

THE CASE FOR  
COVENANTAL  
INFANT  
BAPTISM





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INFANT  
BAPTISM

EDITED BY  
GREGG STRAWBRIDGE

  
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# INTRODUCTION

## GREGG STRAWBRIDGE

In my theological mansion are many rooms. I walk down the hallowed halls to rooms named Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Ursinus, Rutherford, Witsius, Owen, Bunyan, Newton, Gill, Edwards, Spurgeon, Hodge, Ryle, Alexander, Vos, Machen, Pink, Murray, Van Til—and other rooms yet to be named. As I reflect on the magnificent portraits lining the walls, I see those who have loved our Lord unto death. I see teachers of the church who, though dead, continue to speak. These were all mere men, to be sure, yet saints and teachers of the church. They were not all of one mind regarding the subject of this book.

Our challenge, as we serve our risen and reigning Lord, is to become of one mind and so gain a clearer view from standing on their shoulders. I am among the growing number of those who, like many of our Reformed forefathers, hold that the future of the kingdom, even on this side of eternity, is bright. Jesus shall reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. That reign has commenced. Now, however, among evangelical and Reformed believers, the discussion of who should be baptized is an intramural debate. Or, to use the language of St. Paul, baptism is not listed as a doctrine of “first importance” (1 Cor. 15:3; cf. 1:13). C. S. Lewis calls to mind an insightful and instructive metaphor in his preface to *Mere Christianity*:

[Mere or essential Christianity] is more like a hall out of which doors open into several rooms. If I can bring anyone into that hall I shall have done what I attempted. But it is in the rooms, not in the hall, that there are fires and chairs and meals. . . . Even in the hall, you must begin trying to obey the rules which are common to the whole house. And above all you must be asking which door is the true one; not which pleases you best by its paint and paneling. In plain language, the question should never be: “Do I like that kind of service?” but “Are these doctrines true: Is holiness here? Does my conscience move me towards this? Is my reluctance to knock at this door due to my pride, or my mere taste, or my personal dislike of this particular door-keeper?” When you have reached your own room, be kind to those who have chosen different doors and to those who are still in the hall. If they are wrong they need your prayers all the more; and if they are your enemies, then you are under orders to pray for them. That is one of the rules common to the whole house.<sup>1</sup>

I have observed that there are also doors between certain of the rooms. It would seem to be this way between the various Reformed churches. I have moved through the door from the Calvinistic Baptist room to the Reformed Covenantal Paedobaptist room.<sup>2</sup>

After being baptized in a Southern Baptist church at the age of ten, my name was on the roster of several Baptist churches through my college and seminary years. (Let’s hope my name is not still on their rolls.) From my undergraduate days, I was confronted with the issue of infant baptism. Initially, I studied the question in preparation for an interview to be a Reformed University Ministries (PCA) intern. I still recall that interchange vividly. I was not yet persuaded of infant baptism, though I was by no means strongly set against it. The examining committee gave me the “thumbs down,” but said to call them back if my view changed. Actually, seminary study and many discussions with paedobaptists persuaded me against this view for a time.

1. Preface to *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1952).

2. *Paedobaptist* is the common term for those who believe that the infant children of Christians should be baptized.



The first church in which I served as a pastor actually had a membership of both believer's baptists and paedobaptists. So in the early 1990s I wrote a study guide to help people understand both positions and to articulate how our congregation worked out the practical details.<sup>3</sup> We practiced believer's baptism by immersion, yet we did not require our members to be rebaptized (anabaptism). In this we followed the heart of John Bunyan's argument in his book *Differences in Judgment About Water-Baptism, No Bar to Communion*.<sup>4</sup>

During those few years, I continued to study the baptism question. I fortified my arguments against infant baptism on two substantial points. First, we have an explicit biblical basis for believer's baptism and none for infant baptism. Second, the members of the new covenant are exclusively regenerate people. The second of these reasons became for me the most foundational. In my discussions with paedobaptists, I found that they would appeal to the inclusion of children in the covenant, preeminently in the Abrahamic covenant. They would follow the familiar road from circumcision in the Abrahamic covenant in Genesis 17 to the relationship between circumcision and baptism in Colossians 2:11–12, and then to infant baptism in the Reformed tradition. Covenant members should receive the sign of the covenant. The children of Christians are in the covenant, and so they are to receive the sign of the covenant. This was a compelling argument, except for one thing.

The response that kept me from being persuaded by the argument from circumcision was what I will call the new covenant argument. Who is in the new covenant? Aside from the fact that there is no explicit case of an infant baptism in the Bible, I thought that the older covenant administrations were different from the new covenant precisely at the point that separates the two positions on baptism. The old covenant was broken because not all those taking part in it by physical birth were truly the people of God by spiritual birth. The new

3. This was entitled "A Handbook on Baptism: Essays and Resources."

4. See *The Works of John Bunyan*, ed. George Offor (reprint, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1991), 2:641.

covenant promises are not like the old covenant precisely at the point of covenant membership. The important change is that the new covenant is a relationship between God and his *regenerate* people. So we should not automatically include the children of regenerate people (without indications of conversion) in the covenant. In other words, while all members of the new covenant are to receive the sign of the new covenant, all those members are regenerate. We should not presume that all the infant children of Christians are regenerate. Unless there is clear evidence that they are regenerate, and thus members of the new covenant, we should not baptize them. Our practice of baptism should follow our theology of the covenant.

This argument was unfamiliar to many paedobaptists. In my experience, most paedobaptists had not been challenged on the nature of new covenant membership.<sup>5</sup> But in recent years, this new covenant argument has become an increasingly important part of the Baptist case, especially as it has been stated by Calvinistic Baptists.

My study of the issue took a decisive turn when I began to see that the new covenant includes warnings of apostasy (Heb. 10:28–30).<sup>6</sup> If these warnings are to be taken seriously, then it must be admitted that the new covenant has stipulations for judgment. If these are not merely hypothetical stipulations for judgment, then some members of the new covenant will be “judged” (in the language of Heb. 10:30). This became a central challenge to my Baptist view, supported by the new covenant argument. Such clear statements about the new covenant could not be reconciled with my view that every member of the new covenant was regenerate. Being fully committed to the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints, I believed on biblical grounds that regenerate believers cannot lose their salvation (John 10:27–29; Rom. 8:30). I concluded that unregenerate members of the visible church can be

5. In reading Calvin, I saw an even deeper view of the sacraments than held by paedobaptists that I knew. See Lewis Bevens Schenck, *The Presbyterian Doctrine of Children in the Covenant* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1940; reprint, with an introduction by Frank A. James III, Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, 2003).

6. This was shown to me in a discussion with Douglas Wilson. In that context, the baptism/covenant epiphany occurred.

covenant breakers in the new covenant. This meant that there was continuity in the way that membership in the covenant was administered. The signs of the covenant are for members of the visible church. Since this is so, even the youngest members, infants, can be included in the visible church and receive the sign of inclusion. This was the critical theological point for me.

After working through this question, I began to see that the basic structure of the Baptist polemic against paedobaptism is this: (1) We have an explicit biblical basis for believer's baptism. (2) There is no explicit warrant (an example or a command) for infant baptism. (3) The new covenant is made exclusively with regenerate individuals. (4) Believers' little children cannot be assumed to be regenerate. Therefore, the baptistic conclusion is that the children of believers are not to receive the sign of the new covenant until they confess their faith (and thus give evidence of their membership in the new covenant).

After due consideration of this argument, I came to see its weak points. (1) The Baptist assumes that the cases of adult converts being baptized are sufficient to deal with the question of the children of believers. But is this true? Are not the children of the faithful throughout Scripture regarded differently than pagan adults? (2) The Baptist lacks explicit warrant to exclude the infants of believers from the covenant, for there is no biblical command or example that demands their exclusion. (3) Their exclusion is *inferred* from what Baptists take to be the nature of the new covenant. Baptists often deny to paedobaptists the right to draw inferences that lead to infant baptism, yet their central theological objection to infant baptism—that the children of believers are not members of the new covenant—is an inference from their view of the new covenant.

The succinct answer to this central line of argument is: (1) Even a million cases of adult converts professing their faith prior to baptism would prove nothing about the baptism of infants. Paedobaptists heartily concur with the practice of adult profession prior to baptism,

as is evident in the Reformed confessions!<sup>7</sup> Most Baptist polemicists just hammer away at the examples of adults, as though this settles the case. Ironically, the childless eunuch (Acts 8:36–39), who clearly believed before he was baptized, becomes the paradigm for settling the question of children’s baptism. But, in fact, we do not have anything like a million cases. We have the cases listed in figure 1.

FIGURE 1

<b>Adult Baptisms</b>	<b>Household Baptisms</b>
3,000 (men) at Pentecost (no households present)	Cornelius and household
<i>Samaritans</i> (“both men and women”): Simon the sorcerer	Lydia and household
Ethiopian eunuch (no household)	Philippian jailer and household
Paul (no household)	<i>Corinthians</i> :
Disciples of John (12 men) (no household present)	Crispus (and household [inferred])
Gaius	Stephanas and household

The promise of the new covenant came in its fulfillment “for you and your children” (Acts 2:39) at Pentecost. Only men are said to have been baptized, some three thousand of them. In Samaria, “men and women alike” (8:12) were baptized, including Simon (the apostate sorcerer). The godly Ethiopian eunuch, who (being a eunuch) had no familial household, was baptized (8:38). Paul (who had no household) was baptized (Acts 9:18; cf. 1 Cor. 7:7–8). Cornelius’s household was baptized (Acts 10:48; 11:14). Lydia’s household was baptized (16:15). The Philippian jailer’s household was baptized (16:33). Many Corinthians were baptized, including Crispus, Stephanas’s household, and Gaius (Acts 18:8; 1 Cor. 1:14, 16). The disciples of John (adult men) were baptized (Acts 19:5). The explicit cases of baptism, when fully considered, are not evidence for the Baptist view. These examples form a pattern when we consider that the households baptized are Gentiles (Cornelius, Lydia, the Philippian jailer, and Stephanas),

7. For example, the Westminster Larger Catechism, Q. 166.

or at least are in Gentile contexts. In this we see how the gospel goes to the Gentile world—by household (Acts 1:8). This is the covenantal pattern, inclusive of children.

(2) Explicit warrant regarding the baptism of believers' children is lacking in both directions. There is no case of an infant baptism, and neither is there a case of the baptism of a Christian's child as a believer. The question of when to baptize the children of believers must be settled by the proper application of biblical teaching. It cannot be settled by appealing to an explicit text.

(3) There is explicit warrant for the inclusion of children in the new covenant (Deut. 30:6; Jer. 31:36–37), in the church (Eph. 1:1 with 6:1–4; Col. 1:2 with 3:20; 1 Cor. 7:14), and in the kingdom (Matt. 19:14; Mark 10:14; Luke 18:16). Moreover, the covenantal infant baptism view can be argued from truly necessary inferences<sup>8</sup>—drawing upon the continuity of the covenant promise (to be God to your children after you) and the covenant people, as well as the examples of baptism (the households of Cornelius, Lydia, the Philippian jailer, Crispus, and Stephanas). This is a synopsis of the biblical evidence that is convincing to me.

For Christians to progress in this discussion, we need honest hearts, first of all. We need minds that are willing to submit to all the Lord's will as revealed in his Word. As a means to our study, we need substantial discussions on the key passages, theological reflection, and historical data that address central questions. This volume aims to provide such a discussion by well-qualified pastors and scholars.

It will be clear to the discerning reader that the contributors are not in complete agreement on such matters as how to best nurture Christian children, evangelism and baptized children, the efficacy of baptism, and the Lord's Supper and baptized children. They represent several Reformed and paedobaptist denominations. These differences

8. A necessary inference is a logically valid conclusion from given premises, such as: First premise: The children of believers are covenant members. Second premise: Covenant members are to receive the sign of entrance into the covenant. Inference: Therefore (this follows *necessarily* from the premises), the children of believers are to receive the sign of entrance into the covenant.

are a matter of ongoing study. In the house of faith, paedobaptism serves as a kind of hallway that leads to several rooms. And in those rooms many of these matters are being discussed.

Finally, my hope can be stated no better than in the words of George Offor, the editor of John Bunyan's works: "May the time soon arrive when water shall not quench love, but when all the churches militant shall form one army, with one object,—that of extending the Redeemer's kingdom."<sup>9</sup>

9. *The Works of John Bunyan*, 2:593.

## 1

A PASTORAL OVERVIEW OF  
INFANT BAPTISM

BRYAN CHAPELL

**W**hy do Presbyterians baptize infants? We must confess that some bring their children for this sacrament because of the sweetness of the ceremony, or because of the expectations of family and church, or even with the misguided expectation that the “holy water” will magically protect their child from hell. However, neither sentiment nor tradition nor superstition is sufficient reason for believers to bring their children to be baptized. And, thankfully, such reasons are not the basis of our church’s practice. We baptize infants because we believe that the Bible teaches us to do so.

Mine is the happy task of explaining the scriptural foundation for infant baptism from a pastoral perspective. In fulfillment of that task, I will first present the biblical support for infant baptism as I have presented it in new members’ and church officer training classes over the past twenty-five years. Then I will conclude by offering words of explanation that I have often used as a pastor during the administration of the ordinance. My goals are to help explain why we should baptize the infants of believing parents and also to help pastors know how to

administer the sacrament in ways that are meaningful and helpful to their churches. Thus, I plan to present this material in terms that are accessible to laypersons and to leave the technical discussions to the able scholars elsewhere in this book.

One further word of preparation relates to my own journey regarding infant baptism. I did not always accept the practice of infant baptism. I was raised among dedicated, faithful, and well-instructed Baptists who believe that the Bible only regards those who decide to follow Christ as proper candidates for baptism. I well understand and respect those who have questions about the legitimacy of a practice that they feel has no biblical warrant. I also do not want to do anything that the Bible does not support. Thus, the paragraphs that follow are more than the recitation of a party line; they are the reflection of the thought process that led me to believe that Scripture teaches that God wants believing parents to present their children to him in baptism.

The biblical explanation will flow as follows:

#### I. The Biblical Background of Infant Baptism

Salvation is through the *covenant of faith* in the Old and New Testaments.

The faithful receive a *covenant sign* in the Old Testament.

The *covenant continues* in the New Testament.

The *covenant sign changes* to reflect New Testament blessings.

#### II. The Biblical Basis for Infant Baptism

The absence of a contrary command

The examples of household baptism

#### III. The Biblical Benefits of Infant Baptism

The devotion of the parents

The blessing of the child



## THE BIBLICAL BACKGROUND OF INFANT BAPTISM

### *The Covenant of Faith*

Many of the children in our churches enjoy singing the song “Father Abraham Had Many Sons.” This song contains a vital New Testament truth: “Father Abraham had many sons—I am one of them and so are you.” When they sing these words, our children are not merely echoing a statement of faith that a Jewish child in the Old Testament could make. The truth of these words still applies.

A key concept in the New Testament is that all of God’s people (Jew or Gentile—past or present) are blessed in accordance with the covenant that God made with Abraham. The Lord promised in this “everlasting covenant” that Abraham and his descendants would know God’s blessings on the basis of faith in his provision (Gen. 15:1–6 and 17:1–8). No one was to receive God’s blessings on the basis of personal merit or on the basis of some ceremony. Out of his mercy alone—and before they could qualify for it in any way—the Lord covenanted to be the God of Abraham and his descendants (Gen. 17:7). The people would know and claim the blessings of this covenant by expressing faith in God’s provision as Abraham had done (Gen. 15:6). Thus, God promised to bless Abraham and his descendants by grace through faith (cf. Eph. 2:8–9).

But what does a covenant with a Jewish patriarch have to do with people in God’s church today? The apostle Paul reminds us that God said to Abraham, “All nations will be blessed through you” (Gal. 3:8; cf. Gen. 12:3). The “everlasting covenant” that God made with Abraham (Gen. 17:7) continues to be in effect and continues to cover us. Paul says, “So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith” (Gal. 3:9).

This means that we who have faith in Christ as God’s provision for our salvation are blessed in accordance with Abraham’s covenant. We are Abraham’s spiritual descendants and are still covered by the covenant that God first made with him. Paul writes, “Consider Abraham: ‘He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.’”

Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham” (Gal. 3:6–7). Whether or not they are biological descendants of Abraham, believers today are his spiritual children through the everlasting covenant that God has provided.

There is no other way to be a child of God than to be included in Abraham’s covenant. There is no other covenant of salvation, and unless we are part of Abraham’s covenant, we are not part of God’s people. As the apostle says, “He [Christ] redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:14). Those who have faith in Jesus Christ as their Savior receive the covenant promises of Abraham and are his spiritual children, regardless of their time or place of birth (cf. Gal. 3:29).

### ***The Covenant Sign***

After making the covenant with Abraham to bless him and his descendants by grace through faith, God provided a covenant sign both to mark those who were recipients of his promise and to signify his pledge to provide for those who had faith in him. It is important to remember that the sign was given *after* the covenant was made; it was neither a precondition of the covenant nor a means of conferring it. Faith was and is the sole condition of knowing the blessings of God’s covenant.

*The sign of circumcision.* The covenant sign that God gave the Old Testament people was circumcision. The removal of the foreskin from the male reproductive organ signified the removal of spiritual uncleanness from God’s people and communicated that God’s provision for blessing was being passed on to all the children of Abraham from generation to generation (cf. Gen. 17:10–14; Deut. 10:16; Jer. 4:4; Col. 2:13). Circumcision marked God’s people as being separated and consecrated unto him and, consequently, as being in union with him and with each other in covenant family and community relationships (Ex. 12:48; Deut. 30:6; Jer. 4:4; 9:26). The rite of circumcision necessarily involved the shedding of blood, and was one of numerous Old

Testament signs that prefigured what would be required of Christ in order for our sins to be removed (cf. Heb. 9:22).

*The extent of the sign.* Because God's promises extended to Abraham's house, *he was to devote all that he had to the Lord by use of the covenant sign.* This meant that all who were part of Abraham's household in that ancient society were to be devoted to God by circumcision—sons, dependent relatives, and servants (Gen. 17:23; cf. Ex. 12:43–48). In contemporary culture, we are not accustomed to thinking of the head of a household as spiritually representing all its dependent members. Still, the representative role of heads of households has great scriptural precedent and rich implications in both the Old and the New Testaments (cf. Eph. 5:25–27; Heb. 11:7).

The representative principle helps to explain why Abraham devoted all in his house to God through the use of the Old Testament covenant sign, even though some of its members would not yet have expressed their faith. Abraham recognized his need as the head of a household to honor the Lord's promise to be the God of him and his family. The representative principle also explains why, in the New Testament, the apostle Paul could still say that children of a believing parent—even one who is married to a nonbeliever—are “holy” before God (1 Cor. 7:14). Few verses in Scripture more forcefully indicate that God communicates his grace to children while they are in the household of a covenant parent. Scripture does not contend that an adult who has turned from his parent's faith can presume to receive the eternal salvation promised through Abraham's covenant, but, while children remain under the authority of a believing parent, they are represented covenantally by that parent's faith.

The principle of representation by the head of the household also explains why the practice of circumcision was not an indication that women were excluded from the covenant. Both through the act of procreation and through the representative principle implied by circumcision, the rite showed that the covenant promises were extended to all in the house regardless of descent or gender. An adopted child of

either gender or even a dependent servant had equal spiritual standing with a biological son through the representative principle that circumcision signified. The ancient people were slow to realize these spiritual implications, but the New Testament drives home the meaning:

You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. . . . There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise. (Gal. 3:26–29)

We must still answer the question why the covenant sign was administered to those who had not yet expressed faith in God's provision. Since the covenant was made to express God's blessings to those who placed their faith in him, and since the covenant could only be experienced through faith, why did God tell Abraham to circumcise all the males in his household even before they knew of God's covenant of faith? Even if all of Abraham's house could have heard of God's provision and placed their faith in him, no one would expect all of Abraham's descendants to put their faith in God by the time they were eight days old and required to be circumcised (Gen. 17:12). Why then was the covenant sign commanded for all?

*The relationship between sign and seal.* The answer to why those throughout Scripture who were saved through faith alone were still allowed to be circumcised as children (i.e., before they were able to express their faith) has important implications for administering the covenant sign to infants today. Does the requirement of faith for salvation preclude the possibility of administering a covenant sign to the children of believers? It did not in the Old Testament practice of circumcision, and the New Testament tells us why. The apostle Paul says in the book of Romans that circumcision was a "seal" as well as a "sign" of the righteousness that Abraham had by faith (Rom. 4:11). Both terms have important significance for our understanding of the application of covenant sacraments.

We can easily understand how circumcision was a sign of the righteousness provided through God's covenant. The putting off of uncleanness by the shedding of blood and the marking of the faithful as God's special people resonate with many familiar New Testament concepts. However, the concept of a seal is less familiar to us today.

The image that the apostle calls to mind is that of the wax affixed to a letter or document and marked with a signet ring (or other instrument) to authenticate the source and validity of the contents of the document. The seal acted as a visible pledge by the author of the letter to honor what he had covenanted to do in the document when the conditions it described were met. Circumcision was God's way of marking his people with a visible pledge to honor his covenant for those who expressed faith in him. Just as a seal is the pledge of its author that he will uphold his promises when described conditions are met, so circumcision was God's pledge to provide all the blessings of his covenant when the condition of faith was met in his people. Our faith does not actuate God's covenant or cause it to be extended to us—he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4)—but our faith does claim (and live out) the covenant blessings that God provides by his grace and pledges with his seal.

The validity of a seal is not dependent upon the time that the conditions of the covenant accompanying it are met. Like the seal of a document, the seal of circumcision could be applied long before recipients of promised and signified blessings met the conditions of the covenant. The seal was simply *the visible pledge of God that when the conditions of his covenant were met, the blessings he promised would apply* (cf. Rom. 4:11). For this reason, God did not require that covenant parents wait until a child could express faith before commanding them to administer the covenant sign and seal of circumcision.

### ***The Covenant Continuation***

The New Testament apostles and writers take much care to let us know that the principles of the covenant of faith remain in effect for us. When Peter preaches on the Day of Pentecost, he says to his thou-

sands of Jewish listeners, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. . . . The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call” (Acts 2:38–39). Peter frames his call to salvation in Christ in covenantal terms by speaking of a promise that applies to his listeners and to their children as well as to others who are yet far off. The apostle assumes that God continues to relate to us as individuals and as families—that the covenant principles are still in effect. Individuals (even in covenant families) are still responsible to express their personal faith, but God continues to work out his gracious promises in families as well as extending the covenant to others.

The apostle Paul is more explicit about the continuation of the Abrahamic covenant and proclaims, “Those who believe are children of Abraham” (Gal. 3:7). He goes on to say that the Law of Moses “does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise. . . . If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Gal. 3:17, 29).

God’s promise to Abraham to save those who have faith in heaven’s provision remains in effect. Never do any come to God on the basis of their merit or because they have participated in some ritual. *Both the Old and the New Testaments affirm God’s continuing covenant promise to Abraham to bless people by divine grace through faith.*

### ***The Change in the Covenant Sign***

While the covenant continues, its sign changes to reflect what God has done to maintain his promises. The bloody sign of circumcision that prefigured the shedding of Christ’s blood no longer remains appropriate after the Lamb of God has shed his blood once for all in order to remove our sin (cf. Heb. 10:10; 1 Peter 1:18). Therefore, New Testament believers receive a new sign for the covenant that indicates what Christ has accomplished for them. Baptism with water is the sign of the washing away of our sin (cf. Acts 22:16; 1 Cor. 6:11; Heb. 9:14).

Those who continue to require circumcision as a requirement of God's covenant are condemned by the apostle who says, "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love" (Gal. 5:6). Circumcision no longer remains a requirement for those who desire to obey God (1 Cor. 7:18–19). However, baptism is now required of all those who desire to obey Christ and express their faith in him—men and women, Jews and Gentiles (cf. Acts 2:38; 8:12; 10:47–48).

While the sign of the covenant changes, the features of the covenant of faith do not. God continues to express his love to those who have faith in him, and as a result all believers share in the covenant that God prepared for Israel through Abraham (Eph. 3:6). The promises continue to be extended through parents to their children (Acts 2:38–39)—with the ordinary condition remaining that these children must ultimately express their own faith in Christ in order to reap the full blessings of the covenant.

Emphasizing the continuity of the covenant as well as the changed nature of the sign that accompanies it, the apostle Paul writes to the Colossian believers, "In him [Christ] you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead" (Col. 2:11–12). These words remind us that salvation comes through faith, and also that *the rite of circumcision that once signified the benefits of Abraham's covenant has been replaced by baptism.*

Since the covenant remains, but the sign changes, New Testament believers would naturally expect to apply the new sign of the covenant to themselves and their children as the old sign had been applied. Since the old sign was applied to children prior to their ability to express personal faith, there would be no barrier to applying the new sign prior to a child's personal profession of faith in Christ. Baptism would function both as a sign and a seal of the household's faith in Christ. As a seal,

baptism would indicate the visible pledge of God that when the conditions of his covenant were met, the promised blessings would apply.

## **THE BIBLICAL BASIS FOR INFANT BAPTISM**

What evidence is there in the Bible that New Testament parents applied the sacrament of baptism to their children with the understanding that the covenant with Abraham remained in effect with a changed sign? Biblically minded Christians rightly want to see scriptural confirmation of their churches' practices. Thus, we who believe in infant baptism must confess that the lack of any specific example of infant baptism in the New Testament is a strong counterweight to our position. Conscientious Christians who object to infant baptism are not necessarily being superficial, ignorant, or mean spirited. The church would not have argued the issues surrounding infant baptism for centuries if the right answers were obvious. What Presbyterians hope that believers will see in the absence of a named infant being baptized is how strong the other biblical evidences must be to have kept this covenant practice dominant in the worldwide Christian church since the earliest centuries.

### ***The Absence of a Contrary Command***

Just as advocates of infant baptism must deal with the absence of an identified infant being baptized in the New Testament, so also must opponents of infant baptism face the absence of a specific command to deny children the covenant sign and seal. As has already been noted, the apostles took great care to emphasize the continuation of the Abrahamic covenant for New Testament believers. Throughout the two-thousand-year history of this covenant prior to the beginning of the apostolic church, the people of God had administered the covenant sign to their children. It seems highly probable that if the apostles had changed that practice, that change would have been recorded in the New Testament, either by example or by precept.



The removal of any sign of the covenant from believers' children would have been an immense change in practice and concept for Jewish families. After two thousand years of covenant family practice (established since Genesis), a believing Jewish parent would not have known how to interpret a continuing Abrahamic covenant that did not administer the sign of the covenant to children. As will soon be discussed, the apostles frequently record households being baptized after the head of the home believes in Christ. Consider how the head of a Jewish household would have reacted when others in the household (including servants and resident relatives) were baptized on the basis of his faith while his own children were denied the covenant sign.

The absence of a scriptural command to prohibit administering the sign of the covenant to children after two thousand years of such practice weighs significantly against the view that the apostles wanted only those who were able to profess their faith to be baptized.

### *The Examples of Household Baptism*

Further undermining the contention that only those who professed their faith were to be baptized are the examples of apostles expecting that entire households would be baptized once the head of the home accepted the gospel. Those who oppose infant baptism fairly ask for an example of an infant being baptized in the New Testament. Already we have acknowledged that there is no specific mention of an infant's baptism. But fairness requires that another question also be asked: Are there any examples of households being baptized because of the faith of the head of the household? Over and over again, the answer to this question is yes.

In fact, when we read the New Testament accounts of baptism, *every person identified as having a household present at his or her conversion also had the household baptized.* These accounts include every baptism of persons described in detail after the appointment of Christ's apostles (including Paul) was complete.

*Household membership.* Before listing these household baptisms, we should ask who were considered to be members of one's household in the ancient world. Returning to the Old Testament passages in which the covenant sign was first administered in households, we find that a household included all of one's resident dependents: spouse (if living), children (if present), resident relatives, and dependent servants not earning regular wages (e.g., Gen. 14:14–16; 17:23; Ex. 12:3–4). This understanding of households governed Jewish thought and practice for two thousand years, and there is little reason to believe that the Scripture writers would have had any other perspective. There is no evidence that the New Testament writers used the concept of a household in a manner inconsistent with the common understanding of preceding centuries. No effort was made by the New Testament writers to indicate that children were no longer included in households—an exclusion that even today would be alien to our thought.

What is foreign to our thought today is the biblical principle of representative headship. Our lack of familiarity with this principle is one of the reasons why our individualistic culture struggles to accept the covenant family principles and practices of Scripture. But, as has been discussed earlier, the presumption that the faith of the head of the home created obligations for the rest of the family was an historic understanding for God's people. Thus, when the Philippian jailer asked Paul, "What must I do to be saved?" it was natural and scriptural for the apostle to reply, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household" (Acts 16:30–31). Paul's words do not mean that the rest of the household would automatically come to faith in Christ, but his presumption was that the faith of the head of the household would ultimately govern the commitments of the rest of the man's family. As a result, the jailer's entire household was baptized that night (v. 33).

*Household accounts.* The account of the baptism of the Philippian jailer's household is particularly instructive because of the precise description supplied by Luke, the writer of Acts. Luke says that *all* of the

jailer's household was baptized (v. 33), but then he uses a *singular* verb to describe who rejoiced and believed in God that night (v. 34). The jailer himself believed (singular verb), and his whole house was baptized. Sadly, this important distinction in the account is not reflected in some of our modern translations (see the English Standard Version for an excellent translation). As a result, some assume that entire households were baptized in the New Testament because everyone in them believed the gospel. While this is not impossible, it is unlikely that all those households consisted only of those who were old enough to make an intelligent faith commitment. Further, the assumption that everyone in those households must have made a faith commitment does not take notice of the careful distinction that Luke makes between those who actually believed and those who were baptized.

The other household baptisms recorded in the New Testament are well known: Cornelius and his household (Acts 10:38), Lydia and her household (Acts 16:15), and the household of Stephanas (1 Cor. 1:16). Crispus and his household should probably also be included in the list when one considers Acts 18:8 and 1 Corinthians 1:14 together.

The purpose for listing these accounts of household baptism is not to contend that individual adult believers were never baptized in the New Testament. Clearly there were baptisms of individuals who apparently did not have households, such as Paul, the Ethiopian eunuch, and Simon the sorcerer (cf. Acts 8 and 9). Others were baptized during their pilgrimages or when household members apparently were not present (Acts 2:41; 19:5). There may also have been times when household members objected to being baptized. We do not know all of the circumstances of the men and women whom Scripture says were baptized (cf. Acts 8:12). What we do know is that when men and women believed in Christ, they were baptized. Further, whenever an individual baptism is described in detail in the New Testament, the members of the household, if they were present, also received the covenant sign of baptism.

*Household resistance.* The frequency of the household baptism accounts demonstrates that it was normal and consistent with the ancient practice of the continuing Abrahamic covenant for heads of households to see that the covenant sign and seal was applied to all in their home. No evidence indicates that children were excluded from these households. Rather, two thousand years of covenant practice, combined with the absence of any command to exclude children, indicate that household baptisms included infants.

Infant baptism is typically resisted by people in North American culture today because they (1) do not understand the continuation of the covenant of faith made with Abraham and its application to all believers today, (2) are not informed of the representative nature of covenant headship, (3) do not understand how a covenant sign is a seal (i.e., that baptism is a visible pledge that covenant promises will apply when the conditions of faith are met, so that the sign does not have to be tied to the moment that one believes in Christ), (4) do not realize that children would have been included as members of households that were baptized, and (5) cannot conceive of “dunking” a baby, if one’s only experience with baptism involves immersion.

Only the issue of immersing babies has not been covered thus far in this chapter. Sadly, there is not space here to deal with the whole question of the proper mode of baptism. Thus, I will simply note that there are churches in the world that do immerse babies (quickly, I might add) in their practice of infant baptism. However, most of the churches that practice infant baptism teach that baptism is a ceremonial sign of Christ’s cleansing and union with him, and that the amount of water used is not the key issue.

Various amounts of water are used in the ceremonial cleansings that Scripture describes as baptisms. In addition to examining the gospel narratives of Christ’s baptism, we can look at such texts as Mark 7:2–4, Luke 11:38, and Hebrews 9:10–22 to discern a variety of ways in which baptism can be administered. English readers will be aided by knowing that the word often translated “washings” in these verses is a form of the Greek word for baptism. These various ceremonial cleansings

involved different rites of pouring, dipping, and sprinkling. The Hebrews passage even refers to an event where thousands of people (as well as their place of worship) were sprinkled at once (cf. Ex. 24:6–8). I am not contending here that sprinkling is the only valid mode of baptism. Other passages relate baptism to the pouring out of God’s Spirit (cf. Luke 3:16; Acts 1:5; 2:17–18; Titus 3:5–6). My point is only that *in a ceremonial cleansing the amount of fluid may vary in a manner that is appropriate for the occasion*. A child can still be truly baptized by sprinkling or pouring. Parents do not have to worry about drowning their newborns in order to honor God’s covenant.

## THE BIBLICAL BENEFITS OF INFANT BAPTISM

Should we baptize infants because the sacrament will make children Christians or guarantee that they will become believers? The answer is no, because no sacrament communicates the grace of salvation. The apostle Paul reminded the Corinthian Christians that although the ancient Israelites were all “baptized” by passing through the Red Sea under the cloud of God, they were idolaters who displeased God and experienced his wrath (1 Cor. 10:1–11). No mere ritual will save anyone.

But if baptism will not make our children Christians, then why should we administer the covenant sign and seal to them? The most important answer is that we baptize because God makes promises to believers and to their children. In baptism we honor God by marking out and acting on the promises that reflect his grace both in blessing parents who act in devotion to God and in blessing the child being devoted to him in covenantal faith.

### *The Devotion of Parents*

Parents who love the Lord Jesus desire to devote all that they have to him. As Abraham devoted all that he had to God in the covenant of faith, so parents who trust in Christ want to demonstrate that their most precious gifts, their children, are his. In the sacrament of bap-

tism, *we as parents demonstrate our commitment to be faithful stewards of the precious gift of a child's soul that God grants us to nurture for a season of life.*

Through the devotion that is demonstrated in baptism, parents begin to reap the blessings of obedience that come from building the foundations of a home on the promises of God. The baptism of an infant is the first public testimony of parents that they will trust and follow God in the raising of their child. As an act of devotion, the baptism sets the family on the path of blessing that God promises to those who walk in his ways.

The church witnessing the baptism is also blessed by the parents' testimony of devotion and trust. The church has the encouraging example of the parent's obedience, and fellow worshipers are reminded by the water of baptism that God's grace alone will wash away the sin of this child and fit him for heaven. In the truths signified by the water of baptism, the parents humbly acknowledge that they are dependent upon God's grace, not only to raise the child according to Scripture, but also to do what they cannot do to make the child holy before God.

As a public act of devotion, baptism also makes the parents accountable to the church before which they take vows to raise their child in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. Accountability is not simply a willingness to accept advice and correction from others when things go wrong, but a humble and joyful desire to receive the spiritual resources of the church that will help a child grow in Christian character. In baptism, parents link the spiritual livelihood of their child to the spiritual life of the church. They promise to intertwine their life of faith with the life of the church so that they and the child will hear wise counsel from others (including more experienced parents), encounter the reality of God's presence in worship, and learn from the example of mature saints how God's grace forms the beauty of the soul in both good and difficult circumstances.

It is important to remember, however, that baptism is not merely a sign of God's grace—it is also a seal. Baptism does not simply signify what Christ has done, nor does it only demonstrate the parents' de-

votion. Baptism is also God's own continuing, visible pledge to his church that he will fulfill his covenant promises to those who place their faith in him. God is present in the sacrament as though the doors of heaven have opened to have him declare anew to his church, "By the marks of this sacrament, I promise that anyone who trusts in my mercy through the blood of Christ will have his sins washed away and will be as pure before me as the water that flows from this font, so that we will be in holy union forever." With this promise indicated by the seal of baptism, God reaches from heaven to embrace the parents and the child with the assurance of his grace, based upon his mercy, not upon their merit. In our moments of great pride in our children, and in our moments of great shame for our failings, *God's pledge of merciful grace that is evident in baptism is always ours by faith to claim* for ourselves and for our children.

### ***The Blessing of the Child***

The devotion of the parents who present their children for baptism places each child in a privileged position both to hear and to understand the truths of the gospel. The child first has the example of his parents' devotion demonstrated in their willingness to devote their most precious possession to God. Beyond this initial example, the child lives in a home that through the child's baptism has promised to provide Christian nurture and to use the resources of the church to make that nurture truly biblical in character. The parents publicly promise in the sacrament of baptism to pray with and for their child, so that early in life he might know the realities of God's saving grace in Christ.

The child also has the promise of the church to support the parents in his spiritual nurture and admonition. In the public sacrament of baptism, the people of the church vow to pray for the parents and the child, and to provide godly examples for them.

Some no doubt repeat these vows out of courtesy and convention, but as the church repeats its own testimony year after year, the whole body of Christ learns of its obligation and power to influence the eter-

nity of her children. When the church is truly one in this effort, a child is surrounded and embraced by the testimony of Christ at every turn in life. Thus, the church becomes God's instrument of presenting the reality of himself to the mind and heart of the child. A child with such an experience, fostered at his baptism and nourished throughout his life by a mature body of believers, breathes the truths of grace as naturally and unconsciously as he breathes air.

In this atmosphere, faith naturally germinates and matures so that *it is possible, even common, for the children of Christian parents never to know a day that they do not believe that Jesus is their Savior and Lord.* Such covenantal growth of a child is, in fact, the normal Christian life that God intends for his people, and it is one of the most striking, but infrequently mentioned, reasons that baptism is rightly administered to infants.

Just as children are raised to know the color blue through all about them repeatedly and readily attesting the character of the hue, so children raised in an environment of faith ordinarily mature with an understanding of their Savior. Of course, there are exceptions. True faith remains a supernatural gift, but natural human instruments fulfilling their covenant obligations most frequently communicate it. Thus, as a covenant child grows in natural understanding of his world, it is most common for him to mature with a parallel level of spiritual understanding. This means that it is no more likely that children nurtured in a consistently Christian home can specifically mark when they understood that Jesus was their Savior than they can mark when they knew that blue was blue.

So when would be the proper time to baptize such children? Since Genesis, the proper time that God declared for marking children with the covenant sign has been in their infancy in the covenant community. The early application of the sign indicated that there was not necessarily a definitive moment when a child made a life-altering decision to follow the Lord. Instead, children in believing homes were expected to grow in spiritual maturity and understanding as the covenant community embraced and instructed them. In a similar man-



ner, the sacrament of baptism is rightly administered today to infants to indicate that their whole life is to be one of continually growing in Christ through the family that devotes them to God in faithfulness to the covenant they entered at birth.

## **A PASTORAL EXPLANATION OF INFANT BAPTISM**

How should pastors explain the concept of infant baptism when administering the sacrament? The truths that underlie the practice are clear, but require an understanding of the scope of Scripture that many in our congregations lack today. As a result, many of the words of institution that are repeated during infant baptisms refer generally to God's love for his children or to Christ's willingness to allow children to approach him (e.g., Matt. 19:14; Luke 18:16). While such references accurately communicate the compassion of God, I have found them unconvincing as the reason we should baptize infants.

Those who disagree with infant baptism agree that Jesus said, "Suffer little children to come unto me, and forbid them not," and we are all aware that Jesus did not baptize the children who then approached him. Making the gospel accounts of Christ's blessing of children the chief emphasis of an explanation of infant baptism seems rather to prove that such ceremonies come more from sentiment and tradition than from any demonstrable biblical principle.

A number of fine books contain forms that will help pastors to frame credible words of explanation prior to an infant baptism. In addition, I have found the following words, though imperfect, to be useful in my ministry:

Will baptism save this child? No, salvation comes through trusting in Jesus Christ as one's Savior and Lord. Then why do we baptize this child? Not for sentiment, though he/she is sweet. Not for tradition, though it is dear. We baptize this child because we believe the Bible commands us to do so.

Throughout biblical history, God promised to bless through a covenant relationship with his people. He said to Abraham, “I will be a God to you and to your children after you.” Abraham believed God’s covenant promise and devoted all that he had to the Lord, including the members of his household. In obedience to God, Abraham showed his devotion through practicing the rite of circumcision in his household. This rite demonstrated that God’s covenant would pass to future generations, but would necessitate the shedding of blood for sin.

The shed blood did not create the covenant, but rather acted as a seal, a pledge given by God, that he would honor his promise to all who, like Abraham, put their faith in him.

In the New Testament, the apostle Peter, preaching on the Day of Pentecost, assured all that covenant promises of God would continue for the children of believers. He said, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, so that your sins may be forgiven. . . . The promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.”

The promise to bless through faith in God’s grace continued, but the apostle Paul told the Colossian believers that the sign of this covenant has changed. No longer foreshadowing the shedding of Christ’s blood, the New Testament sacrament of baptism is a sign of what Christ’s blood accomplishes, the washing away of sin, and thus our union with him.

This water does not itself wash away sin, but rather, according to the apostle Paul, this sacrament acts as a seal—a visible pledge of God given to the church—whereby heaven assures us that when such children as this one express faith in Christ, all the promises of his covenant of grace will apply to them.

The Bible gives us good reason to express our covenant privileges through such a baptism. In the New Testament accounts of baptism, every person identified as having a household present at his or her conversion also had the household baptized.

Yes, it is sweet to savor God’s goodness to this family, but sentiment is not what leads this church or these parents to this holy ordinance.

We baptize this child in obedience to biblical teaching, in keeping with the precedent of centuries of faithful families, and in expectation of God's presence and blessing. God now uses this sacrament to pledge to us his faithfulness as we, in faith, devote this child of the covenant to him.