Welcome back. Today’s question is:

As you have shared in several places, you came from a Reformed Baptist theological background and later moved to an Anglican setting. I am in a similar situation where most of my theological background and education has been in a Reformed Baptist context, yet I have been on the edge of embracing infant baptism for several years now.

Could you speak to what pushed you over the edge on the issue of infant baptism? Did you switch to that view quite easily? Or was it a long journey?

I want to give some background as to where I am in thinking through this: The basic Presbyterian arguments don’t fully persuade me, though they are compelling. I also don’t want to put all my theological chips in the scant references to infant faith, as some in the Lutheran circles might. I have followed Peter Leithart for some time now, and he and Leonard Vander Zee have been perhaps the most helpful and persuasive in this conversation. In many ways Leithart’s Baptized Body has ruined me for thinking about the covenant community as made up of those who are half way in and those who are fully in, which goes against typical Presbyterian view. Yet, I am also cautious to embrace Leithart’s position full on, because I don’t think I can get on board with predestined real apostasy, as he seems to hold in that book.

Yet, the Baptist demand that the church be a regenerate covenant community and their insistence on a link between repentance and baptism hold me back from embracing paedobaptism entirely.

I imagine that you’d find yourself near Leithart’s views in some ways, but I would love to hear from you some of the biblical support for infant baptism that original compelled you to embrace the position and also how your views have developed since then. Also, how, in your view, does your position on paedobaptism relate to paedo-communion? And if you could recommend some books that depict your general position well.

Well, I’ve already answered some of these questions to some degree or other in other videos. I’ll leave a link to those below, but I’ll give a general answer to the issues raised within this video. I won’t answer everything here. If anyone has any further questions following up from it please leave them on my Curious Cat account and I’ll hopefully answer them in future videos.

What pushed me over the edge on the issue of infant baptism? Well, when we change our minds we tend to do it for a variety of different reasons and the significance of the fact that I came from a Reformed Baptist theological background should not be neglected.

There is a way in which our theology will always develop to some degree or other against the foil of our background and for me that background was a Reformed Baptist background. And the background that I come from and what I gained from that background will always be something that’s a voice within my head, a voice that I’m talking in conversation with. Not a literal voice—I don’t hear voices!—but a voice in my head that I’m engaging with and I’m thinking about my theology in dialogue with. I’m thinking about what I was brought up with and how my theology relates to that.

Now this can be a problem because the background that you have as a child is always a fairly simplified and often a distorted one in various ways. It is also bound up with a lot of emotional attachments, perhaps even a sense of bitterness—whatever it is these relationships that we have with our past can be quite fraught with. So one of the things you see with a lot of progressive thought, for instance, is that they are reacting against a particular evangelical background and often there’s very little content to their thought in its own right. It does not develop out of its own clear impetus, its own clear foundation. Rather, it’s pushing back against something else, something that they grew up with.

And so, for me, part of my development was a relationship with my background and, for better or worse, that is an important part: my relationship with my dad as a Reformed Baptist pastor, my relationship with my church upbringing, my relationship with their theology and the environment of thought within which I was raised. And it’s important to recognize these things, because often we like to think of our theological developments as things that occur in a pure and abstract intellectual vacuum, but it doesn’t. It occurs against the background of relationships, against the background of resentment, against the background of friendship, against the background of attachments.

Now, as I changed my position on baptism, I had a very good relationship with my father. However, it was an important aspect of my development that for me the position was not an abstract position: it was a position that was attached to something—the way I had been raised by my parents.

And so I’ve always found it important to relate it to that context and to think about the extent to which this was a matter of me trying to forge my own identity in contradistinction to the position that my parents raised me with, to what extent was it me dealing with a fairly limited or even caricatured weak-man position (the position that you hold as a young teen, rather than a position that is the mature position of someone who has studied deeply within the theology of Reformed Baptist thought, for instance).

I’ve had to ask myself those questions and have retained a paedobaptist position, which has developed in various ways. However, I have recognized to some extent that some of the different factors that shaped my first arrival at this. Among these factors were friendship, moving to a new context, finding that certain of the contexts within which I was feeling most stretched and was gaining most in my theology were Presbyterian ones.

I recognized that there was a weight of theology within Presbyterian context that I wasn’t finding within a Reformed Baptist context. It can seem like a certain move up in the world as you attach yourself to a new crowd who have a bit more sophisticated theology, better attachments—these sorts of things—that by virtue of your change in theological position that you are part of a better set for you to be stretched theologically. And again, that’s part of it.

It’s important to recognize that that was a factor in my change, and I think it’s an important factor for many people. For instance, in the way that people move in the direction of the Roman Catholic Church. Often there’s a sophistication and there are institutions that are more elite and more facilitating for people who are working at the highest level of theological thought within Roman Catholic contexts, and for many people from a more low-church Presbyterian or Reformed evangelical context that can be deeply attractive.

As you rise up within the arena of academia you can feel that you don’t have a home within the context that you come from. It’s important to consider to what extent this is a certain attraction to a peer group and to what extent is it is actually a response to real theological issues, because positions can become very attractive and appealing when there is a personal motive for holding them. And so, before I go into any of the more theological reasons for changing my mind, I want to consider some of those personal reasons, those personal factors that frame my decision. Not all of them were an impetus in the direction of paedobaptism, but many of them did nudge me in that direction. And it’s important to recognize that, even though some would hold me back, for the most part they did push me in that direction.

I have had to audit, as it were, my reasons, to recognize that some of them were not good reasons, some of them may have been natural reasons but they were reasons that you need to be cautious about. You need to investigate those reasons a bit more carefully to think about what actually underlies them, because when we change our mind on issues it is not something that we do as a pure intellectual decision, and as you study the phenomenon of conversion and the many different forms that it takes it is something that is a very complicated thing. It’s bound up with friendships, it’s bound up with relationships, it’s bound up with key events that occur to people and it is not the pure intellectual shift that we like to think it is.

And often there are complexes arising from our shifts that reveal that we’ve not actually changed in quite as much of a way as we think. We’re still fixed on a certain theme, or background, or foil. For instance, our background that we were once deeply attached to can be something that we are just deeply reacting against now. So it’s important to consider these things. If we’re going to have a healthy way of relating to theological issues we need to recognize these personal factors, we need to think about those, we need to think about the ways in which we’ve been pushed in directions through panic. There are occasions when we change our minds through panic, through fear, through aversion, through rejection, through antagonism, through bitterness, through reaction, and through love—through the way that we can be in a relationship with someone and suddenly all their views seem attractive to us. These are all things that we need to think about. And so, before I go on, I want to register those concerns and those issues.

What were some of the bigger issues that changed my mind? Well, it wasn’t key biblical verses. When you’re changing your mind on an issue like infant baptism, it’s the sort of issue that often represents a consequence of a broader paradigm shift in your theology and most people will make that paradigm shift in a number of stages. There is a fundamental shift that occurs beneath the surface and then it expresses itself in places like infant baptism.

For me it was the shift from an understanding of salvation that was focused upon the individual, with Christ being the means for saving that individual and bringing them to heaven, and that sort of notion of salvation to one where salvation is rooted in history, the grand historical narrative from Genesis to Revelation, and, within that narrative, Christ and the formation of the church as his body. These sorts of things. Christ as the one who fulfills Israel’s identity, the one who forms a new humanity.

All of this is attached to a lot of other issues. When we think about changes in our minds, in addition to thinking about the personal issues, we also need to think about the ways in which our thinking occurs within interconnected systems of thought. When our minds change, it’s like an ecosystem changing. It can be a trophic cascade, a shift on one particular issue can throw everything else out, and as everything else has shifted then new beliefs start to crystallize and new forms of theology start to take shape.

For me those shifts occurred primarily in that area—the shift of that center of gravity. Other changes that occurred related to my anthropology. Again, associated to my earlier position on salvation, my anthropology had previously been very much focused upon the detached individual who is rather self-defined, who’s very much related to God in a direct and immediate way (and there is a certain sort of direct relationship to God). But I began to realize that in Scripture there’s a lot of emphasis upon a different type of anthropology, where we belong to groups, where we are generative beings. We are beings who are born from parents and bear children, we are beings who are related to others, we are beings who have sexed bodies. We are beings who are defined by our bodies, not just by our subjectivities, our agency, and things like that our volition.

And once I began to realize that, many of the underpinnings of my Baptist theology started to fray in various ways, because I realized that Baptist theology often rested upon a very individualistic set of assumptions about salvation, about the church, about the story of Scripture. And the more I realized the center of gravity of Scripture, the more that I began to see that, for instance, the relationship between Israel and the Church was a very key one. Now, I don’t believe that circumcision directly corresponds with baptism, but what I do see is that within circumcision we see an underlying theological and natural logic about the way in which we belong to each other, the way in which the child belongs to its parents and its family—it is defined within that relational network, not just as a detached being.

I also began to think about things like adoption and the way that adoption provides a paradigm for thinking about infant baptism. Adoption in many ways presents the way in which someone can, apart from their own choice but for the sake of their well-being, be included within a new family on the basis of a real belonging and in anticipation of their full participation in the life of that community. Now, I think infant baptism is similar, as is baptism more generally.

This is an important thing: that these shifts are often related to shifts in people’s understanding of the sacraments more generally. So, when I was a Baptist, when I thought about my baptism as a 15-year-old, I had a lot of anxiety about that. I had a lot of anxiety about my salvation more generally for a period of time, but the anxiety was caused in part by the fact that I fell away shortly afterwards and had this long period of backsliding. And that made me wonder: if this was the confession of my faith, what was that faith really worth if I immediately slipped away shortly after my baptism?

As my understanding of the sacrament shifted, my understanding of my own baptism as a 15-year-old shifted and that helped my assurance to no end. I realized that baptism was more about what God was doing to me and saying to me than about what I was saying and that baptism was efficacious for the entirety of my life. It wasn’t something that could just be destroyed by my sin and my failure. Rather, I could keep returning to that in the same way as something like adoption. It has a meaning that you are supposed to live out and enter into. It is a promise that has been held out to you, that you can enter into.

Now, as you look through the evidence of the early Church, you’ll see that there seems to be a variety of practice on this. Against certain paedobaptist arguments, I don’t believe that the early Church *universally* practiced paedo-baptism, but yet we do seem to have evidence that suggests that they did *widely* practice paedobaptism. So, there was a mixed practice. What we see is people like Tertullian pushing back against infant baptism, *not* on the basis of it being invalid and against biblical teaching or whatever, but teaching that it is something that is opposed to *prudence*, that you don’t want to baptize infants, just as you don’t want to baptize those who have not yet married because they might fall away. And that is a concern that I think is ultimately invalid.

There *are* concerns about people not being raised in the faith properly and that is one of the concerns I have about infant baptism being seen as something that can be applied apart from its prospective significance. The significance of baptism, I believe, is very much about what it is pointing forward to. Like adoption, it is anticipating a full participation in the life of the body of Christ and the life of Christ. Now, if you’re baptizing infants and they never darken the door of a church, there really is no point. You are just undermining the meaning of the rite. You are not actually celebrating baptism as it ought to be celebrated.

And so that was a shift that occurred early on, and I’ve been developing that through in various ways. My understanding of infant baptism now is slightly different from what it was in the past. There is a bit more of an understanding of infant baptism as a prudential practice that can be applied appropriately in many instances, and in certain situations I would cut down on the number of infant baptisms. If there were not clear assurances that a child will be raised in the faith, I would not baptize them as an infant. I think that infant baptism very much anticipates that child being raised in the faith and being raised as a member of the body of Christ, and so, if you are not doing that, do not baptize your children, because you’re just undermining the meaning of the rite.

Now, beyond this, I think that there are reasons why in Scripture we see this connection between baptism and repentance and faith, and for the participation of infants in that. So, for instance, if we read Acts 16: “believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved, *both you and your household.”* There is by very implication the inclusion of the household in the faith of its head.

This is an anthropologically-grounded truth. I don’t believe that this is just a theological statement that has to be made by the New Testament for it to be true. Rather, this is a statement that is grounded upon the truth of human nature. Just as God would save Noah and his sons and daughters-in-law, just as God would save Lot and his family, just as God would save the children of Israel as a whole body of people, God saves families. God deals with households because these bodies of people are bound together in their loyalties.

When we think about faith, we often think about faith according to the paradigm of the detached individual that makes up their own choices, their allegiances, etc. as an adult and this is on the paradigm of the liberal individual. But yet as human beings we’re not those who fit the paradigm of the liberal individual well—people who act according to choice, volition, individual agency, and our private subjectivity. Rather, our selves are bound up with our bodies, with our belonging to particular communities, with the people that we are associated with, etc. And so, if we have baptism understood in this framework, it makes a lot more sense to baptize infants, because infants are not those without faith.

When you think about infants as detached individuals who must have faith of a mature form of their own, then they don’t have faith in that sense. But they do belong to their parents and they are cast upon their parents. If their parents are people of faith, just as they have their national identity from their parents and those loyalties, just as they have their family identity from their parents, all these given identities—the name that they are given, the surname that they have—all of these things are similar to the way that baptism operates in such cases. Baptism brings you into a relational network, a given identity, on the basis of something that is already there—you are a participant in the life of faith of a particular family and it is presumed that you will grow in that.

Now, this is because God is forming a new humanity and the new humanity is not just detached fragments of the old humanity salvaged, but it’s a restoring of the channels of humanity—the relationship between parents and children, the relationship between the child and their family of belonging. These are natural relationships that God created. And the gospel as many people think about it is one that treats us as detached abstracted individuals, as people who ultimately conform to some paradigm of the liberal individual. And a certain type of Baptist thought has been very much drawn to the paradigm of the liberal individual. It is the implicit basis of its theological anthropology. But, when we look through Scripture, I think we see a view of anthropology that pushes back against this. And we see it in many different ways: we see it in the salvation of bodies of people, we see it in the assumption that households are implicated in the faith of their heads.

Now the assumption here is *not* that there’s some sort of magical thing whereby, if a head of a household is converted, all their household is automatically saved. No, it’s about the human reality that a body of people are bound together in a union, that we are implicated in the lives of others. This is less so in modern society and so I think this is an important point, that infant baptism has a harder case to make now than it did in the first century AD in the context of Israel, where there were these tight networks and where being a member of a household would mean a participation in the life of worship of the household, and you could far more easily assume that or presume upon that. Now you can’t in the same way. And so, unless there is a clear provision for the raising of the child in faith, I believe there is a reason for caution about the practice of infant baptism. These are contextual and prudential considerations that I think we have to consider in our particular social condition that they did not have to consider to quite the same degree in the first century AD.

Another thing to consider is that this is not something that leaves faith behind. It’s something that assumes the growing of a body of people in the life of faith. Now there’s always a problem when you have a church which is defined purely by infant baptisms, where there is not a maturing in the life of faith. On the other hand, there is a danger of churches where there is no infant baptism, where there is, as I talked about earlier, just odd individuals, flotsam and jetsam of the old fallen humanity drawn together and formed in this new body, rather than God restoring the relationships of the old humanity, God restoring what it means to be generative beings.

This is about what it means to believe, for instance, that God is a friend of the family, that God created the family. God created the bond between parents and children and he’s going to restore that, and part of that is that children belong to the household of faith, that Christ blesses the child on behalf of their parents. This is something we see in a number of occasions in the Gospels: that Christ heals or even saves people on account of the faith of others who are closely related to them—the master or the father or the mother, whatever it is—that these close relationships mean something. They weigh something. They’re not just left behind, leaving us as detached individuals relating to the gospel on this front.

Now if you see the relationship between Israel and the Church and the history of salvation as being far more central, then this makes sense, because it would be a radical shift in God’s pattern of dealing if this were not the case: if it were the case that God suddenly stopped dealing with families, that God suddenly stopped including infants and suddenly just included adults on a personal confession of faith. To actually make that move you need to have created something of a breach between the Old and the New Testaments, a breach that is far greater than what we actually see. There is an escalation, there is a transformation, there’s death and resurrection, but there is not an absolute break and a rejection of what went before, or a supersession of what went before. Rather, what we see is the fulfillment of what went before, and here I think that the inclusion of infants is an important part of this, that the inclusion of infants in the life of the Church is something that draws our mind back to the natural form of creation and is based upon natural law.

It’s not something that we need an explicit biblical verse for, because it’s part of what it means for us to be human beings: that we are bound up with other human beings. We are not detached individuals that form all our own loyalties, all our own identities. Actually, in the same way as I was talking about early on in this video, our minds, our loyalties, our beliefs are formed in relationships and the child who was born into a believing home is someone who is implicated within that. They grow within that and their minds were formed within that. And the hope is as they are raised in the fear and admonition of the Lord they will grow into the fullness of that life. Now this is exactly what is also true in the case of an older convert: that their baptism is prospective. They are baptized in the anticipation that they will grow into the meaning of that, into the full life of the household of God.

There’s a lot more that I could say on this but those were the key factors that changed my mind, those key shifts led to a trophic cascade in my theology, a change in the whole ecosystem of my thought, making paedo-baptism a lot more compelling. Compelling not on the basis of a few verses here and there in the New Testament—which is a fairly thin foundation to work from—but from the deeper texture and roots of biblical thought, its deeper understanding and presentation of human nature, the relationship between Old and New Testaments, and the centre of gravity of salvation in Christ and the Church.

Please leave any questions that you might have on my Curious Cat account. If you would like to support this and future videos, please do so using [my Patreon account](https://www.patreon.com/zugzwanged) or my [PayPal](https://www.paypal.com/cgi-bin/webscr?cmd=_donations&business=40Bicycles%40gmail%2ecom&lc=GB&item_name=Alastair%27s%20Adversaria&currency_code=USD&bn=PP%2dDonationsBF%3abtn_donateCC_LG%2egif%3aNonHosted) account. The links for those are below. I won’t be back probably for a couple of days. I’m moving tomorrow and the next day, so Lord-willing I’ll be back by the end of the week but thank you for listening and I hope you have a great day. God bless.