

Pako Morning Service: 12/06/16;

Scripture Readings: Acts 2:36-41; Gen 17:1-14; Sermon: "Covenant membership"

Beloved family and friends,

Today we witness the baptism of little Grace, Charlotte, Renee, Jobse. Now in this Christian church we do both adult and infant baptism. On occasions, because of the power of God's Word and Spirit, some people come to believe in the Lord Jesus as their Saviour when they are adults.

Perhaps the Lord has used their Christian friends to sow the seed, or perhaps they have been at a Christian funeral or wedding and they heard the good news of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit has persuaded them to believe and commit their lives to Jesus Christ.

Now when that happens they are baptized and with that comes their profession of faith, namely that they believe wholeheartedly in the Lord Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord. Wonderful. May the Lord use us often to sow the seed. We also baptize infants of families where either one or both of the parents are believers. One of the reasons we baptize infants finds it what we believe Scripture to teach about covenant theology.

It already began in the Garden of Eden, but after man fell into sin, God made a new Covenant with Abraham, the father of all believers. When God made his covenant with Abraham he clearly stated, "every male among you who is eight days old, including those born in your household or bought with money from a foreigner – those who are not your offspring" has to be circumcised.

Now this circumcision of all males was a sign that they belonged to God's people. Of all the nations of the world, the Creator God chose them, a weak nation, and few in number to be his people. It was a great privilege to be included as God's covenant people. It wasn't something to be frowned upon, but a great blessing to have the One and only True God as your God.

Now when you make a covenant with someone, you are making an agreement, a contract. "You agree to do one part and the other party agrees to do the other part." One of the requirements was for both adult and infant males to be circumcised. That was the outward sign that they belonged to God's people. Another requirement was to be obedient to God's law, which at its very basis was to love God with all their heart, soul, strength and mind and added to that was to love their neighbour as themselves.

In fact, parents were instructed to teach their children about God's law and the privileges of having God as their God. Parents were told that when they got up, when they walked along the way, when they sat down, they were to teach their children about God.

However, just because they were circumcised did not mean that God's people were protected from God's punishment when they disobeyed him. In fact, with the greater privilege of being God's very own people, came greater responsibility to obey and hence greater punishment when one failed to obey. In fact, there are many occasions recorded in the Bible where God's people were severely punished and on other occasions died at the hands of their enemies for their covenant unfaithfulness.

In Numbers 16 we have the story of Korah, Dathan and Abiram who offered wrong incense to the Lord and the ground opened up and swallowed them and their households, which included their children. In the book of Judges, several times God's people were punished.

Later on, both the Assyrian and Babylonian invasions were used by God to punish His people for their covenant unfaithfulness and they were sent into exile for their disobedience. Of course when they obeyed God's laws, they were wonderfully blessed. So that in a nutshell was the OT covenant with God's people. Both adults and their children were included.

Now in the NT, there seems to be a greater emphasis on adult baptisms. There are several passages in the NT, which calls on people to "repent and believe." It is therefore argued that you have to have some knowledge of God to be able to repent and believe. Of course, we need to remember that the NT church was a mission church. It was mainly adults that were converted to faith in Jesus Christ. Therefore the emphasis to "repent and believe" made good sense. However, that doesn't mean children were excluded. So allow me to give you a few reasons why we also baptize infants in NT times.

First, the Lord's command in the Great Commission is to go and make disciples, baptizing them and teaching them all that I have commanded you. It doesn't exclude children.

Second, a very important consideration is that children born to believing parent(s) are holy. They are set apart as 1 Cor 7:14 states. Just like the instruments used in the OT temple were consecrated (set apart) for temple use, so children of believing parents are set apart.

They are not any better or more deserving than other children, but they are holy. In fact, Paul suggests that a spouse who still needs to come to believe in Jesus is somehow sanctified through the believing spouse. How much more so for our children. In Eph 6:1 Paul speaks to children of believers as being "in the Lord" and therefore they should obey their parents. This command would be meaningless if Paul did not recognize that these children were in some sense 'in Christ' already.

Third, consider the use of the word "household" which clearly included 'infants' in the OT and I suggest were included in the NT. Throughout OT and NT the word 'household' includes infants. Now I admit, on a surface reading, it is true that each "household" baptism in the book of Acts is reported in language that can be interpreted to suggest no infants were present. Acts 10:44; Acts 16:33ff basically tells us that "They all heard the Word...they believed it...the Spirit fell...they were all baptized."

Now we could say it only refers to those who believed. But to insist that Luke is deliberately telling us that no infants were present is taking that too far. In the OT, the word 'household' deliberately expressed the idea of family solidarity in any spiritual choice and clearly included infants. We already noted Korah, Dathan and Abiram.

But note also God's dealings with Noah and his household (Gen 7:1). The promises made to Abraham, which included his children (Gen 17:9-10). Note also God's provision for Jacob and his household through Joseph (Gen 45:11). Note also God's protection of the household during the Passover.

Why would Luke change the intent and meaning of the word 'household' when in his gospel and in other places throughout Scripture it includes infants? That doesn't make sense. Consider the way Luke describes Cornelius. Prior to his conversion, while still under the old covenant, which included infants, we are told that "he and all his family were devout and feared God" (Acts 10:2). That included his children. There is clear continuity between the way, "household" is understood in the OT and the way it is understood in the NT including the Book of Acts.

Fourth, another consideration is the practical, or plain common sense side of things. Can you imagine a Jew who was in the OT Covenant with his children, or a man like Cornelius and his family, once converted to faith in Jesus Christ would have to leave his children outside of the covenant? That wouldn't make sense.

Just consider John the Baptist. Here comes a family, perhaps a father and mother with two or three children, the parents repent and believe, but John the Baptist has to say to them, leave your children on the bank – they can't be baptized. That would not make sense. So that is in part why we practice both adult and infant baptism. Now allow me mention the privileges of being brought up in a Christian environment.

First, we can tell these little children that all the promises we enjoy as parents by believing in the Lord Jesus Christ is also true for them. Now again, that doesn't mean that they are given an automatic entry into heaven. Over time they must give evidence of their covenant membership by their mature expression of repentance and faith (as all those who are baptized must). However, in those early years, they should and can be raised as those who enjoy forgiveness and urged to continue in the faith every day. That's our responsibility as parents. We should never regard them as outsiders.

As far as that goes, our responsibilities are the same as that of the OT parents. We are to teach our children about the love of God to them, especially in Jesus Christ. We treat our young children as small Christians who need to mature in the Lord. We desire to present Jesus to them in a loving, winsome way so that they will choose to stay in the covenant community as they grow. We pray with them and encourage them as they grow to remain in and keep choosing to walk with Christ, for all his work has also been done for them.

Second, understanding it in this way, baptism is a sign to us of God's grace and mercy. It signifies to us something what God is doing and has done in Jesus Christ. In baptism God is saying that he has committed himself to that child or adult in the person of His Son, and in the case with infants, even before they understand.

All the promises God has made to us in Christ, yes even before the foundations of the world were put in place, indeed while we were still sinners are not just for adults, but for all who repent and for all our children and for those who are still far off as Peter mentions in Acts 2:39. If children were not included, why did Peter not simply say be baptized and the promises are also for those far off. But he doesn't. He clearly states, the promises are for you and your children and for all those far off.

Now you may say to me, "There have been plenty of children who have been baptized who have walked away from belief in the Lord Jesus Christ." Sad but true! But that doesn't show that God was unfaithful or that the promises we have in Christ are not true. On the contrary, it shows their unfaithfulness, but hopefully only for a season. As believing parents we keep praying for them, hoping that the Lord would remind them of his promises to them in Christ when they were baptized.

Now some people have said that by having infant baptism we institutionalize Christianity. In other words, we kid ourselves into thinking that our little children can never be lost. Let us be clear, we oppose institutional Christianity. And when we baptize little children we support passionately the need for a personal response to Christ.

But there is an even more important principle in salvation than the need for my response. That principle is the fact that we only come to Christ by the sovereign electing purposes of God, which preceded my response of faith. In other words, the key to my salvation is God's faithfulness to his covenant, not my response. If God were not faithful to his covenant, I would never desire to be part of it.

So we baptize infants of believers to show that they are beneficiaries of grace. But let it be clear, the baptism we receive as infants or as adults, will never save us. We are saved purely by God's grace coming to us an enabling us to believe through faith, in Christ alone. That is what Scripture teaches and it is all to the glory of God alone.

We are saved from God's wrath for our un-holiness, our impurity, all our wrong doing when the Holy Spirit causes us to repent and believe in what Jesus did at the cross and beyond, he did for me. And our baptism, as infants or as adults is a sign and seal of God's covenant love to our children and us.

Nat and Jackie, may the Lord bless you with wisdom as you teach your children, also about the richness of having Jesus as their Saviour! Indeed, may he teach us all whether we are parents or not, the wonderful richness of his covenant love not more clearly seen then in the giving of His Son. Amen.