

“Household” Baptisms in the NT

Intro:

One of the strongest arguments used by paedobaptists is that since the children of the covenant were circumcised, we should now transfer the covenant sign – in the NT, baptism – to the children of believers.

Theologically, paedobaptists often refer to passages such as 1 Corinthians 7:14; 10:1-5; and Colossians 2:11-12 as the basis for their practice of sprinkling the unbelieving infants of believing parents.¹

In addition to these texts, they often appeal to the example we see of household baptisms in the NT, which we will look at now.

Significant Passages:

1. **Acts 10-11** – the baptism of Cornelius’ household.

At first glance, this seems a slam-dunk for the paedobaptist position. However, a basic perusal of the text shows something all-together different!

- i. We are not told the age of all those who were in Cornelius’ “house”.
 - According to **10:24**, those in his “house” were “his relatives and close friends” that he had invited over to hear Peter’s message. Luke goes on to say in **10:25** that there were “many persons gathered.”
- ii. In **Acts 10:44**, Luke says that “the Holy Spirit fell on **ALL** who heard the word,” and subsequently all began “speaking in tongues extolling God” (**10:46**). Peter then says, “Can anyone withhold water for baptizing **THESE**

¹ All of these have significant exegetical and practical problems. For example, in **1 Cor. 7:14**, if we apply “made holy” (ἡγιάσται) to unbelieving (ἄπιστος) husbands the same way paedobaptists apply it to unbelieving children, then is the unbelieving husband “in the covenant”? If so, this has huge soteriological implications that totter on the edge of heresy! The **Colossians 2** passage says that by faith, even Gentile Christians have “been circumcised” supernaturally (i.e., their hearts). Ironically, this is one of the strongest passages in all the Bible that shows only believers are to be baptized. Unbelieving children are still spiritually “dead” (2:13), and need to be “made alive with [Christ]” before they are immersed. The most important word in the argument is “you,” which is referring only to believers.

people, **who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?**” And he commanded **THEM** to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.” (10:47-48).

- It’s very clear that the “those” and “them” who were baptized were “those” who had “the gift of the Holy Spirit poured out” on “them” – that is, believers.
 - This is clearly mimicking the event of Acts 2, where the Holy Spirit was “poured out on” the Jewish believers who had believed Peter’s gospel message. The only difference here, as noted by Luke, is that the recipients of baptism are “Gentiles” (10:45; cf. 11:17).
- iii. The angel’s prophetic message and Peter’s interpretation in **11:14-18** further proves that only believers were baptized:
 - “[Peter] will declare to you a message by which you will be saved, **you and ALL YOUR HOUSEHOLD.** As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on **them** just as on us at the beginning. And I remembered the world of the Lord, how He said, ‘**John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.**’ If then God gave the same gift to them as He gave to us **when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ,** who was I that I could stand in God’s way? When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, ‘Then to the Gentiles also **God has granted repentance that leads to life.**’”

It is beyond dispute that only believers were immersed in Acts 10-11, just as in every single incident in the book of Acts.

2. Acts 16:15

This is tricky, as almost no details are given, other than that the Lord opened Lydia’s heart to pay attention to and receive Paul’s message, and that she was then subsequently baptised, “and her household as well.” This passage neither proves the Baptist position nor the paedobaptist position. Saying anything more than Luke’s bare description falls prey to speculation and arguments from silence.

- This is why it is important to look at the other “household baptism” passages to inform us of what would have happened here.

3. Acts 16:31, 34

Reminiscent of Acts 10-11, a prophetic word is spoken to a Gentile with regards to salvation:

- “Then [the jailor] brought [Paul and Silas] out and said, ‘Sirs, what must I do to be saved?’ And they said, ‘Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, **YOU AND YOUR HOUSEHOLD.**’ And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to ALL who were in his house. And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds; and he was baptized at once, he and ALL his family.” (16:31-34)
 - Once again, see the link between saving faith and immersion. Paul prophetically tells the jailor that upon hearing the gospel, he and all his household will believe and be saved. Unsurprisingly, he and all his household are subsequently baptized, as is the pattern of Acts. Moreover, in **16:34**, Luke says both the jailor and “his **ENTIRE** household” were rejoicing because he – and they – had come to believe in God.²

4. Acts 18:8

Again, and unsurprisingly, we see the link between saving faith and baptism:

- “Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed in the Lord, **together with his entire household**. And many of the Corinthians hearing Paul believed and were baptized.”
 - Luke goes out of his way to emphasize that Crispus’ “entire household” believed. Like the “many” others who had believed the gospel, they too were subsequently immersed.

² Virtually all English translations (e.g., NASB, NET, NIV, CSB, NLT, KJV) include the whole household as not only rejoicing, but also believing. Unfortunately, the ESV stands alone in making it seem that only the jailor had believed. See the NET notes for a persuasive explanation.

The pattern of “household baptisms” in Acts clearly teaches that absolutely no unbelievers were baptized,³ including children.

5. 1 Cor. 1:16

Like the account of the immersion of Lydia’s household, Paul gives us no details or information by which we can say anything substantive with regards to whether we should immerse unbelieving “covenant children” or not.

However, as anyone who has ever studied hermeneutics knows, we need to interpret the less clear passages in light of the more clear passages, as well as the vague passages in light of the specific.

- It is noteworthy, however, to mention that Paul’s letter is written to “the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesu Christ.” (1:2)
 - The “you,” then, of 1:14, is referring to believers, which we would say is true of all the members of Stephanus’ household.

Conclusion:

As one paedobaptist noted, these are not “clinchers” with regards to whether or not we should immerse unbelievers into the church as “covenant children.”

However, we must at least note that the practice in the book of Acts clearly aligns itself with the greatest text against paedobaptism, namely Jeremiah 31:31-33, namely that “ALL” of the members of the new covenant would savingly “KNOW” the true and triune God.

And since new covenant membership is only for believers, the covenant “sign” – immersion – is only for believers. Paedobaptism completely overlooks the

³ “Believers’ immersion” is the undeniable pattern in the book of Acts: **2:37-41** (the pattern and paradigm established in Jerusalem); **8:12** (the conversion of the Samaritans); **8:36** (the Ethiopian Eunuch); **9:18** (the conversion of Saul); **10:47** (the conversion of Cornelius the Gentile and his family); **16:15** (the conversion of Lydia and her household); **16:33** (the conversion of the Philippian jailor and his family); **18:33** (the Corinthian revival); **19:5** (the baptism of John’s disciples in Ephesus). The pattern is easy to see: they heard the Good News; they believed the Good News; they confessed the Good News *through* publicly being immersed.

“newness” of the new covenant and assumes that the new covenant community is just like the old covenant community – namely, the “people of God” are a “mix” of both believers and unbelievers,⁴ completely contravening the clear teaching set forth in **Hebrews 8**.

As Paul teaches elsewhere, Abraham’s true children are identified not by mere outward markers,⁵ but rather by faith in Christ.⁶ And as Paul says in **Galatians 3:26-27**, immersion is only for those who have “put on” Christ through faith.

May God grant us the grace to imitate the noble Bereans (Acts 17:11), who searched the Scriptures to see if these things are so.

Soli Deo Gloria!!

⁴ With all having the covenant “sign” applied to them. This creates not only an inconsistency theologically, but practically, as there are now unbelievers who identify as “covenant people.” Nowhere in the NT do we even see a hint of this. Interestingly, the problem with the old covenant is that one could still identify as belonging to God’s people, while still having an unregenerate (uncircumcised) heart. This is unthinkable in the new covenant!!

⁵ Such as circumcision, dietary restrictions, etc.

⁶ See esp. **Galatians 3:7-9**.