

Is Baptizing Babies Heretical? One Baptist Pastor's Move Sets Off Hot Debate

The sprinkling-style baptism of a Dayton, Ohio, infant—a scene heartwarming and commonplace for Catholics and mainline Protestants—is touching off accusations of doctrinal heresy in the evangelical world.

In April, an influential American Baptist Churches USA pastor performed the rite, which most Baptists believe is reserved for Christians who are able to make a mature confession of faith. Although there are dozens of Baptist denominations in the U.S., the news made instant waves among those who know and understand Baptist teachings.

Before long, a Southern Baptist seminary president compared the notion of Baptists baptizing infants to vegetarians eating steak.

But while denominations squabble about doctrine, the Southern Baptist Convention, the nation's largest Protestant denomination, routinely immerses children age 5 and younger. A task force report based on 2012 figures said that age group was the only one seeing growth in numbers of baptisms, although a top researcher in the denomination said that's no longer the case.

In light of new survey data showing a decline in the number of self-professing Christians, some have wondered whether denominational heads are urging younger baptisms as a way to provide a membership boost.

Others discounted that theory.

“There’s pressure to go downward in age because parents are kind of convinced that their kids are understanding it earlier, and it’s easier to baptize kids,” said Ed Stetzer, executive director of LifeWay Research.

“I don’t think it is a preservationist instinct,” he said. “It’s more of a precociousness instinct.”

The meaning of infant baptism varies slightly among denominations that practice it. In the Middle Ages, the Roman Catholic Church encouraged infant baptism after fears arose that babies not baptized might die without the chance of salvation. Today, the sacrament is still understood to wipe away original sin inherited from Adam and Eve.

Baptists, on the other hand, believe the practice is rooted in Jesus’ own baptism story, said Yolanda Smith, a Yale Divinity School research scholar who specializes in Baptist theology and the black church.

In the biblical account, Jesus was baptized as an adult, and his immersion symbolizes dying to sin and being reborn – a foreshadowing of his death and resurrection, Smith said. For Baptists, making that choice also symbolizes full integration into the church.

The Rev. Rodney Kennedy, the First Baptist Church of Dayton pastor who baptized the 7-month-old boy, said the fact that his church accepts members who were baptized as infants without immersing them as adults influenced his decision. He said the backlash doesn’t surprise him.

“The Christian community needs to have a conversation about baptism,” said Kennedy, a seminary professor who has served terms as president of the Dayton Area Baptist Association. “Our nation is becoming progressively pagan, and we’re going to sit here and argue about when we need to baptize people? ... I am no longer interested whether confession of faith comes before or after baptism.”

He said he performed the baptism with the support of his church's executive council and faced no repercussions from his denomination and no loss of membership.

David Dark, author of "The Sacredness of Questioning Everything" and assistant professor of religion and the arts at Belmont University in Nashville, said people's beliefs have always been fluid, but that fact is getting more attention.

"I think that there is the growing belief that, even if we don't share every approach to religion with people of other traditions or faiths, everyone is in the same relationship with God the way that we're in the same relationship with oxygen," he said. "Increasingly, we receive the wisdom whatever the source without policing the boundaries of traditions."

But Jason Allen, president of Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, who wrote a popular blog post on the subject, was adamant: "Baptizing infants is not Baptist," Allen said. "It's a disqualifier."

"If you are baptizing someone, regardless of age – 4 or 44 – and they don't have a sufficient understanding of the gospel, or they do understand and their heart has not been pierced by it, it's an injustice to that person. They'll be inclined to think they have a right standing before God."

A recent Southern Baptist Convention task force found a two-decade decline in baptism and issued a report last year encouraging parents and church leaders to "make the claims of Christ clear to the Next Generation."

Alvin Reid, evangelism professor at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, North Carolina, who served on that task force, said the idea was to focus on young people from middle school through college.

It's troubling to hear about 3-year-olds being baptized, Reid

said, but he said he was not aware of any Southern Baptist church that receives people into membership who have been baptized as infants. Most Southern Baptist churches require a believer's baptism.

"We have to understand that people don't come to church because we put out a sign and put on a pageant. We have to be missional and living the gospel."

© 2015 Religion News Service. All rights reserved.