

What Happens to Babies When They Die? A Brief Treatment on the Matter

For over three years now I've been going line by line through the London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689 as my devotionals on Biblecia.com. I post them just about every week. As of the date of this letter I'm in section 10 of 32 in that work. Normally they're just short devotionals. I decided to make this one a brief letter because I've been asked about the subject so many times. I pray it's a blessing to the reader.

From the LBCF of 1689, section 10, paragraph 3: "Elect infants dying in infancy are regenerated and saved by Christ through the Spirit; who worketh when, and where, and how he pleases; so also are all elect persons, who are incapable of being outwardly called by the ministry of the Word."

Take heart if you're a parent who's lost a baby in this life. I have wept with my share of parents who've suffered a loss of this sort. While the desire to comfort anyone isn't my primary motive, it's nonetheless a motivation I'm eager to affirm I have regarding the matter at hand.

Those mentally handicapped or those in any way otherwise handicapped so that their levels of mental capacity cannot be accurately known are most certainly in view here. They are lovingly viewed as "incapable of being outwardly called" because of their condition. Outward call simply meaning "preached to". We may speak to them and believe they hear us, as well they might, but we simply cannot know for sure what they're understanding or believing if their condition prevents them from clearly communicating back. Such human incapacities, however, as with all our spiritual incapability, *do not in any way prevent God's inward works*. I believe that God saves in mercy those who, by means of such impairments, do not qualify for his plan of redemption. They cannot hear, repent and believe in a way known to us. I firmly believe this inasmuch that the argument I'm going to set forth here on infants would unswervingly apply. I hope no one takes this in a demeaning way. I would also run to bring comfort to any parent or caregiver blessed to love, pray for, work with or live with those so handicapped hereby.

What about infants who die? I've personally seen men sit on a stage and show cute baby pictures on screens, likely from parents in the crowd, and then evoke the emotions of those parents and the others present by saying something brilliant like, "Calvinists believe God wants to burn these cute little babies in hell". Rumored claims are often attributed to Calvin and others on this matter that cannot be documented. Be careful with what you read on the internet! I'd like to begin by saying that no one can possibly be exclusively definitive on the matter in any view. We just can't. Scripture does not offer a plenary answer to the question of what happens to babies spiritually when they die. It's therefore up to us to deduce what we believe on the matter soundly and safely. And I do believe such deductions can be made. David, after God slew his infant son for his [David's] sin said to his servants, "While the child was alive, I fasted and wept; for I said, 'Who can tell *whether* the LORD will be gracious to me, that the child may live?' But now he is dead; why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me." 2 Samuel 12:22-23. This is not speaking simply of death or of the grave. David's

too clear, as is all of Scripture, to ever soundly deduce the silliness of so called “soul sleep” from this. David’s statement here is about as close as we get in Scripture to the idea that babies are redeemed. He seems to believe that his was. David seems to indicate that he clearly believed he’d somehow see his son again. And since we know that David knew he’d be with God when he died (Psalms 17:15; 23:6; 16:9-11, et al) then we can rationally deduce that in David’s mind there was confidence that his child was already there and that he’d one day go *to him*. There are other passages such as Jesus blessing the little children and passages about covenant mercies to parents that we can lean upon when viewing little kids, but again as I said, it’s all to build what we can as best we can.

When Moses is recounting much of Israel’s history after God took them out of Egypt as he promised their father Abraham it’s very telling how God describes the little ones. Even just as the genealogical seed of his grandson Israel, God had already begun showing the outworking of his promises to Abraham in Genesis 15:5; 22:17 that he would make his descendants like the stars of heaven. Moses attests to this in Deuteronomy 1:10. Of the entire massive generation that God took from Egypt, only Joshua and his kids were allowed to enter into Israel, Deuteronomy 1:34-36. God forbade anyone else, even Moses, from going in. This is a terrible judgment of God upon that generation. *Yet still their children were not judged for their rebellion*. Even though they were not circumcised according to the covenant work God gave Abraham, God still had mercy on them and continued his gracious work to multiply them for the sake of the promise he made to God the Son with Abraham as witness. Now, the great picture here is surely the mercies of God to the seed (Seed) of Abraham. No doubt. The kids no more “deserved” God’s grace by their nature than any others, but God says something about them that bears on this topic. He says, “Moreover, your little ones who you said would become a prey, and your sons, who this day have no knowledge of good or evil, shall enter there, and I will give it to them and they shall possess it.” Deuteronomy 1:39. These kids are even uncircumcised (cf. Joshua 5:2-7). The fact that God still preserves them shows even more depth to the documented truth that we’re all saved by grace alone and faith alone because God had already said that the uncircumcised from day nine of their lives would be cut off, Genesis 17:9-14. It’s not that God failed to keep his word. He had them re-circumcised because he never fails to. God reminds a people he’s about to have die in the desert that their kids had, “...no knowledge of good or evil.” This is another passage that causes me to consider God’s anthropology and how we determine things we call, “levels of accountability” as Christians. These children are born in the sin of Adam. Born DOA. The New Covenant revelation hammers this home without ambiguity in places like Romans 5. Yet they are continued in the blessing because they themselves, despite the horrendous sin of their parents, and despite the fact that they too sin and would also disobey, are called into Israel still as youngsters. He reminds us that they didn’t know good or evil. I take this strongly into consideration when considering an infant’s culpability and/or mental capacity, or the mental capacity of someone even perhaps fully grown who’s so afflicted by the Fall that their impairments make it impossible for anyone to ascertain by profession any semblance of a regenerate heart. This is again something else wise to take into consideration on the matter.

I must plainly admit that it’s absurd for me to imagine an infant (or an aged person who is yet consigned to hell from infancy) in the punishment of God’s eternal hell. I firmly do not believe that a single one will be lost. Though all babies are surely under the condemnation of Adam’s sin from conception, we Baptists (like many others) make a distinction between original

and actual sin. Actual sin is the sin we ourselves commit in life. It helps me to think of it as quantitative. We are justly condemned at our judgment by God for actual sin, not for original sin. God does not condemn a man solely for the sin of Adam, even though it alone would be enough to. This plays a large part in my argument. I believe that God decreed the Fall of mankind. That Romans 5:8-9 was in his mind *before* Genesis 1:1 occurred. I believe that God predestined his people to adoption before the Fall in full knowledge of what all men in Adam would be. I hold to infralapsarianism. Thus, election is *out of* universal condemnation in man's SIN, even though it was decreed by God before the actual Fall itself occurred in real time. Babies are not innocent, but they are obviously free from judgment for actual sin. Judgments visited by God on future generations for the sins committed by their fathers in Scripture appear to me to be temporal and not eternal. All people will manifest a fallen nature since we are all born dead in SIN, but original sin is what leads to actual sin. One gives way to the other. I like what I heard Ravi Zacharias once say. He said, "We are not sinners because we break God's moral Law; we break God's moral Law *because* we are sinners." I think that's exactly right. All babies *will* prove this in their lives. Romans 3:23. The Baptist Faith and Message of 2000, while affirming Original Sin, says this, "Therefore, as soon as they are capable of moral action, they become transgressors and are under condemnation." (Paragraph 3). This condemnation we enter into by our actual sin is what we are culpable for at our judgment having done it freely. We all manifest that sinful nature we're born with. The capabilities of infants and the handicapped are always to be considered in this. I believe that God foresaw every single death before there were any, and so elected infants to eternal life before the foundation of the world. I read the confession here that babies are all "elect infants" though I realize this is perhaps a bit of an interpolation on my part. I cannot say this is exactly as the framers would have me read it. Nonetheless I believe that God, knowing without question as he does all things that the death of a baby would occur, can redeem them from Adam's (and their) sin as he pleases. And I believe that he is pleased to.

But this is how the question must be answered- by deductions made. We cannot "exegete" an answer. We must produce it topically, or otherwise by good and necessary consequence, and we must take heed how we build our answers. I believe that God takes all infants to heaven. That he imputes the righteousness of Jesus to them, as is necessary for their salvation under Adam's headship, having before the foundation of the world already predestined them to eternal life. Romans 8:29-30 will apply to what God has for them in eternity as much as anyone who's been blessed to live a full life here. This is all children who have ever died in any place at any time. Just consider for a moment what *another* monument to God's unmerited grace on the Cross it will be that all the children murdered in the unspeakable wickedness of abortion, or all those who have died by disease or war will be in heaven! That God saves them. This is part of my reasoning on the matter. God will be glorified in their pardon as members of Adam's race. The confession here, like many, works to affirm what we must- that only God's electing grace saves, but at the same time not to too strongly detail any more. What we can affirm is that fallen people (both old and young) go to heaven *only* by God's grace.

Oddly enough it's the Arminians showing baby pictures and saying God wants to burn these sweet little babies who have the hard and inconsistent answers to then try to give here. After all, can a baby exercise its "free-will" to be saved? No. So then in their view no baby ever could be saved because they couldn't decide to be. And how can God give the grace of regeneration, which grace they practically deny anyway, to one person for any reason and not to

all? No, God must work only so far as the will of a man will let him they love to declare. Hence: no will, no way! He has to only give all the chance to save themselves with his help. That's their normal spiel. But no, dear reader. Salvation is always by God's grace alone. He gives it as he pleases. It is a Reformed understanding that paints a God-centered, consistent answer here. Pastor John MacArthur said it well when he preached: "...only pure true reformed soteriology can account for the fact that fallen, sinful, guilty, depraved children who die with no spiritual merit, die with no religious merit, die with no moral merit of their own can be welcomed by a holy God into eternal glory...only pure reformed theology can allow for that because only the purest theology believes that salvation is all by grace. How were you saved? By what? Grace." (The Salvation of Babies Who Die, Part 1. Oct 7, 2001). Synergistic views that make men co-saviors exclusively by virtue of the idol of libertarian free-will should have as much trouble giving God all the credit for an infant's salvation as they do anyone else's.

Much of the debate in history on what happens to babies when they die centered on pedobaptism. Did it save when applied to every infant? The confession here certainly did not believe it. We don't baptize babies as Reformed Baptists. I, like John MacArthur, believe infant baptism in Calvin and the other magisterial reformers to be "the mark of an incomplete Reformation". (See his debate with R.C. Sproul on infant baptism). Calvin did not believe that water baptism saved. His argument was more that it prepared one for it. That it did set a child apart who had one or two believing parents, etc. The charge that water baptism carried regeneration cannot be laid upon him in my study. ...Unlike Lutheranism's abysmal errors on the subject. I digress. In arguing for those of age who may have died without receiving water baptism Calvin said, "...we must not deem baptism so necessary as to suppose that everyone who has lost the opportunity of obtaining it has forthwith perished." John Calvin. (The Institutes. Book 4. Section 26). Calvin's comments here were specific and centered not on infants, but on those who were somewhat aged yet for one reason or another weren't water baptized, but his point can certainly be applied to a person who dies before their water baptism at any age I think. Hence, I'm applying it to babies. Calvinism does not make babies Christians at water baptism. Now, Calvin's theology does tend to lead many there in their minds as John Gerstner taught me, but Calvin does not apply regeneration to the waters of baptism. So, I think we need to rule out the senseless idea that regeneration is ever a matter of wetness. The thief who died on a cross next to Jesus would likely heartily say the amen tonight from heaven. The most profound single statement I've heard *for* infant baptism came from a buddy of mine when he said, "I do it because I want my kids to truly know that if they're saved that it's all by grace. I like this statement. My friend is a pastor in the Presbyterian Church of America. I'll conclude this paragraph by simply stating my belief that no sound view of the blessedness of water baptism should ever imagine the work to be the definitive means of regeneration in anyone's life, young or old.

Charles Spurgeon, a Reformed Baptist who strongly upheld this confession, removed the word "elect" from the beginning of this paragraph in his reprinting of it. In 1855, Spurgeon said of this confession: "This ancient document is the most excellent epitome of the things most surely believed among us. It is not issued as an authoritative rule or code of faith, whereby you may be fettered, but as a means of edification in righteousness. It is an excellent, though not inspired, expression of the teaching of those Holy Scriptures by which all confessions are to be measured." He clearly valued the confession, but he removed the word "elect" from the start

here. I believe he felt it was a bit confusing. Perhaps he felt the word's placement conveyed something different among the original framers than it did in his day and omitted it to clarify what he felt they were always intending to say. Like when many Calvinists today prefer phrases like "radical corruption" to "total depravity" to properly distinguish what they feel anyone originally meant by the phrase "total depravity" from abuses arising against it since it was first used, or from the misleading nature of the phrase itself in our hearing today. That is speculation on my part though I believe Spurgeon's treatment of the phrase bears good witness to my speculation that he interpreted it as I do in any case. I've never read him anywhere directly commenting on exactly why he removed the word. I think it is better to remove it, but again I can also see why it was left. Confessions and creeds need to work hard to be brief for a lot of reasons. They must affirm what they must and not try to parse out every possible issue. This is almost certainly why most of us have no time to write them these days. I feel about the 1689 confession exactly as Spurgeon did.

Spurgeon also preached: "As for modern Calvinists, I know of no exception, but we all hope and believe that all persons dying in infancy are elect. Dr. Gill, who has been looked upon in late times as being a very standard of Calvinism, not to say of ultra-Calvinism, himself never hints for a moment the supposition that any infant has perished. He affirms that it is a dark and mysterious subject, but states that it is his belief, and he thinks he has Scripture to warrant it, that they who have fallen asleep in infancy have not perished but have been numbered with the chosen of God, and so have entered into eternal rest." (Sermon number 411. September 29th, 1861).

Lorraine Boettner said, "The doctrine of infant salvation finds a logical place in the Calvinistic system; for the redemption of the soul is thus infallibly determined irrespective of any faith, repentance, or good works, whether actual or foreseen. It does not, however, find a logical place in Arminianism or any other system. Furthermore, it would seem that a system such as Arminianism, which suspends salvation on a personal act of rational choice, would logically demand that those dying in infancy must either be given another period of probation after death, in order that their destiny may be fixed, or that they must be annihilated." (*Unconditional Election*, 145).

The reverend John Newton. A pastor, a strong influence on Mr. William Wilberforce, and the author of the beloved hymn *Amazing Grace* is credited to have said: "I believe that God's election extends to all children." I cannot provide a citation for this.

The Westminster Confession, in its chapter 10 has "elect infants" at the start as does the confession here before us. The 1689 confession is in many ways simply a copy paste of that venerable confession.

The first London Baptist Confession of 1644 (which I love to add was three years before the Westminster Confession came out to my Presbyterian brothers) didn't expressly mention it, but in section five says clearly, "All mankind being thus fallen, and become altogether dead in sins and trespasses, and subject to the eternal wrath of the great God by transgression; yet the elect, which God hath loved with an everlasting love, are redeemed, quickened, and saved, not by themselves, neither by their own works, lest any man should boast himself, but wholly and

only by God of his free grace and mercy through Jesus Christ, who of God is made unto us wisdom, righteousness, sanctification and redemption, that as it is written, He that rejoices, let him rejoice in the Lord.” This would accord fully with my views briefly set forth here. That the elect alone are saved by Jesus...as are all those dying as infants.

I believe that infants who die are saved by God’s free and loving grace. As are all those who otherwise cannot be seen to repent and believe the good news. What they will be in heaven I cannot say any more than David. I do not want present anyone as innocent, or to remove the necessity of keeping God’s election first and foremost in view, but I believe God will display mercy over those who do not qualify for his plan of redemption.

Thank you for your attention to this letter.