

What's the difference between infant baptism and child dedication? * Q's from the pews
Sunday, September 8, 2019 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone

The question that we have to look at this morning is an important one and one that Christians through the ages have answered it in very different ways. This is definitely one of those areas where people who genuinely love Jesus have differed on the details of following Him.

Here's the question – what's the difference between infant baptism and child dedication? And why do we do child dedications?

Great question and uniquely relevant to us. Many of us probably grew up in traditions where babies were baptised and yet now here we are at Langford where we dedicate children rather than baptising them. And some of you may be wondering – well, what exactly IS the difference? And IS there a difference? And what makes Langford lean one way and not the other?

All great questions and I'm glad to be able to explore them with you today. To be honest, every time I talk to parents about dedications, I've had this conversation in my own head, so it's nice to get it out into the open, so that it can be helpful for you too.

So let's dive in and start with the question 'What's the difference between infant baptism and child dedication?'

And just a brief terminology thing – what do you call medicine for children? Paediatrics. What do you call a doctor for children? Paediatrician. So what do you think paedobaptism might be? The baptism of children? Paedobaptism is just a fancy word for baby baptism; I'll try to stick with infant baptism but just in case, that's what that means.

So – 'What's the difference between paedobaptism – baby baptism – and child dedication?'

Well, let's talk about infant baptism first, which again, means that we need to clarify our terms. Because throughout history, the Church has had different understandings of what infant baptism means and accomplishes. And by and large they fit into two categories – baptismal regeneration and covenant initiation. More big words eh? Let me break them down.

The first one, baptismal regeneration, is a largely Catholic position. The idea here is that babies are born with original sin – that is, sin handed down from Adam and Eve – and baptism is required to wash away their sins.

The Vatican's statement on baptism reads like this –

1250 Born with a fallen human nature and tainted by original sin, children also have need of *the new birth in Baptism* to be freed from the power of darkness and brought into the realm of the freedom of the children of God, to which all men are called....

1263 By Baptism all sins are forgiven, original sin and all personal sins, as well as all punishment for sin. In those who have been *reborn* nothing remains that would impede their entry into the Kingdom of God, ~~neither Adam's sin, nor personal sin, nor the consequences of sin, the gravest of which is separation from God.~~

According to this view, baptising a child automatically washes away their sin. They have new birth and are saved for all eternity and the expectation is that catechesis will fill in the details of faith later on.

This is the belief that led doctors back in the day to baptise babies if they didn't think that they would make it and the belief that some of you have shared with me your relatives hold.

But there's a problem with that view. There's nowhere in the Bible that says baptism does that. There's nowhere in the Bible that says that we are born again through baptism. The only way to be born again is by faith. Remember the conversation Jesus had with Nicodemus in John 3? He says 'you must be born again' and then a little later says how – 'whosoever believeth in me shall not perish but have eternal life.' When exercise faith, turning from sin to God, we are born again. We are made new. That's when we are 'regenerated' so you can safely put baptismal regeneration back on the shelf.

And just an aside – that picture of God as someone who will condemn babies unless they are cleansed of original sin is terrifying and wholly untrue. Babies are safe in God's merciful hands until the time that they either choose to follow Jesus or to reject Him themselves. God will not condemn them for not being baptized – God doesn't work that way.

So as I say – baptismal regeneration – back on the shelf.

Now there is a *different* understanding of infant baptism that we really need to dig into – and that's covenant initiation. This is a more reformed doctrine – so Presbyterian, Christian Reformed churches – and it understands baptism as a way of welcoming the children of believers into the covenant community of God's people.

This way of thinking about infant baptism goes all the way back to Genesis 17. God had previously made a covenant with Abraham, to bless him and bless the nations through him, and then in Genesis 17, He reaffirmed that earlier covenant. Genesis 17, starting in verse 10 reads:

10 This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised.

11 You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you.

12 For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised...
(Gen 17:10-12 NIV).

There are two very important points to be drawn from that passage – one – circumcision is the sign of the covenant that God made with Abraham. If you have the sign, you belong to the covenant.

And two – since children are to receive that sign that means that they belong to the covenant community. They are not lesser members or outsiders to the covenant – they have privileged access to the promises that God made in the covenant.

That means that as they grew up, they would learning about God in the midst of this covenant community and by keeping the terms of the covenant themselves, they would receive its blessings.

Now to be clear – circumcision itself did not make you right with God. It was simply an outward ritual that set you apart as a member of the covenant community. If you were going to receive the blessings

of that covenant, the external rite had to be accompanied by an internal attitude. In the language of Moses and Jeremiah, physical circumcision had to be joined by a circumcision of the heart – that is an attitude of faithfulness and obedience.

Moses for example, writes 16 Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer (Deu 10:15-16 NIV). Jeremiah says ‘Circumcise yourselves to the LORD, circumcise your hearts, you men of Judah (Jeremiah 4:4)

The problem though is that very few people in Israel had circumcised hearts. They had the outward sign, but inwardly they were pointed away from God. They pushed the boundaries of the covenant as far as they could until they just straight up ignored it. Which meant, that they would receive the covenant curses.

But God was not content to see people perish – in fact, He never was – way back in Deuteronomy, Moses promised - 6 The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live. (Deu 30:6 NIV).

And so through the prophet Jeremiah, God promised a New Covenant that would accomplish that. This New Covenant would both bring them back into relationship with God AND empower them for holy living. God Himself would circumcise their hearts so that they could keep the covenant. Jeremiah 31:31 reads:

31 "The time is coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah.

32 It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares the LORD.

33 "This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.

34 No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the LORD. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more" (Jer 31:31-34 NIV).

God promised this new covenant wherein He would renew us from the inside out.

When Jesus said ‘this is the new covenant in my blood’ at the Last Supper – He was talking about *this* covenant. And when He shed His blood on the Cross, He sealed it and put the New Covenant into effect.

He bore the curses that our covenant disobedience deserved, so that we could receive the blessings that He deserved. He established this new covenant community that would be characterized by love.

All that to say that we are still operating under a covenant.

That’s not something that we talk about very often, but the reality is that as followers of Jesus, we belong to the New Covenant – where God freely forgives our sins, writes His Law on our hearts so we desire to keep it and we know Him personally. We belong to the new covenant community.

And if children of OT saints belonged to the covenant community, then children of NT saints should belong to it too. The only difference is that in the new covenant, baptism replaces circumcision as the sign of the covenant. So just as OT saints welcomed their children into the covenant through circumcision, we welcome our children into the community through baptism with the intention that they would grow to know and love God themselves.

Colossians 2:11-12 makes the connection between circumcision and baptism - 11 In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, 12 having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead (Col 2:11-12 NIV).

This seems to set circumcision and baptism side by side to show that the one replaced the other.

And the household baptisms that happen in the book of Acts seem to confirm it. Acts 10 – Cornelius – Acts 16, Lydia and the Philippian jailer, Acts 18, Crispus – these people believed in Jesus so entered the covenant community, but they weren't circumcised to show it. They were baptized. But they weren't baptized alone – their whole households were baptized in order to bring them into the covenant.

Let's take the Philippian jailer's story as an example – he puts his faith in the Lord Jesus – and he and his whole family are baptized. Acts 16:33 says –

33 At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized.

34 The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God--he and his whole family (Act 16:31-34 NIV).

And to be honest, it's probably better translated 'he and his whole family was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God.'

The point is – when the head of the household was a believer, all members of that household were initiated into the covenant. They had privileged access to the covenant and its blessings which they could actively choose to receive for themselves.

That idea again is reflected in 1 Corinthians 7:14 – Paul is writing there about so-called 'mixed marriages' – where one spouse is a believer and the other is not – and he writes -

14 For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. (1Co 7:14 NIV).

Now clearly, Paul isn't saying that the unbeliever is saved – Paul is pretty clear elsewhere that anyone who *believes* will be saved – and yet he does seem to say that the unbelieving spouse is somehow set apart and given a special opportunity to believe and be saved. And children likewise have that same opportunity to experience the New Covenant of life with Christ and forgiveness of sins... and the practice of infant baptism sets them apart as members of that covenant.

Now that's a compelling argument. When you look at the OT, it's clear that God sees families as the primary way of saving people and bringing them into relationship with Him. The children of OT saints clearly had privileged access to the promises of God and it appears that something similar exists under the New Covenant. The only difference is, that instead of circumcision functioning as the initiating sign of the old covenant, baptism welcomes children into the New Covenant, anticipating that they will later receive its benefits by faith.

Now, as I say, that's a compelling argument. It's a good way of honouring God's plan for families and for making sense of the household baptisms and privileges that children of believers appear to have.

The place where some Christians will differ though is that when the NT talks about baptism, it usually describes it as a marker of faith. A person actively puts their trust in Jesus and they are baptised.

Jesus said in Mark 16 - 15 ~~He said to them,~~ "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. 16 Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. (Mar 16:15-16 NIV).

That very situation unfolds in Acts 8 - 12 But when they (Samaritan) believed Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women.

13 Simon himself believed and was baptized... (Act 8:12-13 NIV).

And even the household baptisms are closely linked to faith – Lydia, Crispus, the jailer, in some cases, their whole household – they believed and they were baptised on the basis of belief – baptism doesn't happen apart from belief.

And to be honest, I really don't think that that passage in Colossians equates circumcision with baptism as covenant signs. Look at it again – Colossians 2:11-12 -

11 In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, 12 having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.

Lots going on there but 4 things are clear.

1. Paul's not talking about physical circumcision here; he's talking about spiritual circumcision. He's talking about Jesus coming in and circumcising your heart, just as God promised back in Deuteronomy 10.

2. He's not talking about entering into a covenant in the hopes that you will keep it and so receive the covenant blessings; he's saying that in Christ, we receive the covenant's blessings, one of which is spiritual renewal.

3. This spiritual renewal happens when we die and rise again with Christ by faith. He equates circumcision of the heart with death and resurrection.

And 4th, baptism is the sign that represents that death and rebirth. If anything, baptism is not the sign of the covenant, but of our union with Jesus in His death and resurrection which we receive by faith.

When we go under the water in baptism, we are proclaiming that we believe that since Jesus died and rose again, so too shall we.

Over and again, the NT describes baptism as a sign that someone has actively believed – that they've turned from the old life to the new - and it's hard to imagine that a newborn baby could consciously choose to exercise faith.

And let's be honest – circumcision and infant baptism are marking something very different from believer's baptism. Yes they are all rites of initiation – they all welcome people – but they're doing it at different points in the journey. Circumcision and infant baptism mark the beginning of the journey, hoping that they'll believe; believer's baptism marks the point in the journey where a person HAS believed.

You could think of it like this - Infant baptism is like an engagement ring – it's a *promise* of something to come that's not guaranteed – but baptism is like a wedding ring – a sign that that promise *has* happened – that someone has chosen irrevocably relationship with God.

Now that being said, paedobaptists are right to highlight the role of families in God's redemptive purposes and no church that does believer's baptism would deny that. So a lot of churches have adopted the practice of 'child dedication.' This allows churches to welcome children into their community and sets them on the road to believing in God, but it reserves the language of baptism for something that you do when you believe.

Child dedication is rooted in the OT practice of presenting children before the Lord – like Samuel and Hannah and Jesus in the Temple – and it allows parents to commit themselves and their children to the Lord in the presence of the believing community.

So what's the difference between infant baptism and child dedication?

Well, on the surface, they're not terribly different.

They both celebrate God's gift of children.

They both commit the parents to raising their children to know God.

And they both welcome the children into the church community.

Below the surface though is where you see the difference.

Infant baptism leans heavily on the idea God works through covenant and that children are welcome in that covenant. Infant baptism welcomes them into the covenant, anticipating that through catechism, children will learn to believe and love the Lord.

Likewise, child dedication welcomes children into the church community anticipating that they will come to faith later, but it saves baptism for the time when they believe.

So there it is, the difference between infant baptism and child dedication.

So, now, the tough question. Why do we as a church do child dedication and not infant baptism?

Well, let me start with my own story.

When I was a baby, I was baptised at our little United Church out in the country side. I'm not sure that my parents could articulate all of the theological underpinnings of that baptism – the covenant and the privilege and all that stuff – but they were doing what they knew to be right.

As I grew older, I brushed up against more Baptist leaning people and they seemed to really harp on baptism. You have to get baptised. You have to get baptised. You have to be obedient to Jesus and get baptised and that just sort of turned me off. And I didn't give it much thought.

Then I went to university and came to faith – real, saving faith – I believed in my heart that Jesus was Lord and I was willing to acknowledge Him publically – so then I had to think about 'should I be baptized now?'

And then I went to a Baptist seminary – which – as you can imagine – was VERY PRO-believer's baptism and child dedication – and then I worked for a denomination with very similar leanings and I got to see their point of view. I really do think that being baptized as a believer is a special and precious thing – not just out of obedience to Jesus – because He did call us to be baptized – but it's a privilege to associate so closely with Him in baptism. And I do want to encourage you – if you haven't been baptized as a believer, let's talk about it, because it's a really special act.

But I have to admit – for all I knew about believer's baptism, I was missing pieces in understanding the argument for infant baptism. This week was really helpful to dig into the infant baptism position and try to understand it, and I'll tell you, I've come away with a much deeper appreciation infant baptism. I don't think it's wrong. I think that there's a compelling argument for it, to the point where I'd almost be willing to consider a dual practice situation.

I think that infant Baptists are right to highlight the covenantal nature of faith and it does appear that children of believers have some unique access to faith that others don't. It makes sense to have some sort of ritual to welcome children in and the Church has been baptizing babies for so long that it's just culturally assumed that you welcome kids into the church community by baptizing them.

Now that being said, Baptists and reformed infant Baptists agree that that baptism does not save their child - they need to actively choose a life of faith to receive the covenant blessings – and when they do choose to believe, then we mark it with believer's baptism.

Baby baptism would literally then be a 'baby baptism' - one that sets children up for and anticipates believer's baptism later in life. And I don't think my parents did it on purpose, but that's me – baptized 'into the community' at least, exposed to the life of faith – I later decided to believe for myself and was baptized later on. I could see a church doing that.

But for now at least, why does Langford practice child dedication and not infant baptism?

Well, I think that there are two reasons.

The first is that people generally just don't have that robust an understanding of the New Covenant when they think about infant baptism. Like, when I started this message, could you have explained all the covenant stuff? Most parents just think of baptism as 'the thing you do with your baby' without really having a clear understanding of why you do it. And without that rooting in covenant theology, I think you're probably just as well with a child dedication, which is essentially what people assume you're

doing anyways. Admittedly, we could talk a lot more about the New Covenant but that's a Q from the pew for a different time.

Second, I think that it IS important to preserve the concept of baptism for believer's baptism. You can put passages together to make a good theological case for infant baptism, but with believer's baptism, you just gotta point to like one passage and say along with Jesus – whoever believes and is baptized will be saved. It's pretty straightforward.

16 Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. (Mar 16:15-16 NIV).

If it's possible to do infant baptism without detracting from believer's baptism, I could see doing it, but I think it's wise to make much of believer's baptism as a way to mark conclusively a turning from the old life to the new.

Third I think that infant baptism can breed a sort of apathy towards the life of faith. I mean, how many people do you know who were baptised as children who have gone on to live very worldly lives? Now admittedly, people who have been dedicated as children can go off on their own way to, but at least with child dedication, there's no confusion about belief and salvation. Child dedication says you have to believe and then you're baptized. I fear that some people will think, 'well, I've been baptised as a child and that's all I need' and that's just not true. I'd like to think that child dedication can motivate people towards faith.

And that's why we do child dedications.

Now, like last week, I think that's it's possible to talk so much about the stuff where we differ, that we forget what we agree on, and that's that Jesus died and rose again for the forgiveness of sin and to give us eternal life. Whether we baptise and then encourage belief or believe and get baptized, our faith is in one God, one Saviour, Jesus Christ. So let me leave you with a passage that comes immediately after that talk about baptism and spiritual circumcision in Colossians. Colossians 2:13 says:

13 When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins,

14 having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross.

15 And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross (Col 2:13-15 NIV).

When we believe and when we are baptised is not nearly as important as that we do. He made us alive, He forgave all our sins. Let's give our lives to follow Him.

BENEDICTION

2 Pet. 3:18 - (May you) grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.