

**INFANT CHURCH MEMBERSHIP: A
DISCUSSION OF THE ORIGIN AND
CONTINUITY OF THE CHURCH,
AND THE BAPTISM OF INFANTS**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649313174

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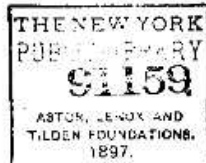
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J. V. STEPHENS

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INTRODUCTION.

Some months ago the editor of *The Cumberland Presbyterian* requested me to write a series of articles for that paper on the subject of "Infant Church Membership." In complying with that request it was my purpose both to popularize and condense, as far as possible, the voluminous matter on this subject. The treatment of this question, in these pages, is in no sense exhaustive; but on the contrary a great deal that I would like to have said was shut out by the rules guiding me in the preparation of the articles. Every one may not agree with me as to what should have been included and what excluded in a treatise of this length.

The discussions are now brought together in this booklet, substantially as they appeared from week to week in the columns of *The Cumberland Presbyterian*. It is no easy matter to be original in the discussion of a question that has been so long under debate by leading scholars of the Church. If most of the arguments contained herein are not new to those who are familiar with the literature involved, it is hoped, nevertheless, that this little book may be of some service to those who have neither the time nor the means to wade through the thousands of pages that bear directly or indirectly on "Infant Church Membership."

J. V. STEPHENS.

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Lebanon, Tenn.,
April, 1897.

INFANT CHURCH MEMBERSHIP.

The relation of infant children of members of the Church is clearly set forth in the early history of that institution. It is an element in the history of the Church which can be easily traced from the days of Abraham down to the present time. It is generally accepted that the children of the Hebrews sustained a peculiar relation to the Church, in view of the covenant which God made with his people. This is assumed in the present discussion which, in a brief outline, traces the subject down to about the close of the fourth century of the Christian era. The question is treated under the following heads: I. The Jewish Church; II. The Transition of the Jewish into the Christian Church; III. The Christian Church; IV. The Fathers on the Continuity of the Church; V. Baptism versus Circumcision; VI. The New Testament on the Question; and VII. The Fathers on the Baptism of Infants.

I.—THE JEWISH CHURCH.

Dean Stanley says that "the history of the Jewish Church is divided into three great periods." He regards Abraham, "the first figure in the long succession which has never since been broken," as the "Father of the universal Church." The first great period closes with the establishment of the Monarchy. The second coincides with the Monarchy, closing with the fall of Judah; while the third begins with the Babylonian Cap-

tivity, and closes with the evolution of the Christian Church.

Dr. Richard Beard has well said: "If the Hebrews, the descendants of Abraham, did not constitute a Church, then there was no Church in the world previous to the time of Christ." But the descendants of Abraham did constitute a Church. Stephen speaks of "the Church (*ekklesia*) in the wilderness" (Acts vii. 38). The Greek word *ekklesia* occurs in the New Testament over one hundred times, and is translated "Church" every time except three, in which instances it is rendered "Assembly." Moreover *ekklesia* of the New Testament corresponds to the word in the Old Testament which means "an assembly for divine worship."

The writer of Hebrews (iii. 3-6) tells us that God established a "House," in which Moses was a servant, and over which Christ presided. The "House" of Hebrews is the same thing as Stephen's "Church." This being true it follows that the Church existed in Egypt before the wilderness wanderings. On its Egyptian history Dr. Edersheim offers the following: "Three great observances here stand out prominently. Around them the faith and the worship alike of the ancient patriarchs, and afterwards of Israel, may be said to have clustered. They are: circumcision, sacrifices, and the Sabbath. We have direct testimony that the rite of circumcision was observed by Israel in Egypt."

This Church can be traced further back than the Egyptian bondage. Paul informs us that the gospel was preached unto Abraham (Gal. iii. 8). There has been but one gospel. It was preached to Abraham, and has been preached ever since. Timothy Dwight maintains that the work of Moses in the "House" of He-

brews, already mentioned, did not find its end "in itself but in what was to follow after him." It has been the same "House" (Church) from the days of Abraham until the present time; and Christ has been "over his own house" through all these ages, both before and since his incarnation.

It was God's plan to give the purest religion possible to the world. In order to do that it was necessary to develop a peculiar people—a nation wholly different from the nations about it. Professor Blaikie puts it thus: "It pleased God to make choice of a family to fulfill the high office of preserving pure and undefiled the true knowledge and worship of himself." Speaking of this family when it had developed into a nation, Professor McCurdy observes that "the greatest boon which any race or people ever conferred upon humanity, was that of religious truth and freedom, and this was the gift of the Hebrews."

God made a covenant with Abraham (Gen. xvii. 9-14). From this it is evident that the Hebrews and their infant children were members of this Church. According to the covenant "every man child" was to be circumcised. Dr. Edersheim says: "In token of the established covenant, God enjoined upon Abram and his descendants the rite of circumcision as a sign and a seal." Professor Orelli gives the symbolical meaning of the rite in this language: "The idea of bodily cleanliness forms the very basis, among the Israelites, for the religious rite of circumcision, but the idea of bodily cleanliness gradually grew into that of spiritual purity, such as was demanded of the chosen people of God: hence such expressions as those in Jer. vi. 10; Lev. xxvi. 41, the non-circumcision of the ear, the heart, etc. Finally the act

became the external token of the covenant between God and his people."

It has been seen that the descendants of Abraham sustained a peculiar relation to the covenant by birth, and that the Hebrews clearly recognized infant church membership. It is a fact that Gentiles, adults and infants, were on certain conditions admitted to membership in this Church. If the Gentiles did not sustain the relation by birth to the covenant, which the Hebrews did, they could, nevertheless, be brought under its gracious privileges. Gentiles who abandoned their own for the Jewish religion were called proselytes. Before inquiring how infants were made proselytes it will be necessary to consider how those who were able to choose for themselves became Jews.

1. *Adult Proselytes.*—It seems that two classes of proselytes were recognized. First, the "proselytes of the gate," who professed their faith in the God of Israel, and merely bound themselves to the observance of the so-called seven Noachic commandments; secondly, the "proselytes of righteousness," who became children of the covenant. It is the latter class only with which we are here concerned.

Dr. Schurer says: "It would appear according to the talmud, that on the occasion of admitting proselytes strictly so called into the Jewish communion three things were necessary: (1) circumcision; (2) baptism; i. e., a bath with a view to Levitical purification; and (3) a sacrifice (literally, a gracious acceptance of blood). In the case of women only the last two were required." Dr. Alfred Edersheim, a scholarly Jew, not only agrees with Dr. Schurer, but affirms that "all writers are agreed" that the three things named above "were re-

quired for the admission of such proselytes;" and he adds, "If anything could have further enhanced the value of such proselytism, it would have been its supposed antiquity. Tradition traced it up to Abraham and Sarah."

Dr. William Wall wrote a very able "History of Infant Baptism," in which he quotes freely from the ablest authorities on this question. He gives the following from the great Jewish scholar, Maimonides: "And so in all ages when an ethnic is willing to enter the covenant, and gather himself under the wings of the majesty of God, and take upon him the yoke of the law, he must be circumcised, and baptized, and bring a sacrifice; or if it be a woman, be baptized, and bring a sacrifice. As it is written, as you are, so shall the stranger be. How are you? By circumcision and baptism and bringing of a sacrifice. So likewise the stranger (or proselyte) through all generations; by circumcision and baptism, and bringing of a sacrifice." It was claimed, "by three things, did Israel enter into the covenant, by circumcision, and baptism, and sacrifice. Circumcision was in Egypt, as it is written, *No uncircumcised person shall eat thereof*. Baptism was in the wilderness just before the giving of the law: as it is written, *Sanctify them to-day and to-morrow and let them wash their clothes*. And sacrifice; as it is said, *And he sent young men of the children of Israel which offered burnt offerings*." He continues: "This solemn baptizing of proselytes differed from the rest of their divers baptism (which St. Paul, Heb. ix. 10, says were customary among the Jews) in this: that those others were upon new occasions of uncleanness, etc., many times repeated; but this was never given but once to one person. It was called (as Dr. Lightfoot shows)

'baptism for proselytism,' distinct from 'baptism for uncleanness.'

2. *Infant Proselytes*.—On this question, Dr. Wall gives the following Jewish authority: "If with a proselyte his sons and his daughters be made proselytes; that which is done by their father redound to their good." The Jerusalem Misna says, "that if a girl, born of heathen parents, be made a proselyte after she be three years and a day old, then she is not to have such and such privileges there mentioned;" and that of the Babylon edition says, "that if she be made a proselyte before that age, she shall have the said privileges." These two authorities do not disagree. Their statements are made from different points of view. Thus it is seen "that a child of never so little age might by their custom be made a proselyte." The Gemara says, "they are wont to baptize such proselyte in infancy upon the profession of the House of Judgment (the court), for this is for his good.

"And the gloss there (having first put in an exception, that if the father of the child be alive and present, the child is baptized at his request; but if not, on the profession of the court) comments thus on those words: They are wont to baptize, 'because,' says the gloss, 'none is made a proselyte without circumcision and baptism.' Upon the profession of the House of judgment. "That is, the three men have the care of his baptism, according to the law of the baptism of proselytes, which requires three men, who do so become to him a father. And he is by them made a proselyte." If a child were fatherless, and his mother brought him, they baptize him at her desire; but the court profess for him, as the Gemara says."