

Repent and be Baptized

A Covenantal-Baptist View of Baptism and Children

Acts 2:37 Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?” ³⁸ And Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹ 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.” ⁴⁰ And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, “Save yourselves from this crooked generation.”

Acts 2:37-41

Do Not Disturb the Water

Sam was bored out of his mind. They'd been here all night and were no closer to getting in. Gandalf had forgotten the password that would open the door to Moria. So, like any normal hobbit would, he started to throw rocks in the nearby lake. A dark, stagnant pool created long ago by the damming of the Sirannon river, the water had gradually grown deeper and crept closer and closer to the West-gate, leaving only a narrow walkway between its shore and the impenetrable door beyond. After a couple of skips, he is

quickly chastised by Aragorn, “*Do not disturb the water.*” It was too late. The menacing **Watcher in the Water** was alerted and soon, it’s many tentacles that lurked beneath would now disturb the entire Fellowship! Hopefully, that is not what this sermon will do!

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Baptism. It is a precious word, near and dear to the NT proclamation of the Gospel. Yet, it is one of those topics that has been fiercely debated for centuries. Entire denominations exist with this term in their title. The word has been used as a derogatory pejorative put upon some by detractors, and as a kind of badge of honor by those who have kept the title. Sadly, Christians have excommunicated, persecuted, even murdered one another over this doctrine. This makes for very disturbed waters in the history of the Christian church. I’ll shoot for something better today.

Speaking about **water baptism** (and not the separate doctrine[s] surrounding the baptism of the Holy Spirit), there are generally two differing opinions on **its proper subjects**. Some believe that the proper subjects are **only those who profess faith in Christ**. These are what we usually call **Baptists**. Others believe that the proper subjects are those who profess faith in

Christ *and their children*. This can get nuanced, but by “children” this usually means infants and the context into which this occurs is often spoken of as “covenant theology.” These people are called Paedobaptists from the Greek *pedo-*, “boy, child.” They are also often called “Infant Baptists.”¹

One of the texts that has been at the epicenter of the disturbing of the this sacred theological water is **Acts 2:39**. A good example of how this verse is used comes from John Murray in his book *Christian Baptism*.

The relevance of this text concerns the clause in verse 39, “For the promise is to you and to your children.” There is no room for question that the children are coordinated with the adults who are being addressed by Peter on this occasion ... Nothing could advertise more conspicuously and conclusively that this principle of God’s gracious government, by which children along with their parents are the possessors of God’s covenant promise, is fully operative in the New Testament as well as in the Old than this simple fact that on the occasion of Pentecost Peter took up the refrain of the old covenant and said, “The promise is to you and to your children.”²

¹ We won’t deal with Rome or the Orthodox who also hold to infant baptism. Their theology is very different from most Protestants in that they believe baptism saves and is necessary for salvation. Both, however, like most Protestant Paedobaptists, also appeal to the covenants for this practice.

² John Murray, *Christian Baptism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books 1952), 71.

Sometimes, as here, the quote from this verse ends right here. Other times, Paedobaptists will quote [the whole verse](#), but the point remains the same. For example, Robert Reymond says,

On the Day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit was uniquely manifested in fulfillment of Joel’s great prophecy (Acts 2:1–4; see Joel 2:28–32), in his explanatory sermon concerning this epochal event inaugurating the new dispensation of the covenant of grace Peter affirmed that “the promise [of the Holy Spirit] is for you *and your children* [τέκνοις, *teknois*] and for all who are afar off—for all whom the Lord our God will call” (Acts 2:39). This Petrine declaration assures us that the ancient promise that embraced children along with their parents continues unabated in this age.³

Getting a Handle on the Paedo View of Baptism

One could listen to Paedobaptists talk about [Acts 2:39](#) until the cows come home, but it really wouldn’t do any good until you understand [the theological system](#) from which they are interpreting the text. If you don’t actually

³ Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: T. Nelson, 1998), 941.

understand them first, then all your counter-arguments will do is talk past them. You could hear from both Murray and Reymond that **covenant theology** is cropping up, even though Acts 2 says nothing about covenants. That shouldn't necessarily bother you, because as Calvin points out, in the next sermon of Peter in the next chapter, he refers to a very similar audience as children of the covenant (You are the sons of the prophets and of the covenant that God made with your fathers; **Acts 3:25**), making it arguably part of our context.⁴

Paedobaptist Covenant Theology

Since it is foundational to their argument, here is the way I understand paedobaptist covenant theology in a nutshell. The purpose of this system is to be able **to understand the Scripture** through a biblical theology of some biblical doctrine that *unifies* the Scripture. Covenants seems like a good doctrine to use, as we have even named our two parts of the Scripture the Old and New Testaments or *Covenants*.

⁴ “The promise is unto you and to your children” (Acts 2:39); and in the next chapter, he calls them *the children of the covenant*, that is, heirs.” **John Calvin**, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 1997), 4.16.15. Of course, “children” is actually probably adults, the “children” of Abraham, but that’s beside the point I’m making.

There are usually **three covenants** discussed by **Paedobaptists**. These are the **covenant of redemption** (which many do not believe exists), the **covenant of works** (which most believe exists), and **the covenant of grace** (which all believe exists). *None of these are biblical terms.*⁵ They are *systematic* terms designed to help you understand some key component of that covenant. I have no problem with that per se. The **covenant of redemption** is that covenant God makes prior to the creation of the world, where the Persons of the Godhead agree with one another to do all things necessary to enter into relationship with humanity and save the human race after the fall.

Covenant is the way **God enters into a formal relationship with a human** or all of humanity. A covenant most basically **defined** is **a binding agreement between two parties**. Now, biblically speaking, it is more than just an agreement. It is a binding legal contract that is actually cut in blood. But, we aren't interested in that today. The **initial** entering into a relationship *with humanity* is what they call **the covenant of works**. This agreement placed a binding obedience upon

⁵ This point to me is really quite vital because it means they are created by man and as such as subject to much discussion and disagreement, as opposed to something like, "new covenant" which is a totally biblical term and has nowhere near the wiggle room of disagreement.

Adam in the Garden, that if he would *do* what God required in the covenant (**Gen 3:22**), he would win eternal life. If he would not, he would die (**Gen 2:17**). It was a **works agreement**, because it was based upon strict obedience. As Jesus summarizes this way of approaching the law, “**Do this and live**” (**Luke 10:28**).

Obviously, Adam failed, but this did not catch God by surprise, because the covenant of redemption had already taken it into consideration. The covenant of works was merely the way God established a **fair relationship** with humanity. And in the realm of justice, everything that God does is always fair (**Rom 2:11**). But since fallen people will never actually obey the terms of this covenant, God entered into another covenant. Paedobaptists refer to this as **the covenant of grace**.

They usually see the beginning of this covenant also in the Garden, but after the Fall, when God graciously comes to **Adam** and Eve and clothes them with the skins of the sacrificial animal (**Gen 3:21**). This was a totally unearned gracious condescension on God’s part which restored the relationship between God and Adam. But, of course, more was needed as the unfolding stories almost immediately show us.

At the time of the Flood, when humanity had gotten as corrupt as God could tolerate, He entered into a covenant with Noah (Gen 6:18; 9:9). This is the first time “covenant” appears in the Bible. This covenant graciously saved Noah, who had found “grace” (LXX) in God’s eyes (Gen 6:8), from the disaster that awaited all other families of the earth. God saved eight in all (1Pet 3:20), thus beginning to show his covenantal love that extends to families.

The next time the word “covenant” appears is with Abraham. In the story, God says he will “make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly” (Gen 17:2), making him the “father of a multitude of nations” (4). He said, “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” (7). And then he says this, “This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised” (10). In this way, circumcision becomes for Paedobaptists, “the sign of the covenant of grace.” Tuck this away for later.

Now, it is important to understand here that by “covenant of grace,” they subsume that post-fall covenant with Adam, that covenant with Noah, and now this covenant with Abraham.” This is *all* “the covenant of grace.” It’s all the same covenant. This covenant will continue in most of their systematics on through **Moses**. Though there is disagreement on how exactly to talk about the law of Sinai in relation to this covenant, they nevertheless see Moses as a recipient of the covenant of grace. After all, God did probably more gracious things to him than anyone else in the entire Bible. Finally, they see the covenant of grace being re-confirmed with king **David**.

In this way, there are **five covenant heads** of the OT: Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David.⁶ God enters with each man in a new generation into a covenant. But it is **the same organic covenant** that he entered into the with the previous. This is seen in places like **Exodus 2:24** where God “heard their (Israel’s) groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob.” Thus, God came to Moses as a response to his previous covenant with Moses’s ancestor.

⁶ A good basic outline of this is the table of contents in **O. Palmer Robertson**, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1980).

There is much to be appreciated about this. It takes seriously the organic relationship between the various covenant “heads,” each of whom comes from the same family. It takes seriously the promises that God will do something through one of their future “seed.” It helps us therefore see much unity in Scripture and redemptive history—something desperately needed in a theological world where nothing seems unified, especially in terms of God’s plan through the ages and how he has dealt with human beings, including even his own people.

The New Covenant and Covenantal Love to Children

This is most importantly understood by going to the NT, which in their mind picks up right where the Old left off. God sends us Jesus and God enters into a covenant with Jesus (e.g. Luke 22:29⁷). This is essentially the covenant of redemption made in eternity past now come in time and space in one last covenant head or representative. Jesus was told to obey everything the Father sent him to do (e.g. John 5:36). The thing is, unlike all others before him, he did not

⁷ “Granted” in this verse is the word for a covenant.

fail! He obeyed his Father perfectly (**Heb 4:15**). This shows that the covenant of works was there as part of Jesus' covenantal agreement. And this is important, because that covenant needed to be obeyed by someone from Adam's lineage.

It is *out of his obedience*, that God then *offers to each of us sinners who come after him, covenantal grace* via the “*new covenant*.” In this way, the new covenant is still the same covenant of grace. It is a covenant of grace to us, just like it was to those in the OT. It is “new” now not in that it is organically dissimilar to the other covenants, for Jesus comes from their same seed. Rather, it is new because this grace now comes *after the finished work of Jesus Christ*. Thus, certain things change even while other things stay the same.

As an example of *changed things*, no more is God to be approached through animal sacrifices, because Jesus' once-for-all sacrifice has taken the need for those away. It was a gracious act of God to give Israel that means of approaching him and being made holy, but now we are made holy purely by the blood of Jesus. So that's a difference.

One of the vital points that Paedobaptists make here is that one thing that does *not* change in the new covenant is *God's showing covenantal love to families*. Here, we must

go back to Abraham and the covenant of circumcision. For remember, circumcision was the sign of the covenant given to the infant that showed he was included in the covenant God made with Abraham. For the paedobaptist, this principle drives the entire way they read baptism in the NT.

They **obviously recognize differences**. For example, no paedobaptist will say that any of us must **circumcise** our infant boys today. No. Circumcision has been done away with. They understand that. However, *the principle behind circumcision* has not changed. God covenants with believers *and their children*, just like he did with Abraham. It's about **continuity** here. This is why they apply baptism to infants of believers.

There are **many NT passages** through which this lens is used to interpret the meaning of the text. **Acts 2:39** is one of the most obvious. It says, “**The promise is for you and for your children (*tekna*).**” It is undeniable that it says this. And read, by itself, with this principle in mind, it makes a ton of sense. Other passages are places like, “**For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children (*tekna*) would be unclean, but as it is, they are**

holy” (1Cor 7:14). The principle from the OT maintains. The child of a believing parent, even if it is only one of them, makes them holy.

Now, for the better of the Paedobaptists, they **do not believe this means they are saved**. It is rather a *sanctifying* kind of holiness, much like in Levitical sacrifices. In fact, they believe the same about baptism and the infant. For example, Iain Duguid says, “**The biblical background is why we baptize little children, for, as Peter declared on the day of Pentecost, the promised gift of the saving Holy Spirit is for our children as well as for us (Acts 2:39). Will baptism save your children? No. But it points them, as it points all of us, to Jesus Christ, whose cleansing blood is symbolized by the water.**”⁸ I will deal very little with the Lutherans, Catholics, and Orthodox today who believe that baptism saves you. Here, I’m trying to put their best foot forward from our Baptist perspective, and with many Paedobaptists like Duguid, we are in agreement on the point.

Another passage you will see is something like **Jesus receiving the little children**. “**But Jesus said, ‘Let the little chil-**

⁸ Iain Duguid, “[The Promise Is for You and Your Children](#),” *Westminster Theological Seminary* (Sept 5, 2016).

dren come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 19:14). The point here is not necessarily that Jesus is baptizing them, but that the **covenantal love** that he had **for children** in the OT as demonstrated by circumcision and inclusion in the covenant is on full display here. God hasn’t changed.

One last kind of passage is worth mentioning, as we will see it a few times in Acts. These are “**household baptism**” passages. Acts 16:15, “And after she [Lydia] was baptized, and her household as well...” They will argue that Cornelius’ household (Acts 10), the Philippian Jailer’s household (Acts 16), Crispus’ household (Acts 18), and Stephanas’ household (1Cor 1) were also household baptisms, and it does little to argue the point, since clearly this happened with Lydia’s household. Their point here is that there were **certainly infants present** and therefore the infants were baptized along with everyone else in the house. Why? Because this pairs up with the continuity of God in how he has chosen to deal with humans in the covenant of grace.

Of course, the absolute key to all of this is that there was *a* (as in one) “**sign of the covenant**” in the OT, that this sign is circumcision and that it was given to infants. Because we

live under the new covenant, God has changed the sign, but it's still the covenant of grace and the same principle of covenant inclusion of infants therefore continues, which is how they take all of these kinds of texts to prove. Therefore, we are to baptize our infants. So when Peter tells the crowds that day that the promise is for you and for your children, after telling them to be baptized, God is doing nothing different than he did with Abraham, when he gave him the covenant to obey with circumcision. It's just now it is with water and not with a knife.

Francis Schaeffer is a good representative here.

The Jew living in the early New Testament days would know something further. He would know that in the Old Testament there were two great ordinances the Passover and Circumcision ... These things all being so, it would be impossible for the saved Jew not to expect that, as in the Old Testament the Covenant sign was applied to the believer's child, so also the sign of his faith, baptism, should likewise be applied to his child. Why should he expect less in this dispensation of fullness than he would have possessed in the Old Testament era?⁹

⁹ Francis Schaeffer, "Baptism," (1976).

Before moving on, I want to reiterate that God did offer some kind of covenant inclusion to **at least some infants**, and seemingly by extension, to all of the infants that came from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. There is most certainly a generational principle of God's covenantal love that is found in the OT. It doesn't save, but it does act as a sign that God loves to save from within the family unit. Is that a principle that just vanishes with the NT?

Getting a Handle on Our Reformed Baptist View of Baptism

Now that we've looked at a brief overview of how a Paedobaptist approaches passages like this, I hope you can appreciate their context and point of view better. There's **nothing worse than not understanding** what someone believes and then trying to argue against it. Especially when at least some things that they believe have logical and biblical and practical benefits. Nevertheless, our church does not believe that the Paedobaptist view is correct. We consider them brothers in Christ, but we still think they are wrong about this. Let's get a little better understanding as to why.

Reformed Baptist Covenant Theology: Two Views

First, let's do a flyby of the way *this* Reformed Baptist talks about covenant theology. Unlike other Baptists, we are covenantal. But I say "this" RB, because my take is a little different than many other RBs, although I also share much in common with them. First, all us RBs agree strongly with the Paedobaptists that the doctrine of covenants in the Scripture is of major importance to the Bible itself. It is one of those doctrines that brings great unity to our understanding of the entire Bible.¹⁰

We also talk about the covenant of redemption and the covenant of works, and our conception of these is not very different from that of our Infant Baptist counterparts. We believe those are biblical and very helpful for understanding God's eternal plan of redemption and of how God first entered into a relationship with mankind. It is at the point of the covenant of grace that we start to diverge.

Now, there has been a modern view of this in RB circles that isn't all that different from that of Paedobaptists.¹¹ They

¹⁰ I've written about this much more expensively in Douglas Van Dorn, *Covenant Theology: A Reformed Baptist Primer* (Erie, CO: Waters of Creation Pub., 2014).

¹¹ An example would be Fred Malone, *The Baptism of Disciples Alone* (Cape Coral, FL: Founders Press, 2003).

will talk about the five different covenant heads as having been given one covenant of grace. Their emphasis and belief in baptism turns, however, on **discontinuity** between the covenant of grace and the way it is expressed in the new covenant. Rather than go to a passage like Abraham and circumcision, they will go to a **Jeremiah 31** and his promise that the new covenant will be written on everyone's heart. They emphasize how very different this all is from the way it was expressed in the OT. And as such, we should expect a different way of doing the sacrament in the NT, since the new covenant administration is so different.

While I think there are some beneficial ideas here, I have personally come to the belief that **they trade too much on discontinuity** for my liking. In this, I agree with the Infant Baptists who argue against them. But there was an older way that RBs thought about this “covenant of grace,” and here is the way I express this.¹²

First, I agree with the basic five covenantal heads of Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David and that these

¹² For example, **Nehemiah Coxe** and Owen, John. *Covenant Theology From Adam to Christ*. Ed. Ronald D. Miller, James M. Renihan, and Francisco Orozco (Palmdale, CA: Reformed Baptist Academic Press, 2005); **Pascal Denault**, *The Distinctiveness of Baptist Covenant Theology* (Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2013).

covenants are all organically related to each other in that each new covenantal arrangement arises out of the previous covenants. I see much unity here. I happen to believe that there is **one more covenant** that most (not all) are not talking about and that it is vital to understanding baptism, but I'll save that for a little later.

Second, we must remember that “**covenant of grace**” is **not a biblical term**. It is a theological term created to express something about the way its authors view the covenants. For a Paedobaptist, there is one covenant of grace. This expresses the great unity I just spoke about. However, to me and the older way of thinking about this among RBs, there is not enough discussion of the differences even *within these covenants*. So much so that we will not refer to these OT covenants as “the covenant of grace.” This phrase is a theological imposition upon the text and one that we think is not helpful. We do, believe, however, in the covenant of grace, but we think about it differently from the Infant Baptist.

The way I describe these covenants is that they are **all organically tied together expressions of a gracious, yet legal relationship** that God entered into with the covenant heads and their posterity. That they are gracious is obvious, for not

a single one of them deserved or merited for God to come to them in a kind and often even one-sided covenantal promise to bless them unconditionally. One could in this way think about them as the covenant of grace, but since that gets confusing, perhaps it's better to think about them as the covenant of grace in type and shadow. They are *gracious*.

God also came to all of these men with certain conditions that they must meet, **legal requirements** such as offering sacrifices only to him or obeying his law or other such things that would keep them in the good graces of the covenant. If they did not, then they would experience the curses of the covenant. For example, if Israel obeyed the law of Moses, God would bless them, but if they would not, he would judge them and send them into captivity. This happened also to the kings of Judah who were under the Davidic covenant, and so on. This has more in common with the covenant of works than it does grace, and I do not think this is appreciated enough of the time in the Paedobaptist way of thinking.

When we come **to Jesus**, we see this gracious-legal principle being divided sharply. Jesus obeyed God's legal requirements, and he did it perfectly. Thereby meeting all the terms of the covenant of works. He merited eternal life. He was saved

by his works, and he was vindicated to the whole world by his resurrection from the dead, for he did not merit death and so death could not hold him. Paedobaptists agree with this.

Because of this, he is able to offer to us **a true covenant of grace**, one that is not in any way conditioned upon our obedience, but only his. The only condition that must be met here is **faith in Christ**, and that itself is a gift of God. All other works, be it the first work of repentance or any subsequent works are fruit that flows out of his gracious coming to us in the new covenant. Unlike the older covenants, if we violate the covenant through disobedience, we are not going to experience the covenant curses and destroy this covenant. There might be repercussions in life because of sin, but not a separation between God and the individual. Only unbelief can do that. This is why we will often call **the new covenant the covenant of grace**. Again, that is not a biblical term, so it seems justifiable.

“The” Sign of the Covenant?

Now, let me bring home the **most important practical implication** of this way of approaching the covenants as it concerns baptism. If each of the covenant administrations is

in some sense different, if it really isn't fair to talk about them all as “**the covenant of grace**,” then it does not follow logically that there is only one “sign of *the* covenant” in the OT. Indeed, **Calvin said that there are many signs** and many sacraments in the old covenant. My most fundamental difference with the Infant Baptist is this presupposition that there was one and only one OT “sign of the covenant.” I strongly believe that this is simply wrong. But it colors everything they believe.

Think about it this way. Abraham lived hundreds of years after Noah. Yet, **Noah was supposedly in “the covenant of grace.”** Multiply that number with Adam who lived thousands of years before Abraham. That means that if circumcision was “the sign of the covenant,” then **for thousands of years of the covenant of grace, there was no sign of the covenant!** It seems arbitrary to me to move thousands of years into history of one covenant of grace and suddenly say only now do we have “the sign of the covenant.” It kind of violates their whole point that God must give a sign to infants in order for them to be in the covenant.

In my way of thinking, **circumcision** was the sign of **the Abrahamic covenant**. It was the national sign of an Israelite.

But **the rainbow** was the sign of the Noahic covenant (**Gen 9:13**). Even though Mosaic law required circumcision, the Bible actually says that **the Sabbath** was the sign of that covenant (**Ex 31:13**). So this is more complicated at even this level than many are willing to admit.

But someone might say, “**True, but those are not sacraments. Circumcision is the sacramental sign of the covenant of grace in the OT.**” How could we respond to this? First of all, what is a sacrament? Technically, it is a “**mystery.**” **Sacraments are also commanded ordinances** that we humans can keep. We can’t keep “a rainbow.” It is simply a sign in the sky from God to us. But you can keep circumcision, because it is an ordinance, a law.

It can be helpful here to listen to Calvin. He says, “**The sacraments themselves were also diverse, in keeping with the times, according to the dispensation by which the Lord was pleased to reveal himself in various ways to men. For circumcision was enjoined upon Abraham and his descendants. To it were afterward added purifications [that is baptisms], sacrifices, and other rites from the law of Moses. These were the sacraments of the Jews until the coming of Christ**” (**Calvin, Institutes 4.14.20**). It is into this idea that I want to bring

up **the sixth OT covenant** that is rarely discussed. This is called by Nehemiah, Jeremiah, and Malachi, the covenant with Levi (**Neh 13:29; Jer 33:21; Mal 2:4**). We actually have an entire book of the OT named after this covenant. It's called *Leviticus*.

The Levitical Covenant

The Levitical covenant is often subsumed and swallowed up by the Mosaic covenant in systematics, but I think this is a grave mistake. It is regarded as its own covenant by these OT books, but more importantly, the covenant God made with Moses was technically *the Ten Commandments* (**Ex 34:28; Deut 4:13**). The laws of Leviticus are massively different from those of the Ten Commandments. They are all about holiness, approaching God, sanctification. They are ritualistic rather than purely moral. Indeed, they are their own covenant as represented by the Tabernacle and all the laws associated with it.

This covenant had **its own initiation sacrament**, every bit as sacramental as circumcision was for Abraham, but importantly given not to all Israelites, but only to those men

from the tribe of Levi—and even then, only to certain ones. This initiation sacrament is described in Exodus 29:

Now this is what you shall do to them *to consecrate them*, that they may serve me as priests. Take one bull of the herd and two rams without blemish, ² and unleavened bread, unleavened cakes mixed with oil, and unleavened wafers smeared with oil. You shall make them of fine wheat flour. ³ You shall put them in one basket and bring them in the basket, and bring the bull and the two rams. ⁴ You shall bring Aaron and his sons to the entrance of the tent of meeting *and wash them with water*. ⁵ Then you shall *take the garments*, and put on Aaron the coat and the robe of the ephod, and the ephod, and the breastpiece, *and gird him* with the skillfully woven band of the ephod.

(Exodus 29:1-5)

The ritual is **threefold**. A **sacrifice**, a **water baptism**, and a **priestly clothing**. It's into this that we need to understand NT baptism.

A massively important question that is rarely discussed when baptism arguments comes up is, “**Why was Jesus baptized?**” He answers that question himself in **Matthew 3:15**, I must “**fulfill all righteousness.**” John was baptizing for the

repentance of sins and Jesus comes to him to be baptized. John stops him and says, “I need to be baptized by you!” (14). Jesus’ reply is the immediate answer to John saying this. And when he gives it, John immediately relents and baptizes Jesus. Something changed in John’s thinking. What?

It's pretty obvious that John came to realize that Jesus was not coming to be baptized for the forgiveness of his sins. His fulfilling all righteousness was somehow tied to the OT law, for that’s what fulfill means throughout Matthew’s Gospel.¹³ And what was that? Consider all of the qualifications for being baptized into the priesthood:

1. A priest had to be washed in water at his ordination (Ex 29:4).
2. A priest could not begin ministry until age 30 (Num 4:3; 47).
3. A priest (especially the High Priest) had to be called of God as was Aaron (Ex 28:1).
4. A priest had to be washed by one already a priest (Ex 29:9; Num 25:13).
5. A priest had to be without defect in several special ways (Lev 21:16-23).
6. A priest had to be a male (Num 3:15).
7. A priest began his ministry immediately after the ordination was completed (Ex 29:1).
8. A priest had to be descended from Aaron (Ex 28:1).

¹³ I discuss all this in much more detail in Douglas Van Dorn, *Waters of Creation: A Biblical-Theological Study of Baptism* (Erie, CO: Waters of Creation Pub., 2009), Part 1.

Now consider all the qualifications of Jesus prior to being baptized by John:

1. Jesus was baptized (Matt 3:16; Mark 1:10; Luke 3:21; John 1:31-32).
2. Jesus was thirty years old at his baptism, the moment prior to the beginning of his ministry (Luke 3:23).
3. Jesus was called directly by God at his baptism (Heb 5:4-10; cf. Matt 3:17; Mark 1:11; Luke 3:22).
4. Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist, a Levitical priest in the line of Aaron (Luke 1:5, 13).
5. Jesus was without spot or blemish (Heb 5:9; 1 Pet 1:19; cf. Matt 3:14).
6. Jesus was a male (Matt 1:21).
7. Jesus begins his ministry immediately after his baptism (Luke 4:18ff).

The only qualification not identical to that of the high priest was the last. He was not from the tribe of Levi. But this is precisely why Hebrews goes to such pains to tell you that Jesus was obeying Aaronic-Levitical priestly law as our high priest throughout his ministry because he was from a greater priesthood, one to whom Levi himself paid tithes: the **priesthood of Melchizedek** (Heb 7:11; cf. Ps 110:4). To put this all much more simply, Jesus was being baptized into the

priesthood at his baptism by John, fulfilling Exodus 29:4. That's why he did it.

Vitally, this means that **Jesus was undergoing a covenantal ordination sacrament at his baptism**, just like he was undergoing a covenantal ordination sacrament when he was circumcised as an infant. But those were not the same covenant and they were not the same sacrament. It is because of this that I find the Paedobaptists arguments about circumcision mostly irrelevant. Not completely. **There are some overlaps in symbolism between circumcision and baptism** (“cutting off” is an example; **Gen 9:11; Gen 17:14**). But that's not relevant to *why* you should do something, for there are overlaps in meaning between the sabbath and circumcision as well (both are eighth day rites for example).

Essentially, the Paedobaptist argument is that **baptism replaces circumcision** as “**the sign of the covenant.**” On the way they have erected their system, this actually makes a lot of sense. But I think their system is the place where the initial problem is found. On the way I think we should think about it, it is much better to say that **baptism replaces baptism**. It is incorrect to say that there was just one sign of the covenant of grace in the OT. It is proper to say that there

were many. So the question becomes, which one is baptism in the NT coming from. The answer is, it comes from the ordination sacramental washing-baptism of the priest under the Levitical covenant. This is demonstrated by Paul who, knowing that the sacrificial part of the priestly ordination has been abrogated by Jesus' sacrifice says, "For as many of you as were *baptized* into Christ have *clothed yourselves with Christ*" (Gal 3:27 NAS).

Getting the Sign Right Changes Everything

Now follow me on this next part. What I've done here is give *an entirely different argument* to the one that is normal for Reformed Baptists to give. When Paedobaptists hear us, they usually shrug and say, "You aren't dealing with the origin of baptism. It comes from a covenantal predisposition to incorporate infants in the covenant. And unless the NT changes that explicitly, we have no right to change the rite." Their argument is actually a very powerful one, and because RBs have traditionally bypassed the way that Infant Baptists argue in favor of something completely different, you end up with the two sides talking past one another.

My argument is different. My argument is that **it is not right to say that the covenant of grace always has God giving the sign to infants**, not only because it isn't right to talk about only one "covenant of grace" in the OT, but also because that simply wasn't the case with the Levitical covenant (let alone Adam, Noah, or David). A Levite baby was incorporated into the Abrahamic covenant via circumcision, but he was not allowed into *the Levitical covenant* until he met all of the above qualifications. And infancy was *not* one of those. So, using the Paedobaptist argument against him, **unless the NT changes it, we have no right to change the rite.**

What we find in the NT is that **it does in fact change some things**. We will see this very dramatically in Acts 8 when at least three things are explicitly changed. In that chapter you have a *Eunuch Gentile* being baptized, thus changing the need to be a Levitical Jew who is physically who, and you have *women* being baptized, thus changing that only men could be. What we never find being changed in the NT is that infants are now baptized. It would take **an explicit mention**, not some implicit inference from households to change it, because you have to start from the correct

covenant and sacrament (baptism with the Levites) before you can presuppose things.

Acts 2:37-40 Briefly Exegeted

Let me turn to **Acts 2:37-40** very briefly to explain now how I read this. First, everyone who heard Peter's sermon, this included those who killed Jesus 50 days earlier, those who were complicit in telling Pilate to put him to death, but also **foreigners**, many Jews, some Gentiles. It included men and women. It included young and old. These are who we are to see asking Peter, "**Brothers, what shall we do?**" (37).

It's into this that Peter says, "**Repent and be baptized everyone one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit**" (38). Here is **the most literal translation** of this I can give you. "***You all* repent, he said, and be baptized *each one of you* [who repents] in the name of Jesus Christ into forgiveness of *your* (plural) sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.**" There is actually a movement here in **the verbs** from the second person plural ("you all repent") to the third person singular ("be baptized each one of you") and

back to the second person plural (“you all will receive...”). This is not often brought out in translations, but I think it is important.¹⁴

The emphasis placed by Paedobaptists from this verse is on **the baptism** part. But Peter actually prequalifies that with the command **to repent**, that’s the word that is inclusive (second person plural—You all). He tells them all to repent. Obviously, this refers to people who are capable of repenting, and that cannot be said of an infant. He then switches the person and number from the plural you to the singular him-her. The point in doing this is obvious. *Those who repent*, each of *those* individuals out of the group, are to be baptized. And then of that group, turning again to the second person plural, those will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Let me say it again, those who repent are to be baptized. That’s Peter’s command.

Now, the gift of the Holy Spirit here seems to refer to **the very special pouring out of the Spirit on that very day at Pentecost**, because other times in Acts where this same idea appears, the Holy Spirit is not mentioned. The point is

¹⁴ See the discussion in **Jamin Hbner**, “Acts 2:39 In Its Context (Part I): An Exegetical Summary of Acts 2:39 and Paedobaptism,” *Reformed Baptist Theological Review Volume 8* 8, no. 1 (2013): 13-15.

simply, you too, if you do this today, will experience what we are experiencing. This is not a statement that if they repent and be baptized that they will be saved. No. Repentance and baptism come after salvation, after the Spirit has already regenerated, after the Spirit has already been given. But this particular day the Spirit was being poured out as a sign that all this was true.

Next comes our main verse. “**For the promise is for you and for your children.**” Now, Francis Schaeffer makes a very interesting point here. He says,

These questions would be further aggravated by what this saved Jew himself would have heard taught in the New Testament time. For example, he would have heard Peter in his sermon on the Day of Pentecost, Acts 2: 38, 39: Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost. For the promise is unto you and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call." Remember, Peter said this to Jews, Jews who were used to having the outward sign of their faith applied to their children.¹⁵

¹⁵ Schaeffer, *Baptism*.

He then goes on to argue that a Jew would have heard this and naturally expected that his child should be baptized. Of course, **he's presupposing** they would have equated baptism with circumcision, which I find doubtful, but it does seem to me like **this very well could have been the origin for why we find Infant Baptism so early on in the church** explicitly. My argument would be that it was actually *a Jewish misunderstanding* of Peter that crept in later over time and the Christians adopted it not realizing what they were doing. If they would have understood that baptism comes from baptism and was ordaining you into the NT temple service of the church, it never would have happened.

But there's something else here about this verse. That is, *it isn't finished*. Although many Paedobaptists stop their quote here, Peter doesn't just say that it is for their children. He says it is also **"for all who are far off."** His point isn't to say that you should therefore go into all the world **forcing everyone far off to be baptized** just like you baptize your infant because all those far off are "in the covenant." Sometimes the church has actually done this. That is wrong! His point is rather that **God is no respecter of persons** in inclusion into the new covenant. You are **a Jew**? Repent and be

baptized. You are **young**? Repent and be baptized. You are a **foreigner** from out of country? Repent and be baptized. It really is that simple. There's no need to read into this a confusion of the Abrahamic covenant and circumcision. Rather, read in **the changes from the administration of the priestly rite** instead: Jews, Gentiles, young, old, male, female, etc.

Finally, the verse says it is “**for everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.**” There are two kinds of calling in the Scripture. One is a **general call** through the Gospel; it is resistible. The other is a special **irresistible call** that goes to the very heart of the inner man. This most likely refers to the irresistible call.¹⁶ The point being, God will call all of these kinds of people to himself and that is the internal way they know Peter is telling them the truth. And it is *those people* who are to be baptized. From the need to repent to the irresistible call, this whole thing is bookended by the need for public profession to be baptized.

Amazingly, he was right. **3000 were added to their number** that very day. Clearly, this was more than just local Jews who killed Jesus, more than just men, more than just leaders. It was a wide variety of people from all over the Roman

¹⁶ **John M. Frame**, *The Collected Shorter Theological Writings* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008).

world come to Pentecost in Jerusalem for the annual feast, not realizing what God was about to do.

Reformed Baptists and God's Covenantal Family Love

I need to say something brief about **covenant inclusion and families** in the new covenant. I believe God's covenant love still extends to families, and that doesn't mean I think they are saved. **Hebrew 6:1-6** speaks of this where some "share in the Holy Spirit" and "taste the goodness of the word of God" and yet fall away. They didn't lose salvation, but they did share in the blessings of the covenant. Certainly, children who come near to the word are can be among these, no? That's a grace, not a curse and not something ordinary that belongs to pagans. There's something special about the visible church and growing up in it. And I think it is a reflection of God's covenantal love.

But here's a couple more thoughts. First, it is often forgotten that **we all who believe** are called God's "children," his "little children," and "infants." That's children and the family language! But it's applied to *believers*.

Second, God often showed covenantal love to children in the OT *without ever giving them a sign in the OT*. Think about all females in the Abrahamic covenant for instance. They never got the sign. No signs were given to the infants of the elect prior to Abraham, yet he surely still used and work through families, something God loves to do. It is not proper to think (or to accuse) all Baptists of “**hating their children**” because they won’t give the sign of baptism to them any more than it would have been to Adam or Noah. Rather, we realize that God places them in the care of the visible church, they grow up with many great blessings not afforded pagans, and this is surely love that is given to them because of the covenant. It doesn’t save them, nor do the better Infant Baptists think that it does either.

This then is *why I’m a Reformed Baptist*. This is why we do not baptize our infants. Let me say as one last word. I understand why Paedobaptists do what they do. *I respect this view, but I think it is a confusion* created by presuppositions that come from systems that mean well and are attempting to understand the Bible and do some very helpful things for us.

I believe the church has done some reprehensible things in the name of Baptism over the centuries. We've been that [Watcher in the Water](#) attacking one another. Sadly, Baptists have been on the receiving end of most of that. We no longer live in such times and I pray they never return. Each of us takes our views very seriously, but there is often very little by way of listening to one another even still. Let us hold our beliefs tenaciously, but let us simultaneously learn why one another believes what we believe and let us try reasoning with each other once more. Disturbing these waters [need not lead to a monster](#). Not if we love God and our neighbor as ourselves.

For the peace of Christ's church and the glory of holding God's word as the supreme arbitrator of all our faith and practice.

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