

BAPTISM IS NOT ENOUGH

*How Understanding God's Covenant
Explains Everything*

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FOREWORD

A NUMBER OF YEARS AGO, A BAPTIST FRIEND accused our church of cultivating a covenantal buzzword culture. He thought we were simply using the word covenant as an all-purpose adjective, one helpful in describing absolutely everything around us. The example he used, as I recall, was our covenant peanut butter and covenant jelly.

This abuse can happen, but even when it isn't happening, it can sometimes look as though it is happening. But why?

The reason this happens is that we do not take the time to define what a covenant actually is. We are usually not this sloppy with other key biblical terms—words like justification, or atonement, or imputation, or sanctification. We define these terms, taking the sweep of all biblical history into account, and then we remember how we have defined them. There are

problems that can arise with this as well, but overall, it is good and helps keep things clear.

We are not nearly this careful with the word covenant. And this is truly odd. Think about this for a moment. Our Bible is divided into two major sections—the Old Testament (covenant) and the New Testament (covenant). What would many Christians do if a non-Christian friend noticed that fact and said, “You know, that really puzzles me. What is a covenant anyhow?” In too many cases, the Christian would be reduced to explaining how an old covenant is a collection of books that begins with Genesis and ends with Malachi, while a new covenant begins with Matthew.

A covenant is a forensic or legal arrangement that establishes a defined relationship. The relationship that is defined is a relationship between persons, so that we must not think of this definition as being rigid, legalistic, or impersonal. One of our best illustrations of a covenant in the modern day—because it is still functioning, although under assault—is the covenant of marriage. Our modern confusions about covenant have had far-reaching and destructive consequences.

In this book, John Crawford does a very good job in beginning his discussion of infant baptism by discussing and defining (from the Scriptures) what a covenant is. He does this thoroughly in the first portion of the book, and some readers might be tempted to check the cover

INTRODUCTION

IN THE SUMMER OF 1995 I READ A CHRISTIAN socialist book that changed my life. It was Ron Sider's *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*. I read it more than once and was convinced that all professing Christians should read this work and begin to conduct themselves according to the agenda found within it. Now before you put this book down, let me first tell you why Sider's book changed my life. Its impact came from the fact that it unapologetically connected my Christian faith with the world around me. It went beyond the first step of "soul-winning" to "culture changing" according to the Word of God. In a world where Christianity did not often venture much beyond a person's internal "relationship with God" or outside the four walls of the church, it was a breath of fresh air. Of course we as Christians would fight cultural battles around us when they were hot issues, such as abortion, homosexuality,

or—a favorite of the last two centuries—alcohol, but we did not take a comprehensive approach to the application of God’s Word to every area of the world around us. I was beside myself with excitement that Sider’s book did.

An interesting thing happened not long after the experience described above. I read a refutation of Sider’s book. It was David Chilton’s *Productive Christians in an Age of Guilt Manipulators*. Those not familiar with the importance and function of good rhetoric may have been put off by the book. But good confrontational rhetoric is quite beneficial. It is especially useful for those sitting outside looking in on an ideological debate. It helps them evaluate and find holes in any given argument. In short, it aids in decision-making, understanding, refining and solidifying ideas, and, ultimately, in gaining direction that manifests itself in the way they conduct themselves throughout life. In this way healthy debate becomes essential to progress in thinking and therefore everything else.

So what was so helpful about this particular refutation of Sider’s book? Beginning with the same premise that Scripture did in fact apply to every area of life, Chilton remained fully faithful to God’s Word and consistent with its authority and the complete sovereignty of God. As opposed to Scripture not applying to all of life or only some of Scripture applying to all of life (Sider’s view), his book was helpful in driving home that all Scripture applies to all of life. As such it became a jumping-off point for scouring Scripture and reevaluating all of my presuppositions in light of God’s sovereignty as well as *sola scriptura* (Scripture alone) and *tota scriptura* (all of Scripture).

CHAPTER ONE:

WHAT IS A COVENANT?

FROM A YOUNG AGE I WAS TAUGHT THAT the most important thing in life was my relationship with God. Much of this book is designed to drive home that very idea. The question is, what does that relationship look like?

What is the nature of that relationship and how are we to conduct our daily life accordingly? Is it a mystical connection to a transcendent God? Is it a daily response to my conscience? What does it mean to have a “close” or a “good” relationship?

A host of evangelical clichés surround these questions but they do not provide the clear insight needed to deal with such important matters. The answer to these questions and many more are bound up in the scriptural idea of a covenant. In fact, from a biblical standpoint, the very key to understanding our relationship to God is the covenant. Most Christians would

acknowledge that the issue is not really whether we have a relationship with God or not, since we all do. We were all created by the Triune God, in His image and for His good pleasure. As created beings we are linked to our Creator. Our very existence depends on Him.

The question is not, therefore, whether we relate to God, but how. How do we relate in time and space to a supernatural God? Since creation, God has related to man through covenants. These covenants provide a real-world structure through which we relate to God on earth.

So what is a covenant? In a biblical sense, it is a legal bond between two or more parties—“legal” meaning that each party makes a statement (confession) and agrees to specific terms, with consequences invoked on each party for failure to keep the terms. This agreement takes place in the presence of witnesses and is usually followed by the public “sealing” or display of the agreement and sometimes a meal together. The parties then relate within the context of this formal structure. Relating together within this legal bond is referred to as being “in covenant” with one another. The parties are connected through this legal bond. The bond is not one of being materially connected in any way. Neither is it of a magical or mystical connection unseen in Scripture. It is a legal connection.

Why then is this so important to understand? Because this is how God chose to link the unseen to the seen, the supernatural to the material or created order here on earth. This in no way diminishes the role of the Holy Spirit and His work within the hearts of men. It merely gives outward manifestation to the

CHAPTER TWO:
**THREE COVENANT
INSTITUTIONS IN HISTORY**

IN CHAPTER 1, I SOUGHT TO HIGHLIGHT how we connect or relate to God. The supernatural or unseen must interact somehow with the natural and material.¹ If we presuppose that God is distinct from us and over us, yet ever-present and intimately involved with us, then there must be a way through which God relates to His creation. Many mystical religions see God as a part of or connected to man or nature. In this way men and women relate to Him as a part

1. For those who think this feels a bit Aristotelian, it is not meant to be so. I am merely distinguishing the seen from the unseen. In biblical terms, there is heaven and earth. There is an infinite God who rules over finite men. “He said to them, ‘You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world’” (John 8:23). Some may prefer the terms historical and eschatological.

of themselves (i.e., not distinct). Those that deny God seek no relation at all.

So, how does the Christian view this relation with God? As we have now seen, we relate to God in time and space through a legal bond with Him. This legal bond shows His sovereignty over us, the structure of His sovereignty on earth, the laws we are to live by, the consequences of obedience and disobedience, and what happens to the bond upon our death.

That said, other legal agreements can have this same structure, so what makes the biblical covenant wholly unique? The unique identifier is that it acknowledges God in a legal context as the supreme authority to declare what is right and wrong along with the associated judgments. It acknowledges the higher authority of our Creator, the God of the Bible, as over and above any authority within His creation.

So we are left with the question, if there is a covenant in place between us and our God, how does He execute judgments of blessings and curses on earth? First, He certainly works through all of His created order to execute consequences of blessing and curses. There exists cause and effect according to the order He established. If you jump out of a tall building, you will be hurt. If you continually lie, you will not be trusted. If you do not cultivate your fields, you will grow hungry. If you cultivate your garden and God sends you rain, then you will eat. God's Word speaks to all of life, and it is where we derive our ethical standard for everything.

That said, did God just leave us to live under His rule directly, experiencing the response of God's creation when we

CHAPTER THREE:

COVENANT STRUCTURE AND CHILDREN IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

WE ARE ALMOST TO THE POINT WHERE WE can begin to discuss baptism more specifically. My intention so far has been to provide a context and framework necessary for such a discussion. Without a comprehensive biblical paradigm through which to understand important theological issues, we are in danger of leaning too much on traditions or worse, building good cases on what we might call sandy presuppositions. I am light-years from putting forth a comprehensive paradigm in the first two chapters, but I am hopeful that the reader has a better understanding of the fundamental biblical concept of the covenant.

Without a basic understanding of how the Creator relates to His creation, we cannot even begin a fruitful discussion on the nature of the church and her members. God relates to all of His creation through a personal but legal, rather than a mystical, connection called a covenant. Adam broke the covenant at creation. The wages, or sanction deserved for this sin, is death. Because of the sin of Adam, all men are born in sin. All men are born as enemies of God, rebellious in nature.

God, the sovereign, all-powerful, and just ruler of all creation, comes into history as a conquering King, offering to this rebellious people a peace treaty—a covenant which, if entered into, requires their full allegiance according to its terms. It gives them an opportunity to be reconciled to their Creator. They are to act as vassals carrying out the will of the Great King on earth and act or judge in terms of His law.

One major problem is that, in their rebellious nature, no one is capable of surrendering on their own. As a provision and according to the good pleasure of the King, He provides grace to His people by opening their eyes and giving them the power to submit themselves to Him. In doing so, they confess He is Lord and subject themselves to His rule. Through His power they are able to rule as vassals and help carry out His will on earth as it is done in heaven.

The change of heart wrought by the power of the King is not clearly discernible to other men but is vaguely discernible through outward actions. Put another way, no man knows another man's thoughts and intentions. He can only visibly

CHAPTER 4:

COVENANT STRUCTURE AND CHILDREN IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

WITH A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF GOD'S covenant structure, His three ordained governmental institutions, and His example of how the family and His covenant community interacted in the Old Testament, we can turn our attention to the subject of baptism and the nature of God's covenant people with the coming of Jesus Christ. Since chapter 1 introduced the covenant concept and the two chapters following reviewed it in detail, I will move straight to a discussion of children and covenant structure in the New Testament.

Has there been a change in covenant structure with the coming of Jesus? Is covenant representation still at work? What is

baptism? Who are God's New Covenant people and what does this mean? These are the questions I will address in this chapter.

CONTINUITY IN COVENANT STRUCTURE

It is clear from the New Testament that there has not been a significant break with the structure of the family in general. With the coming of Jesus we do not see a change in the functional hierarchy of the family or in the overall task given to the family.

For man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. That is why a wife ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels. Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman; for as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman. And all things are from God. (1 Cor. 11:8-12)

Paul hearkens back to the creation and ensures that we understand that nothing has changed with God's original family structure. It pictures interdependence and synergy in carrying out God's will.

Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands. Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might

CHAPTER 5:

NEW COVENANT TEXTS REVISITED

HAVING WORKED THROUGH THE UNDERSTANDING of what constitutes (defines) a covenant, covenant institutions, and their application to baptism and the church, a curious question arises. From a scriptural standpoint (over and against a historical argument), how could someone not maintain a paedobaptist perspective? I believe the answer to this question centers around two primary texts in Scripture. Without the confusion over these two passages, I believe the debate over infant baptism would have been over centuries ago. These are the well-known New Covenant passages in the books of Jeremiah and Hebrews.

These texts are cited as primary support for the idea that those within the New Covenant administration are comprised only of God's elect. That is, they have before the world's foundations been chosen as one of God's people in eternity. Their sins have been atoned for and their eternal salvation is secure.

It follows that if this is the case, and baptism is the sign of the New Covenant, then children of believers cannot be baptized as they would be receiving the sign prior to any confession of Christ as their Savior and Lord (even though this does not equate with election). Hence, this understanding of the New Covenant determines one's conclusion on infant baptism. *A person's doctrine of the covenant will ultimately determine their view on baptism.*

So what are we to make of these texts? Are God's New Covenant people in history comprised of only God's elect? To answer these questions, we will need to look in detail at the passages as well as the historical context of the time when Hebrews was composed. At the same time, a backdrop of the previous chapters will have to be kept in mind in regards to covenant structure.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE BOOK OF HEBREWS

As with any book in the Holy Scripture, the audience and historical context of the writing is vitally important. This is especially true in the book of Hebrews since the contemporary context was a unique, transitional time in the early life of the church. The book of Hebrews was written to a Jewish Christian