

Doctrine of Infant Baptism

Household Baptisms

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There are three definite cases of household baptisms recorded in the New Testament, and there is a strong inference that a fourth case included the entire household. The case where household baptism is strongly implied is that of Cornelius (Acts 10:47-48; 11:14). The three definite cases of household baptisms are those of Lydia (Acts 16:15), the Philippian jailor (Acts 16:33-34), and Stephanas (1 Cor. 1:16).

Whether any of these households had infants in them, and, if so, whether they were baptized, has been a debated issue for centuries. Some years ago, Grover Gunn, writing in the Herald of the Covenant, a voice of the Presbyterian Church in America, and published in Water Valley, Mississippi, wrote a response to the question, "What theology of children does one find in Paul's sermon to the Philippian jailer?" It is strange that such a question should be asked in view of the fact that in three of the four cases of household baptisms named in the New Testament there is positive proof that there was not an infant in these households, including that of the Philippian jailer.

Cornelius

Cornelius and his house needed words whereby he and his house could be saved (Acts 11:14). But there could not have been an infants in the household of Cornelius because, according to Acts 10:46, those who were commanded to be baptized in v. 47 were the ones who had spoken with tongues and magnified God. Such responses to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit would not have been produced in infants who could neither speak (much less in foreign languages) nor magnify God by speaking. Since Peter directed the command to be baptized to those who had spoken in tongues and magnified God, we know that no infants were baptized. How can commands be directed to infants who are not yet capable of comprehending words? Infants cannot speak words, and they cannot understand words directed to them. This being the case, how could Peter have been directing the command to be baptized to infants?

The Philippian Jailer

The same may be said for the household of the Philippian jailer. The divine record says not only that Paul spoke the word of the Lord to the entire house (Acts 16:32), but that the jailer rejoiced and believed with his house (Acts 16:34). The cause of the rejoicing was the fact that they had believed in God. Infants are not capable of rejoicing over such favorable responses to the preaching of the gospel, and they are even more incapable of having believed in God. J.A. Alexander, a Paedobaptist, admits in his commentary on Acts that "thou and thy house" in verse 31 does not mean that personal faith is not required on the part of the jailer's household, as though the others could be saved on the basis of the jailer's faith. He says: "Thou and thy house (or household, see above on v. 15) does not mean that they were to be saved by his faith, but by faith in the same Saviour." Albert Barnes, another Paedobaptist, agrees: "Salvation is offered to

his family as well as himself; implying that if they believed they should also be saved.” The simple fact is that Paul could have delivered no discourse to infant children, nor could infants have believed at the preaching of such a sermon, or rejoiced over something they were not capable of doing (believing in God).

Craig S. Keener makes an interesting observation about what was expected in Roman households: “Romans expected the whole household to follow the religion of its head; they also expected the head to lead his household to the worship of Roman gods. Here conversion is not automatic; the whole household must hear the word of God” (The IVP Biblical Background Commentary: New Testament 370). He also adds the following note about Roman soldiers and shows why the passage cannot be used in support of infant baptism: “In view of 16:20-21, the jailer risks getting in serious trouble here. If he is a retired soldier (which is not clear — v. 23), he may have young children (soldiers were not permitted to marry officially until retirement); but this is far from certain and therefore cannot be used to prove infant baptism (as some have attempted)” (370). Remember, too, that even if he had children, the fact that the whole household had to hear the word of God is enough to show (as pointed out earlier) that no infants were involved.

Stephanas

In the case of the house of Stephanas, those who were baptized later “set themselves to minister to the saints” (1 Cor. 16:15). What “theology of children” does one find in this passage? If one finds infant baptism in 1 Corinthians 1:16 (if this is the “theology of children” found in this verse) because the passage says Paul “baptized . . . the household of Stephanas,” would not consistency demand that his “theology of children” from 1 Corinthians 16:15 be infant ministers in the church, because this passage says, “the house of Stephanas set themselves to minister to the saints . . .”?

Lydia

The only other case is that of Lydia, and the assumptions required in her case make it impossible to build a defensible argument for infant baptism from the baptism of her household. J.W. McGarvey cites several Paedobaptist authors (those who believe in infant baptism) of earlier times who saw no argument for infant baptism in the baptism of Lydia’s household.

It may be that no inference of infant baptism is hence deducible (Henry Alford).

Evidently the passage in itself cannot be adduced as a proof either for or against baptism; there is in it no indication whether there were or were not infants in the household of Lydia (Paton J. Gloag)

. . . no trace is to be found in the New Testament, speaking of the baptism of the children of Christians (H.A.W. Meyer)

This is to say that the references to household baptisms have nothing per se to say on the subject of infant baptism.

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