

# Acts 2:39 and Infant Baptism

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*For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call.*

Act 2:39

The proponents of infant baptism seem to use this Scripture as if it were a cornerstone of their doctrine. Almost all books and articles supporting infant baptism include this verse. But does Acts 2:39 support infant baptism or does it teach just the opposite?

First, let's notice what one proponent of infant baptism says concerning this verse: "The children of believers who are born in the line of the covenant are members of the covenant at the moment of birth or even prior to birth. On the mission field when parents are converted, their children are also saved. Paul tells the Philippian jailer that upon his repentance and faith in Christ, both he and his house would be saved (Acts 16:31).<sup>1</sup> Peter tells the Jews converted at Pentecost, 'For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call' (Acts 2:39)" ("The Place of Children in the Covenant (1)," Professor Herman Hanko, <http://www.cprf.co.uk/crnews/crnoctober2009.htm#children>).

Here is another quote from the Presbyterian theologian, John Murray: "Nothing could advertise more conspicuously and conclusively that this principle of God's gracious government, by which children along with their parents are the possessors of God's covenant promise, is fully operative in the New Testament as well as in the Old than this simple fact that on the occasion of Pentecost Peter took up the refrain of the old covenant and said, 'The promise is to you and to your children'" (*Christian Baptism* [1980, Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing] 71). Before going on, please quickly notice that Murray leaves off the second half of the verse. This is commonly done by writers and speakers who adhere to infant baptism.

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<sup>1</sup> Prof. Hanko misses the obvious meaning of this verse, which is that whatever applies to the jailor also applies to his house or family. Paul is basically saying, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved, and the same thing goes for your family. This is born out in verse 34, which says that when the jailor "had brought them into his house, he set meat before them, and rejoiced, believing [*pepisteukōs*—"having believed"] in God with all his house." Infants cannot believe. Therefore, either the jailor had no infants in his household or Luke expects us to understand they were exceptions who did not believe and were not baptized.

## The Promise

After Peter gave his Pentecost sermon, his hearers "were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do? Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost" (Acts 2:37-38). Then, in verse 39, continuing this thought, Peter says, "For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call."

Remember, this was the Pentecost that followed Jesus' crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. The gift of the Holy Spirit was something new. But Jesus had promised the Holy Spirit (John 14:16-17; Acts 1:4-5), and Peter had mentioned the pouring out of the Spirit in his sermon (Acts 2:17). In fact, "promise" in Acts 2:39 is *epaggelia*, referring to that which is freely promised in an announcement. So, the promise in verse 39 can certainly be seen to refer to the promise of the Holy Spirit. I will add that Peter may also have had in mind the promise God made to Abraham centuries before. I will explain this further later.

## To Whom?

Now, to whom was the Holy Spirit promised? Peter said the promise was to "you." This is easy enough to understand. The people listening were "pricked in their heart" after hearing Peter's gospel message. This indicates that they are believers. Peter also says that the promise is "to your children." This is what infant baptizers seize hold of to support their belief. If the promise is to the children of believers, they reason, then the children of believers ought to be baptized as a show of faith in this promise. There are many nuances that infant baptizers add to this, such as the Reformed belief that this promise places the children born to believers into the covenant. Since baptism is a sign of the covenant, then the children of believers ought to be baptized. But is this verse saying that the promise is to you (believers) and to your children unconditionally?

One thing we must do is look at the Greek word translated "children." There are several Greek words that can be translated as the English word, "child." *Nēpois* literally means "not speaking" and is basically the equivalent of "baby" and "infant." *Pais* means a "child" but can also be used to refer to a "servant." *Paidarion* and *paidion* are diminutives of *pais* and can be used of infants and toddlers. The next word, *huios*,

specifically means a "son" and does not have reference to the size or age of the son. But none of these words are the word used in Acts 2:39. The word used in Acts 2:39 is *teknois* ("children"). It comes from *teknon*, which simply means a "child" as produced, an offspring. Everyone is a *teknon* because everyone is a *teknon* of his or her parents. That is, *teknon* does not limit the age or size of the child. Acts 2:39 can, and perhaps should for the sake of accuracy, be translated, "For the promise is unto you, and to your offspring." Peter did not have the age of the offspring in mind. Had he intended to indicate age, he could have used some of the other words mentioned above, or he could have used *teknion*, which is the diminutive of *teknon*. But he did not. He used *teknon*, which means a child or offspring of any age, including an adult.

We should now look at the next group Peter said the promise is to. He said, "For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off." This fact, and another I will mention below, are so embarrassing to some infant baptizers that they often leave the last part of the sentence off when they quote it. So, look at it carefully. The promise is as much to "all that are afar off" as it is to "you, and to your children." If the promise being to "your children" means that all the children of believers should be baptized, then the promise being to "all that are afar off" means that "all that are afar off"—everyone in the world—should be baptized. Just as with infants, belief is irrelevant. We should (since immersion is also irrelevant to infant baptizers) drive down the streets of every city in fire trucks with the hoses turned onto the people and baptize as many as possible! Although infant baptizers will not admit it, this is the logical conclusion of their position that Acts 2:39 means that all children of believers should be baptized. But this is to ignore, as infant baptizers do, the last bit of information in the sentence: "even as many as the Lord our God shall call."

"Even as many as the Lord our God shall call" qualifies each of the types of people Peter says the promise is for. The promise is to you, if the Lord our God has called you. The promise is to your offspring, as many as the Lord our God shall call. The promise is to "all that are afar off" as many as the Lord our God shall call. The promise is not to all of the offspring of believers any more than it is to all who are afar off. It is only to those whom God calls. The promise is based entirely upon God's sovereign election, not physical descent. The doctrine of infant baptism is contrary to sovereign grace. It is as wrong to baptize all of the children of believers as it is to baptize all who are afar off. Peter told those who heard and believed him to be baptized. He did not tell them to run home and get their infants so they could be baptized too!

No infants were baptized that day. Peter then went on in verse 39 to imply that the believers' offspring and anyone else in the entire world are also partakers of the promise and should be baptized *if* they are called by God. The call makes all of the difference.

This call is not the mere outward calling of God's servants preaching the Gospel indiscriminately. It is the Lord our God's call to Himself (*an proskalesētai*—"might call to Himself"). But how do we know whom God has called to Himself? Such people respond with trust. They believe the Gospel. They must then profess their faith, and upon such profession, they should be baptized. The prerequisites for baptism are belief and profession of belief. Therefore, the prerequisites for the baptism of the children of believers are no different than they are for anyone else ("all that are afar off"). Just as with anyone else, the children of believers must believe and profess their belief. Since infants cannot comprehend the Gospel, they can neither believe the Gospel nor profess belief in it. Infants must not be baptized.

### **Israel a Sovereignly Called Nation**

The defenders of infant baptism often point out that the line of the covenant in the Old Testament was through physical descent, and they say that Peter was merely reassuring his Jewish listeners that the New Covenant would also now pass through physical descent from generation to generation. Nothing could be further from the truth. The people who teach this are, like the Jews before them, missing one of the primary points of the Old Testament.

God called the nation of Israel out of the world to be His special nation in a physical calling, and He gave them physical blessings. This calling did *not* give them spiritual salvation. But they were a type or shadow of the *ekklēsia* (usually translated "church" in English Bibles) of the New Covenant. Just as Israel was God's special nation only because God sovereignly called them, so the people of the *ekklēsia* are God's special people only because God sovereignly calls them. It is this fact—that the Israelites were special only because God sovereignly called them—that the Israelites lost sight of, and this led to their believing they were inherently special because of their genealogical descent. This made them become arrogant and prideful.

### **The Fulfillment of the Covenant of Circumcision in Christ**

On another level, there is another Old Testament message that the Jews and infant baptizers both miss. The descent of the covenant of

circumcision from generation to generation in Israel was to last only until the promised Seed was born. That Seed was Jesus Christ. Generation to generation, all through the centuries from Abraham, circumcision was leading to Jesus Christ. When He was born and circumcised, that physical covenant ended because the promise of the covenant was now a reality. The covenant was fulfilled, and its promise was here. "Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ" (Galatians 3:16). And who receives the benefits of the promise? The physical descendents of Abraham? No. All of the physical descendents of believers? Again, no. "For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Galatians 3:26-29). Romans 9:8 makes it even plainer: "That is, they which are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God: but the children of the promise are counted for the seed."

Who are the children of God? Not the children of the flesh but the children of the promise. Yes, Jesus Christ is the Seed, but we who are in Him through faith are "counted for the seed." And we have the faith to believe this Gospel because God has given it to us through His sovereign election and calling ("even as many as the Lord our God shall call"), and He gives those who are the heirs of the promised Seed the additional promise of the Holy Spirit, as explained at the beginning of this article. The truth in these Scriptures is so plain that it is amazing that anyone can long believe the miserable, dark, physically minded, counterfeit, dry and dead, wooden nickel message of infant baptism.

I want to add something here. Although infants who cannot comprehend the Gospel must not be baptized, this fact must not stop us from baptizing children who can comprehend the Gospel. Oftentimes, children can understand the Gospel with a startling clarity (in contrast to some adults who can get caught up in minutiae, doubts as to their worthiness, and other such unnecessary quibbles). I am not saying to talk your child into a forced "profession," but when a child says that he or she believes that Jesus died for his or her sins, the child ought to be baptized.