

WHAT ABOUT THE BABIES?

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on May 26, 1957 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC.

Many years ago Mark Twain was invited to speak at an important banquet somewhere in the East. Present were a number of outstanding people--generals, statesmen, businessmen, etc.--and the honor guest was General Sherman, whose name is still not forgotten in the South. Mark Twain mentioned the several groups represented in the audience that evening and then said something like this, "We might propose a toast to generals, but that would include only a few of us. We might propose a toast to the statesmen among us, but that again would include only some of us. We might even propose a toast to the ladies, but that, too, would not include all of us. There is just one thing that we all have in common. We've all been babies." Then, he proposed a toast "to the babies," and from that beginning delivered a delightful and entertaining speech on "The Babies." Not because of Mark Twain's example, nor for the reasons that influenced him, but for a number of other reasons, I too, have chosen a subject about babies--"What About the Babies?"

Perhaps you can guess that I am thinking especially of the many smaller children who make up the families of the Hillsboro church. Ten days ago when we presented the new directory of members of this congregation there were a few more than 1100 names of adult members of the church--those who have reached the age when they could become Christians. In addition, for the first time this year, we have included the names of all the children of the congregation. By the side of these names there is an asterisk referring to the bottom of the page where you read. "Denotes children who are not yet members of the church." There are 265 such names in our present directory--the small children and the babies of this congregation. What about the babies?

There are more babies than ever before. That is true not only in this congregation, but throughout the nation as a whole. Hospitals are crowded; housing is short; children's goods are in heavy demand. Particularly have the schools been hard pressed. I know of one metropolitan school district which provides for 238,000 young people of high school age and younger. One of the officials in that school system described their problem graphically by saying. "We have such a tremendous increase of youngsters coming our way that we need to open up a new schools capable of caring for 600 children every Monday morning." In the course of a year they need enough new schools to average one a week.

In our homes these children are the most serious concerns we have. Our heaviest responsibility is in respect to our children. Many a mother spends most of her waking hours caring for her babies. That is particularly true during the first years of their lives. There is not an hour in the first three or four or five years of a child's life that the child can be left untended and unwatched. Many a father works long hours, and, in these days of high prices, takes on a second job in order to provide the food, clothing, housing, transportation, and extras that his children need. But our concern, is not primarily about shoes, or food, or these other things. We are thinking about the babies in their relationship to God, and their place in the church. Let us notice a few questions that will make clear what we have in mind.

"If A Baby Dies, Is It Lost?"

There is a significant segment of the religious world which says, yes. This segment of the religious world is the part which reflects the influence of Augustine and Calvin. They believe in the doctrine of total depravity. The old New England Psalter contained the line: "In Adam's fall, we sinned all." The theory of total depravity is that when a baby is born, no matter how righteous the parents may have been, he bears a burden of Adamic sin. Because of the fall, back in the garden, all men are born depraved, estranged from God. As a natural consequence of this doctrine, there came the idea of the baptism of infants. You can see how logical and how necessary such a practice is. If children are born in sin, we had better do something about it quick. They are too precious to be eternally lost.

The fact is, however, that the doctrine which led to the practice of infant baptism is not of the scriptures. One time when Jesus was teaching, some mothers, with babes in arms, brought their children that they might be touched by Jesus. Here is the scripture: "They were bringing unto him little children that he should touch them. And the disciples rebuked them." You can understand the feeling which the disciples had. After all, Jesus was talking about important matters with the Pharisees. He had no time for babies, so the disciples rebuked them. "But when Jesus saw it he was moved with indignation, and said unto them, Suffer the little children to come unto me; and forbid them not: for to such belongeth the kingdom of God. Verily I say unto you, Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom as a little child, shall in no wise enter therein. And he took them in his arms, and blessed them, laying his hands upon them." (Mark 10:13-17). That one incident, repeated by Matthew and Luke, is sufficient for all time to refute the idea that babies are depraved and lost. Babies are brought into the world sinless and pure, innocent of any wrong. It is only after they have lived here for a while, and have become contaminated by those of us who are older, that infants become subject to sin.

There is a story on the subject of infant baptism which I like to tell, because it is a graphic means of conveying the true teaching of the scriptures. Alexander Campbell, while a young man preaching in the then frontier country of Virginia, was challenged by a Baptist preacher to debate the issue of infant baptism. At the time Campbell was a Presbyterian, which means that he had been sprinkled as a baby. He said he would be glad to debate the subject of infant baptism, but he did ask for a few days in which to marshal his arguments and collect some scriptures on the subject. The debate was never held, because when Campbell went back to his Bible to find the passages that would support the doctrine of infant baptism he did not find them. He was concerned about the matter, but did nothing for a time. He had so strongly believed that infant baptism was taught in the Bible that it was not easy for him to recognize that it was not there.

Later on he and his wife had their first baby, a little daughter. Then, there came a difficult decision. Either he had to baptize the baby daughter or he had to pass the opportunity by. Which would he do? Finally, after wrestling with the problem a great deal, he decided that since it was not taught in the scriptures he could not baptize the baby. That decision led to another. If his baby did not need to be baptized, and if infant baptism was not of any value to his baby, then when he himself had been baptized as an infant many years before in Scotland it had not meant anything either. As a mature man, he had to call on a religious neighbor to baptize him in the old Buffalo Creek not too far from what is now Wheeling, W. Va. It was a little embarrassing because he was a mature man and had been preaching for a number of years. Yet he came to realize that his baptism as an infant had not been scriptural baptism. His wife was baptized at the same time, as were also his parents and a few other adults.

In an earlier paragraph we indicated that “a significant segment” of the religious world believes that babies are born in sin and are therefore lost. Those who believe that babies are born lost are becoming fewer and fewer we are happy to recognize. Many have abandoned the idea that babies are lost, though they inconsistently retain the practice of infant baptism which developed as a result of the doctrine which they have not discarded. Let us hope that they will give up the erroneous basic doctrine and its accompanying mistaken practice.

When Should A Child Become A Christian?

The second question that we would raise in talking about the babies is in line with what we have just been discussing. If children are born innocent and pure and are not lost, if they do not need, therefore, to be baptized as infants in order to be saved, then when should a child become a Christian? The answer is too difficult to work out in general, though it is somewhat difficult to work out in any given case. First of all, when a child comes into the world there is a period of several years known as the age of innocence. From the time he is born until he is some years old he is completely safe. If he should die he would go right on into eternal life just as any saint or Christian. Not having been lost, he does not need to be saved. If a baby dies, you would not say that he is saved. You would simply say that he is safe. Not having been lost he could not be saved, but he is safe and goes right on into the blessings of the heavenly father.

The age of innocence which lasts for some years eventually leads to the age of accountability. The age of accountability is the period when the child is old enough to know the difference between right and wrong, old enough to believe in Christ as the Son of God, and old enough to make serious life-long decisions. When the age of accountability has arrived, the baby is no longer an infant. He is a child of some years and can make a volitional choice to be a Christian or not to be a Christian. When you ask, “When does that age arrive?” there is no real possibility of giving an answer. For some children it arrives as early as the age of nine, while for others it does not arrive until perhaps the age of thirteen or fourteen. Somewhere in the early years of adolescence a child comes to enough maturity that he can seriously make the decision to be a Christian. The exact time depends upon his own innate abilities. It depends also, of course, on the training that the child has had in the home and in the classes at church. It depends on a good many factors, but somewhere in that indefinable beginning of adolescence there is a time when a child is old enough to recognize what sin is, and to recognize the need of turning toward Christ.

Happy is the situation when a child who is born in complete innocence comes at the beginning of the period of accountability to present himself to the Lord and to become a Christian. It is unfortunate when a child reaches the age of accountability and then spends some years outside of God’s protective care. God wants him to continue on in the period of safety, but that period of safety ends when a child is old enough to make his volitional decision, and does not make it for Christ. Parents have a difficult problem in helping their children decide when to become Christians. It ought not to be a spur-of-the-moment decision. Usually it ought to be something that has been mentioned at home, talked over with mother and daddy and perhaps with the preacher of the congregation or one of the elders. After a period of seriously considering it, the child is in a better position to make the decision which must last all his life.

Whole Household

In this matter of coming to Christ I would like to support what I have been saying by a reference to the scriptures. We have no passage in all of the New Testament which indicates that anyone ever became a Christian who was not old enough to believe in Christ, to repent of sins, and to make a decision to obey the Lord’s commandments. Sometimes references are made to a passage or two in the book of Acts, saying that “whole households” were bought into the family of God--the church. “That would include babies, would it not?” people ask. Let us look at one of these scriptures--one that is mentioned more than any of the others.

This is the story of the Philippian Jailor. I will begin at the point where he calls out Paul and Silas from the prison and says, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved? And they said, Believe on the Lord Jesus and thou shalt be saved, thou and all thy house." You notice the first thing they said was, "Believe." That might be a bit ambiguous. It might imply that the father can believe and the whole house be saved, so notice what follows, "And they spake the word of the Lord unto him, with all that were in his house." They were told to believe in order to be saved and then the preaching was done to him and to all that were in his house. That is crystal clear. In that house there were none who were not able to be preached to. "And he took them the same hour of the night, and washed their stripes, and was baptized, he and all his, immediately. And he brought them up into his house, and set meat before them, and rejoiced greatly, with all his house, having believed in God." (Acts 16:30-34). When you read that and then re-read it you notice first that they were told to believe, next the whole household was preached to, next they were all baptized, and finally he rejoiced greatly with all his house. Everyone in that family was old enough to believe, to hear the preaching, and to rejoice. When a child is old enough to hear the preaching, to believe it, and to obey the Lord's commands by his own conscious will he is old enough to become a Christian.

What About Christening?

Another question comes to mind in regard to the babies. Christening is a practice that is growing more and more widespread in our times. God-fearing parents bring the baby to the church building and in a private service the baby is christened. God-parents are usually selected as a kind of a second guarantee that the child will be reared along the lines of Christianity, and then the child is dedicated to the Lord. The first comment that we would make concerning this is that there is no such practice in the scriptures. The matter of christening is something that is outside the covers of the Bible. Since we believe that we must follow explicitly the directions that the Lord gives about how to become a Christian, how to worship, and how to live, we have no authority to bring in any kind of additional worship act or ceremony that is not in the Bible. We therefore do not have christening simply because in religious matters we speak where the Bible speaks and are silent where it is silent.

The second thing that we would say is that it is not necessary for the baby to be christened. It is not necessary because he is perfectly safe and secure in God's care. If he died, or if anything happened to him, he certainly could not be lost because he is innocent and sinless. The third thing that we would say in regard to christening is that it can in no way have significance for the baby. The baby is not old enough to comprehend what is done nor to remember. The only meaning that it could possibly have would be that the parents would tell him later on, "We want you to be a Christian. We have dedicated you to that end."

This leads me to point out what the teaching of the scriptures is concerning parental responsibility. Parents must recognize when they bring children into the world, that they have the responsibility to rear them to be children of God. Recall the passage, "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right." But children cannot learn this unless parents have taught them. "Honor thy father and mother, which is the first commandment with promise, that it may be well with thee and that thou mayest live long on the earth." This is the child's duty, but standing behind the child's duty is the parent's responsibility to teach this duty to the child. "And ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath, but nurture them in the chastening and admonition of the Lord." (Eph. 6:1-4). Fathers have the responsibility to lead. They must dedicate their children to the Lord, must teach them at home and must provide other opportunities for them to be taught so that they may grow up to be Christians. This is our responsibility and we must not forget it. To you men, we would particularly underscore the responsibility to read the Bible with your children. As soon as they are old enough to comprehend you take the lead and read and pray with them, because God enjoins that upon you.

How Early Should Babies Be Brought to Church?

We have a well-equipped and well-staffed nursery in order that babies, so young that they cannot grasp what a worship service is and so young that they might hinder others in worshipping, might be left while the parents worship. A competent nurse of a mother of experience is always in charge of the nursery. There comes a time, however, (I do not know whether it is the second year, or the third, or the fourth) when it is fine for babies to be brought into the worship services. It ought not to be before they can be taught to behave in such a way that they will not hinder the worship of others, but it ought to be early enough that their first permanent memories include the memory of worshipping with parents.

There is tremendous value that a little boy or girl will get by sitting alongside mother and daddy and watching them ever so intently as they sing, as they pray, and as they eat the Lord's supper. The Lord's supper is a teaching device for our younger people before they are old enough to be members of the church and to eat it themselves. Just as the Passover in the Old Testament was a teaching device to tell younger Hebrew children of the great events of former years, when God led their parents out of Egyptian bondage. There is tremendous value that comes from a little boy watching out of the corner of his eye as a daddy, big and strong, worships God. It is about the best way that I know for a child to learn to be religious himself. So, early in life, as early as it is reasonable and possible, all things considered, a child ought to be brought into the services of worship and with the family learn to respect and reverence God.

Our babies are in many respects our most precious possessions. They are also our heaviest responsibilities. We long for the day when they will be old enough to be members of God's family in the full sense and to add their abilities and their power to the doing of the great work that the Lord has outlined for all of us to do. Our prayer is that as they grow up we may remain close to them, at home and in the church, and that when they need help we will be able to give it as that they will not stray away and be lost. We love them and we must do for them what our parents and others have done for us that the church may remain strong and that they may be saved.

