
KEYNOTE

BAPTISM AS A COVENANT SIGN

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The meaning of Christian baptism generally is identified with the outward symbol for this rite. The ritual application of water to a person may depict a cleansing,¹ as well as a new spiritual beginning from death to life (Col 2:12-13).

Beyond these basic meanings, the Bible's usage of the word "baptism" broadens out to include the concepts of initiation, empowerment,² identification and spiritual union,³ and trial by ordeal.⁴ This article will review some of these meanings in connection with ceremonial baptism, particularly the concept of a symbolic "trial by ordeal" within the framework of God's covenant with His people. As such, baptism should be understood as a sacral sign of the New Covenant.

THE SWEEP OF THE COVENANT

God's covenant is the unifying message and over-arching structure of biblical revelation. Grace, salvation, and judgment are key themes of the Bible, but they all are proffered through the covenantal arrangements that God initiates.

The idea of covenant runs from the early parts of Genesis and appears hundreds of times in the OT. New Testament history begins with Zacharias' confession of the imminent outworking of God's "holy covenant" (Luke 1:72), and the Book of Hebrews explains the climactic revelation of the New Covenant that was

enacted at the last supper and sealed at the cross.

GOD BRINGS MAN INTO COVENANT

The first explicit reference to "covenant" is significant. It occurs before the days of the flood. Whereas the wicked world will be judged by water, Noah's family will be saved through the waters because God promises to bring him into the binding relation of the covenant: "...everything that is on the earth shall die. But *I will establish my covenant* with you; and you shall go into the ark—you, your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives with you."⁵

Whenever an OT covenant was made, whether by God or by men, a special descriptive formula normally was used. The technical phrase in Hebrew for establishing a bi-lateral covenant was "to cut a covenant." This language was used because a ritualistic splitting of a sacrificial animal was involved, as was the case when God made a covenant with Abraham (Gen 15).⁶

In God's covenant with Noah, however, scholars⁷ have noted that the phrasing for making that covenant (in Gen 6:18) is not the usual technical form. Rather, God promises to "establish" or "make firm" his covenant with Noah. This unexpected language may imply that the divine covenant had been initiated before the days of Noah, who was about to become the new father of humanity. That covenant, of course, would have been the same covenant that God had made with the first father of the race.⁸

After Noah, the next key covenant representative was Abraham. Abraham as the human mediator of the covenant became the new representative head of God's people. So much more than being an example of faith, the Jews referred to him as "Father Abraham," and the NT writers identify him as the father of all the faithful.⁹

CONTINUITY OF THE COVENANT

With Abraham God's promises and covenant conditions are most clearly delineated thus far. Here are some key elements of the covenantal arrangement with Abraham:

- The gospel is revealed to Abraham in the promise of a Kinsman-Redeemer.¹⁰
- A perpetual rite of initiation into God's covenant community is established with circumcision.
- This community dedicated to God's service is charged with policing its members, even to the degree of excommunication.¹¹

Most students of ecclesiology recognize the foregoing three elements as the requisite essentials for the organized church. These three essentials definitely are found in the NT church. Unbiased eyes will see them also from the days of Abraham, when the primitive church of the OT was established. With this recognition comes a realization of the continuity of the visible church from the OT into the NT, as well as a knowledge of the unfolding of the Abrahamic Covenant into the New Covenant.¹²

Galatians 3 is a clear bridge between these two promissory covenants. The coming of Christ is at the center of both (3:16, 18, 29). The Gentiles come to God

through Christ, an evident blessing promised to the Father of the faithful (Gal 3:14), and all who belong to Christ are Abraham's seed by faith (3:29).¹³

Galatians 3 draws this close connection between the two covenants. The Redeemer and the beneficiaries are the same, yet there are some key differences. The difference brought by the New Covenant is that there are no longer any outward, distinguishing differences for membership. According to Gal 3:28 there now is no difference between believing Jews and Greeks, between slave and free, between male and female. Outward distinctions have passed away under the universal operation of the New Covenant.

Significantly, no new distinctions are mentioned in this context of continuity and discontinuity of the covenant, particularly no distinction based upon age. This would have been the text where Paul might have revealed that children of believers are no longer in the covenant, since they clearly had been under the Abrahamic Covenant. What Paul does reinforce is the entrance of all covenant members by way of baptism (3:27). Not only will circumcision not be required of Jew nor Gentile, the New Covenant broadened to extend the rite of initiation to women. And if circumcision is not required of Gentile converts, neither will it be required for children of believers. But baptism will be required for children of believers under the gracious—not narrowed—terms of the New Covenant. There are fewer distinctions under the New Covenant, not more than the Abrahamic Covenant.

CIRCUMCISION AND BAPTISM

Reasons for recognizing a primitive OT church from the days of Abraham al-

ready have been given. One of the necessary elements of the church is standardized rituals. The NT church has two, baptism and the Lord's Supper. One is a rite of initiation, the other a rite of renewal.

There should be no surprise that these same two kinds of rites were found in the OT church: circumcision, the rite of initiation for adult and juvenile males, and Passover for all Israelites. Jesus, the Mediator of the New Covenant, instituted the NT form of these two sacraments, and the OT forms were instituted through God's covenant mediators, Abraham and Moses.

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The NT confirms the connection between circumcision and baptism, as well as the Passover and the Lord's Supper.¹⁴ Colossians 2:11-14 is the NT bridge from baptism to circumcision. While the exact mode of baptism may not be in view in this passage,¹⁵ Paul shows that the meaning of circumcision and baptism is the same.

That unified meaning has to do with the Christian's spiritual death in Christ and his vivification sealed by Christ's resurrection. Now it is easy for an immersionist to see a meaning of burial and resurrec-

tion behind the outward form of immersion, but why does Paul bring up circumcision in the same context with the same symbolic meaning of putting away sin and being made alive through the circumcision of Christ? Here is the text from Colossians 2:

“¹¹ In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, ¹² buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. ¹³ And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses.” (NASB)

The repetition of the phrases “in him” and “with him” emphasizes the believer's spiritual union with Christ. That union, of course, is publicly sealed at one's baptism (or circumcision in the OT). In relation to the question of the symbolism of circumcision, just how can someone who is “dead in the uncircumcision of the flesh” be made alive through Christ's circumcision? The answer turns on the meaning of Christ's circumcision.

This “circumcision of Christ” does not refer to his sacramental circumcision on the eighth day after birth, but rather is a symbolic reference to his death by crucifixion. As his divine Representative, God worked out in Christ everything symbolized by Jesus' circumcision and his baptism. As our appointed Sin-bearer, not a token portion of the flesh, but his whole body was given over to the circumcision of death “to put off the body of sins of the flesh.” God's purpose in this truth,

symbolized by the covenant sign of circumcision, is that Christ's people must die to themselves and be made alive in Christ.¹⁶

BAPTISM AS A SYMBOLIC ORDEAL

Colossians 2:11-13 speaks of our identity with Christ through the circumcision of his death and our baptism into his representative death. There are passages that also describe Christ's atoning death as a baptism: "But I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how distressed I am till it is accomplished!" (Luke 12:50).¹⁷ This particular use of baptism cannot mean initiation or identification. It clearly means an impending personal trial.

There is biblical background for baptism depicting passage through a trial. A good starting point is 1 Cor 10, where the Israelites faced a terrible ordeal. Behind them were the swords of the Egyptians, and before them were the waves of the Red Sea. When God opened a way in the sea, there still were life-threatening conditions as the Israelites passed between two ominous walls of water that could kill them as easily as their pursuers.

God could have led his people out of Egypt through a rose garden, but he took them out in the midst of trial. God was testing their faith, and they passed this first test. This trial is called a baptism: "Moreover, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware that all our fathers were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea..." (1 Cor 10:1-2). More than a passage through the sea, this event was a "rite of passage" to prove God's care for the Israelites, as well as to prove their fidelity to the God of their fathers. It was an OT type of covenant baptism.¹⁸

The other OT baptism that enlarges our understanding of NT baptism as a covenant sign is the ordeal that Noah's family went through. Like the Israelites at the Red Sea, Noah's passage on the ark also occurred in a life and death situation. 1 Peter 3:20-21 links that diluvian ordeal to baptism:

"...in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water. There is also an antitype which now saves us—baptism (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God), through the resurrection of Jesus Christ...."

The great flood judgment brought God's judicial ordeal upon all the world. The flood waters, likened to baptism by Peter, executed judgment upon rebels, while these same waters lifted Noah's family out of a corrupt world and brought deliverance. Thus can Peter say that Noah was saved ("delivered") through the threatening waters of baptism.

Note Peter's clarification that the symbol of baptism in his argument is not that of purging the world or cleansing Noah's family. Rather, Peter teaches that deliverance from death during the flood is a type of the Christian's public baptism in which God promises deliverance from death in the resurrection of Christ. In this way baptism is an antitype of God's judicial ordeal that the Christian undergoes when he publicly identifies with the ordeal of Christ's death (Christ calls his passion a "baptism" in Luke 12:50) and with the vindication and deliverance of Christ sealed by his resurrection. The Christian's "good conscience" undergirds Peter's argument that baptism must also be viewed forensi-

cally as a judicial acquittal before God as God passes over in judgment to bring deliverance.

Christian baptism brings its recipients into close identification with the judicial ordeal that Christ underwent at the cross. This forensic understanding of the ritual portrays an official entrance into Christ's New Covenant.

PROMISES AND THREATS IN COVENANTAL SIGNS

What should not be lost in the foregoing discussion of circumcision and baptism is that the NT often speaks of baptism as a symbolic ordeal through which its objects may be condemned or delivered. This concept has been lost to the church because baptism has been studied apart from its covenantal purpose, especially by disregarding its OT parallel, circumcision.

God's covenant with his people is a binding relation.¹⁹ Whether in the OT or NT, he has given outward seals²⁰ of his blessing that comes by walking with him. Those same seals depict a threat of punishment for covenant breakers.²¹

To be explicit, circumcision, the initiatory rite of the old covenant, promised blessing to its recipients in the following symbols: 1) removal of outward corruption, and 2) a daily reminder in a most mundane way that God's "...covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting

covenant,²² and 3) a promise of a posterity and that Abraham's Seed²³ would deliver his people. On the other hand, the foreboding symbolism of circumcision is the threat of being "cut off." This involved expulsion from the covenant community and even loss of posterity.²⁴

The OT rite of covenant renewal was the Passover. More than a didactic memorial of historical deliverance, this annual observance re-consecrated God's people to him and his service. The Israelite forefathers should have been dead, cut down in Egypt when the destroying angel passed by. That threat of the Passover hung over succeeding generations that might refuse to obey the terms of observance.²⁵ On the other hand, God promised the blessing of life and deliverance to those who earnestly partook of the substitutionary Passover lamb of innocence. The elements of threat and promise in the observance of Passover reveal its sacramental nature as a covenant sign.

In the NT the two covenant signs are bloodless due to the finality of Christ's sacrifice.²⁶ The Lord's Supper, like the Passover, brings the promise of life through the life-giving symbols of God's perfect provision—the innocent Lamb of God who gives his life for the guilty.

Beyond the promise of life in Christ, however, many have failed to understand the warning of death in the Lord's Supper. Because this sacrament is a binding sign of covenantal renewal in Christ, Paul warns that the curse of the covenant will fall upon those who are not sincere in their observance. Nothing less than the curse of death²⁷ that Christ underwent will fall upon partakers of the covenant meal who will not personally appropriate Christ's atoning substitu-

tion in the symbols for his shed blood and broken body. As a covenantal sign, the Lord's Supper conveys a threatened curse besides its known blessings.

BAPTISM AS A COVENANT SIGN

The continuity of circumcision with baptism as parallel rites of covenant initiation has already been developed in this article. Both signify a promised blessing and a threatened curse under the two dispensations. More than its apparent symbolism of washing, the NT makes plain that the word "baptism" often conveys the idea of a life-threatening situation.

Water is essential to life and is life-giving, but too much water at the wrong time or in the wrong way brings death. From the days of its ceremonial uses in the ancient Near East, water, as a "two-edged sword," has been used to symbolize both cursing and blessing. In the context of ancient covenants, water ordeals communicated a threat for infidelity, but a promise of life for integrity.

Christian baptism brings its recipients into close identification with the judicial ordeal that Christ underwent at the cross. That ordeal he called his baptism²⁸ which is proclaimed as his followers' own baptism when they undergo the symbolic ordeal of water baptism.²⁹ This forensic understanding of the ritual portrays an official entrance into Christ's New Covenant.

Covenant theologians view baptism as the authoritative seal³⁰ that displaced circumcision in guaranteeing the terms of the covenant. Baptism, the New Covenant parallel to circumcision, reveals more of what God is saying at the rite of initiation than what the passive object of baptism is testifying. This covenantal perspective of the

sacraments easily and expectedly fits the Bible's emphasis on the sovereignty of the God who is the First Cause in issues of soteriology and ecclesiology. At the same time, the passivity of the recipients of baptism accords with the biblical teaching of recognizing children of believers as covenant members.

CONCLUSION

Before time the members of the Trinity jointly determined a plan of salvation for God's elect. Because of the binding nature of the agreement and because the Son of God is given a reward in carrying out the Father's will, some theologians have observed a covenantal construct that they have labeled the Covenant of Redemption.³¹

How fitting it is that the beneficiaries of Christ's work should be baptized, not just in His Name, but in the Names of Father, Son, and Spirit. Trinitarian baptism in obedience to Christ's Great Commission is the beginning of life-long obedience in everything that Jesus has commanded his disciples. As such, New Covenant members who receive baptism as the sign of the covenant are sharing in the benefits of the Covenant of Grace that God first promised to Adam and Eve, that were sealed to Abraham and his seed through the sign of circumcision, and that now are secure to the Lord's people because of the baptism of Jesus in his passion and death. 

¹ Acts 22:16: "Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name."

² Luke 3:16.

³ 1 Cor 10:2; Rom 6:3.

⁴ “I came to send fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! But I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how distressed I am till it is accomplished!” (Luke 12:50).

⁵ Gen 6:17b-18.

⁶ Gen 15 does not contain the technical language of “cutting a covenant”—still it does portray God in the form of a smoking lamp binding himself to the terms of his own covenant by undergoing the execration ritual among the foreboding pieces of the slaughtered substitute. Secondly, even though an initiatory ritual is acted out on God’s part, it is best to take this event as God’s confirmation of bringing Abraham into his pre-existing covenant, rather than God’s establishing a brand new covenant at this point.

⁷ See Dumbrell in *Covenant and Creation*, pp. 25-26.

⁸ Many theologians recognize a covenant relation between God and Adam. The elements of covenant are manifest in the garden, such as 1) a sovereign and a vassal, 2) a threat and curse, and 3) a promise and blessing implied in access to the tree of life. Careful Bible students believe that God’s messenger Hosea corroborates this Adamic covenant in his proverbial remark that Israel, “like Adam ... transgressed the covenant“ (6:7, NASB).

⁹ “...Abraham, who is the father of us all” (Rom 4:16). Rom 4:12 says Abraham is the father of believing Gentiles.

¹⁰ Gal 3:8 indicates that Abraham had the gospel in the promise of his blessed Seed: compare Acts 3:25 with Gal 3:16.

¹¹ Abraham will disciple his children (Gen 18:19) in the fear of God. Those progeny refusing to circumcise their children will see their children excluded

from the covenant (Gen 17:14) in fulfillment of the covenantal symbolism of circumcision.

¹² Besides having similar promises, one argument for the continuity of the Abrahamic Covenant with the New Covenant is the thrust of the opening book of the NT. Matthew’s gospel introduces Jesus as “the son of David, the son of Abraham,” and ends with the promised Messiah’s command to “make disciples of all nations, baptizing them....” The target nations in the Great Commission (Matt 28:19) are the same nations promised to Abraham, who would become “the father of many nations” (Gen 17:4-5; cf. Rom 4:17-18 and Gal 3:8, 14). Rather than initiating these Gentiles into the household of faith through Abrahamic circumcision, they will be baptized under the more universal terms of the New Covenant.

¹³ Recognition of this spiritual continuity of the Abrahamic with the New Covenant helps answer the charge of anti-covenant theologians that the Abrahamic Covenant was largely a national/political type of covenant.

¹⁴ “For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us. Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth” (1 Cor 5:7-8).

¹⁵ Col 2:11-13 is not speaking of the two rituals, but of the one spiritual meaning. This is clear from the introductory phrase, “in Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands....”

¹⁶ “When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory. Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth” (Col 3:4-5); “yet now He has reconciled in

the body of His flesh through death, to present you holy, and blameless, and above reproach in His sight” (Col 1:21-22).

¹⁷ Cf. Matt 20:22-23 and Mark 10:38-39 for Christ’s prediction of his approaching passion as a baptism.

¹⁸ Some non-covenant theologians who insist that βαπτίζω always means “immerse” have difficulty in explaining the OT baptism in 1 Cor 10:2, especially since the Israelites came through the sea on dry ground while only the Egyptians were submerged. Covenant theologians will grant that the Egyptian enemies did receive the threatened curses of this baptism (being overwhelmed by the ominous outward substance). At the same time, the Israelites (including their children), survived this trial by ordeal and received the covenant blessings of deliverance and new life, even though the outward substance was not ceremonially applied to them. The larger event of passing through the sea on a dry path must be seen as their baptism, an ordeal by water.

¹⁹ Covenant treaties of the ancient Near East involved graphic rituals that promised blessing for obedience and threatened death for infidelity. The Hebrews were familiar with these covenant arrangements, and when God spoke in terms of the covenant, his people understood.

²⁰ In Rom 4:11 the apostle calls the covenant rite of circumcision both a “sign” and a “seal.” As an outward sign it symbolizes inward spiritual grace, and as a seal it confirms the divine promises of the covenant secured by the Mediator of the covenant (see WLC 162 & 165).

²¹ For example, God executed his threats of the covenant by scattering the bodies of covenant breakers in the wilderness (1 Cor 10:5).

²² Gen 17:13.

²³ Gal 3:16.

²⁴ Gen 17:14 calls for excommunication based on the symbol of circumcision. Paul, who threatens anathemas in Gal 1:8-9 for those who promote an anti-gospel, focuses that threat in Gal 5:12 on the Judaizers when he calls for their emasculation, apparently in keeping with the curse image of circumcision.

²⁵ The mandatory requirements for Passover observance are found in Exod 12:14-15.

²⁶ “...we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

¹⁴ For by one offering He has perfected forever those who are being sanctified” (Heb 10:10, 14).

²⁷ 1 Cor 11:29-30 relates the judgment of illness and death upon those that abused the Lord’s Supper.

²⁸ Luke 12:50.

²⁹ The covenantal perspective of Christ’s baptism/ordeal at the cross helps shed light on how the waterless baptism of Rom 6:3-6 gives the covenant child a stake in Christ’s death and resurrection.

³⁰ “And [Abraham] received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith” (Rom 4:11).

³¹ For a fuller development of the Covenant of Redemption, see what Charles Hodge says at <http://www.mbrem.com/covenant/covchod4.htm>.

EXEGESIS & THEOLOGY

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE MODE OF BAPTISM

JOHNA. BATTLE

One issue that has concerned and divided Christians is the manner in which we should be baptized. Protestants have divided into different denominations over this issue. Lutheran and most Reformed churches practice baptism by sprinkling or pouring water on the person baptized. Baptist and many similar churches believe the only valid way to baptize is by immersing the person in water. While most churches that practice sprinkling or pouring believe that is the proper mode to use, being based on Scripture, they do recognize immersion as a valid mode, although not the proper one to use. Most immersionist churches, however, believe that the mode is essential, and that someone who has undergone sprinkling or pouring has not been baptized at all.

Arguments favoring these different modes of baptism can be divided into several categories: the meaning of the word *baptize* itself, the descriptions of individual baptisms in the New Testament, similar Old Testament and intertestament practices among the Jews, the practice of the early Christian churches as shown in literature and archaeology, and the significance of baptism as it relates to mode. This article will briefly summarize the first four of these arguments, but will concentrate on the final argument—the significance of baptism as it relates to mode. As the sign of the new covenant, baptism by

sprinkling or pouring seems indicated by the Scriptures that describe that new covenant.

POSITION OF THE WESTMINSTER STANDARDS

Perhaps the best creedal statement of Reformed theology is the Westminster Confession of Faith. It briefly states the classic Presbyterian position regarding the mode of baptism:

“3. Dipping of the person into the water is not necessary; but Baptism is rightly administered by pouring or sprinkling water upon the person.”¹

The Confession says that baptism is “rightly administered” by pouring or sprinkling, and that immersion (“dipping”) is “not necessary.” “Rightly administered” meant that pouring or sprinkling had Scriptural support. The term “not necessary” meant to the Westminster divines that immersion should not be practiced in Reformed churches. They prohibited immersion because, by the exclusive principle, all worship forms that are not explicitly required by Scripture or necessarily derived from Scripture were to be avoided. It was only recently that the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has allowed immersion to be used at the discretion of local sessions.²

Reformed churches believed immersion was “not necessary” for valid baptism to take place. However, they did recognize baptisms by immersion as valid, although not “rightly” administered. It was not necessary for those who had been baptized by immersion to be rebaptized when joining a Reformed church. A sacrament may be valid although improperly

administered; for example, baptizing by immersing the head only is an improper mode, but it does not negate the sacrament.

SUMMARY OF OTHER ARGUMENTS

The argument regarding the mode of baptism is lengthy and complex. This article will concentrate on the argument regarding the significance of baptism. Here is a brief summary of other arguments supporting the traditional Reformed position.³

Meaning of the word "baptize"

Immersionists claim that the Greek word to baptize (βαπτίζω *baptizo*) means to immerse.⁴ Hence, Jesus' command in Matt 28:19 is a command to "immerse all nations." Using any other mode would be disobedience to this command.

Careful examination of this word group, however, reveals that *immerse* would be a poor translation; the traditional transliteration *baptize* is much better, as the meaning is not modal at all. Rather, the word means that the object has been changed in some way by the outward element applied. Often it means to be made wet by water or some other liquid; this can be done by dipping, by pouring, or by sprinkling.⁵ The idea of bringing a change in the object baptized is well illustrated by the use of the term for dying—to "baptize" with blood can mean to "dye" with blood, again, using a variety of modes. Thus, when Jesus will defeat his enemies, his garments will be "baptized with blood," dyed red, by having blood spattered upon them.⁶ There are many other examples where these terms are used with modes other than dipping or immersing.⁷

Descriptions of actual baptisms in the New Testament

Immersionists often claim that the language used to describe John's baptism of Jesus and Philip's baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch indicates immersion was used. John baptized "in (*en*) the Jordan."⁸ After he was baptized Jesus "immediately went up (*anabaino*) out of (*ek*) the water,"⁹ or "from (*apo*) the water."¹⁰ Philip and the eunuch "went down (*katabaino*) into (*eis*) the water" and "came up (*anabaino*) out of (*ek*) the water."¹¹

Actually, these narratives employ Greek prepositions that have a wide variety of usage. *En* can mean "in, with, by means of"; *ek* can mean "out of, away from, apart from"; and *eis* can mean "into, unto, to, toward."¹² Thus these phrases can well be translated "down to the water" and "up from the water."

Many examples of baptisms in the NT support the idea that water baptism was a simple rite, performed easily and quickly in a variety of settings, sometimes when little water was available. Sometimes sprinkling or pouring are mentioned in the immediate context.

The earliest pictures and fonts available after Christ show baptisms taking place, usually with the person standing in shallow water with water being poured over his head. This would fit these NT examples, with John baptizing "in the Jor-

dan,” that is, standing in the water while people came down to him to be baptized. The actual mode of baptism is not mentioned in the text. It says merely that people “went down” to the water to be baptized, and then “went up” the bank to dry ground again. This interpretation is confirmed in Acts 8—few would suggest that Philip immersed himself along with the eunuch, yet it says that *both* Philip and the eunuch “went down” to the water and then “came up” from the water. It is talking about their going to the place where the baptism took place, not to the baptism itself.

Many examples of baptisms in the NT support the idea that water baptism was a simple rite, performed easily and quickly in a variety of settings, sometimes when little water was available. Sometimes sprinkling or pouring are mentioned in the immediate context. These examples would include John’s baptizing at the Jordan and at Aenon near Salim, the baptism of 3,000 at Pentecost, Philip’s baptizing the eunuch in the desert, the baptism of Saul, the baptism of Cornelius and his family, and the baptism of the Philippian jailer and his family.¹³ In these cases immersion would be difficult at least, and does not seem to be in view in the text. On the other hand, baptism by sprinkling or pouring fits in naturally with the text and with the historical setting.

Jewish ceremonial washings

While Jewish customs concerning various ceremonial washings are not the rule for Christian baptism, they do provide interesting background.¹⁴ The washings commanded in the OT were very frequently by sprinkling; that is why the author of Hebrews uses the term “baptisms” when describing the sprinkling of

blood.¹⁵ Sometimes the OT regulations use the general term to “wash,” in which case the mode is not specified.¹⁶

During the intertestament period the Jews developed many rules to safeguard the 613 commandments they found in the Torah.¹⁷ This adding to and explaining the law was developed orally and initially recorded about A.D. 200 in the Mishnah and then more fully in the Talmud about A.D. 500.

An example of this development is found in Mark 7:4, “When they [Pharisees] come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles.”¹⁸ This passage refers to the Pharisaical interpretations of Lev 15, which mentions ceremonial defilement of people, utensils, beds, and clothes. People, utensils, and clothes are to be washed.¹⁹ The Pharisees required frequent washings just in case such defilement might have taken place. Their requirements are not found in the OT; it is for this reason that Jesus did not always abide by them.²⁰ He accused the Jewish leaders of adding to the commands of God the commands of men, which sometimes even supplanted the commands of God.²¹

Since an unclean item falling into a vessel made the vessel and its contents unclean,²² the rabbis reasoned that water had to be poured or sprinkled over an item to purify the item; in that way the vessel and its contents would not be made unclean themselves. They noted that a large body of water was not contaminated by an unclean person going in it; therefore, they concluded, if a vessel of water would be of sufficient size, an unclean person or other unclean items could be cleansed in

it without making the water unclean. They determined exact measurements to meet this requirement, generally being stated as water sufficient to immerse a man. The name given to a water bath of this size was a *mikveh*. Archeological examples of such *mikvehs* have been found near the Dead Sea in the village of Qumran, where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found, and on the fortress of Masada, the last place where the Jews held out against the Romans in A.D. 73.

Jewish ceremonial washings in *mikvehs* included proselyte baptisms as well as other periodic cleansings. The community of Essenes at Qumran insisted on many such washings for its members. Its *Rule of the Community* states that if the person is unfaithful to their covenant, then “he will not sanctify himself with seas and rivers or be made clean with any water for washing.” On the other hand, when it describes the actual cleansing procedure, it mentions the mode of sprinkling:

“But in a spirit of true counsel . . . and in the submission of his soul to all the statutes of God his flesh will be cleansed, that he may be sprinkled with water for impurity and sanctify himself with water of cleanness.”²³

While most scholars assume that immersion was the mode used in these Jewish washings, and while that is the practice now used, the literature itself does not require that this mode was used originally. In any case, these non-Scriptural practices are not normative for Christian baptism.

Early Christian baptism

The practice of the church after the apostolic age reveals the way that the early Christians understood the practice of baptism, handed down from the

apostles and those who followed them. The writings of the church fathers are one source of information, and archeological research into early pictures, churches, and baptisteries is another source that helps us interpret the words of the fathers.²⁴ While the early church fathers’ language often is ambiguous, it seems that they concur in the early practice as normally being done while standing in water. Statements about actual mode are not at all definite until the third century, where they appear mixed (“water-bath, plunged, washed, sprinkled”).

One of the clearest statements is found in the *Didache*, a Christian document dated ca. A.D. 150:

“But concerning baptism, thus you shall baptize. Having first recited all these things, baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit in living (running) water. But if you have not living water, then baptize in other water; and if you are not able in cold, then in warm. But if you have neither, then pour water on the head three times in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”²⁵

This statement of the *Didache* can be taken in two ways: (1) immerse if possible, otherwise pour; or (2) baptize, if possible, with the person standing in running water or in a receptacle; otherwise, the person baptized may stand on the floor; in either case, pouring would be used.

Without the benefit of archeology to help interpret the early Christian literature, many in the past have assumed definition (1) to be the case. For example, John Calvin assumed immersion to be the ancient practice:

But whether the person being baptized should be wholly immersed, and whether thrice or once, whether he should only be sprinkled with poured water—these details are of no importance, but ought to be optional to churches according to the diversity of countries. Yet the word “baptize” means to immerse, and it is clear that the rite of immersion was observed in the ancient church.²⁶

However, archeological research since Calvin’s time has revealed that the early churches practiced baptism normally by having the person stand in water, with water being poured over the head.²⁷ This would agree with interpretation (2) of the *Didache*. In confirmation of this practice, the two earliest extant Christian church structures, dating from the third century, have baptisteries that are much too shallow to allow immersion.²⁸

Archeological research since Calvin’s time has revealed that the early churches practiced baptism normally by having the person stand in water, with water being poured over the head.

MODE AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF BAPTISM

While the various linguistic and historical arguments regarding the mode of baptism are important, the argument would not be complete without an examination of the meaning of baptism and the way that meaning relates to its mode.

Immersionist argument

There are two NT passages that relate baptism to the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ, and thereby to the death of our old life and the birth of our new life.

Or don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. (Rom 6:3-4)

. . . 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 2:12)

Many proponents of each position believe that these passages are speaking of spiritual baptism, not water baptism. However, good arguments can be made that Paul is speaking of water baptism in the two passages. Yet, even if only spiritual baptism is in view, it seems reasonable that water baptism should reflect in its mode this same concept. Immersionists claim that immersion in water most closely represents the death-burial-resurrection figure.

Total symbolism of baptism

While baptism does signify our death and resurrection in Christ, its meaning is much broader.²⁹ The Westminster Larger Catechism lists seven different truths symbolized in baptism: “ingrafting into Christ, forgiveness of sins by his blood, regeneration by the Holy Spirit, adoption as God’s children, resurrection to everlasting life, admission to the visible church, and engagement to be the Lord’s.”³⁰ The Westminster standards link baptism to the covenant of grace. All these

significances are positive or beneficial. It is possible to summarize these significances in the following way:

Union with Christ.—Paul mentions this aspect of baptism often, especially in connection with Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection.³¹ God now sees us as in Christ, sharing his righteousness and standing. Some have made this particular significance the primary meaning of baptism.³²

Forgiveness of sins.—Very often baptism is linked to purification, cleansing, forgiveness, and acceptance with God.³³ In a similar manner the gospels associate John’s baptizing with forgiveness and cleansing.³⁴

Regeneration and baptism by the Holy Spirit.—Water baptism symbolizes our spiritual baptism, our regeneration by the Holy Spirit, just as physical circumcision symbolized spiritual regeneration.³⁵

Initiation into the visible church.—Christ commanded all his disciples to be baptized, and it was the standard way for believers to publicly confess Christ and join the visible church, the body of believers.³⁶ Since baptism and circumcision signify the same thing, baptism has replaced circumcision as the means to enter the visible church.³⁷

Baptism should symbolize all of these elements, not just that of death and resurrection with Christ. The sprinkling of water and blood and the pouring out of the Spirit are scriptural terms and figures for these spiritual blessings. In the Scriptures the modes of sprinkling and pouring are most often associated with these concepts. Baptism by sprinkling or pouring

best symbolizes the totality of these blessings.

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Baptism and the new covenant

In addition to the implied covenant God made with Adam when he was created (the “covenant of works”) there are several covenants explicitly mentioned in the Bible that God made with humans on the earth. These include the covenants with Noah, with Abraham, with Moses, with David, and the new covenant. These covenants provide the backbone of biblical theology. Covenant theology, developed since the Reformation, has demonstrated that these biblical covenants are outgrowths or further enactments of a divine plan, which can be framed as a covenant among the persons of the Trinity. Theologians have called this divine cov-

enant the covenant of redemption, or, when applied to us, the covenant of grace. In particular, the Father determined that the Son would take a human nature, perfectly obey the Father's law, and suffer and die for the sins of the elect. In return for this obedience, the Father would reward him with an eternal kingdom and a people to be his own. These elect people would be gathered by the ministry of the Holy Spirit.³⁸

From Adam until Abraham there were individual believers and believing families or clans, but no outward organized body of the church. In Gen 17 God appeared to Abraham and again declared his covenant with him, that God would be his God and the God of his descendants. At that time God instituted the sacrament of circumcision as the rite of initiation into that covenant. Covenant theologians date the beginning of the visible church as an institution from that date.³⁹

Throughout the remainder of the OT history circumcision was required for entry into the covenant community of God, the visible church. The covenant with Moses added the tabernacle system with its Levitical priesthood and multitude of sacrifices. The covenant with David promised a perpetual kingship for that family, specifically, the great messianic king. However, the types and prophecies of the OT pointed to the coming of the Messiah and a better day ahead, when God would not only bring the Messiah, but would give a new heart to his people, to obey God's law and receive all the blessings promised in these covenants.⁴⁰

When Christ came he fulfilled all the demands of the old covenants, and instituted the new covenant.⁴¹ Before Christ came it was not yet revealed that the mes-

sianic coming would take place in two phases, first he would come to suffer, then he would come again in glory to judge and to rule; this truth was made known in the NT.⁴² Therefore, the present dispensation exists in a tension, often called "already, and not yet." Some aspects of the new covenant are now in place, but the fullness of its fulfillment will take place in the future, at the second coming of Christ.

Likewise, it was also newly revealed in the NT that the Gentiles would be made equal partakers with the Jews in the promises of the new covenant. They would do this without having to become proselytes to Judaism.⁴³ In keeping with this new state of affairs, the administration of the visible church changed. The sacrificial and temple laws were abrogated, having been fulfilled by Christ's sacrifice. Circumcision, a sign marking primarily the physical descendants of Israel, was no longer required. Rather, baptism, a sign of the universal blessings of the new covenant, became the new ritual for both Jew and Gentile to become a part of the visible church. It is for this reason that we can refer to baptism as a sign of the new covenant, and thereby as a sign of the covenant of grace.

Ancient covenant initiation

During the twentieth century archaeologists unearthed thousands of texts from the ancient Near East (ANE) dated thousands of years before Christ. The transcription and translation of many of these texts provide scholars with a far greater understanding of the historical, cultural, and legal background of the OT. Of special importance is the use of covenant formats in international relations during that era. ANE covenants followed a set pattern, including a historical intro-

duction, the parties of the covenant, the requirements of the covenant, the rewards for obedience and penalties for disobedience, and a provision for periodic reading and renewal of the covenant. This pattern is duplicated in the book of Deuteronomy and elsewhere in the OT. George E. Mendenhall has pioneered in this area for the past fifty years, relating the international covenants of the ANE to those found in the Hebrew Bible.⁴⁴ These studies reveal that the Mosaic covenant closely follows the form of international covenants of the second millennium B.C. (the time of Moses).

An important feature of ancient covenants was the initiatory ritual. The king (the “vassal”) being bound to a covenant by a greater king (the “suzerain”) was required to make a sacrifice and call down imprecations on himself if he should break that covenant. Echoes of that custom are seen in God’s passing between the pieces of the animals as he confirmed his covenant with Abraham and in the nobles’ passing between the pieces of animals (figuratively speaking) in the days of Jeremiah.⁴⁵

In a similar manner both circumcision and baptism are initiatory rituals, bringing the person under the terms of the Abrahamic and new covenants. These rites picture what are called the sanctions of the covenant—the sanctions being either the promised rewards for obedience or the threatened punishments for disobedience. They picture life, and they picture death.

In particular, baptism pictures the positive benefits spelled out in traditional Reformed theology, but it also pictures death, the divine penalty for disobedience. That is why Jesus could refer to his own

approaching suffering and death as a “baptism.”⁴⁶ For the believer baptism pictures the death of Jesus (and our death in him) because of our sins and the life of Jesus (and our new life in him) because of his obedience. On the other hand, for the unbeliever baptism pictures the threat of death that his sin and unbelief bring upon him. Baptism does not automatically regenerate a person, but it does place him in a position of greater privilege and obligation as a member of God’s covenant community, and places him under the sanctions of the new covenant.

This understanding of the significance of baptism harmonizes all the various Scriptural passages into one concept, which in turn corresponds to ancient practice. If this correspondence is correct, the underlying significance of baptism is that we place ourselves and those under us (children, in the NT) under the obligations of the new covenant. Baptism would therefore symbolize our obligation to accept the blessings available through faith and obedience, and the curses resulting from disobedience and rebellion. Ultimately it pictures Christ, who took those covenant curses on himself so that we, through faith in him, could receive the blessings of the new covenant.

Mode as it relates to the new covenant

Since baptism primarily represents the new covenant and its sanctions, its mode may be determined by examining scriptural passages related to the establishment and operation of the new covenant. This examination reveals that sprinkling and pouring are the primary modes associated with this covenant; immersion is not referred to in any of these passages.

Some passages describing the new covenant (such as Jer 31) do not contain

any of these modal terms. But several other new covenant passages do. Here is a brief account of them:

Isaiah 52:15.—This verse introduces a classic passage predicting the coming Messiah, his sufferings, and his reward of a kingdom of the elect (Isa 52:13-53:12). When the suffering Messiah comes, he will sprinkle many nations.⁴⁷ This refers to the cleansing of the Gentiles that will result from the new covenant. When the Ethiopian eunuch read this passage, Philip taught him that it was speaking of Jesus; the eunuch believed and, as a result, Philip baptized him, presumably and most appropriately by sprinkling.

Ezekiel 36:24-27.—This passage describes the blessings that are to befall Israel when God fulfills the new covenant. It will produce regeneration, a new heart of flesh given by God's Spirit. In the immediately preceding parallel statement God says, "I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean."

Joel 2:28-32.—God predicts that in the last days he would "pour out his Spirit on all people" and bestow miraculous spiritual gifts on them, and there will be an influx of new believers; this will be followed by "the great and dreadful day of the Lord." This promise is similar to Zech 12:10, "I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit [or Spirit] of grace and supplication." During his Pentecost sermon Peter said that Joel's prophecy was being fulfilled as the Christians exercised their special spiritual gifts.⁴⁸ This "pouring out" of the Spirit was called a "baptism" of the Holy Spirit by John the Baptist,⁴⁹ and is one of the signs of the introduction of the new covenant. In the book of Acts occurrences of the baptism of the Holy Spirit were accompanied at the

same time with water baptism.⁵⁰ The mode of pouring, as well as that of sprinkling, fits well with this prophetic context.

Baptism does not automatically regenerate a person, but it does place him in a position of greater privilege and obligation as a member of God's covenant community, and places him under the sanctions of the new covenant.

Hebrews 10:19-22.—The author of Hebrews describes our status under the new covenant; now we can draw near to God, "having our heart sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water." The two expressions "bodies washed" and "hearts sprinkled" are parallel. The sprinkling of our hearts by the blood of Christ is metaphoric of spiritual cleansing; the washing of our bodies probably refers to water baptism as picturing the cleansing of our hearts. The mode of sprinkling would be most appropriate in this case. The previous context in Hebrews clearly links this mode to the new covenant. Hebrews 8 quotes at length the prophecy of the new covenant in Jer 31. Hebrews 9:10-15 states that the "sprinkling" of blood to purify people outwardly has been replaced in the "new order" by the "cleansing" produced by the blood of

Christ on our consciences. The parallel term for “sprinkling” in Heb 9 is “baptisms.”⁵¹ Since sprinkling often was of blood, this mode therefore symbolizes death and burial, as well as new life under the resurrection.

CONCLUSION

Baptism by sprinkling or pouring has strong scriptural support from the usage of the terms employed and from the historical situation. In addition, the significance of baptism provides confirmation of these modes. Baptism is the initiatory rite that brings one into the covenant community of God (the visible church) and into the terms of the new covenant. As such it signifies the curses and the blessings of the new covenant; it obligates the person to believe in Christ so that he will bear the covenant curses in his place; it also warns the person of the serious nature of that obligation. The new covenant is described in several Scriptures; in those contexts immersion is never mentioned; rather, whenever a mode is mentioned in the context, it is pouring or sprinkling. The teaching of the Westminster Standards on the mode of baptism is confirmed both by traditional biblical exegesis and by newer research into the background of the biblical covenants. 

¹ WCF 28:3. The Westminster divines cited the following Scriptures in support: Mark 7:4; Acts 1:5; cf. 2:34, 17, 41; 10:45-47; 11:15-16; 16:33; 1 Cor 10:2; Heb 9:10, 19-22.

² The PCUSA’s current policy: “The water used for Baptism should be common to the location, and shall be applied to the person by pouring, sprinkling, or immersion. By whatever

mode, the water should be applied visibly and generously” (Book of Order W-3.3605). Traditionally, only two modes were permitted; for example, in 1950 this was the stated policy for infants: “He is to baptize the child with water, by pouring or sprinkling it on the head of the child, without adding any other ceremony,” and for adults: “The minister shall baptize the candidate by pouring or sprinkling water upon his head” (Directory for Worship 8:2-3).

³ For a more thorough discussion of these arguments, see John A. Battle, syllabus for Theology 4: The Church and Eschatology, ch. 5, “History of Baptism Through New Testament Times,” and ch. 8, “Mode of Baptism” (http://www.wrs.edu/courses/theology_4.htm).

⁴ This would be true for all the related verbs and nouns from the same Greek root.

⁵ As *bapto* (βάπτω) in Luke 16:24 (dipping tip of finger in water) and in Dan 4:33 and 5:21 LXX (condensation of dew); and *baptizo* in Mark 7:4 (ceremonial sprinkling of household items, in Luke 11:38 (ceremonial pouring of water over hands before eating), and in Heb 9:10 (sprinkling of blood in the OT law; cf. v. 13).

⁶ Rev 19:13, *bapto* used for “dye,” in this case not by immersion, but by spattering (cf. Isa 63:3, Heb. נָזַח *nazah* in the Qal stem). The translation “dipped in blood” in Rev 19:13 in many English translations is incorrect; it should be “dyed with blood.”

⁷ As Jdt 12:7 and Sir 34:25 in the LXX; also several examples in classical Greek in which shed blood “baptized” clouds, a lake, and the ground, cited by Kenneth Wuest, *Studies in the Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament* (Grand

Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1945), 71; these examples contradict Wuest's own conclusion that "*baptizo* means, 'to dip, to immerse.' It never means 'to sprinkle'" (p. 75).

⁸ Matt 3:6 = Mark 1:5.

⁹ Mark 1:10.

¹⁰ Matt 3:16.

¹¹ Acts 8:38-39.

¹² These definitions are given in any standard lexicon or concordance.

Young's Concordance supplies all the English terms used to translate these prepositions in the KJV, along with the number of times each English term is used.

¹³ For details about these accounts that support an easily administered rite involving pouring or sprinkling, see Battle, "Chapter 8, Mode of Baptism," 8.13-14.

¹⁴ For a more detailed discussion of Jewish ceremonial washings, see Battle, "Chapter 5, 'History of Baptism Through New Testament Times,'" 5.2-5.

¹⁵ Heb 9:10, 13.

¹⁶ Such as the cleansed leper, who must "wash" (רָחַץ *rachas*) himself in addition to being sprinkled by the priest (Lev 14:8).

¹⁷ According to Jewish tradition the Torah contains 613 commandments that God gave to Moses for the people to keep. Rabbis have counted 248 positive commandments and 365 negative commandments.

¹⁸ In Mark 7:4 the Greek words for "wash" and "washing" are *baptizo* and *baptismos*. The Pharisees did not immerse themselves, but rather had water poured over their hands.

¹⁹ E.g., Lev 15:4, 6, 9, 12, etc.; cf. Mishnah *Kelim* ("Vessels"), pp. 604-49 in the Danby translation.

²⁰ As in Luke 11:38, when Jesus "was not baptized" (Greek ἐβαπτίσθη *ebaptisthe*) before eating (that is, did not ceremonially have water poured over his hands).

²¹ As in Mark 7:9-13.

²² Lev 11:33-34; Num 19:15.

²³ Translated by Millar Burrows, *The Dead Sea Scrolls* (New York: The Viking Press, 1955), 373; sometimes this document is called the *Manual of Discipline*.

²⁴ For a more detailed discussion of early Christian baptism, see Battle, "Chapter 8, Mode of Baptism," 8.14-19.

²⁵ Ch. 7 (ANF 7:379b).

²⁶ *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 4:15:19; this statement frequently is cited by baptistic writers.

²⁷ There is much published research both into ancient pictures and frescos of baptisms and into early baptismal fonts and baptisteries. See B. B. Warfield, *Works*, Vol. 9, Ch. 12, "The Archaeology of the Mode of Baptism"; Clement F. Rogers, *Baptism and Christian Archaeology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1903).

²⁸ The church of St. Babylas at Kaoussie and the house church in Dura-Europos; see Jack Finegan, *Light from the Ancient Past: The Archeological Background of Judaism and Christianity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959), 499, 549-541; Finegan's suggestion that the baptistry in Dura might be a memorial because he believes immersion was the usual mode of baptism is directly contradicted by the archeologist on the scene, Clark Hopkins, *The Discovery of Dura-Europos* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 91.

²⁹ For a more thorough discussion of this topic, see John Battle, "Chapter 6,

Significance of Baptism,” http://www.wrs.edu/courses/theology_4.htm.

³⁰ WLC 165.

³¹ Rom 6:3-6; 1 Cor 12:12-13; Gal 3:27-28; Col 2:11-12.

³² As John Murray, *Christian Baptism* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1974), 6.

³³ Acts 2:38; 22:16; Col 2:12-13; Heb 10:22; 1 Pet 3:21.

³⁴ Matt 3:6 = Mark 1:4 = Luke 3:3. John 3:25 shows that his baptism was considered a purification. Cf. the “washing” in 1 Cor 6:11.

³⁵ Regeneration in Titus 3:5; water and Spirit baptism linked in John 1:33 = Acts 1:5 = Acts 11:16; either could be referred to in 1 Cor 12:13 and Gal 3:27. Rom 2:28-29 and Col 2:11-13 identify the parallel significance of baptism and circumcision. The OT itself provides these positive significances of circumcision: Gen 17:10; 34:14-17; Exod 12:44, 48; Deut 10:12-13, 16; 30:6; Josh 5:7-9; Jer 4:4, 14; 9:24-26.

³⁶ Matt 28:19; Acts 2:41 and many other examples in the NT.

³⁷ 1 Cor 7:18-20; Gal 2:3-5.

³⁸ Jesus’ high priestly prayer in John 17 contains these elements. For a concise biblical defense of this theological covenant and its relation to the biblical covenants, see John Battle, “Premillennialism and Covenant Theology,” *WRS Journal* 2:1 (Winter 1995): 2-6.

³⁹ The Reformers saw in the Abrahamic covenant the necessary marks of the visible church: the preaching of the Word, the administration of the sacraments, and the exercise of church discipline.

⁴⁰ In particular, Jer 31:31-34; Ezek 36:24-38.

⁴¹ At the institution of the Lord’s supper

—“this is my blood of the covenant” in Matt 26:28 and Mark 14:24, and “the new covenant in my blood” in Luke 22:20; cf. 2 Cor 3:6; Heb 12:24.

⁴² 1 Pet 1:10-12.

⁴³ Eph 3:2-9. The development of this new theological concept is one of the main themes of the book of Acts.

⁴⁴ In the 1950s Mendenhall wrote several monographs published by the American Schools of Oriental Research, and several books since then, as *The Tenth Generation: Origins of the Biblical Tradition* (1974) and *Ancient Israel’s Faith and History: An Introduction to the Bible in Context* (2001); he summarized his findings in “Covenant,” *IDB* 1:714-723. The special application of these findings to the doctrine of the sacraments has been ably expounded by Meredith G. Kline, *By Oath Consigned* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968).

⁴⁵ Gen 15:8-21; Jer 34:18-20.

⁴⁶ Mark 10:38-39.

⁴⁷ נִזְחַּח *nazah* in the Hiphil stem, meaning ceremonial sprinkling to produce cleansing; this is the consistent meaning of the term in the OT. In the Qal stem the term means to sprinkle or spatter in a non-ceremonial sense. Some conjecture the meaning here to be “startle,” because there is no element (water, oil, blood, etc.) mentioned in the verse; this conjecture has no support in the term’s usage.

⁴⁸ Acts 2:17.

⁴⁹ Matt 3:11 = Mark 1:8 = Luke 3:16; John 1:33.

⁵⁰ Acts 2:41; 10:46-47.

⁵¹ “Sprinkling” in Heb 9:13, 19, 21; “baptisms” in Heb 9:10 (Greek; the NIV translates “ceremonial washings”).

**A REFORMED PERSPECTIVE
ON THE DOCTRINE
OF BAPTISMAL
REGENERATION**

DENNIS W. JOWERS

INTRODUCTION

The symbolic documents of the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, and Lutheran churches affirm the doctrine of baptismal regeneration. They affirm, that is to say, that God withholds the grace of regeneration from no infant who receives baptism in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In defense of the churches that adhere to those documents, one can truthfully say that, unlike Quakers and members of the Salvation Army, they insist that every Christian must undergo baptism. Unlike Baptists, Mennonites, and Restorationists, moreover, these churches insist that every Christian parent must present his children for baptism. Unlike nominally paedobaptist groups that allow parents to choose between baptism and dedication for their infants, finally, these churches do not treat infant baptism as a matter of indifference.

The baptismal practice of those paedobaptist churches that sincerely teach baptismal regeneration thus deserves praise and emulation in certain respects. Their advocacy of baptismal regeneration, however, more than cancels any benefits that might accrue from their conscientious regard for the sacrament of baptism. The primary consequence of the doctrine of baptismal regeneration in the life of the church is obvious and devastating: no one worries about being born

again. Rather, in the sacerdotalist churches, anxiety about one's own salvation expresses itself in efforts to avoid mortal sins and to confess such sins to a priest. Naturally, the Lutheran emphasis on justification by faith alone mitigates significantly the spiritual damage wrought by the doctrine of baptismal regeneration in orthodox Lutheran churches. Nevertheless, even Lutherans retain a distinction between mortal and venial sins and deny the necessity of a distinct experience of conversion.

In the following, we hope, first, to examine three arguments for the doctrine of baptismal regeneration, with a view to showing that its proponents offer no compelling reason to believe it; and, second, to present a single argument, which, in our view at least, suffices to demonstrate that the doctrine conflicts with the manifest teaching of Scripture.

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THREE ARGUMENTS FOR BAPTISMAL
REGENERATION

1. Prerequisite of salvation? Proponents of the doctrine of baptismal regeneration, first, usually claim that Scripture identifies baptism, in such texts as John 3:5, Acts 2:38, and Acts 22:16, as a prerequisite, at least in ordinary cases, of

salvation. In Acts 2:38 and 22:16 the Apostles Peter and Paul, admittedly, do characterize baptism as one of the initial steps of the Christian life. This characterization need only imply, however, that one who is authentically regenerate in normal circumstances will, if he has not already been baptized, seek through baptism to unite himself to the visible church. As to John 3:5: the most robust interpretation one could reasonably assign this passage is that, except in extraordinary circumstances, those who enjoy everlasting life also submit to baptism on this earth. Any interpretation that attaches regeneration uniformly and necessarily to infant baptism would seem inconsistent with Jesus' words in John 3:8: "The wind blows where it desires, and you hear the sound of it, but can tell neither from whence it comes, nor whither it goes; such is everyone who is born of the Spirit." These words at least seem to imply that one cannot simply summon the Spirit by uttering the baptismal formula—that one cannot direct him, as it were, to regenerate the person one is currently sprinkling.

2. *For the remission of sins?* Nevertheless, proponents of baptismal regeneration argue, Peter instructs his hearers in Acts 2:38 to "repent and be baptized...for the remission of sins": i.e., presumably for the sake of obtaining the remission of sins. Again, however, Peter instructs his hearers to begin the Christian life and does not pause to make precise distinctions. Even if one grants, for the sake of argument, that Peter sets forth baptism with water as a condition of salvation in this verse, he does not specify whether it is an antecedent or a consequent condition. Peter does not indicate, that is to say, whether one must be bap-

tized because baptism constitutes an instrumental cause *sine qua non* of regeneration; or whether one must be baptized after regeneration because the Spirit, except in extraordinary cases, leads those whom he regenerates and who have not yet undergone baptism to unite themselves to the visible church through baptism. If Peter identifies baptism as a condition of salvation in the latter sense, i.e., as a consequent condition, he in no way endorses the doctrine of baptismal regeneration. He endorses, rather, a commonplace of Reformed theology: that baptism, like good works, is, in ordinary circumstances, a consequent condition of salvation.

Any interpretation that attaches regeneration uniformly and necessarily to infant baptism would seem inconsistent with Jesus' words in John 3:8. These words at least seem to imply that one cannot simply summon the Spirit by uttering the baptismal formula—that one cannot direct him, as it were, to regenerate the person one is currently sprinkling.

3. *Explicit testimony?* Nevertheless, argue proponents of baptismal regeneration, Scripture explicitly states on a number of occasions (Rom 6:4; 1 Cor 12:13; Gal 3:27; Col 2:12; Tit 3:5; 1 Pet 3:21) that

baptism regenerates. In 1 Pet 3:21, however, Peter seems explicitly to deny that physical washing with water procures regeneration: “Corresponding to that,” he writes, “baptism now saves you—not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience—through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.” In Tit 3:5 and 1 Cor 12:13, moreover, Paul certainly employs baptismal imagery for regeneration, but does not unambiguously refer to the sacrament itself.

While Paul seems to describe regeneration as concurrent with baptism in Col 2:12, he identifies faith in the same verse as the instrument through which believers are raised from spiritual death in Christ. In Gal 3:27, likewise, Paul states not that baptism brought about the Galatians’ new birth, but that all of the Galatians who had been baptized had “put on Christ.” Paul describes the same persons in the previous verse as “sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus.”

The strongest verses in the arsenal of those who defend baptismal regeneration perhaps are Rom 6:3-4:

Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

The key phrase in this passage is “through baptism” in v. 4. If Paul refers to baptism with water here, then he does seem to ascribe some instrumentality to baptism in the regeneration of the believer. This need not constitute, however, an endorsement of the doctrine of baptis-

mal regeneration. For, as Acts 2:38, 9:18, and 22:16 illustrate, in the earliest church baptism seems to have come immediately after one’s initial profession of faith and to have been so closely associated with it as to constitute its virtual equivalent. Rom 6:3-4, accordingly, needs supply no more evidence for baptismal regeneration than Rom 10:9: “that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.”

AN ARGUMENT AGAINST BAPTISMAL REGENERATION

The proponents of baptismal regeneration, therefore, offer undecided persons no clear and compelling scriptural warrant for their doctrine. This is not to say, however, that Scripture speaks with an unclear voice on the subject. Rather, as we shall attempt to demonstrate in the present section, Scripture does mandate rejection of the doctrine of baptismal regeneration in unmistakable, albeit implicit, terms. Scripture, it is true, offers numerous arguments of probability against the doctrine of baptismal regeneration that are worthy of attention. For example, Paul proclaims, “Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel” (1 Cor 1:17). He rejoices that he baptized none of the Corinthians save Crispus and Gaius (1 Cor 1:14), yet regards himself as the spiritual father of them all (1 Cor 4:15). Philip demands faith, a fruit of regeneration, from the Ethiopian eunuch as a condition for baptism (Acts 8:37). On numerous occasions, Scripture represents faith as the condition of salvation, without mentioning baptism. One could multiply such arguments indefinitely. It seems, however, that a deft apologist for baptismal regeneration could show arguments such as these to be, at least when con-

sidered in isolation, less than absolutely decisive. Only one argument, drawn not from scattered texts, but from a central theme of New Testament soteriology, seems adequate to the task of establishing irrefragably the falsehood of the doctrine of baptismal regeneration: viz., that this doctrine cannot be true, because it conflicts with the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints.

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If the doctrine of baptismal regeneration were correct, then countless persons who have died apostates were once authentically regenerate. This is impossible for the following reasons. First, the final apostasy of even one regenerate soul would falsify numerous promises, such as, “the one who comes to me I will never cast out” (John 6:37b; cf., e.g., 6:39, 40; 10:27-29) and “neither death, nor life, nor angels...nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate

us from the love of God” (Rom 8:38-39; cf. vv. 29-39). Second, failure to preserve a saint in the state of grace would be contrary to the character of a God who keeps his promises (Num 23:19; Rom 11:29; Tit 1:2) and finishes what he begins (Phil 1:6; 1 Thess 5:24). Third, to allow the apostasy of a saint would be to cheat Christ of a soul purchased by his blood. Fourth and finally, if God allowed the regenerate to perish eternally, then the hope of salvation would not constitute “an anchor of the soul, a hope both sure and steadfast” (Heb 6:19). One could not honestly confess with David, “When my father and my mother forsake me, then the LORD will take me up” (Ps 27:10 AV).

CONCLUSION

By undermining the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints, the doctrine of baptismal regeneration poisons the wellsprings of Christian life and doctrine. Reformed Christians of today, accordingly, would do well to take up the cudgels against this doctrine as Charles Haddon Spurgeon famously did in 1864. In particular, Reformed Christians ought to root out of their churches the so-called Auburn Avenue theology, one of whose tenets is a mitigated form of the doctrine of baptismal regeneration. Whether they are willing to do so is a test of whether Reformed Christians deserve the names Reformed and Christian. 📖

ENGRAVED UPON THE BODIES OF THEIR CHILDREN: CALVIN ON INFANT BAPTISM

TIM PRUSSIC

INTRODUCTION

John Calvin was much more than a theologian and doctor of the church of Christ, he was a faithful pastor of the flock in Geneva. That flock included both adults and children. Rarely does Calvin show himself more kindly pastoral than in his doctrine of infant baptism. This article will examine Calvin's thoughts regarding the sacraments generally and baptism specifically before turning to Calvin's doctrine of infant baptism and its significance. The examination of the sacraments and baptism is limited to issues directly pertinent to the doctrine of infant baptism.

ON THE SACRAMENTS

Relying heavily on Augustine,¹ Calvin defines a sacrament as "a testimony of divine grace toward us, confirmed by an outward sign, with mutual attestation of our piety toward him" (4.14.1).² Sacraments have two functional aspects for Calvin. The first, and by far the most important, is that God uses it to serve the faith of his people. God ministers in the sacraments; he feeds and nourishes his people through them. Secondly, and as a response to God's grace, we proclaim before God and humanity our indebtedness to God.

A sacrament is always tied to a promise and is rightly seen as a sign and seal of that promise. As a sign, the sacrament

is a visible and physical reminder of the promise. The sacrament points to the promise to which God has appended it. Calvin views a sacrament as a seal in that it confirms for us that the promise is true. He often compares sacraments to a royal seal affixed onto a royal decree.³ The royal seal confirms the genuine nature of the document. Since the sacraments are tied to promises, they are necessarily tied to the Word of God, since that is where God publishes his promises. Calvin sees the preaching of the Word as a necessary prerequisite to the sacrament. Without the preached promise, the sign and seal of that promise cannot make sense. The Word "should, when preached, make us understand what the visible sign means ... the sacrament requires preaching to beget faith" (4.14.4).

The blessing of the sacraments is Christ himself, who must be received by faith:

The sacraments have effectiveness among us in proportion as we are helped by their ministry sometimes to

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foster, confirm, and increase the true knowledge of Christ in ourselves; at other times, to possess him more fully and enjoy his riches. But that happens when we receive in true faith what is offered there. (4.14.16)

The Holy Spirit is the active agent by whom we are united to heavenly Christ and partake of him in the sacraments. “But the sacraments properly fulfill their office only when the Spirit, that inward teacher, comes to them, by whose power alone hearts are penetrated and affections moved and our souls opened for the sacraments to enter in” (4.14.9).

Calvin boldly affirms that, in certain specific ways, the sacraments are better teachers to God’s people than the Word. Calvin knows that, in addition to being intellectual beings dealing in propositions, we are flesh and blood, of the earth—so are the sacraments.

For the clearer anything is, the fitter it is to support faith. But the sacraments bring the clearest promises; and they have this characteristic over and above the word because they represent them for us as painted in a picture from life” (4.14.5).

In the sacraments, God “attests his good will and love toward us more expressly than by word” (4.14.6). Calvin considers this sacramental teaching a gracious condescension by God to teach us in our dullness.

By way of summary, according to Calvin, God meets us and ministers to us in the sacraments. In them he teaches us through our senses, draws us up by his Spirit to consider the infinite riches of the enthroned Son, and unites us to the person of his Son, who is our salvation.

ON BAPTISM

Calvin understands baptism to signify and seal a broad array of blessings to God’s people. To begin with, Calvin says that “baptism is the sign of initiation by which we are received into the society of the church, in order that, engrafted in Christ, we may be reckoned among God’s children” (4.15.1). Baptism is the visible beginning of our membership in the body of Christ. Those baptized are to be reckoned as God’s own children. As will be seen below, this reckoning becomes important to how Calvin wants Christian parents to view their children.

God, through our baptisms, ministers to us throughout the entirety of our lives. Note all the benefits that Calvin finds in the sacrament of baptism:

We must realize that at whatever time we are baptized, we are once for all washed and purged for our whole life. Therefore, as often as we fall away, we ought to recall the memory of our baptism and fortify our mind with it, that we may always be sure and confident of the forgiveness of sins. For, though baptism, administered only once, seemed to have passed, it was still not destroyed by subsequent sins. For Christ’s purity has been offered us in it; his purity ever flourishes; it is defiled by no spots, but buries and cleanses away all our defilements. (4.15.3)

It should be recalled that all those benefits are received, according to Calvin, by faith. A Christian looks in faith to his own baptism and sees Christ there ministering to him through that very baptism.

In baptism, we are united to Christ himself, whom Calvin calls “the proper

object of baptism” (4.15.6). Citing Rom 6, Calvin understands that in our baptism, we are united to Christ’s death and his resurrection (4.15.5). Baptism does not just represent these benefits to us. In baptism, God actually accomplishes what he signifies. Commenting on Eph 5:26, Calvin states, “When Paul says that we are washed in baptism, his meaning is, that God employs it for declaring to us that we are washed, and at the same time performs what it represents.”⁴

To begin with, Calvin says that “baptism is the sign of initiation by which we are received into the society of the church, in order that, engrafted in Christ, we may be reckoned among God’s children.” Baptism is the visible beginning of our membership in the body of Christ. Those baptized are to be reckoned as God’s own children. As will be seen below, this reckoning becomes important to how Calvin wants Christian parents to view their children.

Calvin also understands baptism as a sign and seal of our adoption into God’s own family. This aspect was explicitly stated in Calvin’s preliminary definition of baptism quoted above: those who are baptized are to be “reckoned among God’s

children.” Calvin says, “In baptism the first thing to be considered is, that God the Father by planting us in his Church in unmerited goodness, receives us by adoption into the number of his sons.”⁵ According to Calvin, Christians should look back to their baptisms with the eye of faith and see, among many other things, their own adoptions.

ON INFANT BAPTISM

Before bringing together all that has been said and applying it to infant baptism, it is appropriate to examine briefly Calvin’s basis for infant baptism and the peculiarities of baptism when applied to infants instead of adults.

In his *Institutes*, Calvin offers two biblical lines of defense for the practice of baptizing the children of believers: the covenant, and Christ’s own dealings with children and infants. Calvin understands that the covenant God made with Abraham and his children is still in force. The sign and seal of that covenant under the old administration was circumcision, but under the new administration the same covenant has a new sign and seal, that is, baptism. Calvin consistently reasons by analogy between circumcision and baptism.⁶ Calvin considers it “incontrovertible that baptism has taken the place of circumcision to fulfill the same office among us [New Covenant believers]” (4.16.4). While God does not specifically command New Covenant believers to baptize their children, he did explicitly command Old Covenant believers to circumcise theirs. Further, Calvin sees that New Covenant as a magnification and extreme growth of the grace of God. If our children were included in the covenant graces of God under the Old Covenant and were given the sign of that covenant, how much

more under the New Covenant should they be included and given the sign of the covenant. Calvin reasons that “if the covenant still remains firm and steadfast, it applies no less today to the children of Christians that under the Old Testament it pertained to the infants of the Jews” (4.16.5). For Calvin, baptism does not bring the infant into the covenant, but baptism is given to the infant because of the child’s status in the covenant. Thus, he makes bold to say that “baptism is properly administered to infants as something owed to them” (4.16.5).⁷

Calvin sees Christ’s own dealings with infants and children as a confirmation of the same position.⁸ When Christ is indignant that his disciples are preventing the children (infants and little children [βρέφη and παῖδία]) from coming to him, Calvin takes careful note of what Christ says of the children and what he does to them. Christ wants the little children to come to him. He says that the Kingdom of God belongs to such children as those he holds in his arms, and then admonishes the adults to become like the children. Further, Christ blessed the children. Calvin reasons that if we are to take our children to Christ, if he holds them, blesses them, says that the Kingdom is theirs and commands us to become like them in order to enter the Kingdom, that we should not withhold or deny the mere external sign of all these blessings, that is, baptism. If the substance is present, should not the external indication of that substance also be present?

From the earliest moments of their existence, Calvin views the children of believers as in Christ: “The children of the godly are born the children of the Church, and that they are accounted members of

Christ from the womb, because God adopteth us upon this condition, that he may be also the Father of our seed.”⁹

Calvin chides his Anabaptist opponents for not realizing that infant baptism differs from adult baptism in certain obvious ways. Calvin takes up sections 10-20 of his chapter on infant baptism answering a barage of charges against infant baptism. Some Anabaptists argued that since baptism was a sign of regeneration, faith, repentance and other things of which infants are not supposed to be capable, that the sign is not rightly applied to infants. They argue that since baptism is not applied to an adult until the church is satisfied by the fruit of a faithful profession of faith in Christ, then the same should apply to all baptized. Calvin reminds them that they have missed a necessary point: infants are not adults! For Calvin, the children of believers are children of promise. Parents submit their children to the church for baptism based upon God’s promise. They then nurture and train the children to bring forth the promised fruit. “Infants are baptized into future repentance and faith” (4.16.20). Moreover, “if it please him, why may the Lord not shine with a tiny spark at the present time on those whom he will illumine in the future with the full splendor of his light” (4.16.19)?

More than future grace, Calvin asks why we should ever suppose that God would not regenerate our children from the womb. All children are dead in sin from conception, but the remedy is close at hand:

In Adam we can but die. On the contrary, Christ commands that they be brought to him. Why is this? Because he is life. Therefore, to quicken them

he makes them partakers in himself. (4.16.17)

Covenant children are spiritually dead by nature, but, according to Calvin, Christ summons them to himself and make them live in himself. Further, what if God in his infinite power regenerated and saved our children from their mothers' wombs? Calvin sees this as a real possibility: "God's work, though beyond our understanding, is still not annulled. Now it is perfectly clear that those infants who are to be saved (as some are surely saved from that early age [that is, from the womb]) are previously regenerated by the Lord" (4.16.17). Calvin sees both John the Baptist and Jesus himself as evidence that God can and sometimes does call infants from the womb and give them new life. Infant regeneration¹⁰ may come through different means than that of adults, but Calvin does not pretend to know how God accomplishes this, he just knows that, when God wills, he does accomplish it.

ON THE SIGNIFICANCE OF INFANT BAPTISM

The doctrine of infant baptism affords great comfort both to covenant parents and children. Calvin thinks that God's covenant grace and boundless generos-

ity shown forth in infant baptism should flood "godly hearts with uncommon happiness, which quickens men to a deeper love of their kind Father, as they see his concern on their behalf for their posterity" (4.16.9). Calvin wants Christian parents to melt with love to God because God makes their children his children. He wants this doctrine to make Christians love God more. The following quote shows how God's covenantal grace comes together with his sacramental condescension to us and to our children:

If anyone should object that the promise ought to be enough to confirm the salvation of our children, I disregard this argument. For God views this otherwise; as he perceives our weakness, so he has willed to deal tenderly with us in this matter. Accordingly, let those who embrace the promise that God's mercy is to be extended to their children deem it their duty to offer them to the church to be sealed by the symbol of mercy, and thereby to arouse themselves to a surer confidence, because they see with their very eyes the covenant of the Lord engraved upon the bodies of their children. (4.16.9)

This point needs emphasis. Covenant parents should take great comfort that God not only promises mercy to their children, but signifies and seals that mercy to their children in baptism. God's grace to us, in Calvin's mind, is unfathomable and surely extends from generation to generation. "For without doubt he counts as his children the children of those to whose seed he promised to be a Father" (4.16.24).

Far from a reason for laziness or idleness, Calvin uses God's covenant graces to admonish parents unto diligent and

Parents submit their children to the church for baptism based upon God's promise. They then nurture and train the children to bring forth the promised fruit. "Infants are baptized into future repentance and faith."

active instruction of their children. Calvin says that a man is given knowledge of God so that “he would faithfully fulfill the office of a good householder, in instructing his own family.... It is the duty of parents to apply themselves diligently to the work of communicating what they have learned from the Lord to their children.”¹¹ The parents’ conscientious and attentive work in training their children is rooted in and girded about by the pervasive grace of their covenant God.

Calvin grounds infant baptism upon the covenant promises of God to adult believers and to their children. God’s promises of mercy are sure enough, but as a further condescension to the weakness of his people, he seals those promises upon their bodies and the bodies of their children with baptism. Such mercy should melt our hearts and spur us to faithful obedience in all areas of life, but especially in faithful childrearing. 

¹ By the author’s count, Calvin quotes or clearly alludes to Augustine 22 times in chapter 14 of his *Institutes* (only once negatively), while he references Chrysostom and Peter Lombard twice each and Bonaventure but once.

² All citations from Calvin’s *Institutes* come from John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (vols. 20 and 21 of Library of Christian Classics; ed. John T. McNeill; trans. Ford Lewis Battles; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960). The traditional citation system will be used within the text.

³ See, for example, 4.14.5.

⁴ John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries* (22 vols.; Repr., Grand Rapids, Baker, 1998), 21:319 (Eph 5:26). Calvin warns that we should not seek the efficacy of

the sacrament in the sacrament itself. This was mentioned above, but bears repeating: the blessings of the sacraments are not found in the sacraments but in Christ alone. Calvin understands that the Holy Spirit invisibly and internally ministers Christ and his benefits to us though the visible and external ministry of the sacraments.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 20:70 (1 Cor 1:13).

⁶ Calvin uses this analogy quite effectively in defense of the practice of infant baptism against the Anabaptists; see 4.16.20 for a powerful example.

⁷ For a powerful and insightful treatment of Calvin’s view of children in the covenant, see Lewis Bevens Schenck, *The Presbyterian Doctrine of Children in the Covenant* (repr., Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 2003), 3-24. Also, see John A. Battle’s review of the same in this issue of the *WRS Journal*.

⁸ See 4.16.7-9.

⁹ Calvin, *Commentaries*, 18:363 (Acts 8:37).

¹⁰ Schenck contends that in our day (he originally published his work in 1940) we have a narrow and limited notion of regeneration. He argues that Calvin would have understood the term more broadly encompassing the whole of the Christian life, not just a point in time when God takes one from spiritual death to life, though that is certainly included. See Schenck, *The Presbyterian Doctrine of Children in the Covenant*, 8-9, 15-18.

¹¹ Calvin, *Commentaries*, 1:481 (Gen 18:19).

APPLICATION & PERSPECTIVE

COVENANT DUTIES OF PARENTS AND THE CHURCH

LEONARD W. PINE

Throughout the Scriptures, our Lord pictures himself in relationship to his own as a Father ministering to his children. He never uses this image in reference to the wicked. The children of those in a covenant relationship with him enjoy particular blessings. Mark 10:13-16 provides a beautiful picture of this principle:

Then they brought little children to Him, that He might touch them; but the disciples rebuked those who brought *them*. But when Jesus saw *it*, He was greatly displeased and said to them, "Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of God. Assuredly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will by no means enter it." And He took them up in His arms, put *His* hands on them, and blessed them.

Jesus repeatedly blessed—"was blessing them" translates the imperfect of *kateulogew* in verse sixteen—asking God to bestow divine favor upon the little ones brought to him. This blessing has three goals in mind, and has great implications for the duties incumbent upon parents and the Church as each organism seeks to fulfill its covenant obliga-

tions to the children Christ desires to bless.

THE BLESSINGS OF SALVATION

Our Lord's warning in Matt 18:5-6 could not be more stern:

Whoever receives one little child like this in My name receives Me. But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea.

A prime covenant duty of parents and the church is to endeavor to faithfully lead their children to faith in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross in humble submission to the demands of the gospel. For many parents, this duty is perceived as being fulfilled by making sure the kids are in church on the Lord's Day. Even many local churches seem to be content with such thinking, finding satisfaction in stable or growing Sunday school attendance figures. But bringing children to a saving knowledge of Christ requires more of us.

Notice first of all in Mark's gospel that parents are bringing their children to Jesus. It is not enough to tell them, "God is important" and then never demonstrate by your own [lack of] pursuit of God that the statement is true. The Church is to make it easy for parents to bring their children to Jesus as well, providing ample opportunity to meet the Lord through the Word and fellowship with believers.

Furthermore, both church and home must make God's revelation a part of the regular routine of their ministries. Deuteronomy 6:9 directs, "You shall write [God's commandments] on the doorposts of your house and on your gates." In all of the comings and goings of the household, and the household of faith, the law of God should be prominently displayed on walls, and in actions. How will a child know he or she is a sinner and condemned before God if never confronted with the "schoolmaster" God has appointed to bring people to Jesus?

The prophecy of Joel reminds parents and the covenant community to keep the works of God perpetually in the ears and hearts of the succeeding generations: "Tell your children about it, *let* your children *tell* their children, and their children another generation" (1:3). Recounting God's works of both judgment and redemption is a vital part of meeting our obligations to the children God has entrusted to us. Children shouldn't be shocked when God works in their lives because they've never heard that he does such things, but rather should be gratefully joyful that God has once again shown himself faithful. That faithfulness, of course, starts with saving us from our sins.

Parents and the Church must also be careful not to put stumbling blocks in the way of children unto salvation, as Jesus warns in Mark 18. The Apostle Paul speaks of one such way that we could cause little ones to stumble in Eph 6:4, "And you, fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord." If your training is on your own strength and whim and understanding, your chil-

dren will invariably be provoked—for your law is fickle, your wisdom limited, your methods inconsistent, your motives often less than noble. God's training and admonition does not suffer from those limitations and weaknesses.

Verse fifteen of Mark 10 raises some interesting questions about the attitude one has in coming to the Savior. A.T. Robertson observes:

How does a little child receive the kingdom of God? The little child learns to obey its parents simply and uncomplainingly.... Jesus here presents the little child with trusting and simple and loving obedience as the model for adults in coming into the kingdom. Jesus does not here say that children are in the kingdom of God because they are children. (*Word Pictures of the New Testament*, comment on Mark 10:15)

D. Edmond Hiebert sheds a little more light on this verse:

The point of comparison is not the innocence of children (for they, too, have a sinful nature and are not innocent), but their attitude of receptiveness and willingness to be dependent upon others for what they need.... Here is the essence of the doctrine of justification by faith. (*Mark: A Portrait of the Servant*, [Chicago: Moody Press, 1974], 244)

The duty of evangelizing our children holds before us a great prize. Acts 2:38-39 reads, "Then Peter said to them, 'Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children, and to

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kingdom of heaven here, and in our text, clearly relates to the present rule of God in the lives of men and creation, as well as the ultimate glory promised to believers. Our children's involvement with that kingdom, as well as ours, requires a practice based upon identifying with the demands and blessings of being a citizen of that kingdom. In other words, "I will show you my faith by my works" (James 2:18).

Parents and the Church can and must model life as a citizen of the kingdom of heaven as a starting point, and then teaching, encouraging, and disciplining our children to act as citizens as well (in addition to putting their faith in Christ!). These are some of the blessings of citizenship that we should labor to encourage our children to live by supplying the following:

Access.—Unlike children born outside of the covenant, covenant children have the privilege of being ushered into the presence of God every service of the Church, every time of family worship, every bedtime prayer. That assumes, of course, that those activities are taking place and that parents and the Church insist on children taking part in them all. (In this writer's opinion, one of the main problems with such things as "children's church" is that such practices tend to limit a child's access to the larger workings of the Lord through his Word within the Body of Christ.) They can see firsthand the working of God among his people, while in his presence, and rejoice in the promises that God's redemption is for "you and your children," as well as be thrilled to read and obey the words of the text here, "Let the little children come to me," knowing that they will not be turned away.

all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call."

THE BLESSINGS OF CITIZENSHIP

As an integral part of the visible covenant community, children are blessed with the privilege of participating in the benefits of citizens, much as children do in secular society as they are born into the privileges of the laws and benefits of the land of their birth. Full action as citizens is incumbent upon them at a later time, but they are still considered citizens. Ask any child, though, what he is nationally, and he will answer proudly, "I am an American" (or, Canadian, Kenyan, Singaporean, Australian, whatever the case may be)! Encourage them in that identification in secular society, and you produce a patriot. So, how do we fulfill our duty to rear Christian "patriots"? Matthew 18:3 reads, "Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven." The

Discipline.—Discipline may not seem like a benefit, but it is, as long as it is practiced according to biblical principle. Faithful discipline is comprised of several elements, including teaching (“Understanding *is* a wellspring of life to him who has it,” Prov 16:22), demands of obedience to God’s Law (“If you love me, keep my commandments,” John 14:15, and, “You that love the Lord, hate evil!” Ps 97:10), punishment (“Do not withhold correction from a child, for *if* you beat him with a rod, he will not die,” Prov 23:13), and restoration.

Opportunity.—Opportunities for service, enabled by the gifting of the Holy Spirit, are themselves gifts from God. Why should God use frail, fallen people like us to do His work? And yet, he does. Parents and churches should encourage children to take part in serving others to the best of their ability, as unto the Lord. (“Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ,” Gal 6:2, etc.).

Protection.—Jesus prayed in John 17 for the protection of his disciples, as well as for the souls of those who would follow after them. Parents and churches are delinquent in their covenantal duties if they surrender their children to the world’s education and entertainment systems (including bringing the values and practices of those systems into the church), careless of what is going into their minds and hearts and indifferent to their souls’ safety, just as much as if they let them play in the middle of a busy street. Protect them!

THE BLESSING OF RELATIONSHIP

How does God desire to bless his covenant children? Through knowing the Lord Jesus Christ! Christ in all his offices is seen in our text from Mark’s gospel. As

Prophet he gives the command. As Priest he gives the blessing. As King he asserts the authority of his kingdom.

God’s people were called the “children of Israel” based upon God’s self-imposed obligation to deliver, based upon promises to Israel (Jacob), not their obedience or understanding. In the same way, our children must be reminded in word and example that they enjoy the blessings they do because of what God has done. We must promote an attitude of wonder and gratitude at the love of the Person of God for the persons of mankind. If we do not, Robertson’s comment on Mark 10:14 will come back to haunt us:

“He was moved with indignation.” In Mark alone. “Became indignant;” a strong word of deep emotion, to feel pain. Surely it ought to be a joy to parents to bring their children to Jesus, certainly to allow them to come, but to hinder their coming is a crime. There are parents who will have to give answer to God for keeping their children away from Jesus. [*Word Pictures*]

Mark 9:36-37 reads:

“Then He took a little child and set him in the midst of them. And when He had taken him in His arms, He said to them, ‘Whoever receives one of these little children in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me, receives not Me but Him who sent Me.’”

Ask yourself: “Does my home, my church promote my child’s relationship with a ritual or relationship with a Person?” Do your practices encourage Marthas or Marys in your home or church? What are you yourself modeling and practicing in the presence of your children?

CONCLUSION

It was the love of God that caused him to enter into covenant with his people in the first place. He continues to show his love for his people in bestowing favor upon them and their children, as he has promised. Let us all value our children as does the Lord, for we are stewards of their lives. Urge them to saving faith, impress upon them their duties in the kingdom, and model a healthy relationship with the King. Do nothing to hinder them from coming to him, either directly or indirectly! And let us all have the simplicity of a child in coming to Jesus to receive his blessing, for “of such is the kingdom of heaven.” 

“FATHERS, DO NOT EXASPERATE YOUR CHILDREN; INSTEAD BRING THEM UP IN THE TRAINING AND INSTRUCTION OF THE LORD.”

EPHESIANS 6:4

BOOKS

The Presbyterian Doctrine of Children in the Covenant: An Historical Study of the Significance of Infant Baptism in the Presbyterian Church by Lewis Bevens Schenck. Yale University Press, 1940. Reprinted with a new introduction by Frank A. James III: Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, 2003. Pp. 188. Reviewed by John A. Battle.

While there are many good books that defend the doctrine of infant baptism from the perspective of covenant theology, there are very few that relate the doctrine of infant baptism to the position of baptized children in the church and their relation to the Lord. This particular question is answered in different ways by Presbyterian and other Reformed churches that practice infant baptism and agree on its overall significance.

Recently the Federal Vision debate has reopened this discussion. According to the FV, baptism actually regenerates the infant infallibly. The baptized child is not only presumed to be regenerated by his baptism, he actually is regenerated. He has all spiritual graces in Christ (except the grace of perseverance). There is no difference in the spiritual state of a regenerated child who remains faithful and dies in the Lord and a child who later apostatizes and ends in hell.

This view of the FV, a virtual denial of the doctrine of Christian perseverance, has provoked reactions in Presbyterian churches. Most react by saying that grace is conveyed only to the elect in baptism, not to all. The time that that grace is conveyed may be before, during, or after the

actual time of baptism. Further, the grace of regeneration may be given to children who are not baptized at all. On these points most traditional Presbyterians agree. However, they are divided over another, related question. What is the spiritual state of baptized children? Assuming that we cannot know certainly the elective decree of God, and we do not know who is actually regenerated and who is not, and we do not believe that baptism infallibly guarantees regeneration to anyone, how are we to regard the baptized children of the church?

These questions affect our pastoral practice and the attitudes and actions of parents in our churches. Are the children to be regarded as unsaved, needing conversion, still in the devil's power until we can lead them to a conversion experience? Or, on the other side, are they to be regarded as already regenerated by God, and therefore receptive to the teaching and nurture they receive from their parents and the church? Along the same line, are they members of the church and under its oversight and discipline? Or, are they still outside the church, not subject to its discipline until they "join" the church by their own profession of faith?

It is with these questions that this book provides real help and guidance. Lewis Bevens Schenck (1898–1985) graduated from Princeton Theological Seminary (Th.M.) and from Yale University (Ph.D). For thirty-nine years he served as J. W. Cannon Professor of Bible and Religion at Davidson College in North Carolina. This extensively researched and detailed book is based on his doctoral dissertation at Yale. It is the

major literary achievement of his scholarly career.

Schenck was disturbed because many Presbyterian churches of his acquaintance took what he considered to be a more baptistic view, that baptized children were still spiritually unregenerate, and had no special standing in the church other than their being exposed to its teaching and example. They needed to be born again. Only after their conscious conversion could they be admitted to the church as believers.

Schenck believed this common way of thinking was not properly biblical or Presbyterian. Rather, he believed that children of believing parents belong to the Lord as his own children and that we should treat them as already regenerated by God, but in need of teaching and nurture, so that they would learn the truths they were to believe and know God as he is revealed in Scripture. An unregenerate child would reject the gospel teachings; a regenerate child would receive and welcome these teachings. Parents and the church needed to recognize baptized children as members of the church, not as hostile to it. The presumption that their children were already regenerated by the Lord should serve as an encouragement to parents that their teachings would not fall on deaf ears. If a child should grow older and reveal an unregenerate heart by disbelief or scandalous sin, it is the duty of the church to exercise its discipline. It is important to note that "presumptive regeneration," the traditional Reformed view that Schenck espouses, is not the same as "actual" or "necessary regeneration"; we do not know if an individual child is regenerate;

we only presume him to be and treat him as such. This differs significantly from the FV position. Schenck wrote this book to demonstrate that his view was the traditional view of Calvin and the early Reformed church, the Westminster Assembly, and the bulk of Presbyterians until the revivalistic movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

This book concentrates on the history of the Reformed and Presbyterian churches since the time of the Reformation. It does contain some biblical arguments for infant baptism and its meaning, but these arguments are not a major thrust of the book; they are intermingled with the theological discussions through the various historical eras.

In his first chapter Schenck provides detailed and extensive quotations from the early leaders in the Reformed tradition, along with commentary and discussion, interacting with scholars who agree with and who oppose his understanding of these leaders. He discusses at length Calvin, Zwingli, Oecolampadius, Bullinger, Olevianus, Ursinus, and Knox, giving the longest discussion to Calvin. He also examines the Reformed creeds, including the Gallican Confession of Faith, the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Westminster Standards. Likewise, he traces this doctrine through the theologians most responsible for the origin and development of covenant theology, Cocceius and Witsius. This chapter also contains a lengthy delineation of the adoption of this theology by the early Presbyterians and its codification in the Westminster Standards and in the regulations and

practices of the early Presbyterian churches in Britain and America.

Calvin and the early Presbyterians agreed that we baptize our infants, not in order that they may be regenerated (as the FV asserts), but because we are to regard them as already regenerated by God. They have a right to the seal of baptism as much as any adult who confesses Christ. We are to receive into the fellowship of the church infants of believers with that same confidence that we receive adults who profess the true religion. We receive adults on the basis of their profession; we receive their children on the basis of God's promise. Schenck demonstrates conclusively that this was the position of Calvin, the other Reformed leaders, the Westminster divines, and the early Presbyterians.

The second chapter of the book shows how laxity in church teaching and discipline led to the inclusion of a large number of Presbyterian church members who did not appear to have the saving graces. A partial cause of this decline was the theology of the "half-way covenant." While this unfortunate view did not gain a majority status among Presbyterians, it led to an overreaction in the revivalistic movements, which demanded a discreet "conversion experience," often including massive guilt and the emotionally powerful change to relief and joy at the point of conversion. Those church members who believed in Christ, led orderly Christian lives, but could not remember such a personal experience were accused of being hypocrites and lost until they could have it. This conflict produced the Old Side – New Side division in the eighteenth century, and many divisions surrounding the nineteenth century revivals as well. The

extraordinary measures taken during these revivals tended to replace the more ordinary process of infant baptism and Christian nurture as the most desirable way to make disciples and build churches.

The third chapter continues the development of this conflict into the nineteenth century. Schenck provides ample documentation to show how the pro-revivalist Presbyterians tended to associate baptism, not with the eternal covenant of grace, but with an ecclesiastical covenant made with Abraham. Baptized children were taken under the general guidance of the church, but were not presumed to be regenerate; in fact, they were presumed to be unregenerate (unless they died in infancy, in which case they were regenerate). In general the Southern theologians favored the revivalist view, while the Northern theologians favored the traditional view that baptized children were presumed to be regenerate. This conflict of perspective produced an extended theological argument between Charles Hodge and J. H. Thornwell, which Schenck traces in some detail. The particular issue that brought the conflict to the fore was the attempt to amend the Presbyterian Book of Discipline so that baptized children were removed from the discipline of the church session. This was the natural consequence of considering them to be unbelievers until they gave their own professions of faith. In this regard Thornwell had very harsh words regarding the spiritual state of the church's baptized children (pp. 94-95). When the Presbyterian Church divided during the Civil War, the Southern church continued to consider this change, finally adopting it in 1879.

The fourth chapter defends the doctrine that covenant children are to be considered as regenerated by God on the basis of God's promise, and therefore are entitled to receive baptism and be under the care and discipline of the church. Schenck provides a detailed examination of the Princeton theology regarding infant salvation and baptism, comparing the writings of several of its professors to those of Calvin and the early Reformers and contrasting them from later schools of thought, such as the New England theology. His careful analysis exposes and avoids the extremes that some have taken on one side or the other of this issue. He also includes a valuable discussion of the relation of the promise that God would save our children to the responsibilities of the parents and the church in bringing up their children in the nurture of the Lord. God uses means in bringing faith and sanctification; we cannot expect him to work apart from those means. While we "presume" their regeneration, and "consider" them as saved, we still have the obligation to teach the saving truths to them in time; indeed, this doctrine encourages that teaching. If we fail in this task, we cannot presume on God that he will save them anyway. The same principle applies as with preaching the gospel to adults.

In his final chapter Schenck decries the modern tendency to regard children in the church as unsaved and thus to make infant baptism a merely formal entrance into the visible church. It becomes a kind of "wet dedication ceremony." Rather, by understanding baptism as a sign and seal of the covenant of grace and as a means of grace along with the Word and prayer, we recognize the true importance and value of water

baptism. Also, we restore the importance and centrality of Christian nurture of covenant children in our Christian families and in the church.

This book has the added benefit today of helping in the conflict over the Federal Vision theology. FV proponents observe and capitalize on the weakening of the doctrine of baptism in many Presbyterian and Reformed churches. They also recognize the faulty model of a conscious “conversion experience” being required for covenant children. They know that many true believers cannot remember such an experience, that they can never remember a time when they did not believe in Christ. To answer these deficiencies in the churches, they present their doctrine of baptismal regeneration and teach that all their baptized children are undoubtedly saved (they are ambiguous about unbaptized children); however, they must remain faithful or they will fall away. Some have sought to answer this challenge from the FV by presenting a greatly weakened, baptistic doctrine on the meaning of baptism and the status of covenant children. Schenck provides a better way. We can presume our children to be saved, consider and treat them as saved, without asserting that they are for sure—something only the Lord knows. If in time they show themselves to be unsaved, the church can and should discipline them, even excommunicate them. However, in the mean time, we teach and train our children in faith, believing them to be the Lord’s and therefore receptive to this teaching and training. If they die at a young age, we assume they are with the Lord; if they live, we assume that the time will come when they will confess Christ themselves; but we regard them as saved

before then. In this regard we have the exact same confidence that they are the Lord’s as we have for adults who come into the church by their own confession of faith. On the basis of God’s promise we presume them to be saved and teach them as such, but only God knows their hearts.

The new printing of the book has a valuable introduction by Frank A. James III, introducing the reader to this little-known Presbyterian scholar, and summarizing the book’s contents and importance for today. The book has an excellent bibliography and is well indexed. I highly recommend this book for pastors, elders, and all Presbyterians who desire to be faithful in the treatment and nurture of our covenant children. 📖

The Meaning and Mode of Baptism by Jay E. Adams. Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1975. Pp. 56. Reviewed by Christopher K. Lensch.

The Meaning and Mode of Baptism by Jay E. Adams is a biblical and exegetical response to the proponents of baptism by immersion. As such, this concise work answers the charges of immersionists against non-immersionist Christians, and, without answering “proof-texting” with “proof-texting,” it sets forth the biblical case for sprinkling or pouring in baptism.

While baptism is the initiatory sign of the new covenant, Dr. Adams probes beyond the NT texts marshaled by Baptists to show that there were antecedent baptisms (Heb 9:10) in the Old Testament economy that pre-figured the promised fullness (Ezek 36:25-28; Isa 52:15ff.) of NT

baptism. He argues that baptism must be defined biblically and explains that NT baptism was not a brand new innovation (John 1:25), but was a known ritual. This known ritual was not proselyte immersion, of which the Bible reveals nothing.¹

Regarding the meaning of baptism, Adams takes care in first exegeting Romans 6:4. This reference to being “buried with [Christ] through baptism into death” is the Baptist’s cardinal text for the symbol of baptism. Dr. Adams concludes that the immediate context and parallel passages are stressing the believer’s identification with Christ and the benefits of his death rather than teaching a reenactment of the process of his attaining those benefits. The larger thrust of the NT message of baptism is purification (negative aspect) and union/identification (positive aspect).²

One of the most compelling chapters in the book is “The Baptism of Christ.” In five short pages Adams develops Christ’s explanation why John must baptize him: it is in order “to fulfill all righteousness” (Matt 3:15). Working from the thesis that the “righteousness” in view is an OT ceremonial righteousness that involves an OT ritual, Adams denies that Christ’s baptism was a normal Johannine baptism of purification. Rather, it was an anointing in his messianic role, particularly to his priestly office. Only after his baptism could Jesus be called the Anointed One.³

While the matter of the objects of baptism (believers and their children) is outside the scope of the book’s title, Reformed pastors should keep several copies of this inexpensive apology on hand to loan to Baptist skeptics who are willing to let the Scripture speak on a subject of importance. This masterful work is en-

gaging because it argues biblically, and digestible because of its succinctness.



¹ What the Bible does say about proselyte initiation is that male converts were circumcised.

² Were Dr. Adams to revise this book, he might further develop the meaning of baptism as a rite of covenant initiation that conveys promise of blessing as well as threat of malediction. In 1975, when the book was published, there was not much literature on this important dimension that Baptist theologians are reluctant to face because of the implications of the idea of covenant.

³ Both the Hebrew “Messiah” and Greek “Christ” mean “anointed.”

Children of the Promise: The Biblical Case for Infant Baptism by Robert R. Booth. Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1995. Review by Leonard W. Pine.

To the minds of many, the phrase “infant baptism” conjures up images of long-robed priests in the Roman church mumbling incantations that they think will infuse grace into an unwitting child who will then grow up thinking he or she is saved for eternity without ever taking any personal responsibility for his or her relationship to God. And, sadly, for many churches that practice infant baptism, or “paedobaptism” as it is more formally called, the ritual is really nothing more than that—a ritual that has no impact on the soul of anyone. Consequently, many evangelicals have abandoned the practice, substituting in its place a “dry” baptism called “dedication.” In so doing, they keep part of what God has

commanded and abandon the rest because of the abuses of others. This is most unfortunate—and, frankly, sinful—since God has commanded the application of his covenant sign to all of his people.

In *Children of the Promise: The Biblical Case for Infant Baptism*, Robert Booth has provided the Church with one of the most useful tools this reviewer has yet seen for reclaiming the biblical practice of applying water baptism to the children of believers. After ten years of ministry in an independent Baptist church, Rev. Booth began a study of the subject of baptism that changed his entire ministry. As he began to see that he had misrepresented the doctrine in his preaching and pastoral ministry, he came to his church leadership with what he had discovered from the Scriptures. Through a painful (though peaceful) process, he and the church decided to part ways. Rev. Booth now pastors a Reformed and Presbyterian church.

This information is more than of just passing interest. Booth's history affects his writing, and is, I believe, the key to why the book is one of the best resources on the subject available. He writes with compassion, with a pastor's heart. Other books on the subject that I have read are characterized by sarcasm or harshness. There is not a hint of any acrimony from Booth; rather, he gently pleads with the reader to prayerfully consider what the Scriptures have to say on the subject. He has walked in the shoes of those that despised the doctrine, and knows the difficulty of admitting error in an area so fundamental to the external manifestation of faith for so many.

The other key to the usefulness of the book is Booth's approach. Rather than doing what many have done before him in listing verses from the NT that typically are interpreted by Reformed believers to support the paedobaptist position (and that are typically either ignored by non-paedobaptists or interpreted in other ways), Booth begins at a more fundamental level. He begins with a thorough discussion of hermeneutics, the art of biblical interpretation. From there he discusses the matter of covenants in their progression through the OT to their fulfillment in Christ. He demonstrates simply and thoroughly that the Scriptures are a unified whole, that the promises and demands made upon Abraham, for example, did not end when Abraham died, or even at the conclusion of the OT era. In short, Booth lays the foundation of biblical unity to demonstrate that baptism is but the New Covenant version of circumcision, and he does so decidedly and persuasively. His arguments from Scripture are gently overwhelming to those who would resist the doctrine—I have seen its effects in my own ministry among adherents who liked a lot about the Reformed faith but just could not get past their prejudices against paedobaptism for various emotional or ill-informed reasons.

Only after seven chapters of rebuilding a biblical understanding of covenants, covenant signs, the unity of the Old and New Testaments, and the unity of God's covenant people, does Booth then lay out the rationale for the paedobaptist position. When he does so, the various NT "proof texts" that are often the starting point for other paedobaptist apologists suddenly leap

into clear focus, without the inevitable air of dogma that exists if the whole hermeneutic mindset is not first corrected. The result is an even-handed, reasonable approach that opens, rather than closes, minds to further discussion on the issue, if not actually convincing the reader.

Additionally, Booth provides helpful appendices for further study, including Samuel Miller's argument for the position from church history (an excerpt from Miller's 1834 work *Infant Baptism Scriptural and Reasonable*), and a helpful table of passages that clearly demonstrates the close similarities between circumcision and water baptism.

In short, this reviewer highly recommends Booth's work for anyone who wants to understand the doctrine of covenant baptism more thoroughly, without being brow-beaten in the process. 📖

NOTES

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