In defense of infant baptism

By Michael Rizkalla

Baptism of infants is a controversial topic among Christians. Many believe that in order to be baptized, one must be old enough to con-sent. Many who espouse this point of view feel that by baptizing their child as an infant, the parents are not allowing the child to choose Christ as a personal savior and are forcing the infant into Christianity. This cannot be further from the truth. In the Orthodox Church we believe that baptism in necessary for salvation, and that, by not baptizing children from infancy, we are depriving them of their saving grace. Furthermore, the teachings of Christ, the apostles, and the early church fathers support this point of view.

The Orthodox Church baptizes infants because baptism is necessary to obtain salvation. As Jesus said to Nicodemus, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (Jn 3:5). Also, in the great commission, Jesus says to the disciples, “He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned” (Mk 16:16). If we decide to wait until a child is older, and able to consent to the baptism, then we are depriving any child who dies prior to the age of consent of the Kingdom of God.

Biblically and historically, the church has baptized all new believers regardless of age. In the book of Acts, we hear of Lydia the seller of purple in the city of Thyatira. St. Luke says of her, “The Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul. And when she and her house-hold were baptized, she begged us, saying, „If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay“” (Acts 16:14-15). How-ever, this is not the only case. Later in the same chapter we hear of an incident with St. Paul, St. Silas, and the prison guard. After the two saints were miraculously released from the prison (after an earthquake occurred while they were singing midnight praises) the prison guard asked them what he must do to be saved. The two apostles preached to him and his household. Once again St. Luke states, “And immediately he and his fam-ily were baptized” (Act 16:25-33). St. Luke the physician was known to be very detail oriented in his writings; he would have found it important to specify if some members were not baptized due to their age.

In addition, the Old Testament precursor to (or symbol of) baptism was circumcision. This can be seen in St. Paul‘s Epistle to the Colos-sians. St. Paul teaches us, “In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead” (Col 2:11-12).Therefore, circumcision is the Old Testament equivalent of baptism. All males were circumcised on the eighth day of life – certainly too young to consent. Also, nowhere in the Bible do we see a notation that a person had to await being old enough to be baptized. Then, why should we deprive these little ones from unity into the body of Christ? In fact, if we keep

them from Him, we would be violat-ing His teaching which says, “Let the children come to Me and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 19:14). Therefore, how can we forbid them from coming near to Him by our rationalization that they are too young to understand the meaning of the sacrament or too young to consent?

In fact, the controversy over infant baptism is a fairly new phenomenon. Most of the church fathers supported the practice of infant bap-tism. It was not until after the Protestant reformation that major objections were posed about infant baptism. Both Martin Luther and John Calvin supported the practice of infant baptism. In Luther‘s Sermon on Infant Baptism he states: —Therefore we here conclude and declare that in baptism the children themselves believe and have their own faith, which God effects in them through the sponsors, when in the faith of the Christian church they intercede for them and bring them to baptism.‖[2] He believed that baptism of little children was just as valid as that of consenting adults. This view is supported by the early church fathers. St. Gregory of Nazianzus says on this topic: —Do you have an infant child? Allow sin no opportunity; rather, let the infant be sanctified from childhood. From his most tender age let him be consecrated by the Spirit. Do you fear the seal [of baptism] because of the weakness of nature? Oh, what a pusillanimous mother and of how little faith!”[3] Therefore, St. Gregory taught that it is our weak faith that leads us to doubt the effectiveness of baptism on infants. He also believed that it was crucial to baptize infants as to not allow sin to take a foothold in their lives. We see this same sentiment in the writings of St. John Chrysostom. He taught us saying, —You see how many are the bene-fits of baptism, and some think its heavenly grace consists only in the remission of sins, but we have enumerated ten honors [it bestows]! For this reason we baptize even infants, though they are not defiled by [personal] sins, so that there may be given to them holiness, righteousness, adop-tion, inheritance, brotherhood with Christ, and that they may be His [Christ‟s] members.”[4] These are only a few examples of the writings of the early church fathers supporting the practice of baptizing infants. Their writings are replete with support for this practice.

Therefore, the practice of baptizing infants is one that has strong support in both the Bible and the practices and teachings of the Church for nearly one and a half centuries. It was not until recently that objections began to be raised against infant baptisms. It is ill-advised to deprive infants from the blessings of the sacrament of baptism. It is for all these aforementioned reasons that the Orthodox Church continues this great practice.

References:

[1]NKJV Bible
[2]Martin Luther, Luther‘s Sermon on Infant Baptism
[3]St. Gregory of Nazianzus, Oration on Holy Baptism 40:7, A.D. 388
[4]St. John Chrysostom, Baptismal Catecheses in Augustine, Against Julian 1:6:21, A.D. 388.

[5]H.E. Metropolitan Bishoy, Simplifying the Faith Lecture Series# 4 The Sacrament of Baptism

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