

# OpenTheo

## Q&A#97 How Did I Change My Mind on Infant Baptism?

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Today's question:

"As you have shared in several places, you came from a Reformed Baptist theological background and later moved to an Anglican setting. I am in a similar situation where most of my theological background and education has been in a Reformed Baptist context, yet I have been on the edge of embracing infant baptism for several years now.

Could you speak to what pushed you over the edge on the issue of infant baptism? Did you switch to that view quite easily? Or was it a long journey?

I want to give some background as to where I am in thinking through this: The basic Presbyterian arguments don't fully persuade me, though they are compelling. I also don't want to put all my theological chips in the scant references to infant faith, as some in the Lutheran circles might. I have followed Peter Leithart for some time now, and he and Leonard Vander Zee have been perhaps the most helpful and persuasive in this conversation. In many ways Leithart's Baptized Body has ruined me for thinking about the covenant community as made up of those who are half way in and those who are fully in, which goes against typical Presbyterian view. Yet, I am also cautious to embrace Leithart's position full on, because I don't think I can get on board with predestined real apostasy, as he seems to hold in that book.

Yet, the Baptist demand that the church be a regenerate covenant community and their insistence on a link between repentance and baptism hold me back from embracing paedobaptism entirely.

I imagine that you'd find yourself near Leithart's views in some ways, but I would love to hear from you some of the biblical support for infant baptism that originally compelled you to embrace the position and also how your views have developed since then. Also, how, in your view, does your position on paedobaptism relate to paedocommunion? And if you could recommend some books that depict your general position well."

I've discussed baptism and paedocommunion in the following videos:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yD1g9k-Oj6g>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zcRrSinoggs>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xgf2pUmq6ok>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hY41SBE0KbE>

My new blog for my podcasts and videos is found here: <https://adversariapodcast.com/>.

If you have any questions, you can leave them on my Curious Cat account:

<https://curiouscat.me/zugzwanged>.

If you have enjoyed these talks, please tell your friends and consider supporting me on Patreon: <https://www.patreon.com/zugzwanged>. You can also support me using my PayPal account: <https://bit.ly/2RLaUcB>.

The audio of all of my videos is available on my Soundcloud account:

<https://soundcloud.com/alastairadversaria>. You can also listen to the audio of these episodes on iTunes: <https://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/alastairs-adversaria/id1416351035?mt=2>.

## **Transcript**

Welcome back. Today's question is, as you have shared in several places, you came from a Reformed Baptist theological background and later moved to an Anglican setting. I am in a similar situation where most of my theological background and education has been in a Reformed Baptist context, yet I have been on the edge of embracing infant baptism for several years now.

Could you speak to what pushed you over the edge on the issue of infant baptism? Did you switch to that view quite easily or was it a long journey? I want to give some background as to where I am in thinking through this. The basic Presbyterian arguments don't fully persuade me, though they are compelling. I also don't want to put all my theological chips in the scant references to infant faith, as some in Lutheran circles might.

I have followed Peter Lighthouse for some time now, and he and Leonard van der Zee have been perhaps the most helpful and persuasive in this conversation. In many ways, Lighthouse's baptized body has ruined me for thinking about the covenant community as made up of those who are halfway in and those who are fully in, which goes against typical Presbyterian views. Yet I am also cautious to embrace Lighthouse's position full on, because I don't think I can get on board with Protestant real apostasy, as he seems

to hold in that book.

Yet the Baptist demand that the church be a regenerate covenant community and their insistence on a link between repentance and baptism hold me back from embracing paedobaptism entirely. I imagine that you'd find yourself near Lighthouse's views in some ways, but I would love to hear from you some of the biblical support for infant baptism that originally compelled you to embrace the position and also how your views have developed since then. Also, how in your view does your position on paedobaptism relate to paedocommunion? And if you could recommend some books that depict your general position well.

I've already answered some of these questions to some degree or other in other videos. I'll leave a link to those below, but I'll give a general answer to the issues raised within this video. I won't answer everything here.

If everyone has any further questions following up from it, please leave them on my Curious Cat account and I'll hopefully answer them in future videos. What pushed me over the edge on the issue of infant baptism? Well, when we change our mind, we tend to do it for a variety of different reasons. And the significance of the fact that I came from a Reformed Baptist theological background should not be neglected.

There is a way in which our theology will always develop to some degree or other against the foil of our background. And for me, that background was a Reformed Baptist background. And the background that I come from and what I gained from that background will always be something that's a voice within my head, a voice that I'm talking in conversation with, not a literal voice, I don't hear voices, but a voice in my head that I'm engaging with and I'm thinking about my theology in dialogue with that.

I'm thinking about what was I brought up with and how do I think about my theology in relationship to that. Now, this is always a problem because the background that you have as a child is always a fairly simplified and often a distorted one in various ways. It's also bound up with a lot of emotional attachments and senses of bitterness, whatever it is, these relationships that we have in our past that can be quite fraught.

It's one of the things you see with a lot of progressive thought, that they're reacting against a particular evangelical background. And often there's very little content to their thought in its own right. It does not develop out of its own clear impetus, its own clear foundation.

Rather, it's pushing back against something else, something that they grew up with. And so for me, part of my development was a relationship with my background. And for better or worse, that is an important part.

My relationship with my dad as a Reformed Baptist pastor, my relationship with my

church upbringing, my relationship with the theology and the environment of thought within which I was raised. And it's important to recognize these things because often we like to think of our theological developments as things that occur in a pure, abstract intellectual vacuum, and it doesn't. It occurs against the background of relationships, against the background of resentment, against the background of friendship, against the background of attachments.

And I, as I changed my position in the Baptist, I had a very good relationship with my father, but it was an important aspect of my development that for me, that position was not an abstract position. It was a position that was attached to something the way I had been raised by my parents. And so I've always found it important to relate it to that context and to think about, to what extent is this a matter of me trying to forge my own identity and contradistinction to the position that my parents raised me with? To what extent is it me dealing with a fairly limited or even caricatured weak man position? The position that you hold as a young teen, rather than a position that is the mature position of someone who has studied deeply within the theology of Reformed Baptist thought, for instance.

And so I've had to ask myself those questions and I have retained a paedobaptist position, which has developed in various ways, but recognized to some extent that some of the different factors that shaped my first arrival at this, one of those being friendship, moving to a new context, finding that certain of the contexts within which I was feeling most stretched and I was gaining most in my theology were Presbyterian ones. And for that reason, I recognized that there was a weight of theology within Presbyterian context that I wasn't finding within Reformed Baptist context. And so it can seem like a certain move up in the world that as you attach yourself to a new crowd who have a bit more sophisticated theology, better attachments, these sorts of things, that by virtue of your change in theological position, that you are part of a better set for you to be stretched in theologically.

And again, that's part of it. It's recognizing that that was a factor in my change. And I think it's an important factor for many people, for instance, in the way that people move in the direction of the Roman Catholic Church.

Often there's a sophistication and there are institutions that are more elite and more facilitating for people who are working at the highest level of theological thought within Roman Catholic context. And for many people from a more low church, Presbyterian or Reformed evangelical context, that can be deeply attractive. As you rise up within the area of academia, you can feel that you don't have a home within the context that you come from.

And it's important to consider to what extent this is a certain attraction to a peer group and to what extent it is actually a response to real theological issues. Because positions

can become very attractive and appealing when there is a personal motive for holding them. And so before I go into any of the more theological reasons for changing my mind, I want to consider some of those personal reasons, those personal factors that frame my decision.

Not all of them were an impetus in the direction of paedobaptism, but many of them did nudge me in that direction. And it's important to recognize that even though some would hold me back, for the most part, they did push me in that direction. And I have had to audit, as it were, my reasons to recognize that some of them were not good reasons.

Some of them were natural reasons, but they were reasons that you need to be cautious about. You need to investigate those reasons a bit more carefully to think about what actually underlies those. Because when we change our mind on issues, it is not something that we do as a pure intellectual decision.

And as you study the phenomenon of conversion and the many different forms that it takes, it is something that is a very complicated thing. It's bound up with friendships, it's bound up with relationships, it's bound up with key events that occur to people. And it is not the pure intellectual shift that we like to think it is.

And often there are complexes arising from our shifts that we've not actually changed in quite as much of a way as we think. We're still fixed on a certain theme or background or foil, for instance. Our background that we were once deeply attached to can be something that we were just deeply reacting against now.

So it's important to consider these things. If we're going to have a healthy way of relating to issues, of thinking about theology, we need to recognize these personal factors. We need to think about those.

We need to think about the ways in which we've been pushed in directions through panic. There are occasions when we change our minds through panic, through fear, through aversion, through rejection, through antagonism, through bitterness, through reaction, and through love, through the way that we can be in a relationship with someone and suddenly all their views seem attractive to us. These are all things that we need to think about.

And so before I go on, I want to register those concerns and those issues. What were some of the bigger issues that changed my mind? Well, it wasn't key biblical verses. When you're changing your mind on an issue like infant baptism, infant baptism is the sort of issue that represents, it's a consequence.

Often the shift on that is a consequence of a broader paradigm shift in your theology. And most people will make that paradigm shift in a number of stages, but there is a fundamental shift that occurs beneath the surface. And then it expresses itself in places

like infant baptism.

For me, it was the shift from an understanding of salvation that was focused upon the individual and Christ being the means for saving that individual and bringing them to heaven and that sort of notion of salvation to one where salvation is rooted in history, the grand historical narrative from Genesis to Revelation. And within that narrative, Christ and the formation of the church as his body, these sorts of things, and Christ as the Messiah of Israel, the one who fulfills Israel's identity, the one who forms a new humanity. And all of this is attached to a lot of other issues.

When we think about changes in our mind, in addition to thinking about personal issues, we also need to think about the ways in which our thinking occurs within interconnected systems of thought. And so when our minds change, it's like an ecosystem changing. It can be a trophic cascade, a shift on one particular issue can throw everything else out.

And as everything else has shifted, then new beliefs start to crystallize and new forms of theology start to take shape. And for me, those shifts occurred primarily in that area, the shift of that central gravity. Other changes that occurred related to my anthropology, again, associated to this.

My anthropology had previously been very much focused upon the individual, the detached individual, who is rather self-defined, who's very much related to God in a direct way. And there is a certain sort of direct relationship to God, but I began to realize that in scripture, there's a lot of emphasis upon a different type of anthropology, where we belong to groups, where we are generative beings. We are beings who are born from parents and to bear children.

We are beings who related to others. We are beings who have sexed bodies. We are beings who are defined by our bodies, not just by our subjectivities, our agency and things like that, and our volition.

And once I began to realize that, many of the underpinnings of my Baptist theology started to fray in various ways, because I realized that the Baptist theology often rested upon a very individualistic set of assumptions about salvation, about the church, about the story of scripture. And so the more I realized the central gravity of scripture, the more that I began to see that, for instance, the relationship between Israel and the church was a very key one. Now, I don't believe that circumcision is a direct, directly corresponds with baptism.

But what I do see is that within circumcision, we see an underlying theological and natural logic about the way in which we belong to each other. The way in which the child belongs to its parents and its family is defined within that relational network, not just as a detached being. I also began to think about things like adoption and the way that adoption provides a paradigm for thinking about infant baptism.

And adoption in many ways presents the way in which someone can, apart from their own choice, but for the sake of their wellbeing, be included within a new family on the basis of a real belonging and in anticipation of their full participation in the life of that community. Now, I think infant baptism is the same. And baptism more generally, this is an important thing, that these shifts are related to shifts often in people's understanding of the sacraments more generally.

So when I was a Baptist, when I thought about my baptism as a 15-year-old, I had a lot of anxiety about that. I had a lot of anxiety about my salvation more generally for a period of time. But the anxiety was caused in part by the fact that I fell away shortly afterwards and had this long period of backsliding.

And that made me wonder, if this was the confession of my faith, what was that really worth? If that faith immediately slipped away shortly after that. And my understanding of the sacrament shifted. And as my understanding of the sacrament shifted, my understanding of my own baptism as a 15-year-old shifted.

And that helped my assurance no end, because I realised that baptism was more about what God was doing to me and saying to me than about what I was saying. And that baptism was efficacious for the entirety of my life. It wasn't something that could just be destroyed by my sin and my failure.

Rather, I could keep returning to that. And in the same way as something like adoption, it's a meaning that you're supposed to live out and enter into. It's a promise that's been held out to you that you can enter into.

Now, as you look through the position of the early church, you'll see that there seems to be a variety of practice on this. Against certain paedobaptist arguments, I don't believe that the early church universally practised paedobaptism. But yet we do seem to have evidence that they did widely practise paedobaptism.

So there was a mixed practice. What we see is people like Tertullian pushing back against infant baptism, not on the basis of its being invalid against biblical teaching, whatever, but again, teaching that it is something that is opposed to prudence, that you don't want to baptise infants just as you don't want to baptise those who have not yet married because they might fall away. And that is a concern that I think is invalid, ultimately, that there are concerns about people not being raised in the faith properly.

And that is one of the concerns about infant baptism being seen as something that can be applied apart from its prospective significance. The significance of baptism, I believe, is very much about what it is pointing forward to. Like adoption, it's anticipating a full participation in the life of the body of Christ and the life of Christ.

Now, if you're baptising infants and they never darken the door of the church again,

there's no point, really. You're just undermining the meaning of the rite. You're not actually celebrating baptism as it ought to be celebrated.

And so that was a shift that occurred early on. And I've been developing that through in various ways. And so my understanding of infant baptism now is slightly different from what it was in the past.

There is a bit more of an understanding of infant baptism as a prudential practice that can be applied appropriately in many instances. And in certain situations, I would cut down on the number of infant baptisms. If there were not clear assurances that a child will be raised in the faith, I would not baptise them as an infant.

I think that infant baptism very much anticipates that child being raised in the faith and being raised as a member of the body of Christ. And so if you're not doing that, do not baptise your children because you're just undermining the meaning of the rite. Now, beyond this, I think that there are reasons why in scripture we see this connection between baptism and repentance and faith and the participation of infants in that.

So for instance, if we read Acts 16, believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved both you and your household. There is by very implication, the inclusion of the household in the faith of its head. Now, this is an anthropologically grounded truth.

I don't believe that this is just a theological statement that has to be made by the New Testament for it to be true. Rather, this is a statement that is grounded upon the truth of human nature. Just as God would save Noah and his sons and their daughters-in-law, just as God would save Lot and his family, just as God would save the children of Israel as a whole body of people, God saves families.

God deals with households because these are bodies of people that are bound together in their loyalties. And when we think about faith, we often think about faith according to the paradigm of the individual, the detached individual that makes up their own choices, their allegiances, et cetera, as an adult. And this is on the paradigm of the liberal individual.

But yet as human beings, we're not those who fit the paradigm of the liberal individual well. People who act according to choice, volition, individual agency and our private subjectivity. Rather, our selves are bound up with our bodies, with our belonging to particular communities, with the people that we are associated with.

And so if we have baptism understood in this framework, it makes a lot more sense to baptize infants because infants are not those without faith. When you think about infants as detached individuals who must have faith of a mature form of their own, then they don't have faith in that sense, but they belong to their parents. They are cast upon their parents.



Their parents are people of faith. And they, just as they have their national identity from their parents and those loyalties, just as they have their family identity from their parents, all these given identities, the name that they are given, the surname that they have, all of these things are similar to the way that baptism operates. Baptism brings you into a relational body, a relational network, a given identity on the basis of something that is already there, that you're a participant in the life of faith in a particular family.

And it is presumed that you will grow in that. Now, this is because God is forming a new humanity. And the new humanity is not just detached fragments of the old humanity salvaged, but it's a restoring of the channels of humanity, the relationship between parents and children, the relationship between the child and their family of belonging.

Now, these are natural relationships that God created. And the gospel, as many people think about it, is one that treats us as detached, abstracted individuals, as people who ultimately conform to some paradigm of the liberal individual. And a certain type of Baptist thought has been very much drawn to the paradigm of the liberal individual at the basis of its theological anthropology.

But when we look through scripture, I think we see a view of anthropology that pushes back against this. And we see it in many different ways. We see it in the salvation of bodies of people.

We see it in the assumption that households are implicated in the faith of their heads. Now, the assumption there is not that there's some sort of magical thing whereby if a head of a household is converted, all the household is automatically saved. No, it's about the human reality of a body of people that are bound together in a union that we are implicated in the lives of others.

Now, this is less so in modern society. And so I think this is an important point that infant baptism has a harder case to make now than it did in the first century AD in the context of Israel, where there were these tight networks and where being a member of a household would mean a participation in the life and worship of the household. You could far more easily assume that or presume upon that.

Now you can't in the same way. And so unless there is a clear provision for the raiding of the child in faith, I believe there is reason for caution about the practice of infant baptism. These are contextual and prudential considerations that I think we have to consider in our particular social condition that they did not have to consider to quite the same degree in the first century AD.

Another thing to consider is that this is not something that leaves faith behind. It's something that assumes the growing of a body of people in the life of faith. Now, there's always a problem when you have a church which is defined purely by infant baptisms,

infant baptisms where there is not a maturing in the life of faith.

On the other hand, there is a danger of churches where there is no infant baptism, where there is a sort of, as I talked about earlier, it's just odd individuals, flotsam and jetsam of the old fallen humanity that are drawn together and formed this new body. Rather than God restoring the relationships of the old humanity, God restoring what it means to be generative beings, what it means to have, for instance, that God is a friend of the family, that God created the family, God created the bond between parents and children, and he's going to restore that. And part of that is that children belong to the household of faith, that Christ would bless the children on behalf of their parents.

And this is something we see in a number of occasions in the gospels, that Christ heals or even saves people on account of the faith of others who are closely related to them, the master or the father or the mother, whatever it is that these close relationships mean something, they weigh something. They're not just left behind, leaving us as detached individuals relating to the gospel on this front. Now, if you see the relationship between Israel and the church and the history of salvation, far more central, then this makes sense because it would be a radical shift in God's pattern of dealing if this were not the case.

If it was the case that God suddenly stopped dealing with families, God suddenly stopped including infants and suddenly just included adults on a personal confession of faith. To actually make that move, you need to have created something of a breach between the Old and the New Testament, a breach that's far greater than what we actually see. There is an escalation, there is a transformation, there's death and resurrection, but there's not an absolute break and a rejection of what went before.

Or a supercession of what went before. Rather, what we see is the fulfilment of what went before. And here I think that the inclusion of infants is an important part of this, that the inclusion of infants in the life of the church is something that draws our mind back to the natural form of creation.

This is based upon natural law. It's not something that we need an explicit biblical verse for because it's part of what it means for us to be human beings, that we're bound up with other human beings. We are not detached individuals that form all our own loyalties, all our own identities.

Actually, in the same way as I was talking about early on in this video, our minds, our loyalties, our beliefs are formed in relationships. And the child who is born into a believing home is someone who is implicated within that and they grow within that and they form their minds up within that. And the hope is, as they're raised in the fear and admonition of the Lord, they will grow into the fullness of that life.

Now, this is exactly what is the case in the case of an older convert, that their baptism is

prospective too. They are baptised in the anticipation that they will grow into the meaning of that, into the full life of the household of God. Now, there's a lot more that I could say on this, but those were the key factors that changed my mind, those key shifts that led to a trophic cascade in my theology, a change in the whole ecosystem of my thought and made paedobaptism a lot more compelling.

And compelling not on the basis of a few verses here and there in the New Testament, which is a fairly thin foundation to work from, but from the deeper texture and roots of biblical thought, its deeper understanding and presentation of human nature, the relationship between Old and New Testament and the central gravity of salvation in Christ and the church. There's a lot more that I could say about this. Please leave any questions that you might have on my Curious Cat account.

If you would like to support this and future videos, please do so using my Patreon account or my PayPal account. The links for those are below. I won't be back probably for a couple of days.

I'm moving at tomorrow and the next day. So Lord willing, I'll be back by the end of the week, but thank you for listening and hope you have a great day. God bless.