

John Calvin for Everyone  
The Institutes of the Christian Religion  
Book 4 – Chapter 16 – Part 2  
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 that adult, or believer's baptism, was the only appropriate way to baptize.

**Summary:** in the first part of this chapter, Calvin explains that baptism is more about God's choosing us, than us choosing God; that the children of believers are part of God's covenant community; and that baptism is the New Testament equivalent of circumcision in the Old Testament.

Calvin begins this section of the chapter with a reminder that God's promises to the Jewish people, as sealed in circumcision to children, are irrevocable. *"Nevertheless...Paul...still saw...that the covenant which God made once for all with the descendants of Abraham could in no way be made void...so...we must not despise them, while we consider that for the sake of the promise, God's blessing still rests among them"* (pg. 1336-37). He sees this same irrevocable nature of God's promises at work in the children of Christians. *"For as Paul argues in that...the Jews are sanctified by their parents, so he teaches elsewhere that the children of Christians receive the same sanctification from their parents [1 Corinthians 7:14]"* (pg. 1337). Again, this is one reason we baptize children, because as children of believers, they have already been given the promises and blessings of God.

Calvin continues his defense of infant baptism by turning to the issue of children who die in infancy (Infant mortality in Calvin's time was about 30% and Calvin's only biological child died immediately after birth). If, as his opponents believe, that children of believers are not chosen by God, then at death they will be lost. Calvin believes however, that God chooses children even in their mother's wombs. He offers both John the Baptist and Jesus as illustrations of this concept. They were both *"sanctified"* (pg. 1340) in their mother's wombs, thus proving that if God can do it for them, God can do the same *"in others"* (pg. 1340). He makes this belief clear when he writes, *"For if fullness of life consists in the perfect knowledge of God, when some of them, whom death snatches away in their very first infancy, pass over into eternal life, they are surely received to the contemplation of God in his presence"* (pg. 1342).

At this point, he offers several positive arguments for infant baptism. He believes that even though infants cannot repent of sin that *"...infants are baptized into future repentance and faith, and even though these are not yet formed in them, the seed lies hidden within..."* (pg. 1343). He believes that baptism will cause children to be *"...fired with greater zeal for renewal, from learning that they were"* baptized (pg. 1344). He believes that baptism will give children comfort in that they know that there is for them *"forgiveness of sin"* (pg. 1345).

Calvin concludes with a reminder that baptism is not necessary for salvation (this is God's work) and that baptism is an *"entrance and a sort of initiation into the church, through which we are numbered with God's people; a sign of our spiritual regeneration, through which we are reborn as children of God"* (pg. 1352).

**Reflections:** We baptize infants because of what we believe about God. We believe that God is a God who loves children long before they can return that love. We believe that God has chosen our children and made them members of the covenant people of God. We believe that God's grace is given freely and does not wait for us or our children to seek it. We believe that God desires children and adults to live, not in fear, but the peace of God's love. For these reasons and more we claim our children in baptism on God's behalf.

**Questions:**

1. What do you think about Calvin's claim that God's promises to the Jews are irrevocable?
2. Where do you find comfort and hope in Calvin's views on infant baptism?
3. How do your beliefs about God shape your understanding of baptism?