

Why We Baptize Children of Believers

By Zechariah Schiebout

A Biblical Defense of Infant Baptism

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Introduction

John Duncan, a 19th century minister of the Free Church of Scotland, ordered his convictions as follows, an order which I fully adopt as my own:

I am first a Christian, next a catholic,¹ then a Calvinist, fourth a paedobaptist [infant-baptist], and fifth a Presbyterian. I cannot reverse this order.

Because these are my convictions, my first priority is Jesus Christ; He has called me to be His disciple, so I am to pick up my cross, deny myself, follow Him, and encourage others to do the same. My second priority is to other Christians, Christians with whom I may not stand in full agreement doctrinally or ethically, but Christians with whom I nonetheless stand intimately united in Jesus Christ and for the cause of His gospel. My third priority is the doctrines of grace—unmerited, costly grace. Having been brought from death to life, blindness to sight, and lost to found, all by the free gift of God’s amazing grace to a wretched sinner like me, I cannot help but confess God is sovereign in salvation. He saved me when I was not seeking Him, rescued Me when I didn’t know I needed rescuing, and died for me when I didn’t know my sins needing dying for. Jesus endured hell on the cross so I could be delivered from eternal torment: His infinite suffering is my eternal bliss; His unflappable love is my sure salvation; His costly loss is my richest gain; His voluntary sacrifice is my soul’s song. The Christian life is unspeakable joy because He did it all. “It is finished” was His cry; Praise the Lord, what a Savior! My fourth (paedobaptism) and fifth (Presbyterian) priorities are far less important to me, and though I have paedobaptist and Presbyterian convictions, these are not hills upon which I would die. When push comes to shove, there is only one hill I would die on, the same hill Christ died on, for what He accomplished on that hill, in His death and resurrection, is that without which the gospel is powerless and meaningless. Men and women are saved by Jesus Christ, they are saved to serve Christ’s body, and they are saved by grace; their beliefs about baptism and church government are, in my opinion, matters of secondary importance to the gospel.

I am under no delusion, however, that readers of this booklet agree with me on the relative insignificance of the infant-baptist/believer-

¹“Catholic” here refers not to “*Roman Catholic*” but to “universal”, meaning a Christian who embraces Christians of any culture, race, and gender as brothers and sisters in Christ. A “catholic” (lowercase “c”) Christian believes the body of Christ extends into the whole world and is not confined to any one country or continent. The language is the same as used in the Apostles’ Creed, “I believe a holy, catholic [universal] church.”

baptist debate, so if you elevate the issue higher than I, elevate it, only be not surprised at my indifference. I am a man at home among the gospel, very content to know nothing but Christ and Him crucified, and to preach the same: as all roads led to Rome, and lead to London, so all texts lead to Christ. I don't consider Christian baptism insignificant, but I believe the debate between infant-baptists and believer-baptists has been elevated to a position of unhealthy prominence in the Christian community, a place of prominence which in my opinion should be reserved solely for the good news of Jesus Christ's atoning work.² For this reason I hesitate to write about infant-baptism; I fear writing on it only exacerbates the problem. Jesus Christ's Person and work, not baptism, are the gospel. Get baptism wrong and you'll receive not even so much as a mild rebuke at the pearly gates; get Christ wrong and you'll receive an overly warm welcome at hell's gates. So please, no matter how strongly I argue for infant-baptism, remember I consider the issue of relative importance, a far cry beneath the importance of a crucified Savior who hung in the Christian's place. I personally wish the Christian church was in full agreement on baptism, but since it isn't, and doesn't look like it ever will be, I reluctantly write.

One more thing before we start. I often hear people say infant-baptism is a doctrine the Protestant reformers (Luther, Zwingli, Bucer, Calvin, Knox) blindly and uncritically carried over from the Roman Catholic Church. Such is not the case. The Reformers and those who followed in their Protestant steps seldom accepted anything blindly and critically; in fact, the argument could be they saw too much and were too critical, though I don't believe this either. In any case, we do not practice infant-baptism simply because the Protestant reformers did; rather, we practice it because we believe it's a biblical doctrine, firmly grounded in Scripture. And though you may disagree with our interpretation of Scripture, we hope, in the very least, that you see we baptize children of believers because we think the Bible teaches it, not because we've blindly accepted a church tradition.

The existence of gifted Bible teachers on each side of the infant-baptism³ and believer-baptism⁴ debate, each of whom believes *all*

² As important as water baptism is, the Apostle Paul elevated preaching the gospel above baptism: "Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel" (1 Corinthians 1:17).

³ Proponents of infant-baptism: C.S. Lewis, J.I. Packer, John Stott, G.K. Chesterton, Jonathan Edwards, George Whitfield, B.B. Warfield, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Charles Hodge, Abraham Kuyper, Herman Bavinck, Louis Berkhof, John Murray, David Wells, James Montgomery Boice, Tim Keller, J.B. Phillips, Eugene Peterson, Francis Schaeffer, R.C. Sproul, Sinclair Ferguson, Michael Horton, Bryan Chapell, Geerhardus Vos, Jacob

Scripture is God-breathed,⁵ should tether pit-bullish opinions on the issue to a short leash. If church history had sorted through the written tomes and revealed, as it often does, a clear champion position, the debate would be over and our decision made easy. If one position was supported solely by men of theological acumen, and the other by theological flakes, we'd have warrant to thunderously denounce the flakes. Church history has done us no such service. Therefore we approach the issue with requisite humility, not consigning it to the arena of irrelevance, but to the arena of "Proceed with Caution, and generosity, for it is fellow believers with whom you disagree." To put it mildly, if you must step on your brother's toes, step, but step lightly, for Scripture gives your brother plenty of reason to step back, and, for heaven's sake, non-Christians are watching, learning of God's love by how His people disagree with each other.

I have often been asked why the sheer volumes written *against* infant-baptism in the past century far exceed the volumes written *for* it. Most take this to be an argument in itself against infant-baptism. I respectfully disagree. The reason (I think) more believer-baptist material exists, and is more readily available for consumption, is believer-baptists *have* to make more an issue of baptism than infant-baptists for the simple reason that "Baptist" is oftentimes in the name of their denomination. Whether Northern or Southern, Particular or General, Free Will or Reformed, Missionary or Primitive, the name of each includes "Baptist", demanding baptism be a preeminent issue, and therefore one written and spoken of voluminously. Though infant-baptists stand firmly on baptism, we are concerned, generally, about many more doctrines than baptism. "Baptism is just baptism" is a phrase you'll hear in infant-baptist circles, but such a phrase cannot exist in the conversations of those associated with "The Southern *Baptist* Convention" or the like. Those with "Baptist" in the name of their church or denomination must write and speak about it frequently, and usually do.⁶

Arminius, Richard Baxter, John Knox, Richard Sibbes, John Owen, John Calvin, Theodore Beza, Martin Luther, St. Augustine of Hippo, Cyprian, Justin Martyr, Jerome, *et al.*

⁴ Proponents of believer-baptism: John MacArthur, Charles Spurgeon, Stuart Briscoe, John Piper, Alistair Begg, Tony Evans, David Jeremiah, Charles Stanley, Chuck Swindoll, D.L. Moody, D.A. Carson, Mark Dever, C.J. Mahaney, Al Mohler, Thomas Schreiner, Bruce Ware, Gregg R. Allison, Tertullian, *et al.*

⁵ 2 Timothy 3:16.

⁶ I often wonder, though not out loud, why the ordinance of baptism is elevated far above that other, rather forgotten ordinance, the Lord's Supper. Humor me: Should we not also have denominations such as, "Particular Communionists" and "General Communionists", or "Free Will Eucharists" and "Reformed Eucharists"?

If you try to become a full member in a believer-baptist church, most will require you to admit as invalid your infant baptism and be re-baptized as an adult, fully immersed of course. But at Gospel of Grace Church we do not make baptismal views an issue for church membership. Our church membership contains both believer-baptists and infant-baptists, each of whom enjoy full membership in the church. If you want to become a professing member of Gospel of Grace Church, we care not whether you are an infant-baptist or believer-baptist; we care only that you've been baptized. If you haven't been baptized, we'll gladly dunk you—yes, all the way, for immersion is our preference. And, if you like, we'll immerse each member of your household too, but we leave that decision to the parents of the household.

Our believer-baptist brothers like to say the debate over infant-baptism and believer-baptism is easily resolved, for since the New Testament (N.T.) nowhere explicitly commands the church to baptize infants, therefore, they argue, infants should not be baptized. If only it were this easy. If we follow this principle, needing an explicit command in the N.T. to do anything in the life of the church, then:

1. N.T. churches should not worship on Sunday, for worshiping on Sunday is something we *infer* from Scripture⁷ and church history, but it is not something explicitly commanded in the New Testament.
2. N.T. churches should not use any instruments in a worship service, for the N.T. nowhere commands us to use instruments in worship. All the commands for using instruments come to us from the Old Testament (O.T.), and particularly the Psalms. If we are to use instruments in our worship, then, the O.T. command to use instruments should be repeated in the N.T. But the command is not repeated.
3. Women should not partake of communion, for there is no explicit N.T. command for women to partake of it.
4. We should not speak of the age of accountability, for there is no command concerning the age of accountability in the N.T.
5. Babies should not be dedicated, for there is no N.T. command to dedicate them, and Hannah's dedication of Samuel is a poor proof for infant dedication since Samuel was dedicated to the LORD for service in the *tabernacle*, the old covenant dwelling place of God fulfilled in Jesus Christ who tabernacle among us (John 1:14).

⁷ Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:2; Revelation 1:10.

These few examples help expose the weakness of the believer-baptist position that everything not commanded in the N.T. is therefore irrelevant for the N.T. church. The Bible simply does not fit into this mold, and neither do most believer-baptist churches. If, therefore, the many facets of N.T. church life don't abide by this principle, then why is baptism singled out as necessary to adhere to this principle? Put another way, either every facet of church life which does not abide by the principle is out of whack, or the principle itself is out of whack.

The debate between infant-baptism and believer-baptism centers not on the Bible's *authority*, but on the Bible's *teaching*, and the heart of the issue comes down to the thickness of the page between the Old and New Testaments in our Bibles. If the page is really thick and the N.T. is a brand new entity which had no prior foreshadowing or prefiguring and simply dropped out of heaven into a vacuum, and if the O.T. is not necessary for our understanding of the N.T., then infant baptism stands on feebler ground.⁸ But if the page is of medium thickness and the N.T. entered into a long history of promises, signs, and seals, and if the N.T. is really the climax to which all the prior covenants of grace point⁹, then infant-baptism is the silent stance of the N.T. Put another way, if the N.T. can be explained only in light of the O.T., then the real question is not, "Where does God command us to include children in the covenant?", but "Where does God command us to stop including children in the covenant?"

Now let's set about the work of considering infant-baptism under the following headings:

1. A Definition of Baptism
2. The History of Infant Baptism
3. Reasons for Infant Baptism
4. The Mode of Baptism
5. The Authority to Baptize

⁸ J.V. Fesko, in his book, *Word, Water, and Spirit: A Reformed Perspective on Baptism* (pp. 337-338) speaks to this issue:

Perhaps the exclusive appeal to the New Testament, at least in the American context, is due to the influence of dispensationalism, which sees the Old Testament as largely irrelevant for the New Testament church, since the church is a different entity from Old Testament Israel. Whatever reasons lie behind the exclusion of the Old Testament, such a methodology is inherently myopic, cutting off half of the Bible. It is essential to build doctrine on the canon of Scripture...Individual texts must be placed within the context of the scope of redemptive history.

⁹ God's covenant with Adam (Gen. 3:15); with Noah (Genesis 9); with Abraham (Genesis 15); with Moses (Exodus 19-20); with David (2 Samuel 7); and God's promise of the new covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-34).

A Definition of Baptism¹

Here is our definition of baptism:²

Baptism is a sacrament of the New Testament, ordained by Jesus Christ,³ by which the person baptized is solemnly admitted into the visible church.⁴ Baptism is also for him a sign and seal of the covenant of grace,⁵ of his ingrafting into Christ,⁶ of regeneration,⁷ of forgiveness of sins,⁸ and of his surrender to God through Jesus Christ to walk in newness of life.⁹

Notice the definition does *not* say, “Baptism ingrafts the baptized into Christ, regenerates them, and washes away their sins.” Rather, it says baptism is a *sign and seal* of these things. What is meant by *sign* and *seal*?

A *sign* is a picture or portrait of a greater reality. Think of charades, the game where people act-out words in silence. Through actions, the actors give viewers a visual rendition of an unspoken word. Similarly, baptism is a visual rendition of the gospel pointing us to a greater reality. Do you want to know what Christ’s cleansing blood washing away our dirty sins *looks* like? It looks like water washing away dirt (baptism). Do you want to know what the new birth *looks* like? It looks like someone who scrubbed their dirty skin in the bathtub and emerged squeaky clean. And do you want to know what surrendering to God (dying to ourselves)

¹ Here are definitions to clarify concepts used throughout the booklet:

Covenant. The biblical covenants are God’s way of accomplishing His purposes of redemption through human participation in the means He has established. God involves us in accomplishing His redemptive purposes by entering into a gracious relationship with believers and their children. This relationship is called a covenant; the mediator of the covenant is Jesus Christ.

Visible Church. The visible church is what we see, the *visible* community of worshiping believers expressed in each local congregation. Not all members of the visible church are members of the invisible church, for many non-Christians, who have no relationship with Jesus Christ, are baptized and join the church.

Invisible Church. The invisible church is unseen and composed of the elect of God, all whose names are written in the Lamb’s Book of Life.

² The following definition is taken from *The Westminster Confession of Faith in Modern English*, 28.1.

³ Matthew 28:19.

⁴ 1 Corinthians 12:13; Galatians 3:27-28.

⁵ Romans 4:11; Colossians 2:11-12.

⁶ Galatians 3:27; Romans 6:5.

⁷ John 3:5; Titus 3:5.

⁸ Mark 1:4; Acts 2:38; 22:16.

⁹ Romans 6:3-4.

and walking in newness of life looks like? Baptism portrays it. Baptism, then, is both for the person baptized and for those witnessing the baptism:

Each baptism is a means of grace for the whole Church. When by faith we witness the baptism of others, and/or recall our own baptism, the promises of God are confirmed to us, for we know that God cannot lie. Likewise, our duties to God are freshly impressed upon us, and we are moved to renew our obedience.¹⁰

A *seal* is a promise or guarantee. The promise of baptism is not that the person baptized has faith or will have faith. The promise of baptism is that *if* or *when* the baptized (or anyone) puts their faith in Jesus Christ, their sins will be washed away by His blood, guaranteed. The seal, then, refers to God's consistency in keeping His promises. An adult convert who was baptized in infancy should marvel at the way God kept the promise He made to him at his baptism: while an infant, God promised He would wash away his sins with Christ's blood *if he put his faith in Jesus Christ*. Years later the convert received the gift of faith and was cleansed of his sins. God kept his promise to the new convert. Amazing: No one keeps promises like God, especially not promises made decades earlier.

Please notice what baptism is not:

1. We do not agree with the teaching of *baptismal regeneration* or baptismal conversion, meaning, we do not believe water baptism washes away original sin or converts the person to Jesus Christ. Johannes Vos explains:

Romans Catholics and some Protestants hold that baptism itself confers regeneration or the new birth, so that the two are virtually identical, and whoever is baptized is also regenerated. The great majority of Protestants reject this teaching as an error. It is a confusion of the sign with the thing signified. If baptism is a sign and seal of regeneration, then it cannot be identified with regeneration. Titus 3:5 is relevant in this connection; note that it does not speak of "the regeneration of washing" but of "the washing of regeneration," which is a very different thing. We are not regenerated by washing (baptism), but we are washed (spiritually cleansed) by regeneration (the new birth).¹¹

¹⁰ The Standards of the ARPC, The Directory of Public Worship, 5.B.8.b.(2).

¹¹ Johannes Vos, *The Westminster Larger Catechism: A Commentary*, p. 473.

2. We do not agree with the teaching of *presumptive regeneration*, a teaching which argues that baptism should be administered to children on the basis of presuming they are regenerate until proven otherwise. We do not baptize *children* on the presumption they are born again; neither do we baptize *adults* on the presumption they are born again. We baptize both groups of people on the objective basis that God covenants with those who publicly profess faith in Christ and their children—God covenants with those who belong to the visible church.
3. Baptism is not about the salvation or regeneration of the person baptized. The person baptized may or may not be regenerate¹², but their regeneration is not the issue. We are not saying anything about the regeneration of the person baptized, for no human being can know whether or not the adult, or the child, is ultimately regenerate.
4. Baptism is not about the election of the person baptized, for we acknowledge that many people baptized die in unbelief and will reside under the eternal punishment of God in hell. Therefore, baptism is the inclusion of the baptized into the *visible* church,¹³ not the *invisible* church, and into the covenant community, not into the elect of God.
5. Baptism is not *our* promise to God, but *God's* promise to us: “For the promise is for *you* and for *your children* and for *all who are far off*, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.”¹⁴ The promise of the covenant, ratified by baptism, is not ours to God, but God's to us. The covenant is not based upon our promises to God, but upon God's promises to us.
6. Baptism is not *man*-centered, but *Christ*-centered, pointing us not to the person baptized, but to God's promises to us in Christ. What does the gospel *look* like? Jesus gave us two pictures: baptism and the Lord's Supper. Baptism is a visible depiction of being buried and raised with Christ, and of having all our sins washed away by His blood in the same way that water washes dirt from our skin. Baptism is the gospel made visible.

¹² Though the regeneration of an infant is not the issue of baptism, an infant *may* be regenerate in infancy. The biblical evidence often adduced to support such a possibility is John the Baptist: he was “filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb” (Luke 1:15).

¹³ 1 Corinthians 12:13; Galatians 3:27-28.

¹⁴ Acts 2:39.

The History of Infant Baptism

In order to understand the New Testament teaching on baptism we must consider the O.T. foundation upon which the apostles built.¹ The New Testament did not drop from heaven into a vacuum, but was preceded by 39 books of God-breathed revelation. Thus we begin our look at baptism with a story, a true story, a true story told by the Holy Spirit about how God relates to His people in the covenant.

In Genesis 15 God established His covenant with Abraham² and instituted circumcision as the sign of the covenant.³ From that time forward all male, Israelite children were circumcised on the 8th day and included in the covenant of grace. Conversely, all uncircumcised males were cut off from God's covenant people.⁴

Circumcision was a physical act, but it was supposed to become more than physical. Circumcision was a picture of a deeper, spiritual reality. The outward, physical act of circumcision portrayed what might become an inner, spiritual reality in the heart of each person in the covenant.⁵ Far from being a bare act of physicality, it was an external sign pointing to the spiritual realities which can only come by faith.⁶

Circumcision did not mean, however, that the recipient automatically possessed the realities signified. Isaac and Ishmael were circumcised, yet only Isaac possessed the inner realities. Similarly, Jacob and Esau were circumcised, yet only Jacob possessed the signified realities. When the Apostle Paul reflected on these incidents, he wrote:

Not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named." This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring...And when Rebekah had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God's purpose of election might continue...she was told, "The older will serve the younger." As it is written, "Jacob I have loved, but Esau I hated."⁷

¹ Ephesians 2:20.

² Genesis 15.

³ Genesis 17:10-11.

⁴ Genesis 17:14.

⁵ Deuteronomy 10:16; 30:6.

⁶ Romans 4:11.

⁷ Romans 9:6-8.

Circumcision, then, was not the spiritual reality itself, but only the sign or picture of the spiritual reality. In the same way, some who have been baptized with water do not possess the spiritual realities of forgiveness of sins and regeneration.

Although adult circumcisions were administered in the rare occasion that a foreigner or stranger believed in God,⁸ it was primarily the male, Israelite children who received the sign of circumcision during the approximately 2000 years between Genesis 17 and Jesus' birth. It comes as no surprise, then, that Jesus Christ was circumcised on the 8th day⁹ in obedience to the Abrahamic covenant. For Joseph and Mary, including Jesus in the covenant via circumcision was as ordinary as eating breakfast.

After Jesus' resurrection, He sent the apostles out to preach, and as people came to faith the converts were baptized.¹⁰ For the first time in redemptive history, the covenant people of God grew in number *not primarily from the inside through childbirth, but from the outside through adult conversions*. During the previous 2000 years of redemptive history, adult, non-Israelite converts such as Rahab the *Canaanite*,¹¹ Ruth the *Moabitess*,¹² and Naaman the *Syrian*¹³ were the *exception*, but after the pouring out of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, *adult conversions became the norm*. So naturally, the issue for the apostolic church was not how to incorporate *children of believers* into the covenant, but how to incorporate *adult converts* into the covenant. Acts 15 addresses the controversy surrounding Christian participation in pagan worship practices, and Galatians is an epistle dedicated to the controversy surrounding freedom from Jewish ceremonial laws (circumcision), but there is no controversy over including children of believers in the covenant. If for the first time in redemptive history God told His people, "Do not administer the sign of the covenant to children of believers", there would almost certainly have been a large controversy and probably a couple epistles dedicated to the issue. Jewish Christians would have had a lot of questions if their children were no longer included in the covenant via the sign of the covenant. No such controversy exists. Why not? The reason is likely that no drastic changes took place—the children of believers were still included in the covenant.

⁸ Exodus 12:48-49.

⁹ Luke 2:21.

¹⁰ Acts 2:41; 8:38.

¹¹ Joshua 2; Hebrews 11:31.

¹² Ruth 1:22; Matthew 1:5.

¹³ 2 Kings 5; Luke 4:27.

Reasons for Infant Baptism

Now to the question: Why do you baptize children of believing parents? We baptize them for the following reasons:

Church History

Although church history is of secondary importance, it is noteworthy that those personally trained by the apostles practiced infant baptism.³⁷ It was not until the German Anabaptists began believer-baptism in the 1520's, that the denial of infant baptism became officially accepted in an ecclesiastical setting. Prior to that time, the church knew 1500 years of infant baptism, and 2000 additional years of incorporating infants into the covenant community through circumcision.³⁸

Of special note is believer-baptists often accuse infant-baptists of leaning too heavily on church history. Yet the first Protestant advocates against infant-baptism campaigned their cause on the basis of church history, claiming infant baptism was absent the church many years after the apostles died. John Calvin explains:

The opponents of infant baptism spread among the simple folk the notion that many years passed after Christ's resurrection during which infant baptism was unknown. In this they are most shamefully untruthful. For indeed, there is no writer, however ancient, who does not regard its origin in the apostolic age as a certainty [Irenaeus, Origen, Cyprian].³⁹

Oftentimes believer-baptists mock appeals to church history, claiming the Bible alone as their standard for believer-baptism, but the original Anabaptists said no such thing. Whether or not you agree with their conclusions, one thing we must acknowledge: the Anabaptists appealed to church history to make their case against infant-baptism.

If you prefer a more in depth look at the history of baptism in church history, you'll likely enjoy a standard work on the subject by Joachim Jeremias, *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries*. For those uninterested in reading his work, here follow some historical tidbits from church history on the issue of baptizing infants:

³⁷ Origen says infant baptism is "from the apostles" (Maxwell Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation*). For a detailed treatment of infant baptism in the early church, see *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries* by Joachim Jeremias.

³⁸ Genesis 17:9-14.

³⁹ John Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.16.8.

1. Tertullian (160-220AD), in the 2nd century, questioned the propriety of infant baptism because he wanted to make sure of faith, but he acknowledged it was a widespread practice in his day.
2. Origen, in the early 3rd century, said, “The Church has received the tradition from the apostles to give baptism even to little children.”
3. The Council of Carthage, in AD 253, debated whether or not infant baptism should be performed on the 8th day of the child’s life.

Old Testament Continuity

Consider Paul’s well known words to Timothy,

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.

2 Timothy 3:16

To what does “*All Scripture*” refer? It refers to the Old Testament. The word translated “Scripture”⁴⁰ is a technical term commonly used in Paul’s day to refer to the Old Testament, the authoritative “writings” we know as Genesis through Malachi. Thus, we might paraphrase Paul, “The entire Old Testament is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching...”⁴¹ The starting point for understanding the N.T., then, must be the O.T.

That there is nowhere in the N.T. a command or indication to *stop* including the children of believers in the covenant is important. If God wanted His people to stop including children in the covenant, He would have said so. But quite the opposite is the case: Jesus said the kingdom of God belongs to infants,⁴² and He blessed the little children;⁴³ Peter said the promise of the covenant is “for you and for *your children...*”;⁴⁴ Paul says

⁴⁰ Greek γραφή (graphe), from which we derive our English root “graph”, as in *orthography* (correct writing) and *calligraphy* (beautiful writing).

⁴¹ This is not to deny the inspiration of the New Testament. This is only to say that when Paul wrote 2 Timothy (-A.D. 65), Genesis through Malachi were the official “Scriptures” and Paul’s primary referent. By this time some New Testament writings were considered Scripture (cf. 2 Peter 3:15-16), but the Old Testament Scriptures were undoubtedly authoritative, so much so that the apostles’ sermons in Acts are all derived from the Old Testament. Jesus and His apostles did not think the Old Testament irrelevant for the New Testament church; rather, they considered it of equal importance with the New Testament, as Christ-centered (Luke 24:27), as breathed out by God, and as profitable for us. Therefore the Old Testament must be our starting point for understanding baptism.

⁴² Luke 18:15-16.

⁴³ Mark 10:16.

⁴⁴ Acts 2:39.

that the children of believers are holy,⁴⁵ and many household baptisms were performed throughout the N.T.⁴⁶ Simply put, if God wanted His people to stop applying the sign of the covenant to their children, a sign which they had been applying for about 2000 years in obedience to the Abrahamic covenant, then Jesus and His apostles would have said something like, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unlike the gracious covenant I made with Abraham, the new covenant does not include children of believers, so you must not apply the new covenant sign of initiation (baptism) to children of believers anymore.” But there is no such instruction.

Here is a step-by-step walk through of the continuity between the covenant God made with Abraham and the N.T. church.

Infant-baptists argue that the covenant of promise God made with Abraham is fulfilled in Christ and still relevant for us today. They derive this principle from passages such as Romans 4:16 where Abraham is called “the father of us all” and Galatians 3:29 where Paul writes, “And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise.” Though Abraham lived about 20 centuries prior to the coming of Christ, Paul argues that Christians are children of Abraham’s, in direct connection with Him, through Christ. In other words, we have the same relationship with God Abraham had (a one-sided relationship of promise), or, put another way, the covenant of promise God made with Abraham is still in effect.

This may come as a surprise to those unfamiliar with covenant theology, for a surface reading of Hebrews 8 seems to suggest the entire Old Testament is fulfilled in Christ and done away with. However, a closer look at Hebrews 8 tells a different story.

In Jeremiah 31:31-34, the LORD promises He will make a new covenant with the houses of Israel and Judah, not like the covenant He made with their fathers on the day *when He brought them out of Egypt*, a covenant they broke:

Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on

⁴⁵ 1 Corinthians 7:14.

⁴⁶ Acts 16:15, 31-34; 18:8; 1 Corinthians 1:16.

their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more (Jeremiah 31:31-34).

According to Jeremiah, this new covenant surpasses the old covenant God made with Israel at Mt. Sinai (Mosaic covenant, Exodus 19-34) shortly after they exited Egypt (Exodus 14). And sure enough, just as we might have expected, the writer of Hebrews picks up the language of Jeremiah 31 and tells us the Mosaic covenant has been surpassed by the new covenant. Here is the passage from Hebrews 8:

7) If that first covenant [the covenant made through Moses] had been faultless, there would have been no occasion to look for a second. 8) For he finds fault with them when he says:

“Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, 9) not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt. For they did not continue in my covenant, and so I showed no concern for them, declares the Lord. 10) For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. 11) And they shall not teach, each one his neighbor and each one his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. 12) For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more.”

13) In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.

Hebrews 8:7-13

In verses 8-12, the writer of Hebrews quotes Jeremiah 31:31-34, and then in verse 13 he tells us why he quoted it: “In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one [covenant] obsolete.” The question we have to answer is what covenant the author of Hebrews means by “the first” covenant. Thankfully he tells us just a few verses earlier: “the first” covenant is the one the Lord made with the Israelites when they came out of Egypt, commonly referred to as the Mosaic covenant (the covenant made through Moses). This is very instructive. Many believer-baptists use Hebrews 8 to write-off every covenant in the Old Testament as irrelevant for believers today, but what they often miss is Hebrews 8 says only the Mosaic covenant is obsolete, and with this we agree. The chapters say nothing

about the Abrahamic covenant being obsolete. Therefore, the covenant made obsolete is the Mosaic covenant of law, not the Abrahamic covenant of promise, which means the Abrahamic covenant of promise is still in place, and rightly so, for it was a covenant established on promises, not on laws, promises which God made to Abraham concerning him and his children, and promises which God still makes to believers and their children.

At this point some will argue that since circumcision belonged to Israel, and since Israel has been done away with, therefore circumcision's meaning is irrelevant for us, and its connection with baptism should not concern us. But it should be carefully noted that circumcision did not belong to Israel. God gave it to Abraham (Genesis 17:12-14). *God gave circumcision not to the nation of Israel, but to the family of Abraham*, so doing away with Israel and the Mosaic covenant in no way affects the covenant God made with Abraham, a covenant which included Abraham's children. Simply put, the covenant God made with Moses has been fulfilled in Christ and made obsolete, but the covenant God made with Abraham, though fulfilled in Christ, is still in effect, and that is why the Apostle Paul argues for its ongoing relevance.

Paul does not contrast the old covenant with the new covenant so much as he contrasts the Mosaic covenant with the Abrahamic covenant, and he makes very clear that though the Mosaic covenant is fulfilled and no longer binds us to its ceremonial and civic laws, the Abrahamic covenant is still in effect, and so much so that he calls *us*—*new* covenant Christians—children of *the promise!*

Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law? For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman. But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise. Now this may be interpreted allegorically: these women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar. Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother...Now you, brothers, like Isaac, *are children of promise [of Abraham]*. But just as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so also it is now. But what does the Scripture say? "Cast out the slave woman and her son, for the son of the slave woman shall not inherit with the son of the free woman." So, brothers, we are not children of the slave *but of the free woman*.

New covenant Christians, then, are not children of Moses, children of the law, children of slavery, but are children of Abraham, children of the promise, children of freedom.

For those of you not convinced, read Genesis 17 in conjunction with Acts 2:39 and notice the similarities in language:

And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.

Genesis 17:7

For the promise is for you and for your children, and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.

Acts 2:39

The covenantal position is that the Abrahamic covenant of promise is yet in effect, which means God still covenants with both believers and their children. The only significant change between the way God covenanted with Abraham and the way He covenants with us is the covenant sign: from circumcision to baptism. The cleansing ritual of the Abrahamic covenant (circumcision) is replaced by the cleansing ritual of the new covenant (baptism). This is taught specifically in Colossians 2:11-12:

In [Christ] also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.

Notice Paul's progression of thought, and the correlative conclusions, in these verses:

1. All Christians are spiritually circumcised: "you were circumcised with a circumcision made *without hands*."
2. Spiritual circumcision means dying to ourselves: "by putting off the body of the flesh."
3. Spiritual circumcision—dying to ourselves—is performed on us by Christ: "by the circumcision of Christ."
4. Spiritual circumcision occurs when we are buried with Christ in spiritual baptism (baptism of the Holy Spirit) and raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God.
5. Spiritual baptism, then, is the replacement of spiritual circumcision.
6. Both spiritual circumcision and spiritual baptism are realized through faith in the powerful working of God.

7. Therefore, as spiritual baptism is the replacement of spiritual circumcision, so water baptism is the replacement of physical circumcision. And as physical circumcision ultimately pointed to spiritual circumcision, so water baptism ultimately points to spiritual baptism.

Lest this sound like a stretch, read the testimony of Paul K. Jewett, a believer-baptist, on the significance of Colossians 2 for teaching baptism as the replacement of circumcision.

To experience the circumcision of Christ in the putting off of the body of the flesh, is the same as being buried with him and raised with him in baptism through faith. If this be so, the only conclusion we can reach is that the two signs as outward rites symbolize the same inner reality in Paul's thinking. So circumcision may fairly be said to be the Old Testament counterpart of Christian baptism.⁴⁷

Just as circumcision was entrance into the covenant community, and meant either divine blessing if it met with faith, and divine curse if met with unbelief, so the same with baptism as entrance into the covenant community. If the baptized has faith, there is blessing; if the baptized has no faith, there is divine cursing:

Now, since baptism is the replacement of circumcision, we must discern the true meaning of circumcision in order to understand the true meaning of baptism. Circumcision in the flesh was the sign and seal of circumcision of the heart, or, physical circumcision was the outward ritual which pointed to what became an internal reality to those with faith: spiritual circumcision of the heart. That is to say, physical circumcision was not an end in itself—it did not save anyone. Rather, it was a pointer to a greater reality inside each one who believed. Plenty of Israelites males had been physically circumcised who never received, through faith, spiritual circumcision.

Consider the following passages, two from the Old Testament, and one from the New Testament, on the spiritual reality to which physical circumcision pointed:

Circumcise therefore *the foreskin of your heart*, and be no longer stubborn.

Deuteronomy 10:16

⁴⁷ P.K. Jewett, *Baptism and Confirmation*. Found in David Kingdon's, *Children of Abraham: a Reformed Baptist view of Baptism, the Covenant, and Children*; p. 168.

Circumcise yourselves to the LORD; remove *the foreskin of your hearts*, O men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem; lest my wrath go forth like fire, and burn with none to quench it, because of the evil of your deeds.

Jeremiah 4:4

No one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, *nor is circumcision outward and physical*. But a Jew is one inwardly, and *circumcision is a matter of the heart*, by the Spirit, not by the letter.

Romans 2:28-29

The claim is often made by believer-baptists that circumcision was merely outward and therefore had little or no spiritual component. But both the New and Old Testaments teach that though circumcision entailed the physical cutting off of the foreskin, the physical act was symbolic, a signification of what takes place to the heart of those who believe in Christ. The heart of a believer was circumcised spiritually, and physical circumcision was a pointer to this reality in the lives of those who believed.

New Testament “Silence”

The mightiest charge leveled against infant-baptism is the lack of an explicit command in the New Testament to include children of believer’s in the covenant. “If God wanted infants baptized,” say proponents of believer-baptism, “Then He would have said, ‘Hear ye, hear ye, my people. I command you to baptize infants. Now, then, get busy.’” Since no such announcement exists, therefore infant-baptism must be invalid; so goes the argument. Quite the opposite is the case: the argument from silence is the most powerful evidence that infant-baptism is valid. Here is what we mean. The argument from silence is actually an inaccurate description of the argument, for though we believe the NT is silent, the Bible is not silent. The Old Testament has already spoken to the issue, and the New Testament never overturns the injunction to include children of believers in the covenant.

Underneath it all is a fundamental difference of opinion concerning the relationship between the Old and New Testaments. Believer-baptists abide by the principle that in order for something from the Old Testament to be binding on Christians, it must be repeated in the New Testament. Infant-baptists abide by the principle that everything in the Old Testament not rescinded by the New Testament is still binding on Christians. Putting these two principles to work in a logic ladder, we arrive at two very different conclusions about baptism:

Believer-baptist Logic Ladder:

Since baptism is a New Testament ordinance; and
Since there is no explicit New Testament command to baptize infants;
Therefore infants of believers should not be baptized.

Infant-baptist Logic Ladder:

Since the Old Testament ordinance of circumcision was applied to infants; and
Since the New Testament ordinance of baptism replaces circumcision;
Therefore infants of believers should be baptized.

New Testament Missionary Emphasis

The baptisms in Acts pertain to missionary situations, situations in which the gospel entered the lives of people and families *for the first time*—people and families never before confronted with the faith were now hearing and believing. In these circumstances, both infant-baptists and believer-baptists agree adult converts should receive baptism after they confess faith in Jesus Christ.

But Acts never explicitly describes the apostles handling a situation of children born to believing parents—children born after the parents became Christians. Dennis Johnson, professor of Practical Theology at Westminster Theological Seminary in California, summarizes the teaching of Acts on this point:⁴⁸

1. Acts never tells us about an adolescent or young adult who had been raised from infancy by parents who believed in Jesus, and who then received baptism only after he or she personally expressed his/her faith in Christ.⁴⁹
2. Although Acts records the baptism of whole households, it never explicitly states whether or not there were infants or young children in any of these homes, or whether infants in the household were excluded

⁴⁸ I am indebted to Dennis Johnson for the previous paragraph; and the following three points, footnote included, are quoted verbatim from Dr. Johnson's *Infant Baptism: How My Mind Has Changed*.

⁴⁹ Timothy is the only individual whose "childhood history" we know much about, but it's likely that both he and his mother were, so to speak, "Old Testament believers" until Paul arrived in Lystra, bringing the news that God's Old Testament promises had been fulfilled in Jesus the Messiah (Acts 16:13; 2 Tim. 1:5; 3:10, 15). Since Timothy's mother taught him the Scriptures "from infancy," apparently she would have had him circumcised as an infant as the Law commanded, were it not for the fact that his Gentile father forbade it. Paul circumcised him as a young adult not because circumcision is a sacrament/sign still applied to believers under the New Covenant, but simply to remove a potential obstacle to the effectiveness of Timothy's ministry among Jews. Anyway, we don't ever read about when Timothy was baptized.

from receiving baptism because they were too young to express personal faith in Christ.

3. Acts and the rest of the New Testament never record any statement by Jesus or the Apostles that the infants of believers are now to be treated differently in the New Covenant from the way that the infants of Israelite believers were in the Old: namely, that, whereas Israelite children were treated as part of the covenant community, the children of Christians are to be treated as outside the covenant community that is under Christ's Lordship. The other changes that occurred with the coming of Christ are clearly indicated in the New Testament: Circumcision is not to be required of Gentiles (Galatians), but both Jews and Gentiles who come to faith must be baptized (Acts). Animal sacrifices are done away with because of Jesus' final sacrifice (Hebrews 10). The kosher dietary laws no longer apply because Jesus cleanses people from all nationalities (Mark 7; Acts 10-11). The temple in Jerusalem is replaced by a "living temple" made up of people (1 Peter 2). But the New Testament never hints that the relationship of believers' children to the church community has changed: The New Testament never suggests that, although before Jesus' coming Israelite children were "inside" the covenant community and received the covenant sign of circumcision (the boys, that is), now since Jesus' coming the children of believers are "outside" the community and therefore excluded from the covenant sign of baptism.

The New Testament church needed no instruction about including children of believer's in the covenant. What she needed was instruction about including adult converts. Most believers in the Old Testament were *born* into the covenant; very few people born outside Israel came into the covenant as adults. But after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, He commanded His disciples, for the first time in redemptive history, "*Go, therefore, make disciples of all nations...*" Prior to this commission, the Israelites were to *welcome* all nations, but not *go out* to them with the good news. Jesus' Great Commission dawned a new age of adult conversions never before encountered by the Israelite religion. Now the only question confronting the disciples and apostles who went out preaching the gospel was, "How do we include adults into the covenant? What do we do to adult converts?" The answer: "Baptize them, and their entire household."⁵⁰

The New Testament was written in a missionary situation. It is therefore not surprising that we should have to note at the outset that all New Testament statements about baptism without exception relate to

⁵⁰ Acts 16:30.

missionary baptism—i.e. baptism administered when Jews and Gentiles were received into the fellowship.

If we realize this fact, we shall understand why, in the New Testament statements about baptism, the conversion of adults and their baptism stands right in the middle of the picture. For it is they who are joining the Church, while the children, who are, as it were, hidden in the bosom of the family, cannot claim the same degree of attention.⁵¹

The Impurity of the New Testament Church

Believer-baptists believe that though the old covenant was made with the nation of Israel and thus included many unbelievers, the new covenant is made with believers only. In the Old Testament, then, God covenanted with every *biological* child of Abraham, regardless of faith, but in the New Testament God covenants with only the spiritual children of Abraham—those who give credible evidence of regeneration. This belief system usually means each church establishes a minimum age of accountability, officially or unofficially, so the elders of each church are better able to discern genuine, vital faith in each person prior to baptizing them. According to believer-baptists, therefore, New Testament churches are pure communities: God covenants only with the regenerate. This means that while many unregenerate adults are baptized every year, these unregenerate adults are not *truly* members of the covenant. It also means that young children (infants) cannot be members of the covenant until, Lord willing, such time as they profess faith in Jesus Christ.

Though this argument sounds good in theory, Scripture disproves it over and over again. First, the Bible teaches us God has been covenanting with believers and their children since the days of Abraham, so if the new covenant is made with believers only, excluding their children, we should expect God to tell us, “The children are no longer part of My covenant.” He does no such thing, but in fact announces the opposite. Children are announced as part of the new covenant (Isaiah 59:21; Jeremiah 32:37-41; Ezekiel 37:24-26), are welcomed as part of the new covenant (Matthew 19:14; Acts 2:39), are set apart in the new covenant (1 Corinthians 7:14), and are addressed as members of the new covenant (Ephesians 6:1-4).

Second, the Bible teaches us the new covenant can be broken, which means that as in the old testament, so in the new testament, God covenants with non-Christians. Put another way, if unbelief or gross disobedience breaks the relationship between God and a member of the

⁵¹ Joachim Jeremias, *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries* (Wipf & Stock, 1960); p. 19.

new covenant, then the new covenant is made not just with believers, but is also made with unbelievers—with those who profess faith in Christ, yet have no genuine faith in Christ.

Many passages of Scripture teach that people who are part of the new covenant community—members of the church—fall away. Their falling away does not mean they were never members of the church, but means one of two things: either they currently give no evidence of regeneration, or they never were regenerate. The New Testament does not assume every member of the church who professes faith in Jesus Christ is a genuine, born-again Christian. The New Testament church is a mixed body, composed of believers and unbelievers. The church makes judgments about the condition of a person's heart by looking upon outward appearances—a profession of faith (words) and a life bearing some fruit (deeds)—but only God sees the heart.⁵² Jesus says there are plenty of people who hear the word, immediately spring up (join the church), but when persecuted or tried wither away.⁵³ He later explains this phenomenon:

As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away.⁵⁴

Jesus presents the same idea in John 15 where He says there are people who give every appearance of union with Him, but do not bear fruit, and so are cut off and thrown into the fire.⁵⁵ These are professing, baptized members of the church, people of the covenant but not of Christ.

More examples of people who were brought into the covenant and later gave no evidence of genuine faith are Hymenaeus and Alexander,⁵⁶ the man who had his father's wife,⁵⁷ Demas,⁵⁸ and those who belonged outwardly to the church but left because they were not genuine Christians.⁵⁹ And in a startling comment made to the Corinthian Christians, whom he called "saints" and "brothers", Paul said, "Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves" (2 Corinthians 13:5). He said these words to members of the Corinthian

⁵² 1 Samuel 16:7.

⁵³ Matthew 13:5-6.

⁵⁴ Matthew 13:20-21.

⁵⁵ John 15:1-11.

⁵⁶ 1 Timothy 2:20.

⁵⁷ 1 Corinthians 5:5.

⁵⁸ 2 Timothy 4:10.

⁵⁹ 1 John 2:18-19.

church, which leads us to believe Paul doesn't assume everyone in the covenant community is regenerate.

Moreover, Christian experience proves many people profess faith in Jesus Christ, get baptized, stay with the faith for a while, and eventually reject the gospel, reject Christ, and die hating Jesus, and will tell you so themselves. Plenty of people profess faith and are baptized not because they have faith in Jesus Christ, but because of peer pressure, parental pressure, societal pressure, and/or desire for acceptance or approval. Therefore, if true, genuine, persevering faith is the necessary prerequisite for baptism, then no one should be baptized. Who except God alone can discern true faith infallibly?

The pastoral implications for an impure church community are numerous and sobering, especially for non-Christians who claim to be Christians. The author of Hebrews says the punishment for unbelievers in the new covenant who fake regeneration and eventually fall away will be worse than the punishment of those who faked belief in the old covenant:

If we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. *How much worse* punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has spurned the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace?

Hebrews 10:26-29

And the Apostle Peter speaks of false prophets and teachers who profess Christ, and claim to teach others about Christ, and are set apart by the churches to teach, yet who are unbelievers who will one day be judged severely. Speaking of them Peter writes:

For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. For it would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them.

2 Peter 2:20-21

The church, therefore, in both her membership and teachers, is composed of people who undergo great moral or doctrinal transformation, but who are not born-again. These people are genuinely members of the new covenant, they are genuinely members of churches, but they are lost.

In His visible community, the church, God covenants not only with the elect, but also with those who are not elect. Therefore, we don't baptize children of believing parents because we hope they will one day become real, genuine members of the covenant community, but we baptize them as true members of the covenant community. If, by God's grace, these children come to faith in Jesus Christ, they will receive all the benefits of the covenant (justification; adoption; eternal life), but if these children reject Jesus Christ, they will receive the curses of the covenant (greater condemnation than those who never heard of Jesus; eternal punishment). As with baptized adults, so with baptized children, the more you know, the more you are held accountable for. Being a member of the covenant is either the grandest blessing, or the worst curse, but it is never benign.

Another way to skin the cat of how non-Christians can be genuine members of the covenant is to recognize that the covenant community is not the same community as the elect of God. There is, to be sure, a large amount of overlap between those who are in covenant with God (church) and those who are elect, but, I think it is safe to say, there are more people in covenant with God (professing members of churches) than are elect of God, that is to say, there are many more people in church who claim to be Christians than there are in church actual born-again Christians.

This helps us answer the sticky question raised by Hebrews 6:4-8, a passage which appears, on the surface, to suggest Christians can lose their salvation:

It is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt. For land that has drunk the rain that often falls on it, and produces a crop useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God. But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed, and its end is to be burned.

Hebrews 6:4-8

Can true Christians lose their salvation? No, not at all. But Hebrews 6:4-8 is not teaching us about true Christians, but about people who are genuine members of the covenant of grace yet who are not truly converted to Christ. These people are baptized church members (1 Corinthians 10:1-5) who profess to believe in Jesus Christ, who have received many external blessings of the Holy Spirit (fellowship of the saints; joy of serving others),

who have tasted (but not swallowed and digested) something of the blessings which come to those who believe in Jesus Christ, and who believe the Word of God is good and true and that heaven and hell are powerful realities with which all men will one come face to face. These people are elders, deacons, and pastors (1 John 2:18-19); these people serve on various committees and teach others the truths of Christianity; these people serve in every capacity in the church, and may even reach out to non-Christians. But though these people enjoy, for a time, many external blessings of the gospel, they are unbelievers, non-Christians, lost souls who without repentance and genuine faith in Christ will spend eternity in hell. This by no means suggests those who are really and truly saved can fall away from Christ, but suggests there are people who give every external appearance of genuine faith, yet are dead in sin. Every aspect of regeneration can be counterfeited: non-Christians can learn, duplicate, and make appear as the real thing every aspect of being born-again.

What does all this mean for baptism? It means that children of believers are genuine members of the covenant community, along with all adults who profess to believe in Jesus Christ, until such time as either of them explicitly, either in doctrine or in grossly sinful living, rejects Jesus Christ.

Household Baptisms⁶⁰

Household baptisms suggest God relates to New Testament families as He did Old Testament families—He relates to them as a unit, welcoming them into the covenant community (the visible church). In the Old Testament, Israel was saved by households at the Passover,⁶¹ and corporately as a nation at the Red Sea. Men, women, and children (infants too) were baptized in the Red Sea.⁶² In the New Testament this pattern continues. The households of Lydia,⁶³ the Philippian jailer,⁶⁴ Crispus,⁶⁵ Stephanus,⁶⁶ and Onesiphorus⁶⁷ were baptized.

Notice particularly the household baptisms in Acts 16. Believer-baptists almost always say that when the households in Acts 16 were

⁶⁰ Under this heading I have borrowed profusely from J.V. Fesko, *Word, Water, and Spirit: A Reformed Perspective on Baptism*, pp. 345-351.

⁶¹ Exodus 12:3-4.

⁶² 1 Corinthians 10:1-3.

⁶³ Acts 16:15.

⁶⁴ Acts 16:33.

⁶⁵ Acts 18:8.

⁶⁶ 1 Corinthians 1:16.

⁶⁷ 2 Timothy 1:16; 4:19.

baptized, each member of the household believed. But the passages say no such thing. If you look at the passages closely you'll find a different story. Here is the account of Lydia's conversion and the baptism of her household:

One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshiper of God. *The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul.* And after she was baptized, and her household as well, she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay." And she prevailed upon us.

Acts 16:14-15

The only thing we're told about Lydia's household is that the Lord opened her—Lydia's—heart to pay attention to what Paul said. There is not a single word which suggests anyone else in her house believed. The only one we are told believed is Lydia, and on the basis of her belief, *she and her entire household were baptized.*

Similarly, notice the account of the Philippian jailer's conversion, and the baptism of him and his household:

The jailer called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them out and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" And they said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds; and he was baptized at once, he and all his family. Then he brought them up into his house and set food before them. And he rejoiced along with his entire household that he had believed in God.

Acts 16:29-34

Paul and Silas spoke the word of the Lord to the jailer and to his household, yet the only one we are told believed is the Philippian jailer. Luke writes in such a way to tell us that the entire household was rejoicing because *he* (singular)—the Philippian jailer—had believed in God. The Greek participle translated, "he had believed" (πεπιστευκως⁶⁸) is *singular* and *masculine*, referring, most likely, not to the jailer's household but to the jailer himself. The whole household rejoiced that the

⁶⁸ The Greek word is attested the same in all Greek manuscripts: Textus Receptus (the Greek text of the KJV and NKJV); Nestle-Aland, 27th Ed. (Greek text of RSV, NASB, NIV, ESV); Majority Text. See also Daniel B. Wallace's translation in *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Zondervan, 1996; p. 632): "He rejoiced with his whole house *because he had believed* in God."

jailer believed, but the text says nothing about the rest of the household believing.

What do we learn from the accounts of Lydia and the Philippian jailer? We learn this: The basis for baptizing households was not the faith of every member in the household, but the principle of representative headship. Bryan Chappell explains:

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

The account of the baptism of the Philippian jailer's household is particularly instructive because of the precise description supplied by Luke, the writer of Acts. Luke says that all of the jailer's household were baptized (v. 33), but then he uses a singular verb to describe who rejoiced and believed in God that night (v. 34). The jailer himself believed (singular verb), and his whole house was baptized. Sadly, this important distinction in the account is not reflected in some of our modern translations (see the English Standard Version for an excellent translation). As a result, some assume that entire households were baptized in the New Testament because everyone in them believed the gospel. While this is not impossible, it is unlikely that all those households consisted only of those who were old enough to make an intelligent faith commitment. Further, the assumption that everyone in the households must have made a faith commitment does not take notice of the careful distinction Luke makes between those who actually believed and those who were baptized.⁶⁹

A household allows for the presence of infants and young children. When all of Scripture is examined, there are O.T. passages which specifically mention infants and children as members of households,⁷⁰ and

⁶⁹ Bryan Chappell, *Why Do We Baptize Infants?* p. 18.

⁷⁰ Genesis 18:19; 36:6; 46:27; 47:12; 1 Samuel 22:15-19; Jeremiah 38:17-23.

there are O.T. passages which specifically exclude infants and children from the household.⁷¹ The key point is this: if, when it wants to distinguish between adults and children, the Bible uses language which excludes children from a household, then the fact that the New Testament does not use language which excludes the children when households are baptized suggests the infants and children in the household were baptized. The entire household was baptized regardless of the age or intelligence of the members. Simply put, if the children of believers were not supposed to be baptized until they came to faith, it is strange we are not told the entire household was baptized *with the exception of those without faith* (i.e., infants and small children). As went the head of the household, so went the whole house, meaning, Romans and Jews in the 1st century A.D. embraced the solidarity of the family. If the head of the household was initiated into the visible, covenant community, the rest of his family would also be initiated into that visible community:

The way in which the solidarity of the family was taken for granted explains further why no reason was found for emphasizing or justifying especially the baptism of children.⁷²

Jesus Welcomed the Little Children and Infants⁷³

In the Greco-Roman world, infants and small children were socially useless, of no social advantage to those associated with them. So a teacher such as Jesus who welcomed them gambled with His social status and certainly wasted His time. It was only natural that the disciples, wanting to protect both themselves and their teacher from social humiliation and

⁷¹ Genesis 50:8; 1 Samuel 1:21-22.

⁷² Jeremias Joachim, *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries* (Wipf & Stock, 1960), p. 23.

⁷³ John Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.16.7, also speaks to this:

Christ commands that the infants be present to him, adding the reason, 'for of such is the Kingdom of Heaven.' And thereupon he attests his will by his act when, embracing them, he commends them with his prayer and blessing to his Father. If it is right for infants to be brought to Christ, why not also to be received into baptism, the symbol of our communion and fellowship with Christ? If the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to them, why is the sign denied which, so to speak, opens to them a door into the church, that, adopted into it, they may be enrolled among the heirs of the Kingdom of Heaven? How unjust to drive away those whom Christ calls to himself! To deprive those who he adorns with gifts! To shut out those whom he willingly receives! But if we wish to make an issue of the great difference between baptism and this act of Christ, how much more precious shall we regard baptism...than the receiving, embracing, laying on of hands, and prayer, by which Christ himself present declares both that they are his and are sanctified by him?

wasting time, denied the children access to Jesus. But Jesus rebuked the disciples,⁷⁴ and said something astonishing about the children, “To such belongs the kingdom of heaven.”⁷⁵ If the kingdom of heaven belongs to infants and children,⁷⁶ then denying them the sign of covenant inclusion (baptism) is no different than hindering them from coming to Jesus.

If it was right for infants to be brought to Christ why not also to be received into baptism the symbol of our communion with Christ? Why should the church not receive into her bosom those whom Christ received into his? How unjust we should be to drive away those whom he willingly received.⁷⁷

The Promise of the Covenant

In Acts 2:39, while preaching his famous sermon at Pentecost, the Apostle Peter said, “Repent and be baptized every one of you...*for the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off...*”⁷⁸ Especially three things stand out from this verse.

First, the words I italicized are an echo of Genesis 17:7, “I will establish my covenant *between me and you and your offspring after you.*” This may seem a stretch, until we consider that when Peter preached his sermon the Old Testament was the only Scriptures written, therefore, those present for Peter’s sermon could have interpreted his words in only one way: “as a reference to the promise in God’s covenant and the fact that that promise extended not only to believers but to their children as well.”⁷⁹

Second, notice Peter did not say, “The promise *was* to you and your children” but “The promise *is* to you and your children.” The promise of the covenant is still valid for the children of believers.

The third item which stands out is the *direction* of the promise is from God to us, not from us to God. *God’s promise to us* is the core of our relationship with Him; our promise to God is merely a response to His unbreakable promise. Though our desire for Him ebbs and flows, His desire for us, in Jesus Christ, remains consistent.

⁷⁴ Matthew 19:13-15; Luke 18:15-17.

⁷⁵ Matthew 19:14; cf. Luke 18:16.

⁷⁶ It might be of some importance that this incident occurred in Judea, which means the children to whom Jesus’ referred were children of the covenant, Israelites by birth.

⁷⁷ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 19.20.4.

⁷⁸ Acts 2:39.

⁷⁹ *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*, edited by Gregg Strawbridge. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2003; p. 57.

The following excerpt is taken from the ARPC Standards and aptly summarizes the direction of the promise:

In the administration of baptism, the emphasis is on God's bringing people into covenant relationship with Himself. Baptism is not primarily a means through which one signifies a commitment to Christ. The baptism of children is not intended as a sign of their parents' faith. Nor is it an act of dedication by the parents, giving up their child to God and seeking from God a blessing upon their child. All these things may accompany baptism, as our response to God. Nonetheless, the primary focus must be on God's initiative to establish a covenant with His people: marking them as His own, assuring them of the truth of His promises, and calling them to covenant faithfulness.⁸⁰

Children of Believers Are Holy

According to the traditional Anabaptist/Baptist view, the children of believers are not regarded as holy until they repent of their sins and believe in Jesus Christ.⁸¹ However, the New Testament declares the children of believers "holy", even if only one parent is a Christian.⁸² What does "holy" mean? It means "set apart", or "different." The children of a believing parent are holy because the Christian parent will raise the children in the faith, connect the children to a covenant community (the body of Christ, a church), and thus provide the children with all the spiritual benefits that children born to two believing parents have. The children of one believing parent, then, are baptized into the visible church and partake of all the benefits of instruction and nurture operating within the covenant community.⁸³

⁸⁰ ARPC, *The Directory of Public Worship*, p. 305.

⁸¹ Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrim's On the Way*, p. 795.

⁸² 1 Corinthians 7:14.

⁸³ John Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.16.9, aptly summarizes the benefits children of believers receive from their inclusion into the covenant community through baptism:

Children receive some benefit from their baptism: being engrafted into the body of the church, they are somewhat more commended to the other members. Then, when they have grown up, they are greatly spurred to an earnest zeal for worshiping God, by whom they were received as children through a solemn symbol of adoption before they were old enough to recognize him as Father.

Baptism Is a Sign of Righteousness Received by Faith Alone

External circumcision did not guarantee circumcision of the heart. Circumcision pointed to the need for a new heart, but only the Holy Spirit could supply that need. Paul makes that clear in Romans 2:29, "Circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit." This Spirit-wrought circumcision of the heart is what Abraham received, which is why Paul says in Romans 4:11, "Abraham received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the *righteousness* that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised." Circumcision, then, was symbolic of the *righteousness* which comes by faith alone. Many people read Romans 4:11 and conclude circumcision was a sign of Abraham's *faith*, but it wasn't. Circumcision was a sign of the *righteousness* which all who believe in Christ receive through faith. This is very significant. Neither circumcision nor its New Testament counterpart baptism are about the *subjective faith* of the recipient, but about the *objective righteousness* (full approval: justification) God freely gives to each one who believes in Him.

This becomes evident in that "God commanded that [circumcision] be administered to Israelite baby boys at 8 days old, before anyone could tell whether God had changed or would change their hearts by his Spirit, whether he would enable them to trust his promises!"⁸⁴

Instructions for Parent-Child Relationships in the Covenant Community (Church)

In his epistles, the apostle Paul talks to children as though all of them were part of the covenant community. Paul does not distinguish between two kinds of children in the church, those who have *not* confessed faith or been baptized (little pagans), and those who *have* confessed and been baptized. Rather:

[Paul] speaks to all the children present in the congregation, and he implies that their identity "in the Lord," their trust in the promises of God, and their desire to do what "pleases the Lord" should motivate all these children to obey their parents. Of course, these congregations may include some children who are not born again, not believers; but Paul is not presuming to read individual hearts at long distance. He is simply treating the children, as a group, as members of the King's community,

⁸⁴ Dennis Johnson, *Infant Baptism: How My Mind Has Changed*.

under the King's authority, and therefore responsible to the King for their response to their parents.⁸⁵

Why are Paul's instructions to Christian parents and their children so important? They are important because Paul regards the relationship between new covenant parents and children the same way Moses regarded the relationship between old covenant parents and children. Paul's New Testament instructions echo and include the Old Testament instructions to parents and children. For example,

Old Testament instruction to the children of the old covenant:

Honor your father and your mother, as the LORD your God commanded you, that your days may be long, and that it may go well with you in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.⁸⁶

Corresponding New Testament instruction to the children of the new covenant:

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. "Honor your father and mother" (this is the first commandment with a promise), "that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land."⁸⁷

Old Testament instruction to parents of the old covenant:

Keep your soul diligently, lest you forget the things that your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life. Make them known to your children and your children's children.⁸⁸

You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children.⁸⁹

Corresponding New Testament instruction to parents of the new covenant:

Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.⁹⁰

What does this prove? Only that children were not considered "outsiders" to the covenant community. You can picture the scene: young

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Deuteronomy 5:16; cf. Exodus 20:12.

⁸⁷ Ephesians 6:1-3.

⁸⁸ Deuteronomy 4:9.

⁸⁹ Deuteronomy 6:5-7.

⁹⁰ Ephesians 6:4.

pastor Timothy stands in front of the Ephesian church during the Sunday worship service and reads Paul's letter to the congregation. And in the letter Paul addresses the children! Why? Because they are members of the visible church.

The "Better Covenant"⁹¹

In the old covenant, women worshiped in a separate courtyard of the Temple, not allowed to draw as near the Holy Place as the men; in the new covenant men and women worship shoulder to shoulder. In the old covenant the Gentiles were excluded with few exceptions (Rahab, Ruth, and Naaman); in the new covenant Gentiles (all non-Jews, i.e., most of you reading this booklet!) enter in droves. In the old covenant males only received the sign of the covenant (circumcision); in the new covenant females are baptized as well as males.⁹² The new covenant is a covenant of greater inclusion; the entire trend of the new covenant is bringing inside those who were formerly kept at a distance. So if the new covenant is one of inclusion and expansion, then the burden of proof rests upon those who make the new covenant more exclusive and restricted by withholding the covenant sign from children of believers. Stated simply, it is hard to see how converted Jews would regard the new covenant as a better covenant if their children, for the first time in redemptive history, were to be excluded from it.

If children in the new covenant were excluded from the covenant sign, there surely would have been gallons of ink spilt in the New Testament and later writings addressing the controversy. As it is, there is no controversy or complaint from Jewish Christians against Christianity that they are not allowed to include their children in the covenant.

What Peter said to his audience during his Pentecost sermon is one of the richest proofs that the new covenant includes children:

Peter's audience were Jews and Gentile converts to Judaism from throughout the Roman world, and some of them (despite their heritage as covenant people) had committed treason against God's Messiah, Jesus. When they realized what they had done, Peter told them to repent

⁹¹ Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Christians On the Way* (p. 795), sums this entire point up well:

If children are included in the covenant of grace under its Old Testament administration, surely they are not excluded in the new covenant administration, which the writer to the Hebrews calls "better" than the old (Heb. 7:22).

⁹² Acts 8:12.

and receive baptism in Jesus' name (Acts 2:38). Then he added: "The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call" (2:39). "All who are far off" are the pagan Gentiles.⁹³ This is consistent with the expansion of the reach of God's gracious covenant that I mentioned above. But now notice this: the children of these people who are at the point of repentance, faith, and baptism are not bypassed as Christ's promise goes out to the pagans. The promise of forgiveness and renewal by the Spirit is spoken specifically to the children of Peter's listeners...In expanding his community of grace to the Gentiles, God will not expel the children.⁹⁴

Sovereign Grace⁹⁵

Baptism is the work of God, not man. It is not a sign of the believer's commitment to God, but the sign and seal of God's promise to save those who trust in Christ alone. What role does sovereign, supreme grace play in baptism? Dennis Johnson explains:

1. To emphasize God's gracious initiative to us in our helplessness. Circumcision and baptism are not events in which the recipient acts, but in which someone else acts (in God's name) on or for us. This is true, of course, when an adult is converted and comes for baptism: she doesn't baptize herself, but a pastor applies the water of baptism to her. The Apostles' instruction to adults is not "baptize yourselves" (reflexive) but "be baptized" (passive: receive baptism from someone else). But it's even more obvious, when infants are baptized, that baptism is "announcing" to us that God graciously gives a change of heart that we in our spiritual death could never produce in ourselves.

⁹³ The expression is from Isa. 57:19 and is applied to Gentiles in Acts 22:21; Eph. 2:13, 17.

⁹⁴ Dennis Johnson, *Infant Baptism: How My Mind Has Changed*.

⁹⁵ J.V. Fesko, *Water, Word, and Spirit: A Reformed Perspective on Baptism* (pp. 360-361), explains this well:

The very helplessness of infants highlights the truth that God saves His people. Man cannot initiate, achieve, supplement, complement, or complete His own redemption. To attempt to do so is to marginalize the supreme place of Christ in man's redemption. If the temptation in adult baptism is to overemphasize an individual's faith in Jesus, then the temptation in infant baptism is to devalue the importance of faith and thereby destroy the evangelistic message of the news of God's saving action. Adult and infant baptism maintains this necessary balance. It also appears that balance was an implication of Paul's appeal to Israel's Red Sea baptism. All of Israel was baptized into the Holy Spirit, the sea, and Moses [1 Cor. 10:1-3]. Ironically, it was the professing baptized adult believers who were barred from the land and condemned to die in exile. By contrast, the younger Israelites, including the baptized children and infants, possessed the faith to enter the Land of Promise (cf. Heb. 3:16-19; 4:2).

2. To emphasize the mysterious role of the family in the communication of God's covenant grace down through the generations. This role really is mysterious. On the one hand, the Bible is so clear that being born into a believing family is no guarantee of salvation: every individual is accountable to respond to the Gospel in faith, or endure the consequences of rebellion...

[On the other hand] God seems to view us both as members of a family, influenced (for good or ill) by our family context and identity, and as individuals, bearing responsibility for our own response to his Word of grace. This is God's perspective not only in the Old Testament, when virtually all the covenant people were of one physical family (Abraham's-although Gentiles such as Rahab, Ruth, Uriah, and Naaman were also included); but also in the New Testament, as the Gospel goes out to all the families of the earth (Acts 3:25). This is what I find striking about the baptism of Lydia and her household (Acts 16:14-15) and of the jailer and his household (Acts 16:31-34). There's no way to tell for sure whether or not there were babies or children in those households, so both sides in the infant baptism dialogue read these texts in light of their own presuppositions. But what we can agree on is that in these texts the Holy Spirit speaks of the persons involved not as disconnected individuals but as "households," as families (or perhaps even families with resident servants). Doesn't this suggest that in the New Testament God does not discard the family as a means for extending his gracious covenant-kingdom, but rather he spreads his grace to and through more families, to households not previously reached with his salvation?

Infant circumcision and infant baptism in themselves emphasize the balance: they are administered to infants not because we presume to know or predict the infant's spiritual state, but because the child is in the home of and under the authority of Christian parents (hence the sign belongs not only to "birth-children" but also to adopted children). Yet the fact that circumcision and baptism are administered to infants at all is a testimony to the fact that birth into a particular family is no guarantee of ultimate spiritual blessing, rather that something more is needed, something that only God can do for us through the shedding of Christ's blood and through his resurrection, applied through the regenerating power of the Spirit, in order for us to become children of God.⁹⁶

⁹⁶ Quoted verbatim from Dennis Johnson's *Infant Baptism: How My Mind Has Changed*.

The Mode of Baptism

The Reformed, infant-baptist community has, as a whole, said very little definitively about which mode of baptism is to be preferred. Whether the baptism is performed by immersion (dunking), effusion (pouring), or sprinkling, Reformed infant-baptist churches have historically acknowledged each mode legitimate provided the baptism is performed by an ordained minister of the church, with water, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit:

The outward element to be used in this sacrament is water, with which the person is to be baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Baptism is to be performed by a minister of the gospel, lawfully called to that office.⁹⁷

The Greek word βαπτίζειν (*baptizein*), from which we derive our English word “baptism”, means “to plunge, dip, wash.”⁹⁸ Therefore the semantic range of the word most naturally encompasses immersion and effusion (Mark 7:3-4; Luke 11:38; Hebrews 6:2), excluding sprinkling. Since I can provide no better explanation of the preferred mode of baptism throughout church history than Herman Bavinck’s eloquent explanation, I here quote it, at length, for your edification:

In the first period of the life of the church, the rite of baptism consisted in immersing candidates for baptism in water and after a moment lifting them out again. The Greek word βαπτίζειν (*baptizein*) already points in that direction for it literally means “to dip” or “dip into”(John 13:26); and also, when it is used in a broader sense for washing (Matt. 15:2; Mark 7:4; Luke 11:38; Heb. 9:10) or figuratively (Matt. 3:11; 20:22; Acts 1:5; and so forth), it denotes an act in which the person who or thing which is “dipped” is completely immersed and cleansed. Furthermore, the cases that Scripture reports clearly show that in the apostolic era baptism occurred by way of immersion (Matt. 3:6; John 3:23; Acts 8:38). And, finally, “sacramental phraseology” is completely based on this mode of administering baptism (Rom. 6:4; Gal. 3:27; Col. 2:12). Accordingly, immersion remained in use in the Christian church for centuries. The Greek [Orthodox] church still adheres to it. Sprinkling or rather affusion only occurred in ancient times when there was not enough water or when the sick had to be baptized on their bed (*baptismus*

⁹⁷ Westminster Confession of Faith in Modern English, 28.2.

⁹⁸ *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd Ed. Revised and edited by Frederick William Danker. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000; pp. 164-165.

clinicorum). In this last case Cyprian defended aspersion or perfusion with an appeal to Ezek. 36:25, but the rest of the church fathers speak of baptism as an immersion in water. In AD 754 Pope Stephen II permitted baptism by affusion in cases of necessity involving infants or the sick, but a council of the year 816 still instructed priests “not to pour out water upon the heads of infants but always to immerse them in a bath.” Thomas [Aquinas] said: “It is safer to baptize by immersion because this is the more common usage.” The Council of Ravenna (1311) left the choice between immersion and affusion open. Until the thirteenth century, therefore, immersion and sprinkling still occurred side by side in the West. After that, however, the latter became increasingly common. When in Christianized Europe adult baptism became the exception and infant baptism became the rule, there also occurred a change in the manner in which baptism was administered. This happened not for dogmatic but for hygienic reasons. In a sense all infants existed in “a state of infirmity.” The Reformers also adopted this practice. Luther preferred immersion; Calvin considered the issue an adiaphoron; but the Anabaptists made it a matter of principle and returned to immersion.

And this alone is what needs to be combated. There is no doubt that in ancient times immersion was the general rule; it is still permitted today and also illustrates the rich meaning of baptism better than sprinkling. But one cannot make this a matter of principle for the following four reasons:

1. The water is not the blood of Christ itself and does not itself effect the washing away of sins but is the sign and seal of it. Therefore, what really matters in baptism is not the quantity of water that is poured out on the person being baptized or in which they are immersed.
2. The spiritual benefit depicted in baptism is not only called a washing away of sins but also a sprinkling with clean water and with the blood of Christ (Ezek. 36:25; Heb. 12:24; 1 Pet. 1:2; cf. Exod. 24:6; 29:16,20).
3. Although for centuries the practice of immersion remained in use, from the most ancient times onward sprinkling was also considered permissible in cases of necessity. The Christian church never even dreamed of regarding a baptism invalid only because it had been administered by way of sprinkling, and the proponents of immersion as a rule even themselves recoil in practice from drawing this conclusion.
4. Although, despite the threefold immersion that had been practiced from ancient times, one must, with Gregory the Great, maintain that “whether it is performed by a single or a triple absolution, it does

not matter”; yet sparkling must not be reduced to such minute amounts that the whole idea of a “washing away” is lost. Just as the Lord’s Supper, however shrunken, must remain a meal, so also the symbolism of “washing away” must be kept alive in the sprinkling [of infants or adults] with baptismal water.⁹⁹

In addition to Bavinck’s informative treatment of baptism, the *Didache*, a 2nd century treatise for Christian instruction, informs us in Chapter 7:

Baptize “in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit” in running water. But if you have no running water, then baptize in some other water; and if you are not able to baptize in cold water, then do so warm. But if you have neither, then pour water on the head three times, “in the name of the Father and Son and Holy Spirit.”

“Running water” refers to streams or rivers, and was preferred because running water was usually cleaner than the stagnant waters of a pond or lake. If the cleanliness of baptismal water is an issue of primary importance, then in modern day America we should baptize not in the running water of rivers and streams but in a baptistery or large tub filled with drinkable water. But the *Didache* tells us the issue of primary importance is not the cleanliness of baptismal water, but the water itself. Accordingly, each local church is free to figure out the best method of administering baptismal waters to the recipient (baptistery, river, fount, etc.), only every effort should be made to use copious amounts of water.

Taking into account, therefore, the word “*baptizein*”, the sacramental imagery of being buried in Christ through baptism, and the panoply of church history, it is our conviction at Gospel of Grace Church that the purest expression of baptism is immersion. We immerse both infants and adults, and will, only in cases of extreme parental preference, revert to pouring water three times over an infant with a large pitcher (thereby immersing the infant in water). Our Lord Jesus Christ gave us the sacrament of baptism as a picture of the washing away of our sins which occurs through faith in Christ, so we make every effort to depict, for all to see and meditate upon, this thorough cleansing.

⁹⁹ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, Vol. 4*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008; pp. 516-517.

The Authority to Baptize

As Jesus announced the great commission and the command to baptize (Matthew 28:16-20), it is important we notice to whom He spoke. Jesus did not give the command to baptize to Caesar or Pontius Pilate (civil government), and He did not give it to fathers as heads of households (family government). The command to baptize was given by Jesus to the *apostles*, and by extension to the *apostolic church* of which the apostles are the foundation (Ephesians 2:20). Therefore Jesus did not invest the civil government with authority to baptize, neither did He invest individual families with authority to baptize, nor did He invest para-church organizations such as seminaries, campus ministries, or private Bible studies to baptize. He gave the authority to baptize to the church alone, so for a baptism to be valid, it must be performed in connection with the church. Simply put, baptism belongs, by Christ's command, to His church.

A common objection made against this teaching is the biblical example of Phillip and the Ethiopian Eunuch. The Ethiopian Eunuch was baptized not in the presence of a local church but on a desert road in the middle of nowhere, somewhere between Jerusalem and Gaza (Acts 8:26). And, as the argument continues, he was baptized not by an apostle but by Philip; therefore, baptism can be administered in any context by anyone.

But a closer look reveals Philip's baptism of the Ethiopian Eunuch is a baptism performed as a ministry of the church. Two chapters earlier (Acts 6:5-6) Philip had been ordained (set apart through the laying on of hands) to the office of deacon, so when an angel of the Lord sent Philip to evangelize the Eunuch, the angel sent a man officially set apart by the church for ministry. Philip baptized the Eunuch (Acts 8:38), then, not on his own authority as a Christian, and certainly not on the authority of a father (Philip was not the eunuch's father), but on the authority given him by the church, and in a context very similar to a modern day missionary setting. Though the baptism was not performed in the midst of a local church, it was nonetheless performed through the ministry of the church and thus with the authority of the church. Likewise, Peter, an apostle of Christ for the *church*, commanded believers to be baptized in Acts 2:38 and Acts 10:48. What this illustrates is that in missionary contexts where a local church did not yet exist, baptisms were performed under the authority of someone officially sent by the church. In line with the Bible's teaching that baptisms must often occur in missionary settings where no local churches exist, the Associate Reformed Presbyterian

Church authorizes ministers to baptize new converts immediately when the situation calls for it:

In cases of exigency [necessity] a pastor may hear the profession of faith of a penitent sinner and administer to him the Sacrament of Baptism. He (the pastor) shall then report his action to the session.¹⁰⁰

We acknowledge, then, that though baptisms need not take place during a service of worship in a local congregation, they do need to have some connection with the church. Dr. Thomas White, a believer-baptist, in an essay entitled “What Makes Baptism Valid”, offers a helpful perspective on baptism as an ordinance of the church:

The ordinances logically are administered by the local church...Can a six-year-old boy in his backyard lead a friend to Christ and baptize him? Will the local church accept that baptism as valid? Typically this strikes us as unwise. Why? Because the ordinance should be practiced by the church and not by an individual, a seminary or a denomination. The gathered believers should see the person's baptism and accept him or her into fellowship. It is a church ordinance. Thus, baptism must be associated with a local church.¹⁰¹

Ever since the Donatist controversy of the 4th and 5th centuries A.D., the Christian church has wrestled with “who” is authorized to administer baptism. The Donatists declared invalid all baptisms performed by *traditores* (traitors), those ministers who, under the Diocletian persecution (begun in A.D. 303), betrayed their Lord by handing over their copies of the Scriptures to avoid persecution. But the Donatist position was rejected by Augustine¹⁰² and the Council of Arles¹⁰³ on the grounds that the meaning of baptism is not dependent upon the godliness of the administrator so much as it is dependent upon

¹⁰⁰ The Standards of the ARPC, The Form of Government, 5.C.1.c.; and The Standards of the ARPC, The Directory of Public Worship, 5.B.8.b.(9).

¹⁰¹ Dr. Thomas White, *What Makes Baptism Valid*. The Center for Theological Research, July 2006. Online at:

<http://www.baptisttheology.org/documents/WhatMakesBaptismValid.pdf>.

¹⁰² See Augustine, “On Baptism, Against the Donatists.” *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, edited by Philip Schaff, vol. 4. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004; pp. 407-514.

¹⁰³ Canon 14 of the Council of Arles (A.D. 314):

Concerning those who are said to have handed over the Holy Scriptures or sacred vessels or the names of their brothers, be it resolved by us that any of those who from the public records, not from words alone, are discovered to have done so be removed from the office of the clergy. But if that same person who was exposed has ordained others, and the affairs of those ordained are all in order, let their ordination not be revoked.

the authority of Christ through the ministry of His church. It is our conviction, then, at Gospel of Grace Church that the sacrament of baptism, thankfully, does not depend upon the godliness of the pastor but on the authority of Christ exercised through the ministry of each local church. This is not to say we support ministerial apostasy or ungodliness. We support neither, and believe any such minister should be disciplined and, if necessary, deposed from office. This is only to say the meaning of the sacrament of baptism does not depend upon the future godliness of a pastor, but upon the authority of Christ, and thus a baptism performed by an ordained officer of the church who is subsequently deposed from office is not invalidated. Baptism does not belong to any one man, but to the church, and thus it does not depend upon the authority of any one man, but upon the authority Christ exercises through His church.

We believe baptism should be administered by an ordained minister not because of any mysterious power inherent in the minister himself (in himself he is nothing), but because of the authority invested in him by Christ through the church. It is because the church has set him apart for the work of ministry that he is invested with authority to baptize. Therefore, for example, a minister who baptizes one of his children in a service of public worship does not do so as the child's father but as an ordained officer of the church. He baptizes not on the authority of a parent, for Jesus did not give parents authority to baptize, but on the authority of the church. Thus, baptism is performed by the church through the administration of a person set apart for the work of ministry, and the one who performs the baptism acts on behalf of the church as one set apart by the church for such work.

The Westminster Confession of Faith limits the administration of baptism to ordained ministers:

Neither sacrament [baptism or the Lord's Supper] may be administered by any person, except a minister of the Word, lawfully ordained.¹⁰⁴

Baptism is to be performed by a minister of the gospel, lawfully called to that office.¹⁰⁵

On the same grounds, the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church (ARPC) Form of Government explicitly states the sacrament of baptism is to be administered by “an ordained minister of the Word.”¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Westminster Confession of Faith in Modern English, 27.4.

¹⁰⁵ Westminster Confession of Faith in Modern English, 28.2.

What does this mean practically at Gospel of Grace Church? Practically we distinguish between what we *do* and what we *accept*. What we *do* at Gospel of Grace Church is have ordained ministers of the gospel baptize since these men are the ones set apart by the church for such work. But we understand that in other denominations and independent churches baptisms are handled differently. Many Christian churches have no doctrine of ordination, so the baptisms they perform are done by whoever happens to be leading worship that Sunday (a layman, deacon, elder, pastor, etc.). Other churches have long-standing traditions where fathers or family members perform baptisms in the context of the local church, either at the church building or out at a pond or river. Though none of these are our practice, we understand the baptisms were performed as a ministry of the church, and thus we have no problem *accepting* such baptisms as valid, provided they were done in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, with water. Regarding the validity of baptisms performed by fathers, apart from the church, on the authority of their being head of their household, and baptisms performed by para-church organizations such as campus ministries, seminaries, or small group Bible studies, the elders of Gospel of Grace Church are glad to discuss with you the validity of each baptism on a case-by-case basis, inquiring about the reasons for baptizing apart from the church and also about the consciences of those baptized (whether or not they accept their baptism with a clear conscience). If you have any questions about the validity of your baptism or the baptism of a loved one, please ask our pastor or elders. We are more than happy to study each baptism to help you discern whether it was a genuinely Christian baptism as instituted by our Lord Jesus Christ. If we conclude you have not been baptized, we will be more than willing to baptize you in a service of public worship.

We do not accept baptisms performed by Mormons, Buddhists, or any other non-Christian religions as valid.

Conclusion

Having laid out concisely our biblical, theological basis for infant baptism, we ask not that you agree with Gospel of Grace Church's perspective. You must abide close by your conscience, guided in your understanding of the Scriptures by the Holy Spirit. We ask only that you examine what you

¹⁰⁶ The Standards of the ARPC, The Directory of Public Worship, 5.B.8.b.(5).

believe against the whole of Scripture.¹⁰⁷ If we should never agree on the issue of infant-baptism and believer-baptism our fellowship need not be hindered the slightest. The issue is not one of salvation or condemnation, of heaven or hell, of unity or disunity, so examine the entire Bible freely, diligently, thoughtfully, and prayerfully, coming to the conclusion which you deem most God-glorifying.

Baptism does not save you; Jesus Christ alone saves. So, whether we present our children for baptism in infancy/youth, or withhold them from baptism until, Lord willing, they publicly profess faith in Jesus Christ, our differences of opinion need not hamper the preeminent work of making disciples of all nations¹⁰⁸ and equipping the saints for the work of ministry.¹⁰⁹ In the words of the famous dictum:

In essentials, unity;
In non-essentials, liberty;
In all things, charity;

We enjoy liberty on the issue of infant-baptism/believer-baptism, and hope you enjoy it too.

¹⁰⁷ As the Bereans who searched the Scriptures diligently to see if the things preached and taught were so (Acts 17:11).

¹⁰⁸ Matthew 28:19-20.

¹⁰⁹ Ephesians 4:11-12.

Appendix I: Objections

Here we handle two common objections leveled against infant baptism:

Effectual Objection

The first objection sounds something like this: “In Romans 6:3-4 and Galatians 3:27, Paul speaks of baptism as if those baptized with water possess the spiritual realities to which baptism points. Therefore, since we do not know whether infants possess the spiritual realities to which baptism points, we should not baptize them.”

Response

Let’s take each passage one at a time, Romans 6:3-4 first:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

To begin, it must be acknowledged Paul’s primary point in these verses has nothing to do with the infant-baptist/believer-baptist debate. His argument is that being baptized into Christ (converted) means Christians are *united* to Christ in His death and resurrection. Therefore, since our old selves were buried with Christ, we must put sin to death and live in the newness of life which is ours in Christ. John Murray explains:

Baptism “into Christ Jesus” means baptism into union with Christ. To be baptized “into Moses” (1 Cor. 10:2) is to be baptized into the discipleship of Moses or into the participation of the privileges which the Mosaic economy entailed. To be baptized “into the name of Paul” (1 Cor. 1:13) is to be baptized into the discipleship of Paul, a suggestion which Paul violently rejects. To be baptized “into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost” (Matt. 28:19) is to be baptized into the fellowship of the three person of the Godhead. Hence baptism into Christ signifies simply union with him and participation of all the privileges which he as Christ Jesus embodies.¹¹⁰

The main point I want to draw from John Murray is “baptized into Christ Jesus” means “united with Christ” or “converted/regenerated.”

¹¹⁰ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997; pp. 214-215.

Therefore the apostle is not addressing Christians who have simply undergone baptism (with water) but have undergone baptism into vital union with Jesus Christ (conversion).

And Leon Morris has this to say about Romans 6:3:

We may perhaps miss something of what [Paul] is saying because for us *baptized* evokes liturgical associations; it points to a comforting and inspiring piece of ceremonial. But in the first century, while the verb could denote this ceremony...to “baptize” evoked associations of violence. It meant “immerse” rather than “dip.” It was used, for example, of people being drowned, or of ships being sunk. Josephus used it metaphorically of crowds who flooded into Jerusalem and “wrecked the city”. It is quite in keeping with this that Jesus referred to his death as baptism (Mk. 10:38; Lk. 12:50). When it is applied to Christian initiation we ought not to think in terms of gentleness and inspiration; it means death, death to a whole way of life. It is this that is Paul’s point here. Christians are people who have died, and their baptism emphasizes that death. Death runs through this passage and is mentioned in every verse up to v. 13. We should not let the modern associations of baptism blind us to the point Paul is making so strongly. He is saying that it is quite impossible for anyone who understands what baptism means to acquiesce cheerfully in a sinful life. The baptized have died to all that.

The value of this quote from Leon Morris is the emphasis (properly so, in my opinion) he places on baptism as a radical initiatory rite. Water baptism is symbolic of the radical nature of the Christian life, meaning, that the moment a person is baptized into Christ (converted), he/she undergoes a severe death. The old, sinful ways are violently drowned, and of this water baptism is a powerful picture.

What does this have to do with infant baptism? It has this to do with it: Romans 6:3 is not about whether we should baptize adults or infants, but about the radical nature of being baptized into Christ (converted), being united with Him in His death, and thereby putting to death our former, sinful way of living. In other words, Paul draws a tight correlation between the violence associated with baptism and conversion. A paraphrase of Romans 6:3-4 might read as follows, “Alright folks, we need to get something straight. Those of you who have been converted to Christ are united to Jesus in His *death*. Just as He was buried, so you have been buried with Him when you were baptized spiritually (converted), which also means that just as Christ came out of the tomb, so you came out of your spiritual deadness. You have been raised from the dead, spiritually speaking, in order that you might walk in newness of life.”

Notice next the passage in Galatians:

For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.

Galatians 3:27

Here again we encounter the language of “baptized into Christ.” In this passage Paul connects “baptized into Christ” with having “put on Christ.” In other words, whatever we say about the meaning of “baptized into Christ” we must also say about “putting on” (literally, “clothed”) Christ. And the previous verse helps us, “In Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith” (Galatians 3:26).

In essence, then, the meaning of being baptized into Christ in this passage is being genuinely converted, through faith, and having put on Christ. “Baptized into Christ” refers to believers who have been baptized spiritually with the Holy Spirit, meaning they have been genuinely converted. Or, put another way, the apostle is addressing genuine Christians, telling them that by their conversion to Christ they have been clothed with Christ. Commenting on this passage, William Hendriksen writes,

It should not be any matter of controversy that “being baptized into (union with) Christ” means more than being baptized with water, for surely not all those who were the objects of the outward administration of this sacrament have actually “put on Christ.” The apostle is speaking, therefore, not about the merely outward administration of baptism, as if some magical healing power adhered to it, but about the sign and seal in conjunction with that which is signified and sealed. All those, then, who by means of their baptism have truly laid aside, in principle, their garment of sin, and have truly been decked with the robe of Christ’s righteousness, having thus been buried with him and raised with him, have put on Christ. In Christ they have risen to newness of life.¹¹¹

What both passages (Romans 6:3-4; Galatians 3:27) illustrate for us is being “baptized into Christ”—genuinely converted—*means* something for the believer. Conversion is a radical, dramatic, even violent action performed by God upon the heart and soul of a believer which calls them to flee their former life and walk in the newness of life which is theirs in Christ. When a person is truly converted, they are united to Jesus Christ in His death and resurrection, clothed with Him. Union with Christ, then, not the mode or efficacy of water baptism, is the key issue in these passages.

¹¹¹ William Hendriksen, Galatians. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004.

Infant-Dedication Objection

The second objection sees infant dedication as a suitable substitute for infant baptism: "Infant dedication is more biblical than infant baptism. Why not just dedicate our children like the believers of old?"

*Response*¹¹²

Now, we could ask, couldn't a "dedication" ceremony such as that practiced at many Baptist churches serve the same purpose as infant baptism in recognizing that the children of believers do have some sort of special place in the community of Christ's covenant? Well, yes and no.

Yes. Infant dedication in Baptist churches seems to reflect a sort of Spirit-prompted "instinct" that, even though (in such churches) they are treated as unbelievers and outsiders by being denied baptism, the children of believers actually do have some sort of a relation to Christ and his church. It would be more consistent, it seems to me, for churches of "believer baptism" convictions not to replace infant baptism with dedication, but simply to wait and see what path kids choose (faith or rebellion) as they grow up. Typically the dedication services I have heard still imply that believing parents are doing something in relation to the Lord on behalf of their infant children. Wouldn't it be more consistent to wait until children are old enough to decide for themselves whether they want to be dedicated to God? And yet, frankly, I'm glad that Baptist churches are inconsistent enough to have infant dedication, and that Baptist parents bring their children to church and teach them the Gospel at home and sing "Jesus Loves Me, This I Know" with their kids. The way I see it in all these ways, they are acting as though their children have a place in the community of Christ, even though Baptist parents don't acknowledge that their children can receive the sign of inclusion in Christ's community, baptism. And since (in my view) the Bible teaches that believers' children have a place in the community of Christ (though that doesn't guarantee their salvation!), the more that Christians act in ways consistent with the Bible (even if our understanding of its teaching is unclear), the more the Lord is glorified.

No. A Biblical Case for Infant Dedication in the New Testament Is Far Weaker than the Case for Infant Baptism. If we are looking for a biblical justification for how we treat the infants of believers, it seems to me that it is far harder to make a case for dedication than for infant baptism. Consider the biblical examples of infant dedications: There was

¹¹² This entire response is quoted verbatim from Dennis Johnson's *Infant Baptism: How My Mind Has Changed*.

Samuel, whom his mother Hannah promised to return to the Lord for tabernacle service even before he was conceived (1 Sam. 1:11, 24-28). But Hannah's dedication of Samuel did not replace his circumcision, of course. Rather, it made him a "Nazirite," whose uncut hair signified his special consecration as a servant of God (1 Sam. 1:11; Numbers 6:1-21). Nor is it treated as an ongoing pattern for Israelite infants in the Old Testament, let alone for the children of believers in the New Testament. There were Samson and John the Baptist (also Nazirites from conception), whom God had promised to barren parents and set apart for his own special purposes even before their conception (Judges 13:3-5; Luke 1:13-17).

Then there is the presentation of Jesus in the temple (Luke 2:22-24) when he was about 41 days old. (He was circumcised at 8 days, and then 33 days later Mary could be "purified" following her son's birth, Lev. 12:37). But we should notice that this presentation fulfills the command that came from the Exodus from Egypt, and specifically the night when the Passover lamb died in the place of the Israelites' firstborn: "Every firstborn male shall be called holy to the Lord" (Exod. 13:2). Firstborn animals were to be sacrificed as holy to the Lord (Exod. 13:12). Firstborn sons were to be redeemed (Exod. 13:15). It is hard for me to see how this Old Testament custom, which had to be observed carefully for Jesus since he came to fulfill every requirement of the Law of Moses, could be viewed as a model for Christians dedicating their children. Christian infant dedication services don't mention the ceremonial purification of the infant's mother after the birth; they are performed not only for firstborn sons but also for later children--of both genders! They do not involve offering sacrifices for the redemption of the child from death or the purification of the mother. In all these ways Christian infant dedication services today are very different from Jesus' presentation to the Lord at the age of a month and a half--and they should be! The Old Testament sacrificial system, which included the redemption of Israel's firstborn and the ceremonial cleansing of Israel's mothers, was fulfilled in the sacrifice of Christ on the cross.

Because I find no convincing biblical command or example that would provide a basis for infant dedication by Christian parents today, if we have to choose between infant dedication and infant baptism on the basis of biblical evidence, it seems clear that the weight of biblical evidence favors infant baptism, because of the continuity between circumcision and baptism as signs of entry into God's community.

"Dedication" Focuses More on the Parents' Action Than on God's Promise of Grace through Faith. Finally, infant dedication as a ceremony lacks an important element that infant baptism has: Infant baptism encourages us and our children to trust in Christ by symbolizing the

promises of God, achieved for us by Christ and received by faith alone. Dedication tends to focus more on what we do than on what Christ has done. As parents look back on that day with their kids, they are saying, "We dedicated you to the Lord's service when you were a baby." On the other hand, as "infant-baptist" parents look back on the day of their child's baptism, they say to her, "On that day long ago, the Lord Jesus promised to you that if you trust him he will wash away your sins and give you a heart to love and serve him by the power of his Spirit. Just as the water 'cleansed' your baby skin, so the Holy Spirit will make your heart clean if you trust in Jesus, because Jesus died for the sins of everybody who trusts in him." You can see the difference. Both sets of parents are calling their kids to respond in faith and both sets do so by teaching the Gospel about what Jesus did for us in his sacrifice on the cross, but children baptized as infants have received a sign/symbol that points directly to that gift of God's grace.

So I would say that infant dedication is better than nothing (since it is a way of recognizing that the children of believers have the privileges and responsibilities of being included in the Lord's community), but it seems to me that infant baptism has much stronger biblical support than does infant dedication in the New Testament church.¹¹³

¹¹³ Again, this entire response is quoted verbatim from Dennis Johnson's *Infant Baptism: How My Mind Has Changed*.

Appendix 2: For Further Study

Here are some Presbyterian & Reformed confessional and catechetical statements on the sacraments in general, and the sacrament of baptism in particular, followed by additional resources on baptism:

Westminster Confession of Faith (in Modern English)

Chapter 28: Baptism

1. Baptism is a sacrament of the New Testament, ordained by Jesus Christ,¹¹⁴ by which the person baptized is solemnly admitted into the visible church.¹¹⁵ Baptism is also for him a sign and seal of the covenant of grace,¹¹⁶ of his engrafting into Christ,¹¹⁷ of regeneration,¹¹⁸ of forgiveness of sins,¹¹⁹ and of his surrender to God through Jesus Christ to walk in newness of life.¹²⁰ By Christ's own appointment, this sacrament is to be continued in his church¹²¹ until the end of the age.¹²²
2. The outward element to be used in this sacrament is water, with which the person is to be baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Baptism is to be performed by a minister of the gospel, lawfully called to that office.¹²³
3. Dipping of the person into the water is not necessary. Baptism is rightly administered by pouring or sprinkling water on the person.¹²⁴
4. Not only those who personally profess faith in and obedience to Christ,¹²⁵ but also the infants of one or both believing parents, are to be baptized.¹²⁶
5. Although it is a great sin to despise or neglect this ordinance,¹²⁷ nevertheless, grace and salvation are not so inseparably connected with it that a person cannot be regenerated or saved without it.¹²⁸ Neither is it true that all who are baptized are undoubtedly regenerated.¹²⁹

¹¹⁴ Matthew 28:19.

¹¹⁵ 1 Corinthians 12:13; Galatians 3:27-28.

¹¹⁶ Romans 4:11; Colossians 2:11-12.

¹¹⁷ Galatians 3:27; Romans 6:5.

¹¹⁸ John 3:5; Titus 3:5.

¹¹⁹ Mark 1:4; Acts 2:38; 22:16.

¹²⁰ Romans 6:3-4.

¹²¹ ARPC edition: "this church"

¹²² Matthew 28:19-20.

¹²³ Acts 10:47; 8:36, 38; Matthew 28:19.

¹²⁴ Hebrews 9:10, 13, 19, 21; Mark 7:2-4; Luke 11:38.

¹²⁵ Acts 2:41; 8:12-13; 16:14-15.

¹²⁶ Genesis 17:7-14; Galatians 3:9, 14; Colossians 2:11-12; Acts 2:38-39; Romans 4:11-12; Matthew 19:13; Mark 10:13-16; Luke 18:15-17; Matthew 28:19; 1 Corinthians 7:14.

¹²⁷ Genesis 17:14; Matthew 28:19; Acts 2:38; See Luke 7:30.

¹²⁸ Romans 4:11; Acts 10:2, 4, 22, 31, 45, 47.

¹²⁹ Acts 8:13, 23.

6. The efficacy of baptism is not tied to that moment of time when it is administered.¹³⁰ Nevertheless, by the right use of this ordinance, the grace promised is not only offered but really exhibited and conferred by the Holy Spirit to all (whether adults or infants) to whom that grace belongs, according to the counsel of God's own will, in his appointed time.¹³¹

7. The sacrament of baptism is to be administered only once to any person.¹³²

The Westminster Larger Catechism (in Modern English)

162. What is a sacrament?

A sacrament is a holy regulation established by Christ in His church¹³³ as a sign, seal, and outward display¹³⁴ to those within the covenant of grace¹³⁵ of the benefits they have from Christ's mediation.¹³⁶ It serves to strengthen and increase their faith and all other graces in them;¹³⁷ it obliges them to obey God¹³⁸ and to witness to and cherish their love and fellowship with each other;¹³⁹ and it distinguishes them from those outside the covenant.¹⁴⁰

163. What are the parts of the sacrament?

There are two parts of the sacrament. One is the external, physical sign used according to Christ's own directions. The other is the internal, spiritual grace signified by the external use.¹⁴¹

164. How many sacraments has Christ established in His church under the New Testament?

Under the New Testament, Christ has established in the church only two sacraments, baptism and the Lord's Supper.¹⁴²

165. What is baptism?

Baptism is a sacrament of the New Testament in which Christ has ordained washing with water in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit¹⁴³ as a sign and seal of our being joined to Christ,¹⁴⁴

¹³⁰ John 3:5, 8.

¹³¹ Romans 6:3-6; Galatians 3:27; 1 Peter 3:21 Acts 2:38, 41.

¹³² Romans 6:3-11.

¹³³ Genesis 17:7,10; Exodus 12; Matthew 28:19; 26:26-28.

¹³⁴ Romans 4:11; 1 Corinthians 11:24-25.

¹³⁵ Romans 9:8; 15:8; Exodus 12:48; Galatians 3:27,29; 5:6; 6:15.

¹³⁶ Acts 2:38; 22:16; 1 Corinthians 10:16.

¹³⁷ Romans 4:11; Galatians 3:27; 1 Corinthians 11:24-26.

¹³⁸ Romans 6:3-4; 1 Corinthians 10:21.

¹³⁹ Ephesians 4:2-5; 1 Corinthians 10:17; 12:13.

¹⁴⁰ Ephesians 2:11-12; Genesis 34:14; 1 Corinthians 10:21.

¹⁴¹ Genesis 17:10; Matthew 3:11; 26:27-28; 1 Peter 3:21; Romans 2:28-29; Titus 3:5.

¹⁴² Matthew 28:19; 1 Corinthians 11:20,23-26; Matthew 26:26-28.

¹⁴³ Matthew 28:19.

¹⁴⁴ Galatians 3:27; Romans 6:3.

of the remission of our sins through His blood,¹⁴⁵ of rebirth by His Spirit,¹⁴⁶ of adoption,¹⁴⁷ and resurrection unto everlasting life,¹⁴⁸ and it is the means of solemnly admitting those baptized into the visible church¹⁴⁹ and of their making a public commitment that they belong completely and only to the Lord.¹⁵⁰

166. Who should be baptized?

Those who are not members of the visible church and so are not included in the covenant of promise should not be baptized until they profess their faith in Christ and obedience to Him.¹⁵¹ However, the infants of one or both parents who do profess their faith in Christ and obedience to Him are by that relationship included in the covenant and should be baptized.¹⁵²

167. How do we continue to use our baptism?

We have a necessary but frequently neglected obligation to use our baptism our whole lives, particularly in times of temptation and when we are present at the baptism of others.¹⁵³ We should seriously and thankfully reflect on what is involved in baptism, why Christ established it, the privileges and benefits conferred and sealed by it, and the significance of our own solemn vows when we were baptized.¹⁵⁴ This reflection humbles us when we recognize how defiled we are by sin and how far short we fall of living up to, and indeed walk so contrary to the standards set by the grace of baptism and by our other spiritual commitments.¹⁵⁵ We are also assured of pardon from sin and of all the other blessings sealed in that sacrament.¹⁵⁶ We draw strength from the death and resurrection of Christ, into who we were baptized, in order to keep killing our sins and becoming alive by His grace.¹⁵⁷ We are also spurred on to try to live by faith,¹⁵⁸ to have our human relationships defined by holiness and righteousness,¹⁵⁹ as is proper for those who have

¹⁴⁵ Mark 1:4; Revelation 1:5; Acts 22:16.

¹⁴⁶ Titus 3:5; Ephesians 5:26; John 3:5.

¹⁴⁷ Galatians 3:26-27.

¹⁴⁸ 1 Corinthians 15:29; Romans 6:5.

¹⁴⁹ 1 Corinthians 12:13; Acts 2:41.

¹⁵⁰ Romans 6:4.

¹⁵¹ Acts 8:36-37; 2:38,41.

¹⁵² Genesis 17:7-9; Galatians 3:9,14,17-18,29; Colossians 2:11-12; Acts 2:38-39; 1 Corinthians 2:11-12; 7:14; Matthew 28:19; Luke 18:15-16; Romans 4:11-12; 11:16.

¹⁵³ Colossians 2:11-12; Romans 6:4,6,11; Psalm 22:10-11.

¹⁵⁴ Romans 6:3-5.

¹⁵⁵ 1 Corinthians 1:11-13; Romans 6:2-3.

¹⁵⁶ Romans 4:11-12; 1 Peter 3:21.

¹⁵⁷ Romans 6:2-5.

¹⁵⁸ Galatians 3:26-27.

¹⁵⁹ Romans 6:22.

given up their names to Christ,¹⁶⁰ and to walk with each other in brotherly love, as is proper for those baptized by the same Spirit into one body.¹⁶¹

The Heidelberg Catechism

65. It is by faith alone that we share in Christ and all His blessings: Where then does that faith come from?

The Holy Spirit produces it in our hearts¹⁶² by the preaching of the holy gospel,¹⁶³ and confirms it through our use of the holy sacraments.¹⁶⁴

66. What are sacraments?

Sacraments are holy signs and seals for us to see. They were instituted by God so that by our use of them He might make us understand more clearly the promise of the gospel, and might put His seal on that promise.¹⁶⁵ And this is God's gospel promise: to forgive our sins and give us eternal life by grace alone because of Christ's one sacrifice finished on the cross.¹⁶⁶

67. Are both the Word and the sacraments then intended to focus our faith on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross as the only ground of our salvation?

Right! In the gospel the Holy Spirit teaches us and through the holy sacraments He assures us that our entire salvation rests on Christ's one sacrifice for us on the cross.¹⁶⁷

68. How many sacraments did Christ institute in the New Testament?

Two: Baptism and the Lord's Supper.¹⁶⁸

69. How does baptism remind you and assure you that Christ's one sacrifice on the cross is for you personally?

In this way: Christ instituted this outward washing¹⁶⁹ and with it gave the promise that, as surely as water washes away the dirt from the body, so certainly His blood and His Spirit wash away my soul's impurity, in other words, all my sins.¹⁷⁰

70. What does it mean to be washed with Christ's blood and Spirit?

To be washed with Christ's blood means that God, by grace, has forgiven my sins because of Christ's blood poured out for me in His sacrifice on the

¹⁶⁰ Acts 2:38.

¹⁶¹ 1 Corinthians 12:13,25-27.

¹⁶² John 3:5; 1 Corinthians 2:10-14; Ephesians 2:8.

¹⁶³ Romans 10:17; 1 Peter 1:23-25.

¹⁶⁴ Matthew 28:19-20; 1 Corinthians 10:16.

¹⁶⁵ Genesis 17:11; Deuteronomy 30:6; Romans 4:11.

¹⁶⁶ Matthew 26:27-28; Acts 2:38; Hebrews 10:10.

¹⁶⁷ Romans 6:3; 1 Corinthians 11:26; Galatians 3:27.

¹⁶⁸ Matthew 28:19-20; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26.

¹⁶⁹ Acts 2:38.

¹⁷⁰ Matthew 3:11; Romans 6:3-10; 1 Peter 3:21.

cross.¹⁷¹ To be washed with Christ's Spirit means that the Holy Spirit has renewed me and set me apart to be a member of Christ so that more and more I become dead to sin and increasingly live a holy and blameless life.¹⁷²

71. Where does Christ promise that we are washed with His blood and Spirit as surely as we are washed with the water of baptism?

In the institution of baptism where He says, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."¹⁷³ Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned."¹⁷⁴ This promise is repeated when Scripture calls baptism the washing of rebirth¹⁷⁵ and the washing away of sins.¹⁷⁶

72. Does this outward washing with water [baptism] itself wash away sins?

No, only Jesus Christ's blood and the Holy Spirit cleanse us from all sins.¹⁷⁷

73. Why then does the Holy Spirit call baptism the washing of regeneration and the washing away of sins?

God has good reason for these words. He wants to teach us that the blood and Spirit of Christ wash away our sins just as water washes away dirt from our bodies.¹⁷⁸ But more important, He wants to assure us, by this divine pledge and sign, that the washing away of our sins spiritually is as real as physical washing with water.¹⁷⁹

74. Should infants, too, be baptized?

Yes. Infants as well as adults are in God's covenant and are His people.¹⁸⁰ They, no less than adults, are promised the forgiveness of sin through Christ's blood and the Holy Spirit who produces faith.¹⁸¹ Therefore, by baptism, the mark of the covenant, infants should be received into the Christian church and should be distinguished from the children of unbelievers.¹⁸² This was done in the Old Testament by circumcision,¹⁸³ which was replaced in the New Testament by baptism.¹⁸⁴

¹⁷¹ Zechariah 13:1; Ephesians 1:7-8; Hebrews 12:24; 1 Peter 1:2; Revelation 1:5.

¹⁷² Ezekiel 36:25-27; John 3:5-8; Romans 6:4; 1 Corinthians 6:11; Colossians 2:11-12.

¹⁷³ Matthew 28:19.

¹⁷⁴ Mark 16:16.

¹⁷⁵ Titus 3:5.

¹⁷⁶ Acts 22:16.

¹⁷⁷ Matt. 3:11; 1 Pet. 3:21; 1 John 1:7.

¹⁷⁸ 1 Cor. 6:11; Rev. 1:5; 7:14.

¹⁷⁹ Acts 2:38; Rom. 6:3, 4; Gal. 3:27.

¹⁸⁰ Genesis 17:7; Matthew 19:14; Luke 18:15-16.

¹⁸¹ Isaiah 44:1-3; Acts 2:38-39; 16:31.

¹⁸² Acts 10:47; 1 Corinthians 7:14.

¹⁸³ Genesis 17:9-14.

¹⁸⁴ Colossians 2:11-13.

Additional resources on infant baptism

Baptism: Three Views. Edited by David F. Wright.

Christian Baptism by John Murray.

Infant Baptism: How My Mind Has Changed by Dennis Johnson.

Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries by Joachim Jeremias.

Institutes of Elenctic Theology, Nineteenth Topic, Twentieth Question by Francis Turretin.

Institutes of the Christian Religion, 4.16.1-32 by John Calvin.

Systematic Theology by Louis Berkhof.

The Biblical Doctrine of Baptism: A Study Document issued by The Special Commission on Baptism of the Church of Scotland.

The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way by Michael Horton.

The Standards of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church, The Directory of Public Worship, 5.B.8.

Why Do We Baptize Infants? by Bryan Chapell.

Word, Water, and Spirit: A Reformed Perspective on Baptism by J.V. Fesko.