

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 4 – Chapter 16 – Part 1
INFANT BAPTISM

This chapter is the second part of Calvin's examination of baptism. In Chapter 15 he offered an overview of baptism and in this chapter he defends the practice of infant baptism. Though the Roman and Orthodox churches always baptized infants, in Calvin's time Anabaptist churches had begun to argue against the practice, insisting that adult, or believer's baptism, was the only appropriate way to baptize.

Summary: Calvin begins by reminding his readers that the effectiveness of any ritual such as *baptism* "...does not rest solely in the external ceremonies, but depends chiefly upon the promise and the spiritual mysteries, which the Lord ordains the ceremonies to represent...therefore let him who would fully learn the value of baptism...fix his thoughts...to God's promises which are there offered to us...in it" (pg. 1325). What Calvin means by this is that people are not to focus on the how (dunking, sprinkling, etc.) or the when (for infants, children or adults) of baptism, but on the promises of Christ that it represents. These promises include the inclusion of people into the church and the washing away of their sins, both of which, Calvin will argue, are gifts of God applicable to children as well as to adults. His example of this concept is that of circumcision, through which the Israelites included children in all of God's covenant promises.

This connection between circumcision and baptism is explained when Calvin writes, "...it will be evident that baptism is properly administered to infants as something owed to them. For in early times the Lord did not deign to have them (children) circumcised without making them participants in all those things which were then signified by circumcision...for he expressly declares that circumcision of a tiny infant...certifies the promise of the covenant. But if the covenant still remains firm and steadfast, it applies no less to the children of Christians than under the Old Testament it pertained to the infants of Jews...for this same reason, the children of Christians are considered holy..." (pg. 1328). This is perhaps one of the most important statements that Calvin makes about infant baptism; that the children (meaning both boys and girls, even though circumcision was originally only for boys) of Christians are by birth, part of the new Christian covenant community. They are, in other words, not "outsiders" until they choose to profess Jesus and join the church. They are, at birth, part of God's people.

Calvin offers Jesus' welcoming the children to him as an example of this inclusion of children within the community. When the disciples wanted to keep the children away from him, Jesus invited the children to come to him and be blessed because "for of such is the Kingdom of Heaven" [Matthew 19:14]. Therefore, if Jesus invites and blesses children who cannot yet profess faith, the church ought to as well.

Though some people argued that children don't receive any benefit from their baptisms, Calvin disagrees. He writes, "On the other hand, the children receive some benefit from their baptism: being engrafted into the body of the church, they are somewhat more commended to the other members. Then, when they have grown up, they are greatly spurred to an honest zeal for worshipping God, by whom they were received as children through a solemn symbol of adoption..." (pg. 1332). To put this another way, children benefit because they are part of a loving and caring community that has vowed to nurture them in the faith.

Reflections: You and I live in a world in which the ultimate good is often seen as our ability to choose; to choose everything from what we eat, to where we live to those with whom we will associate. Choice is everything. This concept of choice has crept into the arena of faith as well. We think that because faith is a "choice" then we should not baptize infants because they are not capable of choosing. What I hope that we will remember however, is that while we can choose our friends, we cannot choose our families. They have chosen us, and this is what we believe about our children. They are part of God's family because God has chosen and claimed them. And because of that we welcome them through baptism into the church that we might love and nurture them so that, one day they might discover the love of God in Jesus, for themselves.

Questions:

1. What are thoughts about Calvin's connection of baptism and circumcision?
2. How have you participated in the nurture of children baptized in your church?
3. What role has your baptism played in your life? How do you think it helped to shape you?