

Module Four

Baptism

Abide

A standalone session. Run it any time.

Part One: Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group discovers that the New Testament speaks of baptism as an efficacious sign that truly effects what it signifies rather than as a bare symbol of a decision already made, and that the covenant sign it replaces was given to infants.

Catholic Touchstone. Baptism is not our statement about God. It is God's act on us, which is why an infant can receive it.

What You Need to Know

Gather the verbs first, because they do the work. Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. He saved us by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit. Rise and be baptised, and wash away your sins. Baptism now saves you. Be baptised for the forgiveness of your sins, and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. All of us who have been baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death.

In four of those, baptism is named outright and stands as the subject of an active verb or the instrument of one. In the other two, John 3:5 and Titus 3:5, the word baptism does not appear; the Church has always read birth of water and the Spirit and the washing of regeneration as baptismal, and you should say that out loud rather than let someone find it. Even granting the point, the texts that do name baptism still carry the whole weight of the claim. It saves, it washes, it regenerates, and it buries; and at Colossians 2:12 you are raised with him in it. A purely declarative reading has to turn all of them into figures of speech at once, which is a heavy load for one doctrine to carry.

Infants

Concede the honest fact first: no New Testament passage narrates the baptism of an identifiable infant. Say it before anyone says it to you.

Then give the case. Acts 2:39 says the promise is to you and to your children. Whole households are baptised on the faith of their head at Acts 16:15, 16:33, and 1 Corinthians 1:16, and at Acts 18:8 Crispus believes together with all his household, and a first-century household would ordinarily include children. Colossians 2:11-12 identifies baptism as the circumcision of Christ, and a male child born into the covenant was circumcised on the eighth day, on nobody's profession of faith. Circumcision was not an infant rite only: the same verse puts the sign on the males of the household, and Genesis 17:23-27 has Abraham circumcising Ishmael at thirteen and every male of his house on one day. Say that plainly, because it is in the text they will read. The point the argument needs is narrower and survives it: where the sign was given to an infant, it was given without decision, profession or consent, and it was given to a household on the faith of its head.

And use the hostile witness, which is more persuasive than a friendly one. Around the turn of the third century, Tertullian argues that baptism should be delayed in the case of little children. He is arguing against a practice, which means the practice already existed and was current enough in the churches he was writing to that he thought it needed answering. That is all the argument needs, and it is more than a friendly witness could give us.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

“He that is eight days old among you shall be circumcised; every male throughout your generations, whether born in your house, or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring.” **Genesis 17:12**

The sign of the covenant was placed on a child who had made no decision, could profess nothing, and would grow into the identity he had already been given. Colossians 2:11-12 then puts baptism in exactly that position. If the covenant sign was for infants under the old dispensation and is refused to them under the new, the new covenant would be narrower than the old, which is not the direction the New Testament ever moves.

Consider also 1 Peter 3:20-21, which reads the flood as the pattern: eight persons were saved through water, and baptism corresponds to that and now saves you.

Voices of the Church

Voice of the Church

Tertullian

On Baptism (summary)

Writing around the turn of the third century, Tertullian argues that baptism should be delayed in the case of small children, on the grounds that sponsors take on a risk and that innocence can wait.

We cite him against ourselves deliberately. He is arguing against infant baptism, which establishes beyond dispute that it was being practised. A hostile witness to a practice is stronger evidence than a friendly one.

Summary of his argument; presented as a witness against the practice, not for it.

Voice of the Church

St. Cyprian of Carthage

Letter 64, to Fidus, on the baptism of infants (summary)

Asked by a bishop whether infants should wait until the eighth day, in analogy with circumcision, Cyprian answers with a council of African bishops that none should be delayed, and that the mercy of God is to be denied to no one born.

Notice what the question is. Nobody is asking whether infants may be baptised. They are asking whether to wait a week.

Summary of Cyprian's reply to Bishop Fidus and of the African synod that answered with him. The letter is numbered 64 in the modern critical numbering and 58 in the older Ante-Nicene Fathers collection; no section number printed.

Voice of the Church

St. Augustine

On the Merits and Forgiveness of Sins, and the Baptism of Infants, Book One; and On Baptism, Against the Donatists, Book Four (summary)

In the anti-Pelagian treatise on the baptism of infants, Augustine argues that it would make no sense for

the Church to baptise infants for the forgiveness of sins if there were no sin in them to forgive. In *On Baptism*, Against the Donatists he treats the Church's custom of baptising infants as received tradition rather than an innovation, something not to be scorned and not to be believed at all unless it came down from the apostles.

The argument runs from practice to doctrine rather than the reverse, which tells you how settled the practice was by his time.

Summary of two arguments, given by work and book; chapter and section numbers to be added from the edition used.

Catechism Connection

- CCC 1213-1216 on baptism as the gateway and on regeneration.
- CCC 1250-1252 on infant baptism, including that the practice is attested from the second century and that it is likely the apostolic period already saw household baptisms include children.
- CCC 1257 states that God has bound salvation to the sacrament of baptism, but that he himself is not bound by his sacraments.
- CCC 1261 on children who die without baptism, which allows us to hope. Read it if the question arises; it will.

THE OBJECTION BENCH

Leader only. Deploy what the room needs, skip the rest. Do not hand this page out. The matching Take-Home carries a shorter version in the participant's own words.

"Baptism is an outward sign of an inward decision."

Ask where Scripture says that. It says baptism saves, washes, and regenerates. The declarative account is not wrong that baptism signifies; it is silent about what the New Testament says baptism does. A sacrament is a sign that does the thing it shows.

"Acts always shows belief first, then baptism."

True of adult converts, and it should be. The Church requires the same order for adults and runs a whole catechumenate to preserve it.

Then note what is being generalised from. Missionary preaching to adults tells you the order for adults. It does not tell you what happens to their children, and Acts 2:39 addresses exactly that.

"Baptising a baby who cannot believe is meaningless."

It assumes the sacrament is our act rather than God's. Ask whether the infant did anything to receive circumcision, or to be born.

The Church also takes the objection seriously in practice: infant baptism carries an obligation on parents and godparents to raise the child in the faith, and the Church requires a founded hope of that before baptising.

"What about babies who die unbaptised?"

Answer immediately and gently, because someone in the room may be asking for a reason. The Church entrusts them to the mercy of God and allows us to hope for their salvation.

Do not offer limbo as a doctrine; it was a theological opinion, never a defined teaching. CCC 1261 is the paragraph, and it is warm. If someone is grieving, put the theology down and be kind first.

Part Two: Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Father, you claimed us before we could claim you. Thank you for the water. Amen.

Win

1. Do you know the date of your baptism? Do you know who was there?
2. What were you taught baptism does?

Build

Live discovery. Give five people one verse each: John 3:5, Titus 3:5, Acts 22:16, 1 Peter 3:21, Romans 6:3-4. Ask each to underline the verb attached to baptism and read only that.

3. What are the verbs?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Born of water and the Spirit. Saved by the washing of regeneration. Wash away your sins. Baptism now saves you. Buried with him by baptism into death, so that we might walk in newness of life.

Every one is active. Baptism is doing something in these sentences, or God is doing something through it. Be precise on Romans 6: the one raised in verse 4 is Christ, and what follows for us is newness of life. Colossians 2:12 is the verse that says you were raised with him in baptism, through faith in the working of God.

Ask the honest follow-up: how many of these would you have to read as figures of speech to hold a purely symbolic view? The answer is all of them at once.

4. Read Colossians 2:11-12. What does Paul identify baptism with?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

The circumcision of Christ, a circumcision made without hands, and then he says you were buried with him in baptism.

Now ask when a boy born into the covenant received the sign. Genesis 17:12: at eight days. Read the rest of the verse too, which extends it to the males of the household, so that nobody can say you stopped the quotation where it suited you.

If the covenant sign was for infants before, and is refused to them now, the new covenant would be narrower than the old.

5. What does the New Testament actually say about households?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Acts 16:15, Lydia and her household. Acts 16:33, the jailer and all his family, immediately, that same hour. Acts 18:8, Crispus believed in the Lord together with all his household; note honestly that this verse names the household's faith, not its baptism. 1 Corinthians 1:16, the household of Stephanas.

Concede plainly that no infant is named. Then note that household is a term of art in that world and would ordinarily include children and servants.

The Steelman

The strongest form of the objection.

Every baptism narrated in the New Testament follows the same pattern: someone hears the word, believes, and is baptised. Repent and be baptised. Those who received his word were baptised. He believed, and was baptised, with all his family. Faith comes by hearing, and an infant cannot hear in that sense.

And not one infant is ever named. Not one. A practice this central, if apostolic, would have left a trace, and instead the first clear evidence appears well into the second century, alongside a Christian writer arguing against it.

Baptising infants also empties the thing of meaning. If the sacrament works regardless of faith, then the millions of baptised Europeans who believe nothing are proof either that it does not work or that it does not matter.

6. What is granted, and where does the case actually stand?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Granted: no infant is named, the narrated baptisms are of adult converts, and the earliest explicit discussion is second-century. Say all of it first.

What the objection does not reckon with: the argument from silence cuts both ways. No surviving source records a child of Christian parents being told to wait, and no surviving source records a controversy over a change in practice, which is remarkable for a Church whose arguments about everything else came down to us in volumes.

Then the positive case. Acts 2:39, the promise is to you and to your children. The household formula. And Colossians 2:11-12, which identifies baptism with the covenant sign given to eight-day-old infants.

On Tertullian: use him. He argues for delay, which means the practice was there to argue against.

On the last part, concede hard. Widespread nominal Christianity is a real scandal and baptism without formation is a failure. But note what the objection assumes: that a gift is void if the recipient neglects it. The Church says instead that baptism truly gives something which can be neglected, which is precisely why she treats a lapsed baptised person as a Christian in need of return rather than a stranger.

Send

7. What difference does it make that God moved first?

8. Who could you bring back toward their own baptism this year?

Live It This Week

- Find out the date of your baptism and mark it in your calendar as an anniversary.
- Bless yourself with holy water deliberately, thinking about what it recalls.
- Read Romans 6:1-11 slowly.

Closing Prayer

Father, you buried us with your Son and raised us with him before we knew what was happening. Make us live like it. Amen.

Memory Verse

“Baptism... now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a clear conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.” 1 Peter 3:21

Part Three: Leader Reference Card

- Genesis 17:12, circumcision at eight days
- John 3:5; Titus 3:5; Acts 22:16; 1 Peter 3:21; Romans 6:3-4 (live discovery, memory verse at 1 Pet 3:21)
- Acts 2:38-39, the promise is to you and to your children
- Colossians 2:11-12, the circumcision of Christ
- Acts 16:15, 16:33; 1 Corinthians 1:16, the households baptised (Acts 18:8, a household that believes)
- 1 Peter 3:20-21, the flood as pattern

Catechism: CCC 1213-1216, 1250-1252, 1257, 1261.

Patristic: Tertullian, On Baptism (cited against the practice). St. Cyprian, Letter 64 to Fidus (Letter 58 in the Ante-Nicene Fathers numbering). St. Augustine, On the Merits and Forgiveness of Sins, and the Baptism of Infants, Book One; On Baptism, Against the Donatists, Book Four.