

Appendix 4: An Exposition of Acts 2:39 and Infant Baptism

by

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For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, *even* as many as the Lord our God shall call (Acts 2:39).

Consider a few obvious objections to using Acts 2:39 as a proof text for infant baptism:

1. Peter is speaking to *unbelievers* and not to *Christian parents*. He is telling convicted sinners how to be saved, not giving believing parents the assurance that their children are in the covenant. The *you* in the phrase “the promise is unto you” are *unbelievers* asking what they must do to be saved. In the very next verse, Peter exhorts these unsaved people to “Save yourselves from this untoward generation” (Acts 2:40). How can an exhortation to lost sinners to trust Christ be turned into a promise to Christian parents that their children are in a special covenantal relationship with God?

2. The ‘promise’ in Joel that Peter is quoting is “whosoever shall call on the Lord shall be saved” and it can in no way be connected to infant baptism. (Romans 10:13 where Paul also quotes Joel 2:32 and shows that the promise spoken of in Joel, and quoted by Peter, is the promise of the gospel to all unbelievers whether they are Gentiles or Jews.) Here is a classic illustration of what I said earlier concerning biblical terminology versus phrases such as “covenant of grace.” Peter’s declaring the promise of the gospel of grace to unbelievers cannot be turned into God’s making a covenant of grace with Christian parents, and yet this is exactly what Covenant Theologians do with this text.

3. The children of believers have no more unique promise in this text than do those who are afar off (the heathen). Peter understood the gospel promise of *whosoever* in Joel to include *three distinct groups*. The promise that “whosoever shall call on the Lord shall be saved” is given to the following persons:

A. To *you*, unconverted and convicted sinners; and the same promise is;

B. To *Your children*, if they will repent and believe; and likewise the same promise is;

C. To *All who are afar off* in heathen Gentile lands, if they will also repent and believe the same gospel.

Let us look again at the comparison of Joel’s prophecy and Peter’s interpretation:

Joel 2:32	Acts 2:38–40
And it shall come to pass	The promise is unto
<i>that</i> whosoever shall call upon the LORD	You , and to your children , and to all that are afar off
shall be delivered	shall receive Spirit (v. 38) shall be saved (v. 40)
and in the remnant whom the LORD shall call	<i>even as many</i> as the Lord our God shall call

Notice how clearly Peter interprets the words *whosoever* and *as many*. What Peter is declaring is this: just as all men without exception (covenant children included) are guilty lost sinners who need to be saved, so all men without exception (covenant children included and no non-covenant children excluded) are freely invited in the one gospel of grace to believe and be saved. Peter is showing that the gospel message is now to all men without exception and not just for the Jews. There is now only one category of lost people before God. No one is physically either inside or outside of a special covenantal category by birth. There is only one gospel message, and that one message is for all men without distinction or exception. There are not unregenerate ‘pagan’ children and unregenerate ‘covenant’ children with different promises for each group. There is one gospel for all lost sinners.

4. The last phrase “even as many as the Lord our God shall call” must be applied to all three categories mentioned in the text. Peter is saying, “as many as God shall call from among *you*, shall call from among your *children*, and shall call from among the *heathen afar off*.” It is the sovereign effectual call of God in *all three categories* that determines the true objects of the promise. The one and only thing that determines whether a person is either in or under grace is the eternal election of God, and the only thing that proves it in time is the effectual call of the Holy Spirit. Being under a covenant of grace has

nothing at all to do with physical birth. We must not destroy the universal offer of the gospel of God's free grace by turning it into a supposed covenant of grace given exclusively to Christian parents and their seed. We also must not overthrow the doctrine of sovereign election by making the physical children of believers to be in a special spiritual category before God through physical birth and baptism.

A birth certificate proving one was born in the right home does not make one a covenant child. I repeat, this text of Scripture promises just as much to a pagan child who is afar off as it does to a so called covenant child born in a Christian home. The promise in Acts 2:39 is given equally to the pagans, to the hearers, and to their children.

5. The people addressed in Acts 2:39 are still unbelievers in 2:40, and they themselves get converted and baptized in 2:41. It is exegetically impossible to make Acts 2:39 refer to Christian parents. Such a gross misuse of a text of Scripture is only possible by totally misunderstanding the promise made to Abraham and his seed

It is not accidental that hyper-Calvinism and a strong 'covenant seed' concept go hand in hand. It is impossible to think and speak in terms of covenant children and non-covenant children and not wind up with two different gospels, one for the covenant child that includes "God loves *you*" for sure, and one for the pagan child that cannot include "God loves you" until we are first sure that they are one of the elect.

I think it can be proven historically that one of the major problems created by using Acts 2:39 as a proof text for infant baptism is that it confuses the message of the gospel of grace to all men. The 'Seed' in Acts 2 is neither natural Jews nor children of believing parents. The Seed in this whole chapter is our Lord Jesus Christ himself. He is the true Seed to whom the promises were made, and the message of this chapter, and especially verse 39, is that the promise to the seed has been fulfilled — the Messiah Redeemer has come — believe in him and be saved *whoever you are*.

The gospel of grace is to be preached to whosoever believeth, not just one nationality or group and their physical children. There is no such thing as a covenant community inclusive of all physical children now that the prophecy of Joel has been fulfilled. No one group any longer has any special claim or privilege because of birth. There is only one status before God — *guilty*,

regardless of who your parents are, and there is only one gospel message to every guilty sinner — *repent* and *believe*. This is the one message we must preach to the children of believers as well as the children of unbelievers.

This is what Peter is declaring in Acts 2:39! Do not destroy the universal offer of the gospel by twisting these words into a promise to Christian parents only!