

Department of Liturgics

Commission on Worship

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Why do parents and congregation renounce the devil and confess faith in the triune God on behalf of a child in baptism?

The practice of renouncing the devil and confessing the Apostles Creed on behalf of a child rests on four foundations.

1. The confession of a common faith in the triune God is an essential part of baptism. On the one hand, baptism is performed 'in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit' (Matt 28:19). It is therefore the work of the triune God, his commitment to us. It is valid whether a person believes or not. On the other hand, only those baptised people who believe in Christ are saved (Mark 16:16). Faith receives what God gives to us in and through baptism. We must not, however, reduce the link between baptism and faith to a chronological sequence of events in a person's life in one of two ways. We do not first have to believe and confess our faith in the triune God before we can receive baptism, for baptism lays the abiding foundation for the life of faith, just as the marriage ceremony provides the basis for confidence in one's spouse and adoption provides the basis for trust in adoptive parents. Like a marriage or an adoption, our baptism is valid whether we believe in Christ or not. It is also true that we do not first have to be baptised before we can believe in Jesus as our Lord. Yet we do not receive the benefits of baptism apart from faith, just as married couples cannot enjoy the blessings of marriage if they mistrust each other. So the baptismal rite emphasises both these sides to baptism, God's gracious commitment to us and our reception of him and his gifts in faith. Since everything cannot be done at once, the rite consists of a series of enactments that are not meant to be taken separately but all join together as part of a single event.
2. Since both infants and adults are in the same boat before God, spiritually dead in their trespasses and sins (Eph 2:1), unable to do anything to regenerate themselves, we have the same baptismal rite for both. Because we quite wrongly equate faith with knowledge and understanding, we think that it is easier for an adult to believe than a child. But that is not so. Jesus teaches that unless we all become as little children we will never enter God's kingdom (Matt 18:2, 13-14; Mark 10:13-15; Luke 18:15-17). Before God we are all spiritual infants with nothing to give and everything to receive. So since apostolic times the church has always baptised infants as if they were adults and adults as if they were infants. This, traditionally, is why people did not bring themselves to baptism but had sponsors who spoke for them; they brought them to be baptised, presented them for baptism, and joined with them

in renouncing the devil and confessing faith in the triune God. Like the friends of the crippled man who used their faith to bring him to Jesus (Mark 2:1-12), the congregation and the sponsors bring people who cannot walk in the way of the Lord to him in baptism for forgiveness and healing.

3. Socially, legally and spiritually children are under the headship of their parents. Parents speak and act on their behalf until they come of age. This, too, is so in Christian families. Parents and grandparents speak and act on their behalf until they become adults. Just as parents pray for their children, share the word of God with them, and bring them to church, they also can use their spiritual authority to confess the faith for them and renounce the devil for them.
4. While Christ deals with each of us personally, he does not regard us as isolated individuals but communally as members of families, as children of Adam and Eve, and as members of God's family. This means that just as we all share in the same sin against God and were once all enslaved to the same devil, we have all been redeemed by the same Lord Jesus and given the same gift of faith by the Holy Spirit. We therefore confess a common faith in a common Lord (Eph 4:4-6; Tit 1:4). Just as we pray for others, we too confess that common faith on their behalf and so include them in the common confession of faith of the whole church. That's what happens at every baptism. In love the congregation reaches out to the candidates for baptism and speaks for those who cannot yet speak for themselves. Yet this does not mean those who were once baptised as infants need not later on in life renounce the devil for themselves and make the Apostles Creed more and more their own confession of faith. That does not happen just once at first communion or at confirmation. It is a lifelong process of growth in faith as we are gradually drawn from our spiritual isolation into fuller union with Christ and each other.

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