INFANT BAPTISM

[This entry has two parts: the LDS Perspective concerning this practice, and the Early Christian Origins.]

LDS PERSPECTIVE

Children are baptized as members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when they reach age eight and receive a bishop's interview to assess their understanding and commitment. This age for baptism was identified by revelation (D&C 68:25, 28). The Church does not baptize infants.

The practice of baptizing infants emerged among Christians in the third century A.D. and was controversial for some time. According to the Book of Mormon, it similarly became an issue and was denounced among the Nephites in the fourth century A.D. When MORMON, a Nephite prophet, inquired of the Lord concerning baptism of little children, he was told that they are incapable of committing sin and that the curse of Adam is removed from them through the Atonement of Christ. Hence little children need neither repentance nor baptism (Mor. 8:8-22). They are to be taught "to pray and walk uprightly" so that by the age of accountability their baptism will be meaningful and effective for their lives.

[See also Accountability; Children: Salvation of Children; Fall of Adam; Original Sin.]

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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EARLY CHRISTIAN ORIGINS

Although the New Testament never mentions infant baptism either to approve or to condemn the practice, many passages therein associate baptism with FAITH in Jesus Christ, REPENTANCE, and forgiveness of SINS, none of which are appropriate requirements for infants (Mark 1:4-5; 16:15-16; Acts 2:38; 19:4; 22:16; Rom. 6:1-6; 1 Cor. 6:11; Gal. 3:26-27; Col. 2:12-13; Heb. 6:1-6; 10:22; 1 Pet. 3:21).

The assumption that those baptized were committed disciples continues through the second century in Christian literature (Didache 7.1; Shepherd of Hermas: "Vision" 3.7 and "Mandates" 4.3; Epistle of Barnabas 11; Justin, First Apology 1.11, 15). The earliest explicit reference to the practice of baptizing infants dates to shortly after A.D. 200 in the writings of Tertullian, a North African theologian who opposed it on the grounds that baptism carries an awesome responsibility and should be delayed until a person is fully committed to living righteously (De baptismo 18). A decade later Hippolytus, who would become a schismatic bishop in Rome, wrote a handbook of rules for church organization and practice. Some versions of his Apostolic Tradition (21.3-4) refer to baptizing "little ones," who should have an adult relative speak for them if they are unable to do so themselves. However, since Hippolytus prescribed a normative three-year preparatory period of teaching, reading, fasting, and prayer prior to baptism (Apostolic Tradition 17), the infant baptism passage has been questioned as a later interpolated.

The first writer to defend infant baptism as an apostolic practice was apparently Origen, the preeminent theologian of the Greek-speaking church, who wrote on the subject around A.D. 240 in Alexandria, Egypt. Origen referred to the frequently asked question of why the church should baptize sinless infants (Homily on Luke 14). In response, he argued that baptism takes away the pollution of birth. Origen's Commentary on Romans further elaborates this theme, asserting that because of hereditary sin, "the church has a tradition from the apostles to give baptism even to infants" (5.9). However, this passage is suspect be-
because it is found only in a Latin translation by Rufinus, who tended on several occasions to “correct” Origen according to later doctrine. A few years later, Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, addressing the question of the timing of infant baptism, wrote that a child’s soul should not be placed in jeopardy of perdition even one day by delaying the grace of baptism (De peccatorum meritis 1:34).

Historically, then, infant baptism cannot be demonstrated as beginning before the third century, when it emerged as a topic of extended controversy. Not until Augustine wrote against the Donatists two centuries later was infant baptism established as a universal custom (Jeremias, pp. 94–97; Jewett, p. 16). Thereafter, the practice went largely unquestioned until the Protestant Reformation, when a radical group in Zurich broke with the reformer Zwingli over this and other issues in 1525. These so-called Anabaptists (those who denied the validity of their baptism as infants and were rebaptized as adults) were precursors of the Baptist movement.

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INSPIRATION

All humans are entitled to inspiration, which is the influence of the Spirit of the Lord upon their minds and souls (Benson, p. 142). The Lord inspires men and women and calls them “to his holy work in this age and generation, as well as in generations of old” (D&C 20:11). Inspiration from God is essential to understanding spiritual matters. The Prophet Joseph Smith explained, “If a man learns nothing more than to eat, drink and sleep, and does not comprehend any of the designs of God, the beast comprehends the same things . . . it knows as much as we, unless we are able to comprehend by the inspiration of Almighty God” (TPJS, p. 343).

“Inspiration” and “revelation” are sometimes used interchangeably by LDS leaders in explaining the source of prophetic authority. The first presidency of the Church said, “Moses wrote the history of the creation, and we believe that he had the inspiration of the Almighty resting upon him. The Prophets who wrote after him were likewise endowed with the Spirit of revelation” (MFP 2:232). President Wilford Woodruff later noted, “This Church has never been led a day except by revelation. And He will never leave it. It matters not who lives or who dies, or who is called to lead this Church, they have got to lead it by inspiration of Almighty God” (MFP 3:225).

Latter-day Saints believe that their efforts can be enhanced and their personal capabilities expanded when they do their best work and at the same time depend upon the Lord “for light and inspiration beyond [their] own natural talents” (Benson, p. 173). Inspiration must be sought and then acted upon when it is received. This quest for inspiration is important in all the affairs of life. President Ezra Taft Benson’s explanation of the necessity of inspiration is as valid in temporal, family, and all other matters as it is in Church concerns: “Inspiration is essential to properly lead (D&C 50:13–14). We must have the spirit of inspiration whether we are teaching (D&C 50:13–14) or administering the affairs of the kingdom (D&C 46:2). If we do our part in preparation and work and have the Spirit of the Lord, we can be led, though we do not know beforehand what needs to be done (1 Ne. 4:6; Alma 17:3). Therefore, we should always pray, especially prior to commencing the work of the Lord (2 Ne. 32:9)” (Benson, p. 433).

Inspiration comes from the Lord and may be received in various ways. It comes from prayer (D&C 63:64), from a personal manifestation of the spirit of the Lord (D&C 20:11), from reading and following the commandments, and from studying and pondering the scriptures. Women and men may also be inspired by good causes, such as protection of home, family, and personal freedoms (Alma 43:45). President Spencer W. Kimball explained, “We pray for enlightenment, then go to with all our might and our books and our thoughts and righteousness to get the inspiration” (Kimball, p. 122). Much of the world’s fine music, art, and literature can inspire, as can the role models provided by noble people living in the past or present, because “every thing which inviteth and enticeth