

The First Century Family: What Can We Validly Infer from Household Baptisms

The New Oikos Formula

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Abstract - As we consider biblical revelation as it relates to marriage and family, all of the data matters. From Acts and the Epistles there are only nine individuals (explicitly named or described) who were baptized. It will be argued that six of these baptisms are “household baptisms.” This pattern has led to a century old discussion on the “oikos formula” and what it means or does not mean. That debate between the likes of Joachim Jeremias and Kurt Aland (circa 1960) set the stage for the current discussion about family solidarity and the ordinances of baptism and communion in the NT. What may we validly infer from this set of facts? I will work through the pattern and provide conclusions consistent with the implications.

Introduction

The NT uses the term *oikos*² (and *oikia* and cognates) in a range of ways, similar to our English term house, i.e., for the property, the people, “house of God,” metaphorically, etc. The uses and examples that concern us are passages which indicate salvation coming to the people of the house.

Biblical Examples of Households

- Then the LORD said to Noah, “Enter the ark, you and all your household, for you alone I have seen to be righteous before Me in this time. Genesis 7:1
- When Abram heard that his relative had been taken captive, he led out his trained men, born in his house, three hundred and eighteen, and went in pursuit as far as Dan. Gen. 14:14
- “And every male among you who is eight days old shall be circumcised throughout your generations, a servant who is born in the house or who is bought with money from any foreigner, who is not of your descendants. 13 “A servant who is born in your house or who is bought with your money shall surely be circumcised; thus shall My covenant be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant. Genesis 17:12–13
- Then Abraham took Ishmael his son, and all the servants who were born in his house and all who were bought with his money, every male among the men of Abraham’s household, and circumcised the flesh of their foreskin in the very same day, as God had said to him. Genesis 17:23
- “For I have chosen him [Abraham], so that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice, so that the LORD may bring upon Abraham what He has spoken about him.” Genesis 18:19
- “The patriarchs became jealous of Joseph and sold him into Egypt. Yet God was with him, 10 and rescued him from all his afflictions, and granted him favor and wisdom in the sight

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² Dozens of cognates are in the NT: *oikeios* (family member), *oikeo*: (to live, dwell), *oiketeia* (slave household), *oikete:s* (servant), *oike:ma* (prison cell), *oike:te:rion* (dwelling), *oikiakos* (household member), *oikodespoteo*: (to run the household), *oikodespote:s* (master), *oikodimos* (building), *oikodomeo*: (to build, strengthen), *oikodome*: (building, strengthening), *oikonomeo*: (to be manager), *oikonomos* (steward), *oikonomia* (responsibility), *oikoumene*: (inhabited earth), *oikourgios* (devoted to home duties), *epoikodomeo*: (to build up), *katoikeo*: (to inhabit), *katoikia* (place in which to live), *katoikizo*: (to place, put), and *katoike:te:rion* (home or haunt) - see Jonathan Watt, “The Oikos Formula” in *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*, ed. G. Strawbridge (Presbyterian & Reformed, 2003).

of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and he made him governor over Egypt and all his household. Acts 7:9–10

- And has raised up a horn of salvation for us In the house of David His servant Luke 1:69
- And Jesus said to [Zaccheus], “Today salvation has come to this house, because he, too, is a son of Abraham. Luke 19:9
- And a centurion’s slave, who was highly regarded by him, was sick and about to die. 3 When he heard about Jesus, he sent some Jewish elders asking Him to come and save the life of his slave. . . .Now Jesus started on His way with them; and when He was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends, saying to Him, “Lord, do not trouble Yourself further . . . say the word, and my servant will be healed . . . 9 “I say to you, not even in Israel have I found such great faith.” 10 When those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the slave in good health. Luke 7:2–10
- “Return to your house and describe what great things God has done for you.” So he went away, proclaiming throughout the whole city what great things Jesus had done for him. Luke 8:27, 39
- The royal official *said to Him, “Sir, come down before my child dies.” 50 Jesus *said to him, “Go; your son lives.” The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and started off. 5 So the father knew that it was at that hour in which Jesus said to him, “Your son lives”; and he himself believed and his whole household. John 4:49-53
- Now there was a man at Caesarea named Cornelius, a centurion of what was called the Italian cohort, 2 a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, and gave many alms to the Jewish people and prayed to God continually. Acts 10:1–2

Households in these cases include more than a nuclear family (i.e., one’s spouse and children). In the ancient world, apart from one’s own spouse(s) or offspring, adopted children, slaves, various kinds of servants and freedmen, and “clients” may be part of a household. In the case of prominent people or those of significant responsibilities, slaves and their families were a considerable addition to the *oikos*.³ For example, when Peter spoke to Cornelius household, the text says, “As he talked with him, he entered and *found many people assembled” (Acts 10:27).

New Covenant Baptisms

Consider all the biblical examples of Christian baptism, beginning in Acts. The basic outline of Acts is indicated in the first chapter. The gospel of Christ goes forth: “You shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth” (Acts 1:8). The pattern of baptisms follow this expansion: Jerusalem and Judea, Samaria, and the rest of the world.

³ That slaves or servants are in an *oikos* is clear in the Scriptures presented. “The Latin term *verna* usually meant “home-born slave” in Roman literature, law and inscriptions. *Clients* were also a possibility. These were in an hierarchical relationship to the *paterfamilias* (head of household) with mutual obligations (see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Patronage_in_ancient_Rome). That prominent people had an extended household becomes clear from their position. E.g., “A centurion was a noncommissioned officer who commanded one hundred soldiers; he was probably a Roman citizen. A “cohort” of soldiers typically numbers six hundred (one-tenth of a legion)—although this is contested by historians of the Roman army, as is the location, date, and precise role of the “Italian Cohort.” See J. A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles*, AB 31 (Garden City, N.Y. : Doubleday, 1998) 449; Cited in Robert W. Wall, “The Acts of the Apostles,” in *The Acts of the Apostles-The First Letter to the Corinthians* (vol. 10 of NIB, Accordance electronic ed. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 162.

Adult Conversion Baptisms	Household Baptisms
3000 (men) Pentecost (no household present)	Cornelius and household
Samaritans: (both men and women) Simon the Sorcerer	Lydia and household
Ethiopian Eunuch (no household)	Philippian Jailer and household
Paul (no household)	Corinthians: Crispus and household [inferred] Stephanas and household [Gaius below]
Disciples of John (12 men) (no household present)	
Gaius (and household?)	

In summary of the actual baptisms, we find the following: (1) The new covenant promise came “to you and your children” (Acts 2:39) at Pentecost. Only men (3000) are said to have been baptized (Acts 2:5, 14, 41). (2) In Samaria “men and women alike” (Acts 8:12) were baptized, including Simon (the apostate Sorcerer). (3) The Ethiopian eunuch (who had no familial household) was baptized (Acts 8:38). (4) Paul (who had no familial household) was baptized (Acts 9:18; cf 1 Cor. 7:7-8). (5) Cornelius’ household was baptized (Acts 10:48, 11:14). (6) Lydia’s household was baptized (Acts 16:15). (7) The Philippian Jailer’s household was baptized (Acts 16:33). (8) Many Corinthians were baptized, including Crispus, Stephanas’ household, and Gaius (Acts 18:8, 1 Cor. 1:14, 16). (9) The disciples of John (adult men) were baptized (Acts 19:5).

Getting the Count Right

These are the facts about who was said to be baptized. There is some factual error on this in just about every book on baptism.

John Piper says, “When we look at the New Testament, the closest thing to infant baptism that we find is the reference to three “households” being baptized.”⁴

Walton Weaver of “The Truth” magazine says, “There are three definite cases of household baptisms recorded in the New Testament, and there is a strong inference that a fourth case included the entire household.”⁵

John Murray reports on twelve occurrences of baptism in the NT and one quarter are households (which would be 3 out of 12).

R.C. Sproul writes, “In the twelve occurrences of baptisms in the New Testament, three of these include household baptisms...” Acts, 287 (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010)

⁴ <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/how-old-is-infant-baptism>

⁵ <http://www.truthmagazine.com/archives/volume45/V4503150108.htm>

Admittedly, this is true even in my book, *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*. Jonathan Watt in a discussion of the household cases reports only four cases of household baptism.

The Right Count

Let us do a RECOUNT! There are nine baptismal events (Jerusalem, Samaritans, including Simon, the Ethiopian eunuch, Paul/Saul, Cornelius, Lydia, Jailer, Corinthians, including Crispus, Stephanas, and Gaius), and the Ephesians. Then there are nine named or identified individuals (Simon, the eunuch, Paul, Cornelius, Lydia, the Jailer, Crispus, Stephanas, and Gaius). If we name every group and in addition to this name the individuals identified, the total is thirteen: 3000 at Jerusalem, Samaritans + Simon, the Ethiopian eunuch, Paul, Cornelius, Lydia, the Jailer, many Corinthians + Crispus, Stephanas, and Gaius, and the Ephesians.

From this we learn: of *nine people* singled-out in the baptism narratives—*five clearly had their households baptized* (Cornelius, the Jailer, Lydia, Crispus [inferred], Stephanas), two had no households for obvious reasons (eunuch & Paul). That leaves Simon, who actually turned out to be an unbeliever, and Gaius listed with Crispus, whom Paul baptized (1 Cor. 1:14).

As for Gaius, Romans 16:23 says, “Gaius [is] host to me and to the whole church.” This implies he was a man of some means (3 Jn. 1 references him as “elder” assuming he is the same person). As such, he may have had at least household servants, if not a familial household.

Was Gaius also a household baptism? Gaius is mentioned with household head, Crispus (synagogue leader). Crispus, “believed in the Lord with all his household” (Acts 18:8). Thus, his household was undoubtedly baptized with him. Yet, Paul said in no uncertain terms, “I baptized *none of you* except Crispus and Gaius” (1 Cor. 1:14). Given that culture, Paul probably spoke of Crispus as representing the household in the administration of baptism.⁶ Also, the text goes on to say, “Now I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized any other (*allos*) (1 Cor. 1:16). The referent to the pronoun *allos* is “household” (*oikos*). “I do not know whether I baptized any other [household].” Therefore, if Gaius had a household, it was baptized, just like Crispus’ household.

Who Was in a Household

Sproul: “When we see in the New Testament an entire household receiving baptism, it is clear that the principle of family solidarity is shown to remain intact.” (Acts, 287)

John Rodman Williams in *Renewal Theology: Systematic Theology from a Charismatic Perspective* says, “Clearly ‘all . . . in his house’ were people of age capable of hearing and believing the word of God: thus likely his wife and older children.” (Zondervan, 1996, 230)

In *Believers Baptism* (Schreiner/Wright), “Stein reports that the most detailed case of household baptism is the case of Cornelius (61). However, this is a ambiguous, since the issue in this case is the inclusion of Gentiles, rather than the uniqueness of the household. Many agree that the Jailer case (ch. 16) is a more detailed case of the household inclusion in baptism. Both are important,

⁶ It is logically possible Paul baptized only Crispus and Gaius, then someone else baptized the households. However, it seems unlikely Paul would baptize Crispus only to turn the proceedings over to someone else.

as will be argued; but Stein's prejudicial statement belies his interest in pointing out the reception of the Word and Spirit by Cornelius's household."

John Piper said, "It is significant that in regard to the family of the Philippian jailer Luke reports in Acts 16:32, just before mentioning the baptism of the jailer's household, "[Paul and Silas] spoke the word of the Lord to him together with all who were in his house." This seems to be Luke's way of saying that hearing and believing the word is a prerequisite to baptism. The whole household heard the word and the whole household was baptized. In any case, there is no mention of infants in any of these three instances of household baptisms, and it is an argument from silence to say that there must have been small children. It would be like saying here at Bethlehem that a reference to Ross Anderson's household or Don Brown's or Dennis Smith's or David Michael's or David Livingston's or dozens of others must include infants, which they don't."

Piper quotes, "It is characteristic that Luke could report the matter thus. For by so doing he gives expression to the fact that 'the solidarity of the family in baptism and not the individual decision of the single member' was the decisive consideration" (Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries, 1960, p. 23, quoting Oscar Cullman, Baptism in the New Testament, 1950, p. 45).

In *Believers Baptism* (Shreiner/Wright), as in many baptistic polemics, the argument is that households do not prove infants. "Once again it is assumed by proponents of infant baptism that the jailer's family included not only children but infants and these infants were baptized as well" (63). Stein argues that the jailer's "entire household (*panoikei*) rejoiced in their new-found faith in God (16:34)!" This implies they were capable of believing or rejoicing.

These comments do not reflect the nuances of the grammar of these passages.

Acts 10:2 uses the Greek preposition *σὺν* (*sun*): εὐσεβῆς καὶ φοβούμενος τὸν θεὸν σὺν παντὶ τῷ οἴκῳ αὐτοῦ

The reply, "But every member of the household believed," will not be persuasive after considering the specific grammar of the two cases which include statements about the households and faith (the Jailer 16:31-34 & Crispus 18:8). Consider the nuances of these texts. Do they support the individualist (Baptist) thesis or the covenant family thesis (household members followed the leader according to their capacity)?

In the Philippian Jailer passage (Acts 16:31-34) and the Corinthian passage with Crispus (Acts 18:8), the Greek texts have singular, not plural verbs, to describe the actions of believing. These texts *do not say*, the Jailer (or Crispus) "and (*kai*)" household members "believed [plural]." Instead, these texts teach what any Old Testament believer might have expected: the Jailer, the household head, "rejoiced (singular verb) greatly, with all his house (*panoikei*, an adverb), having believed (*pepisteukos*, participle, *singular*) in God" (16:34, from the literal rendering of the 1901 American Standard Version). Crispus, the household head, "believed (*episteusen*, verb, *singular*) in the Lord "with" (*sūn*) all his household" (Acts 18:8). However, observe Luke's careful language indicating baptism is administered to each member of the Jailer's household:

“he was baptized, he *and* all his household” (*kai hoi autou pantes*, literally, “those of his all”) (16:33).

In the case of the Jailer, the narrative is set up in a covenantal frame, “What must I [individual and singular] do to be saved?” The answer is covenantal. “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you [individual] shall be saved, *you and your household*” (Act 16:31). These texts, when carefully considered, strongly support the covenantal thesis. They do not teach that every individual in these households had the capacity to self-consciously profess the faith and did so.

The Philippian⁷ Jailer’s household is very important to the purpose of Luke. So, Luke takes some time explaining this. Why? The Jailer was the first recorded baptism of an outright pagan. Previous Gentiles had been God-fearers, worshiping the true God of Israel. The eunuch worshiped in Jerusalem. Cornelius was “devout and feared God.” Lydia “worshiped God.” Philippi was a Roman colony. Many retired soldiers were rewarded with land there. It is likely this Jailer was a former Roman soldier. The Jailer was about to kill himself before Paul and Silas called out to him. This indicates his Roman value system which called for the “duty” of suicide in the face of grave failure, like the loss of one’s prisoners.

In fear and trembling with an earthquake, no less, he cried out, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” The answer is pregnant with Biblical, covenantal concepts: “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household” (Acts 16:31).

Further, the Exodus images and resonances of this passage should not be missed. This happened at midnight (16:25). Luke emphasizes the events of washing happened, “the same hour of the night” (16:33). This is an unmistakable Passover allusion (Ex. 11:4-5). “Midnight” in Hebrew [*tokh ha-laylah*] literally means, “the division of the night,” or the point of release between darkness and light. Ironically, with the release of those in bondage (Paul & Silas), the Jailer’s house would be delivered by the blood of the Lamb to pass through the Red Sea of baptism with rejoicing.

Remember, the inclusion of Israelite children were essential in the Exodus, since this event unfolded the Abrahamic promise (e.g., Gen. 18:19). Moses’ request to be released was to “go with our young” to “hold a feast to the LORD.” Pharaoh was willing to let the men go, but not “your little ones” (Ex. 10:7-11). Then came “one more plague,” the death of the cherished first born child “at midnight” (Ex. 11:29). “Then [Pharaoh] called for Moses and Aaron by night, and said, ‘Rise, go out from among my people, both you and the children of Israel’” (Ex. 11:30-31). The children were essential then and now.

This first pagan baptismal account is a household baptism account which alludes to the Exodus. By casting the Jailer’s deliverance as a Passover/Exodus kind of event, Luke strengthens the

⁷ “Philippi was an ancient town which had been renamed by Philip of Macedon c. 360 BC. It was the site of the defeat of Julius Caesar’s murderers, Brutus and Cassius, by Antony and Octavian (the later Emperor Augustus) in 42 BC. The town then became a Roman colony, i.e. a settlement for veteran Roman soldiers who possessed the rights of self-government under Roman laws and freedom from taxes.” I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary* (TNTC 5; IVP/Accordance electronic ed. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 282.

image of the deliverance of children. It would hardly be a Passover without the salvation of the first-born. Children were also delivered through the Red Sea of baptism (1 Cor. 10:1-4).

These important Biblical facts regarding household baptisms are often dismissed. If household inclusion in the new covenant is not the point, did Luke and Paul intentionally include *more irregular and anomalous cases* of baptism (households), than “regular” cases? Beginning with Cornelius, *every baptism is a household baptism passage*—except where we are told those present were “twelve men,” who were apparently Jews (Acts 19:7).

Gentile Baptisms

As a prominent feature of Acts, we see the inclusion of Gentiles in the Jewish Church. When Peter recalls the first case of Gentile conversion (Cornelius), it is framed with covenantal words: “And he shall speak words to you by which you will be saved, *you and all your household*” (Acts 11:14). Then, the Gentile households of Cornelius, Lydia, the Jailer, Stephanas, and possibly Gaius (see the previous discussion) were all baptized.

Outline of Acts The Gospel Goes To...	Baptisms Follow This Outline
Jerusalem and Judea	3000 Men at Pentecost
Samaria	Samaritans, Simon, Eunuch
Ends of the Earth Transition: Apostle Paul (Acts 9) First Gentile: Cornelius (Acts 10) God-fearer: Lydia (Acts 16) New Convert Gentiles: The Jailer (Acts 16), Corinthians (Acts 18) Ephesus (Acts 19)	Saul (apostle to Gentiles) Cornelius’ Household Lydia’s Household Jailer’s Household Corinthians: Crispus’ Household Stephanus’ Household Gaius, 12 Men in Ephesus

Acts is a *selective history* of thousands of examples of baptisms over the first few decades of the church. Surely Luke did not record the only household baptisms in the entire apostolic period. Rather, this was the normative practice of the apostolic church as the gospel went to Gentile families. The gospel and its outward sign went *to families* because *families* were to be saved (Acts 16:31b, also 3:25).

The New Oikos Formula

There is a four-fold repetition of the conversion of Cornelius (10:1-48, 11:1-18, 15:7-11, 13-21). Which makes this the move repeated event reported in Acts aside from the death and resurrection of Christ. “The Conversion of Cornelius is the longest story in Acts, rivaled only by Paul’s journey to Rome.”⁸

⁸ Richard I. Pervo, Acts: A Commentary (Hermeneia 65P; ed. Harold W. Attridge; Accordance electronic ed. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 264.

“And he shall speak words to you by which you will be saved, *you and all your household*” (Acts 11:14).

This is clear in the Jailer’s case: “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you shall be saved, *you and your household*” (Act 16:31, emphasis mine). I repeat, this is how Luke frames the first case of Gentile conversion (Cornelius): “And he shall speak words to you by which you will be saved, *you and all your household*”(Acts 11:14).

In Acts 10:48 the David J. Williams comments, “He ordered that they be baptized: The subjects of this baptism were Cornelius and the “large gathering” assembled by him to hear Peter (v. 27), including, we may suppose, “all his family” (v. 2), which may have included children. That the whole family and even the whole household (servants, etc.) should be baptized with the head of the house [Acts, p. 198] would have been a natural assumption in that society and as much a mark of family solidarity as of their own faith (cf. 16:15, 33; 18:8; 1 Cor. 1:16; 16:15; the solidarity of the family could also have adverse effects, see Titus 1:11). That the children of believers were regarded as part of the “household of faith” can be readily maintained (see, e.g., 1 Cor. 7:14; Eph. 6:1-3; Col. 3:20), but it must be equally emphasized that membership in Christ does not derive from physical descent or ritual act (cf., e.g., Gal. 3:11, 26).”⁹

⁹ David J. Williams, *Acts* (NIBC 5; Accordance electronic ed. 18 vols.; Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1990), 197-198.