

This is a truly remarkable, page-turning book that is peppered with personal illustrations and persuasively and winsomely presents a robust defense of the baptism of infants of believers. Written from the overflow of the big heart that this pastor and father has for children and the church, it excels at being biblically enlightening, doctrinally sound, experientially balanced, and practically helpful. The Q&A section is superlative—so succinct, so wise, so “spot-on.” One does not have to agree with every detail Jason Helopoulos propounds in order to realize that this book has immense potential to move the church community forward by helping it to grasp the beauty of baptism without either overestimating or underestimating it. Highly recommended!

—**Joel R. Beeke**, President, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary

This is an immensely helpful study of God’s Word on a very important topic. The Q&A at the end alone is worth the read. If you want to understand Reformed teaching on baptism, look no further.

—**Michael Horton**, J. Gresham Machen Professor of Systematic Theology and Apologetics, Westminster Seminary California

In this scripturally based, theologically sound, and practically helpful book, Jason Helopoulos has provided a concise yet robust resource for anyone who wants to know more about the truth and beauty of covenant baptism. As he rightly states in the first chapter, the key to understanding and embracing baptism is

knowing “the kindness of our covenant-making God.” In other words, God is so incredibly gracious that he lavishes amazing gifts on his people *and* their children. Baptism is one of those gifts. I will be recommending and using this book frequently.

—**Julius J. Kim**, President, The Gospel Coalition

Jason Helopolous, in this highly readable volume, has given us the theological foundation for why the sign and seal of the new covenant, baptism, is to be placed upon believers and their covenant children to affirm their faith in Christ, who fulfills his promises—including “I will be a God to you and to your children after you.” An additional blessing of this volume is the consequential foundation it presents for parenting based upon the promises of God and the anticipation of the covenant blessings he will bring in and through families by his sovereign grace.

—**Harry L. Reeder III**, Senior Pastor, Briarwood
Presbyterian Church, Birmingham

Discussions of baptism can so easily raise the temperature in the church and draw lines among Christians. We may be grateful to Jason Helopoulos for gifting the church with a clear, accessible, irenic, and practical treatment of the Bible’s teaching on baptism. Whether you have been thinking about these questions for a long time or for the first time, *Covenantal Baptism* will inform your mind and stir your heart as Helopoulos shows you the blessing that God intends for baptism to be.

—**Guy Prentiss Waters**, James M. Baird Jr. Professor of New Testament, Reformed Theological Seminary

COVENANTAL
BAPTISM

BLESSINGS OF THE FAITH

A Series

Jason Helopoulos

Series Editor

Covenantal Baptism, by Jason Helopoulos

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COVENANTAL
BAPTISM

JASON HELOPOULOS


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For my mother
No son has been more blessed

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FOREWORD

It has often been said—sometimes with a sense of humor and sometimes in annoyance—that Presbyterian and Reformed churches love to do things “decently and in order.” I can understand both the humor and the frustration that lie behind that sentiment. We love our plans, our minutes, our courts, and our committees. Presbyterian and Reformed folks have been known to appoint committees just to oversee other committees (reminding me of the old *Onion* headline that announced “New Starbucks Opens in Rest Room of Existing Starbucks”). We like doing things so decently that we expect our church officers to know three things: the Bible, our confessions, and a book with *Order* in its title.

But before we shake our heads in disbelief at those uber-Reformed types (physician, heal thyself!), we should recall that before “decently and in order” was a Presbyterian predilection, it was a biblical command (see 1 Cor. 14:40). Paul’s injunction for the church to be marked by propriety and decorum, to be well-ordered

like troops drawn up in ranks, is a fitting conclusion to a portion of Scripture that deals with confusion regarding gender, confusion at the Lord's Table, confusion about spiritual gifts, confusion in the body of Christ, and confusion in public worship. "Decently and in order" sounds pretty good compared to the mess that prevailed in Corinth.

A typical knock on Presbyterian and Reformed Christians is that though supreme in head, they are deficient in heart. We are the emotionless stoics, the changeless wonders, God's frozen chosen. But such veiled insults would not have impressed the apostle Paul, for he knew that the opposite of order in the church is not free-flowing spontaneity; it is self-exalting chaos. God never favors confusion over peace (see 1 Cor. 14:33). He never pits theology against doxology or head against heart. David Garland put it memorably: "The Spirit of ardor is also the Spirit of order."¹

When Jason Helopoulos approached me about writing a foreword for this series, I was happy to oblige—not only because Jason is one of my best friends (and we both root for the hapless Chicago Bears) but because these careful, balanced, and well-reasoned volumes will occupy an important place on the book stalls of Presbyterian and Reformed churches. We need short, accessible books written by thoughtful, seasoned pastors for regular members on the foundational elements of church life and ministry. That's what we need, and that's what this series

delivers: wise answers to many of the church's most practical and pressing questions.

This series of books on Presbyterian and Reformed theology, worship, and polity is not a multivolume exploration of 1 Corinthians 14:40, but I am glad it is unapologetically written with Paul's command in mind. The reality is that every church will worship in some way, pray in some way, be led in some way, be structured in some way, and do baptism and the Lord's Supper in some way. Every church is living out some form of theology—even if that theology is based on pragmatism instead of biblical principles. Why wouldn't we want the life we share in the church to be shaped by the best exegetical, theological, and historical reflections? Why wouldn't we want to be thoughtful instead of thoughtless? Why wouldn't we want all things in the life we live together to be done decently and in good order? That's not the Presbyterian and Reformed way. That's God's way, and Presbyterian and Reformed Christians would do well not to forget it.

Kevin DeYoung
Senior Pastor, Christ Covenant Church
Matthews, North Carolina

Introduction

BEGINNING WITH THE RIGHT PERSPECTIVE

Baptism. Need I say more? Too often, it is best known as the church family “celebration” that causes conflict. This sacrament seems to be fertile soil for debate, disagreement, ridicule, and even mocking among fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. Yet baptism lies at the very heart of the charge that our Lord and Savior gave to the church in the Great Commission of Matthew 28:18–20, and it represents, as we shall see in these pages, the core of the Christian faith—the gospel. When we approach it as a source of conflict and controversy, we miss the blessing that is attached to this sacrament, as well, and the kindness God has shown his people—the family of Christ—by gifting it to them. I hope that this book, beyond anything else, will show you this blessing and kindness.

I take it for granted that if you are reading this book, you have some interest in the doctrine of baptism. That is good. That is right. Maybe you are a parent who is wrestling with whether you should baptize your child

(or children). Maybe you are new to the Reformed tradition or wrestling anew with what you believe about baptism. Maybe you are a pastor attempting to articulate covenantal baptism more clearly, or a teenager wondering whether you should be “rebaptized” at the urging of friends, or a Christian parent wondering whether your wandering child’s previous baptism means anything for him or her now. Maybe you are simply looking for a quick refresher on the reasons for and blessings of covenantal baptism. This book is written for you.

But before we enter the discussion on baptism, I ask you to make a commitment with me. John Rabbi Duncan, a Scottish Presbyterian from a former generation, once said, “I’m first a Christian, next a Catholic,¹ then a Calvinist, fourth a Paedobaptist,² and [finally] a Presbyterian.”³ He places the right things in the right order. Before you read further, commit with me in the tenor of Duncan’s confession above, first, that you are a Christian; second, that you identify as a member of the universal church; and that everything else follows in importance.

We need to remain careful not to make too much of baptism on the one hand but neither to dismiss it with a nonchalant attitude on the other. Baptism is truly a “secondary doctrine.” Yet it is a *significant* doctrine. Our beliefs regarding baptism inform our parenting, our expectations of our covenant children, and even what church we attend and join. And, since blessings are attached to this sacrament (as we shall see), we desire those blessings to

be received by all who are able. Most of all, because baptism is a foundational part of the Christian faith, our view of it should be well-informed and biblical.

If those who practice covenantal baptism⁴ by baptizing their children do so in contradiction to God's Word, then they put words (and especially promises) in the mouth of God that are untrue. And yet, if God counts children as members of the covenant community who are to receive this sign and seal of his covenant, then those who neglect covenantal baptism prevent covenant children from receiving one of God's chief means of grace for their lives and the life of the church. These practical and theological implications are why the "discussion" about baptism is not idle theological discourse.

It may be of some help for you to know that my own convictions went through a change regarding this subject. By God's grace and kindness, I came to saving faith in college. Faithful college-aged Christians shared the gospel with me, and I joined a ministry that emphasized the need for believers to be baptized as—and only as—believers.⁵ When I went off to seminary for more biblical and theological training, the one thing "I knew that I knew" was that an individual must be a believing and confessing person of age in order to be baptized.

In fact, I remember sitting with my wife in a Presbyterian church on a sunny day in Dallas, Texas, and watching with horror as families brought their infant children forward for baptism. I recall the pastor holding one of

these children in his arms. The child remained still and quiet—until the pastor applied the waters of baptism. As the water flowed, the child erupted; a piercing cry—one that it would be assumed only grown adult lungs could bring forth—echoed through the sanctuary. I turned to my wife and with a little too much glee whispered, “See—even that child knows it should not receive baptism!”

Years later, I now sit here typing as a Presbyterian pastor who finds covenantal baptism one of the greatest blessings our God has given us. Some who read this book will come to the same conclusion; others will not. Either way, our consciences must be informed and convinced by what we believe the Scriptures teach. I hope, through these pages, to provide at the very least a sound argument and a helpful discussion.

May the Lord be with you as you read, and may he encourage your soul with his ineffable kindness. I pray that you will see the blessing of the sacrament of baptism and the goodness our God has shown by gifting it to his people. Blessings upon your reading.

1

THE KINDNESS OF GOD

A family of six stands before their local church. It proves to be the odd Sunday on which the father chooses to wear his “Sunday best”—his normal Sunday-morning attire consists of a pair of pants and a short-sleeved shirt, but on this day he wears a coat and a tie. The mother of the family, adorned with a patterned dress, stands by his side. Three children, ranging from four to seven years old, gather around their parents’ feet. Smaller hands are placed in larger hands, and one child, with curious eyes, searches the congregation for a friend. The mother’s arms cradle a baby girl who is outfitted with a fine white dress. It glimmers as the early morning sunlight enters the sanctuary windows and falls on this infant child. The dress, a “baptismal gown,” has belonged to the family for four generations, each of which has passed it down to the generation after them. Its history wonderfully represents the importance of this moment. This is a covenant family moment.

The parents beam with an air of pride, though anxiousness also seems to mark their faces. Who, besides the

pastor, likes standing in front of a congregation? Most people who sit looking on from the pews know that this small child embodies answered prayer. Sadness has been an all too familiar companion to this couple over the past years. They would have stood as a family of seven, instead of six, this particular morning, but God's providence led to one of the greatest sorrows of their earthly lives. Yet they stand, a covenant family of God, beaming with great joy before their church family on God's day. Most importantly, they also stand before their covenant-keeping God.

In the moments that follow, their pastor provides an explanation of baptism, prays for their child, takes the little girl into his arms, and asks the parents a series of questions, as they reply with vows before God and before their brothers and sisters in Christ. The pastor then asks the congregation a question, and they respond by making a commitment to assist these parents in raising this covenant child. The scene is familiar to those who have occupied the pews of this little church over the decades. They know that their pastor radiates a particular joy on these mornings. He takes the child in his arms, dips his hand in the baptismal bowl, and, after saying the child's name, baptizes her in the "name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit." In this way, this beautiful little girl receives the profoundly beautiful sign and seal of God's covenant promises: the waters of baptism. As is his habit, the pastor utters a short and simple yet strong prayer over the child before handing her back to her mother.

This is a very ordinary scene that uses very ordinary means—yet it is one that represents the very *extraordinary* grace of God. It is a covenantal moment, and it takes place in the midst of the covenant people of God.

As you read about this scene, you may find yourself either comfortable or uncomfortable with it. You may have watched a similar scene unfold dozens of times or may never have seen it before. Whatever your experiences, I hope that as we explore covenantal baptism together in this book, you will come to appreciate the gracious gift that God grants to his precious children—and to rejoice over it with thanksgiving.

But before we look at baptism directly, we first need to focus, in this chapter, on the kindness of God as it is seen through the covenants he enters into with his people. This provides us with the necessary framework for understanding the blessing of baptism itself.

The Starting Place: The Kindness of a Covenant-Making God

Fundamental to baptism is the kindness of our covenant-making God. That is the most important thing I want to impress on you in this book. Baptism is a gift from a kind Father who loves to lavish good things upon his children. As we will see, baptism serves as a sign and seal of the promises God makes to us in his covenant. He did not have to make a covenant, yet he did. He did not

have to provide promises, yet he did. He did not have to give signs and seals to reassure us of his promises, yet he did. Kindness upon kindness. Therefore, before we venture into the specifics of baptism, let's turn to the beginnings of this covenant.

Covenants Defined

What is a covenant? The simplest definition is that it is a relationship that involves mutual commitments—albeit commitments that are not always equal to one another. In the Bible, we often see these commitments sealed in blood. O. Palmer Robertson describes a covenant as “a bond in blood sovereignly administered”¹—a definition that is both concise and rich. Another modern theologian has defined a covenant as simply “an agreement between God and human beings, where God promises blessings if the conditions are kept or threatens curses if the conditions are broken.”² When God enters into a covenant with another party, he makes a bond that includes a pledge of faithfulness. Those who keep the obligations of the covenant will receive blessing and life, while those who do not receive cursing and death.

Reformed theology maintains a bicovenantal (two-covenant) system.³ God entered into a covenant with Adam, which is called the *covenant of works*. After the fall, God entered into a second covenant—what Reformed theologians have come to call the *covenant of grace*. The covenant of grace is an overarching covenant that threads

itself throughout the pages of Scripture, making redemptive history one story of God's willing and working in this world.

The First Promise of the Gospel

We see the principal promise of the covenant of grace first being articulated in the garden, to Adam and Eve, in Genesis 3:15: a child will be born into this world who will crush the head of the serpent. This has been called the *protoevangelium*—the first gospel. As we continue through the Scriptures, we find that this same Promised One will also bring reconciliation between God and mankind. All the rest of the Scriptures, in both the Old and the New Testaments, unfold and realize the fulfillment of this great covenantal promise.

This covenantal promise greatly impacts the way we read and understand the Bible. It ties together the entire history of God's people and helps us to find continuity across the pages of Scripture.⁴ From this covenantal view, we read the Bible as one book that tells one overarching story of promise about one Savior's coming to reconcile one people to the one true God.

The Promise Takes Shape

Although foreshadowed in Eden, God's covenant of grace is not formally inaugurated until the time of Abraham, when God revealed that the Promised One would be Abraham's descendent. "What was the Abrahamic