

BAPTIZED INTO GOD'S FAMILY

**The Doctrine of Infant
Baptism for Today**

Second Edition

A. Andrew Das

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Scripture taken from the
HOLY BIBLE, REVISED STANDARD VERSION

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FOREWORD

I first met Andrew Das when I was preaching in a church in Houston. He was a little boy then. I next met him when he was my student in a class in the Lutheran Confessions. At that time I was amazed to learn that he as a college student had already written a book on baptism.

The book, enlarged and improved, I am sure, since then, is now being published by Northwestern Publishing House. It is truly a remarkable book. It is written on one of the most controverted and unappreciated articles of our Christian faith. Its audience is just about anybody at all—pastors, Christian lay people from any denomination, or interested readers who want to know what Christian baptism is all about and what the Scriptures say about it.

The book is winsome. Not only has Andrew Das written in a popular, understandable style, but he digs into the Scriptures in a way that every reader will perceive what God is saying about baptism. The book is also scholarly without being threatening. The author treats all the biblical material which deals with Christian baptism, and he thoroughly goes into the chief passages, even quoting (but also translating) a key Greek word at times.

Two very important comments must be made about this book, comments with which we wish to commend the book most highly. First, baptism is not treated as a minor ordinance or disconnected appendage to Chris-

tianity, but is related to the great biblical themes of sin and grace, faith and salvation. Second, baptism is shown to be not law, some ordinance, or work that I the Christian do, but a marvelous work of God's infinite grace for Christ's sake in me.

Andrew Das's little book will be a great blessing to anyone who reads it.

Dr. Robert D. Preus

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INTRODUCTION: WHY BE CONCERNED ABOUT INFANT BAPTISM?

Some two thousand years ago our Lord Jesus Christ gave to his church the gift of baptism. Scripture refers to this gift in many places. Yet what was given as a blessing seems at times to have become a curse. For the same two thousand years Christians have been unable to agree on the nature and meaning of this gift. Rather than binding together the family of God, baptism brought division and strife. Or so it seemed.

Indeed at one point, baptism seemed to become a curse for me as well. I was a Lutheran from birth. I was baptized as an infant. I believed in Jesus as my Savior as far back as I can remember (age three). Before I was confirmed, I was shown Scripture to help me see what God did in my baptism. It all made sense to me. I had *always* believed in Jesus, since my baptism.

As a college student I met a wonderful Christian girl. While her church background was not the same as my own, our relationship grew strong over the course of two years. Yet a single issue seemed to divide us. Her church did not believe in infant baptism. Nor did she. Nothing I said seemed to shake her conviction.

As young people do, we had talked about marriage. But what were we to do with the children? Baptize them

as babies? Only if we baptized them again later on when they confessed their faith. But wait a minute! That didn't make much sense. It was a compromise. And a shoddy one at that! What should two Christian parents do? And why?

So we went back to the Scriptures. And from there, we went around and around. Surely two Bible-believing Christians should be able to reach an understanding! But we didn't. That doesn't take away from the Word of God. It just means that we sometimes get in the way of that Word.

In the process, infant baptism became for me a matter of law—*God's* law. We *have to* baptize babies. So I used Scripture like a sledgehammer. Perhaps you can relate to that. Christians have a way of using the Word like that all the time. Maybe it's just our sinful flesh. . . . (We'll have to come back to that one.) Only later did I come to see the error of my ways. Infant baptism was never meant to be pushed onto people. It was never an Eleventh Commandment. No, infant baptism was given to us as an expression of God's free *grace*. And that's how we have to think and speak of it!

Maybe that's why my college sweetheart and I never came to agree. When you try to motivate people by the law, you only arouse a rebellious spirit. No, we have to persuade one another gently, and in love. Surely, if infant baptism is an authentic blessing of God's grace, the Scriptures should bear that out.

As time went on, I found out that the objections my friend had were the same ones others had too. Isn't baptism only helpful if a person believes? And how does an infant "believe"? And where in the Bible does it ever say to baptize babies? Whoever said baptism saves, let alone that infants need that salvation in the same way as adults? Are infants really sinful? And couldn't God deal with infants in his own special way?

Do any of these questions sound familiar to you? I'm

sure some of them do. But how would one answer these questions? What Scripture would bear on the issues? As I searched for material to help me, I didn't find a single source that effectively dealt with the full gamut of issues that infant baptism brings up. That fact, along with experiences talking with other people, showed me that it was time to look at infant baptism afresh.

I invite you to come with me on a journey through the Scriptures as we see what God's will is for these little ones. Infants are important people too! They are just as important as any of us. Christians today are very concerned about the abortion issue. Not to diminish that issue, but people discussing abortion often are treating merely the physical side of life. How much greater are the stakes with infant baptism—the spiritual life of infants! God wants to provide babies a new life in Christ. He works his will for the infant by the baptism that the church administers in his stead.

Whether you agree with me or not, surely you would agree that the issues themselves are major ones. Consider if what I'm saying is true. If indeed the Bible *does* teach baptism as his means of saving the infant, we don't want to stand in the way of God's saving work! So at least join with me on this journey through the authoritative Word of God, the Scriptures.

Heavenly Father, we come before you today confessing our sinfulness. But you saved us from our sins by the saving work of the crucified Lord Jesus Christ. We didn't deserve to be saved; yet you have saved us. We praise you for that. But often our sins still get in the way of our hearing your Word. We pray that you open our hearts and minds, even as when you first opened our ears to salvation. Make us diligent and faithful to that Word in our lives. In your mercy we pray this through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord. Amen.

1.

BAPTISM AND ORIGINAL SIN

“He’s got the dimples of his father.”

“He’s a cutie alright,” responded Marcie. Janet was holding the quietly slumbering babe in her arms. She and her husband had wanted a baby for a number of years. Finally, little Michael came along.

“I can’t get over how peaceful he looks when he’s sleeping,” said Janet.

“Janet, are you going to get the baby baptized?”

“Well, Marcie, we don’t baptize babies in my church.”

“Why not?”

Janet paused for a second as she shifted Michael over a bit. “We believe that baptism is for a new Christian. Once a person realizes his sinfulness, then he can get baptized. But a little baby can’t sin like that.”

Janet’s answer took Marcie by surprise. She had never really thought about it that way before.

“You really don’t think so?”

Janet smiled. “Marcie, have you ever heard of a baby murdering someone? Or a baby stealing? Michael’s just a baby. He’s totally unconscious about things like that. Just look at him sleeping here.”

Janet had a hard time seeing the need for infant baptism. After all, if infants are too young to really sin, what's the need for baptism? Notice also how Janet saw sin in terms of the actual deeds that were done. But sin is much more than that! It's also a state, a condition that we are in . . . from the time of conception and birth.

The Scriptures on original sin

In other words, the story of baptism goes back to the very beginning. The story began with sin. God had created man and placed him in the Garden of Eden. Genesis 1:26,27 says: "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. . . .' So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him." After God created the world, Genesis 3 tells of the fall into sin. Genesis 3 paints a dark picture in contrast to the creation account. Man was ashamed of himself. He hid from God. The earth was cursed because of man's sin. Death became the inevitable.

This dark picture continues all through the early chapters of Genesis. The curse on Cain, the Flood, and Babel are all further results of sin, a tragic contrast to the dignity of man in the creation. As Genesis 6:5 says: "The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually."

In the midst of the bleak images from the Fall come the words of Genesis 5:3. Seth is born in *Adam's* image and likeness! Adam's sin had tainted the image of God in him. Seth inherited a tainted image of God. So Genesis 5 continues on with the lineage from Adam and Seth. Like a funeral dirge, the words "and he died" repeat themselves through the names of Adam's descendants. People were born only to die. Such are the natural results of sin. So Genesis 8:21 can say that man's thoughts are evil from his youth, from his childhood.

Indeed, people are evil from their very conception!

Job 14:1 states: “Man that is born of a woman is of a few days and it is full of trouble.” But it’s not just that man *does* evil from his conception. Man *is* evil from the womb. Job 14:4, a few verses later, adds: “Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? There is not one.” Jesus affirms these words in Matthew 7:17 when he says that a corrupt tree can only bring forth corrupt fruit. Job 15:14 says: “What is a man, that he can be clean? Or he that is born of a woman, that he can be righteous?” Job 25:4 seems to repeat: “How then can man be righteous before God? How can he who is born of woman be clean?” Sin is more than just a matter of what we do. It’s how we are!

David and his son Solomon attest to this truth. In Psalm 25:7 David talks about sins from youth, from childhood. David confesses in Psalm 51:5: “Behold, *I was brought forth in iniquity*, and in sin did my mother conceive me.” David says that he was sinful as an infant even in the womb. In Psalm 58:3 he laments: “The wicked go astray *from the womb*, they err from their birth, speaking lies.” In Ecclesiastes 7:20 Solomon says: “Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins.”

If infants were really innocent of sin, why doesn’t Scripture say this? Rather, the exact reverse is stated. There is “*nobody* so righteous on the earth”, not even the newborn.

In his New Testament letters, the Apostle Paul frequently echoes the Psalms and Ecclesiastes. For example, he asserts in Romans 3:10-12 that “none is righteous, no, not one.” Then in Romans 3:23 he states that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Again, the language of Scripture is ALL, with no exceptions. Romans 7:14-25 describes the Apostle’s struggle with his sinful nature, his very own flesh. Ephesians

2:1-3 also speaks of man's sinful flesh and its desires. 1 Corinthians 15:50 is explicit: "I tell you this, brethren: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable." So Paul can say: "The unspiritual man does not receive the gifts of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Corinthians 2:14). This is because man's very *will*, by nature, is corrupt and bound to sin according to Romans 8:7,8: "For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law, *indeed it cannot; and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.*" Everyone is under the curse of sin and in need of God's saving work in their lives. "Everyone" means even the littlest.

Janet had remarked how peaceful, how innocent little Michael looked. This is not an easy matter for us in our day. Our society teaches us that people are by nature good. It's hard enough to believe that an *adult* is by nature sinful. Then to say that even small babies are sinful seems too much to bear. Yet that is exactly what the Bible teaches. Man's flesh, his nature, is sinful. The sinful flesh then expresses itself in sinful actions.

A person can't seem to beat an habitual sin. Two people are talking and one flies into a violent rage. A young person finds his or her thoughts quite often turning to lust. A brooding, self-centered depression settles over a life. Sometimes we manipulate other people—even unconsciously. As great as the urge to murder, as simple as a desire to lie, so sinful actions flow from a sinful flesh.

Man inherits this sinful flesh, ultimately, from Adam. As Romans 5:12 says: "Therefore as sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all men sinned." If babies were really sinless, this passage tracing our sin

directly to Adam would simply have to be wrong. Sin would have nothing to do with Adam. Sin would only have to do with each man in and of himself.

In Romans 5, St. Paul traces our sin back to Adam. It seems unfair, doesn't it? Why should *all* people have to suffer for the one man's sin? God's system of justice is not always quite the same as ours. Is this a matter for us to complain to God about? Before we pass a too hasty judgment on God's system, perhaps we should see the full picture. On the same basis that sin was passed to all, so God grants his salvation from sin!

Romans 5 goes on to say that if by *one man* all were made sinners, so by Jesus Christ, *one man*, salvation was obtained for all. Even as Adam's one sin affected all of us, so the saving work of the one man, Jesus Christ, affects all of us. To deny the first denies the second.

Those who reject the imputation of Adam's sin as an injustice are compelled, if they would be consistent, to declare the imputation of Christ's righteousness to be an injustice and to reject it; thus they take their stand outside the pale of Christianity.¹

Romans 5:18-19 summarizes it all: "Then as *one* man's trespass led to condemnation for *all* men, so one man's act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for *all* men. For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man's obedience many will be made righteous." Romans 5:15 says: "But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if many died through one man's trespass, how much more have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many." 1 Corinthians 15:22 also expresses this thought: "For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive."

Although God's judgment on "original sin" may be a tough concept that doesn't quite seem fair, we can still praise the Lord. Even as Adam's sin brought us all death and a sinful nature, so Jesus brings us life. Why should one man's sin bring us all death? But then again, why should one righteous man's work bring us all life? That doesn't make sense on our scales either. But we can praise the Lord for it! One man's righteous act brought *me* life!

Original sin and baptism: John 3

But what connects original sin to infant baptism? First, because of original sin, babies too need to be saved. The Scriptures are very vocal about infant sin. Nor has God been silent about his saving plan for infants! John 3:5-8 can help us there. Verse 6 says: "That which is born of flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." But wait a minute! What does "flesh" mean for John? Is it sinful? And what does "born" mean? In other words, how does this passage connect original sin to a need for water baptism?

John speaks of "flesh" in John 3:6. But for John, the Word, Jesus Christ, "became flesh" (John 1:14). Certainly the Word did not become sinful! Many writers have thus thought that John's "flesh" refers just to the realm of the earthly and the natural as opposed to the heavenly or the spiritual. In and of itself, "flesh" would not be sinful, that is, have original sin. But on the contrary, John *does* have a concept of original sin.

Each of the Gospels is concerned with the issue of Jesus as the Savior from sin. Each Gospel, however, tackles this theme from a different angle. John speaks of Jesus as the one who reveals the Father, who is the incarnate only-begotten Son (John 1:18). But as the people in John's Gospel meet Jesus, they come to a turning point in their lives. In the Gospel of John, sin reveals

itself always in one's relation to Christ. Man either receives Jesus as the Son of God in the flesh, the Savior from sin, or rejects him (John 1:10-12).

Thus the Evangelist John deals in opposites: belief/unbelief, light/darkness, flesh/spirit, from below/from above. All of these pairs contrast the earthly and natural with the divine and heavenly. John places "flesh" and "spirit" opposite each other in John 3. It's not enough to be born of flesh. A man must *also* be born of the Spirit. While *Christ's* flesh was not sinful, one need only see what happens to *man's* flesh. *Flesh without the Spirit is sinful flesh!* As the Pharisees judge "according to the flesh" they miss out on who Jesus is as the Savior (John 8:15). Throughout John's Gospel, when Christ is seen just according to the flesh, the person misses out on Christ as the Savior (for example, Nicodemus in John 3:3-8). Flesh when left to itself is lost .

When John places flesh in opposition to Spirit he is showing that flesh is not enough. The birth in flesh, without the birth in Spirit, leaves us in sin. And for John, there is no middle ground. The person in sin is a person opposed to the things of Christ. A man *must* be born from above. It is *necessary!* For until one is born from above, that person is left with sin clinging to his flesh. Such flesh can only lead *away* from the truth! So John emphasizes why we must be born *not* just of the flesh but from above (John 1:13)!

John is always trying to show that it's the spiritual level of things *in Christ* that counts. Why? Because apart from Christ the flesh is lost. What is this but original sin? The doctrine of original sin does not say that man's flesh *in itself* is evil (John 1:18). But it does say that sin cleaves to man's flesh, requiring the spiritual birth (John 3:3-8). It is sinful flesh that needed to be saved. So the Word became flesh.

Because of their sinful flesh, then, babies are in need

of spiritual birth, just as adults are. John 3:6 uses original sin as the explanation for the prior verse: “. . . unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.” But what does that phrase “of water and the Spirit” mean?

Some have said that the “water” here is figurative and not the water of baptism. But baptism is often referred to by such language. Nicodemus, to whom Jesus was speaking here, was a member of the Pharisees. The Gospel according to Luke says that the Pharisees did not receive baptism for the forgiveness of their sins (Luke 7:30). Nicodemus would have understood Christ’s “new birth” in the sense of baptism. The Jews used such terms with their own convert baptism.² Not all the Jews, though, were sold on convert baptism. Perhaps Nicodemus’s objection in John 3:4 was what he said to the Jews who baptized. But John was also writing his Gospel for an early Christian community that would have associated water with the regular baptism of new converts. Thus baptism would have been the obvious meaning of the term “water.”

The context also indicates water baptism. After this discussion with Nicodemus, Jesus and his disciples went into Judea and baptized people (John 3:22). Verse 23 even speaks of John the Baptist baptizing. Water baptism thus forms the context of Jesus’ talk with Nicodemus. This shows that the “water” with Nicodemus is baptism. Indeed, there is more to these verses than meets the eye.

Verses 22-30 of John 3 are mysteriously placed in the Gospel of John. The passage would really fit in better, thematically, right after the material on John the Baptist in John 1. The parallels are striking. The obvious common elements are John the Baptist and water baptism. Also, in John 1:19-21 the Baptist denies that he is the Christ. He denies that he is the Christ in 3:28. In

1:30, the Baptist says that Christ was before him (see also 3:28). In 1:30, John the Baptist says the Christ ranks before him, while in 3:30, the Baptist says that he himself must decrease.

But note also the parallels to the wedding at Cana. In 3:25, the dispute is over purification. In 2:6, Jesus uses purification jugs for his miracle. John 2 describes the wedding at Cana, and in John 3:29 we find more wedding imagery. Similar words are shared in the accounts. For example, “bridegroom” is common to both. The word “lesser” (wine) and (I must) “decrease” are related Greek words.

John 3:22-30 would seem to fit in better between 1:19-34 and 2:1-11, thematically. Why, then, is it here in chapter 3? The answer is that 3:22-30 along with 4:1,2 are strongly baptismal. After the talk with Nicodemus on “water and Spirit,” this section serves to further and strengthen the *baptismal* theme in John 3:1-8. The inspired writer thus places the material here in order to teach the reader how to understand the talk with Nicodemus.

So, “. . . unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.” In other words, baptism is the means by which the Spirit works in man the spiritual birth that frees from the curse of his sinful flesh. The Greek word “*tis*” used here means “anyone” with no respect for age or status. That would include infants.

Some have thought that the passage speaks of *two* births, either one natural and one spiritual, or one by water baptism and one of the Spirit. But the phrase does not read “born of water *and* born of the Spirit” but rather reads “born of water *and* Spirit”—one act and event, not two.³ So baptism is the means by which the effects of original sin in being “born of the flesh” are countered by being “born of the Spirit.” F.D. Bruner develops this thought further:

Spiritually a man is born only once and that “of water and the Spirit.” That is why baptism is the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Christian baptism is *one* (the single “of”), really a baptism (“of water”), and at the same time really spiritual (“and the Spirit”).⁴

Finally, verse 8 in the context of John 3:5-7 shows why *infants* must be baptized and born of the Spirit. The Spirit “blows” wherever he wills whether we understand him or not. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit. Bruner writes of verse 8:

The descent of the Spirit in baptism remains a sovereign mystery and a wonder of grace. The only connection made for the Holy Spirit in this passage is with water. But *how* he relates himself to this water (coming immediately before, during, after?), or how and why he comes at all, is forbidden a too curious inquiry. Just as “the wind blows where it wills.” . . . This is a clear warning against prescribing conditions (pattern) or evidences (pou) for the Spirit apart from his sovereign coming in Christ Jesus in baptism.⁵

The Spirit therefore can create faith in anyone as he pleases, adult or infant. He has promised, however, to work in the water of baptism. So when we baptize infants in view of their sinful flesh, we stand firmly on God’s word in John 3:5 that one must be born of water and the Spirit to enter into God’s kingdom. For the water and the Spirit work together *to reverse* the effects of man’s sinful flesh (verse 6).

While the story of baptism began with the Fall and sin, it reaches its climax in Jesus and his saving work. Sin corrupts us all, by nature. But even as sin corrupts

us all, so Jesus' saving work is for us all. Baptism takes all of Christ's saving work from centuries ago and makes it a reality for our lives today. In baptism, the effects of Adam's sin on the baby, indeed, on each of us, are countered.

But it's not just John 3:5-8 that tells us of the wonderful blessings that come with baptism. As we shall see, the Scriptures describe these blessings in *several* places.