subjects of this ordinance.” (Shaff, Philip. *The Creeds of Christendom*, III.741)

The New Hampshire Baptist Confession, 1833

“We believe that Christian Baptism is the immersion in water of a believer, into the name of the Father, and Son, and Holy Ghost; to show forth, in a solemn and beautiful emblem, our faith in the crucified, buried, and risen Saviour, with its effect in our death to sin and resurrection to a new life; that it is a prerequisite to the privileges of a Church relation.” (Shaff, Philip. *The Creeds of Christendom*, III.747)

The Baptist Faith and Message, Revised 2000

“Christian baptism is the immersion of a believer in water in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It is an act of obedience symbolizing the believer's faith in a crucified, buried, and risen Saviour, the believer's death to sin, the burial of the old life, and the resurrection to walk in newness of life in Christ Jesus. It is a testimony to his faith in the final resurrection of the dead. Being a church ordinance, it is prerequisite to the privileges of church membership and to the Lord's Supper.” (From www.sbc.net/bfm)

On the other hand, the connection is explicit in the very first article of the Anabaptist *Schleitheim Confession* of 1527. (Written two years before Luther's *Catechisms*.)

“**I. Observe concerning baptism:** Baptism shall be given to all those who have learned repentance and amendment of life, and who believe truly that their sins are taken away by Christ, and to all those who walk in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and wish to be buried with Him in death, so that they may be resurrected with Him and to all those who with this significance request it (baptism) of us and demand it for themselves. This excludes all infant baptism, the highest and chief abomination of the Pope. In this you have the foundation and testimony of the apostles. Matt. 28, Mark 16, Acts 2, 8, 16, 19. This we wish to hold simply, yet firmly and with assurance.” (www.anabaptists.org/history/schleith.html) This Confession is quoted on the Southern Baptist website in an article explaining the Baptist understanding of baptism. (www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?ID=14103)

You are He who took me out of my mother's womb.
My praise shall be continually of You.

Note, first of all, that the word 'youth' is expansive in Hebrew, used as a word for infants even unto young men and women². The context of this word indicates what the Psalmist (presumably King David) means by 'youth', adding to the text 'birth' and coming out of the womb. This is as young as young can be, and to this young youth the Lord is his 'trust', his faith, his Confidence.

In verse 6 we would perhaps prefer a more literal translation. The word translated "have been upheld" by the New King James Version is reflexive, to 'support' or 'brace oneself'.³ Here are a few different versions:

New International Version: "From birth I have relied on you."

Revised Standard Version: "Upon thee have I leaned from my birth."

An American Translation: "I have depended on you from birth."

These phrases, 'relied upon, leaned upon, depended on', certainly imply faith. This verse, as the one before it, extols the faith and trust of the child "from birth." This text tells of the trust and reliance of an infant in the true God, and this text is not alone in the Scriptures.

As we turn to the pages of the New Testament we find a number of passages discussing the possibility and the reality of infant faith. There are a number of Greek words for 'child', and a quick survey of these words will help set the stage for our review of these passages.⁴

paidion- [παῖδιον] This is the most common word used of a very young child, infant, child, both boys and girls.

brephos- [βρέφος] This word can be used of unborn babies in the womb [*St Luke 1:41,44*] or of nursing babies and infants [*St Luke 2:12,16*].

mikron- [μικρον] Literally, "small one," this word can be used to describe one's stature [*St Luke 19:3*], one's age [*St Matthew 18:6,10,14*], or in esteem, influence and power.

napion- [νηπιων] This word can be used of an infant, often nursing [*Hebrews 5:13*], or, in the legal sense, of a minor. [*Galatians 4:1*].

thalazonton- [θηλαζοντων] One who is nursing [*St Matthew 21:16*].

teknon- [τεκνον] Child, with special reference to the relationship with the parents, used even for unborn babies in the womb.

Jesus Blesses the Children

LOOK UP AND READ

St Luke 18:15-17 [And parallels in *St Matthew 19:13-15* and *St Mark 10:13-16*] (NKJV)

¹⁵ Then they also brought infants (brephos) to Him that He might touch them; but when His disciples saw it, they rebuked them. ¹⁶ But Jesus called them to Him and said, 'Let the little children (paidion) come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of God. ¹⁷ Assuredly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child (paidion) will by no means enter it.'

Jesus would have the children come to Him, and would have no one forbid them. Why? Because "of such is the kingdom of God." The children who possess the kingdom are the infants, the nursing babies being carried in their mother's arms. (Infant and children are used interchangeably in this passage, the infants [brephos] that are

2 נער "Boy, lad, youth" a. of infant [*Exodus 2:6*], to be born [*Judges 13:5,7,8,12*], just born [*1 Samuel 4:21*], not weaned [*1 Samuel 1:24*; also *Isaiah 8:4*, cf. *7:16+*]. b. of lad just weaned [*1 Samuel 1:24,25,27*], etc. c. youth: of youth Ishmael [*Genesis 21:12f*], Isaac [*Genesis 22:5,12*]... d. with special stress on youthfulness [*Judges 8:20*; *1 Samuel 17:33,42*]... e. of marriageable age [*Genesis 34:19*], warrior Absalom, [*2 Samuel 18:5,12*]" *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Hendrickson Publishers: Peabody, MA. 1906, Sixth Printing, 2001, p. 654-655).

3 תָּקַן is in the Niphal, as in *Isaiah 48:2*. See BDB, p. 701-702.

4 Definitions are taken from *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, Walter Bauer, William Arndt and Wilbur Gingrich (The University of Chicago Press. Chicago, IL. 1979)

being brought are the same children [paidios] that Jesus receives.) And their possessing of the kingdom is not accidental; as if Jesus says, "Because they have not attained the age of accountability I will overlook the necessity of faith and give these babies the kingdom because they are innocent" or some other such thing. No, theirs is the kingdom of heaven in such a sense that the children are the very picture of faith. The children are such a picture of faith that even adults must be like them in order to attain the kingdom of heaven. This same teaching is heard in the following text, where Jesus again talks of the necessity of becoming as a child to have the gift of the heavenly kingdom.

True Greatness

St Matthew 18:1-5 [And parallels in *St Mark 9:33-37* and *St Luke 9:46-48*] (NKJV)

¹ At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, 'Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?' ² Then Jesus called a little child (paidion) to Him, set him in the midst of them, ³ and said, 'Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children (paidion), you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. ⁴ Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child (paidion) is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. ⁵ Whoever receives one little child (paidion) like this in My name receives Me.'

Here Jesus sets a child before His disciples to teach them who the greatest in the kingdom of heaven is, and, what's more, says that unless we, too, become as children, we will not enter the kingdom of heaven. There are not two ways to obtain the kingdom of heaven, one for adults (faith) and another for children (apparently just being children). Possessing the kingdom of heaven is the sole result of faith (faith alone). According to Jesus the children are the possessors of the kingdom and, therefore, the very picture of humility and faith. This is said plainly in the next verse.

The Little One Who Believe in Me

St Matthew 18:6 [And parallels in *St Mark 9:42-43* and *St Luke 17:2*, see also *18:10* and *14*] (NKJV)

⁶ But whoever causes one of these little ones (mikron) who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea."

The little ones of verse six is the little child of the previous passage whom Jesus sets before His disciples. These "little ones" are explicitly described as the ones "who believe in" Jesus. The clarity of the text needs no comment.

Later in the text these little ones are described as the possessors of angels who "behold the face of the Father" [*18:10*] and as those whom the "Father desires that they do not perish" [*18:14*].

Jesus Gives Thanks to the Father

St Matthew 11:25-27 [And parallel in *St Luke 10:21-22*] (NKJV)

²⁵ At that time Jesus answered and said, 'I thank You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because You have hidden these things from the wise and prudent and have revealed them to babes (napion). ²⁶ Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in Your sight. ²⁷ All things have been delivered to Me by My Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father. Nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and he to whom the Son wills to reveal Him.'

It is, Jesus teaches us, the Father's will to reveal 'these things' to babes. What are "these things" which the babes have? They are not offended by Christ, but trust that He is the Coming One, sent from God. [*St Matthew 11:3-6*] It is the wise and the prudent that have so much trouble with the works of Christ, but not the babes. These are the ones to whom the kingdom is revealed.

While it might be a mystery to us, it is becoming clear that in the mind of Jesus and the context of the Scriptures it is not strange thing to think of babes, infants and children as those who believe in Christ. It might not seem good to us to ascribe to infants faith and trust in Christ, but it does seem good in the Father's sight [*11:26*].

Out of the Mouths of Babes and Nursing Infants

St Matthew 21:15-16 (NKJV)

“¹⁵ But when the chief priests and scribes saw the wonderful things that He did, and the children (paidion) crying out in the temple and saying, “Hosanna to the Son of David!” they were indignant ¹⁶ and said to Him, “Do You hear what these are saying?”

And Jesus said to them, “Yes. Have you never read,

‘ *Out of the mouth of babes (napion) and nursing infants (thalazonton) You have perfected praise’?*”

Jesus here quotes Psalm 8:2 to support the accolades that the children are offering Him as He makes His triumphal entry into Jerusalem. The Lord enlists children, babies, and nursing infants to sing His praises and announce His coming. While it is possible for the Lord to call forth His praises even from stones [*St Luke 19:40*], it is His good pleasure to perfect (or complete) His praise with the confession and singing of babes and nursing infants. This praise is certainly a fruit of faith.

John the Baptist

St Luke 1:15,41

“¹⁵ For he will be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink. He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb.”

“⁴¹ And it happened, when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, that the babe leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.”

The circumstances of John the Baptists conception and birth are certainly unique, and we should, therefore not presume too much from it. What is clear is that it is certainly possible for the Holy Spirit to fill a child even in the womb, and that this child even responds with joy at the presence of His Lord (who is also in the womb of the blessed Virgin Mary).

From Childhood You have Know the Scriptures

2 Timothy 3:14,15

“¹⁴ But as for you, continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them, ¹⁵ and that from childhood (brephos) you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.”

The word 'childhood' would lead us to think of this as a young person, studying and leaning from a teacher, but the Greek word 'brephos' pushes us back further, to infancy. (NIV: “how from infancy you have know the holy Scriptures.”) Again, the Scriptures do not think it a strange thing for an infant to trust, believe, know, and praise the Lord.

Because You Have Known the Father

1 John 2:12,13

“¹² I write to you, little children (teknon),
Because your sins are forgiven you for His name's sake...”

¹³ I write to you, little children (paidion),
Because you have known the Father.”

St John, here, addresses the little children much as our Lord did, as those who believe. In the first instance (verse twelve), this could be seen as a familiar address, as John does in 2:1 (My little children, teknia) and other places. But that John changes the word in verse thirteen is striking, and leads us to interpret the little children referred to as actual youths, babies, etc. This is certainly not out of the ordinary in the Word of the Scriptures.

We see from the testimony of the Scriptures that infants can and do have faith. What this means is that infant baptism is believer's baptism. So to the original conversation concerning infant faith,

“Will you have your baby baptized?” I asked.

“No, Bryan, You know we believe in believer's baptism.”

“Well,” and here comes the answer, “so do I.”⁵ While the faith does not give validity to the baptism, when we baptize an infant we are not just splashing water on a rock. This child can and does, by the power of God's Word, have faith in Christ Jesus, theirs is the kingdom of heaven. What has now become apparent is that there are two different understandings of faith at work. On one hand, faith is seen as a gift of God, on the other, faith is the response of man to the offer of salvation. These two different understandings of faith we now take up as we consider faith as gift.

Faith as Gift

To get a handle on the Baptist/Evangelical conception of faith, we turn to a classic tract that has been used as a 'witnessing tool' for years: *The Four Spiritual Laws*⁶. The Four Spiritual Laws are:

- (1) God loves you and offers a wonderful plan for your life.
- (2) Man is sinful and separated from God. Therefore, he cannot know and experience God's love and plan for his life.
- (3) Jesus Christ is God's only provision for man's sin. Through Him you can know and experience God's love and plan for your life.
- (4) We must individually receive Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord; then we can know and experience God's love and plan for our lives.

Notice that the Gospel, as expressed in the third law, is potential. “Through [Christ] you *can* know and experience God's love.” It is possible to know God's love, but there is a necessary first step for the potential

5 That Lutheran baptism assumes faith in the infant being baptized can be seen in the Lutheran baptismal liturgy. Before the child is baptized they are asked:

“N., do you renounce the devil?”

Answer: “Yes.”

“And all his works?”

Answer: “Yes.”

“And all his ways?”

Answer: “Yes.”

Then he shall ask:

“Do you believe in God the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth?”

Answer: “Yes.”

“Do you believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son our Lord, who was born and suffered?”

Answer: “Yes.”

“Do you believe in the Holy Spirit, one holy Christian church, the community of saints, forgiveness of sins, resurrection of the body, and after death an eternal life?”

Answer: “Yes.”

“Do you want to be baptized?”

Answer: “Yes.”

This liturgy is taken from Luther's baptismal book, published in 1523 and republished in 1526 (on which this text is taken). This translation is taken for the *Book of Concord*, ed. Kolb and Wengert (Augsburg Fortress. Minneapolis, MN, 2000. p. 374-375).

The rubric calls for the sponsors to answer the questions in the place of the child, but never-the-less, it is the child who is asked the question, and so it is the child who says, “Yes, I renounce the devil. Yes, I believe in God the Father. Yes, I believe in God the Son. Yes, I believe in God the Holy Spirit. Yes, I want to be baptized.” This assumes that the child has faith before they are baptized. So Lutherans, following the Lutheran liturgy, baptize believers.

6 *The Four Spiritual Laws* were written in 1965 by Bill Bright, the founder of “Campus Crusade for Christ.”

Approximately 1.5 billion copies of this tract have been printed according to the evangelical website of Campus Crusade: www.greatcom.org.laws.

Christian, there must be a response to God's love and plan. Faith, then, is the "must" of the fourth law, "we must individually receive Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord." In *The Four Spiritual Laws*, this "receiving" takes the form of the "sinner's prayer", asking Jesus into our heart. There are any number of ways that this "receiving" occurs in different churches, but all are a response to the offer of salvation. Faith, then, is a "response," an act of man to whom the Gospel is offered.

If this is how faith is understood, it is understandable that infants would be excluded. Infants have trouble praying the sinners prayer and walking forward for the altar call; infants have trouble talking and walking at all. So the inability to respond is equated with the inability to believe.

The Bible, on the other hand, is careful to show how faith is a gift of God. "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God." [Ephesians 2:8] The gift of God is precisely the faith through which salvation comes. "For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake." [Philippians 1:29] "You were raised with Him through faith in the working of God." [Colossians 2:12]

Faith, then, is a gift, created by God's Word. "Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God." [Romans 10:17] Of course, God does not do the believing for us. It is we, infants and adults, who believe, just as it is we who live, and yet just as God gives and sustains our life, so God gives and sustains our faith. Though infants cannot speak, they certainly can hear. Though infants cannot respond, they can receive gifts. As we saw in the survey of Biblical texts, the trust and dependence and receptiveness of infants is very picture of faith.

It might offend our reason and sensibilities, but the Scriptures are clear that infants and children can and do have faith. May God grant to all of His people, both young and old, the faith of a child in order that ours would be the kingdom of heaven.

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Oculi, Lent III, 2006