

UNDERSTANDING INFANT BAPTISM
IN THE COVENANT COMMUNITY OF GOD'S PEOPLE

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ABSTRACT

The understanding of infant baptism within Presbyterian churches is on decline. This decline parallels that in other Protestant churches, especially those who identify themselves as being evangelical. This decline has been attributed to the influence of revivalism in evangelicalism, and the emphasis on baptism which follows an individual's profession of faith. Furthermore, many evangelicals often attend churches which have different traditions from those they have attended in the past, and influence the practice of infant baptism negatively within Presbyterian churches they attend. This study seeks to present the Presbyterian understanding of infant baptism from the perspectives of history, theology and biblical studies, and apply those perspectives to circumstances in the present-day church.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

What do Presbyterians understand about infant baptism? Although the historic teachings of orthodox Presbyterianism fully support infant baptism, many Presbyterians do not have a clear understanding of the practice.¹ The Westminster Confession of Faith (28.4) states that the sacrament is to be performed on infants when one or both parents are believers. Calvin, in his *Institutes*, speaks to the necessity of infant baptism as something that is “owed to infants” (Book IV, 16.6). John Murray explains that infants of those who make an “intelligent and credible confession” are baptized “simply because God has instituted” the ordinance.² Yet many who attend Presbyterian churches lack a satisfactory understanding of infant baptism, and some do not find available resources on the subject to be very convincing.³

Those who seek a better understanding of the nature of infant baptism are challenged by the variety of opinions that have been expressed on the subject. Historically, from the Presbyterian perspective, the doctrine of infant baptism has been critical to the understanding of the Christian family. In this view, ecclesiology is vitally important.⁴ What has emerged

¹ James III, Frank A. “Introduction: The Covenantal Convictions of a Compassionate Calvinist,” in *The Presbyterian Doctrine of the Children in the Covenant*. Louis B. Schenck, Author (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2003), xvi.

² Murray, John. *Christian Baptism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), 55.

³ Orner, Robert H. *Why Baptizing Your Child Matters* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2014), x-xi.

⁴ James, *Introduction*, xv.

over time is a divergence of opinion within Presbyterian circles regarding the doctrine of infant baptism that involves different ideas of the church, and of children within the church, from that of historic doctrine.⁵ In our era, the over-emphasis of the individual in God's redemptive work has resulted in a de-emphasis of the corporate nature of that work.⁶

A right understanding of infant baptism is of critical importance to God's people within the context of the covenant community as it is described in Scripture. Unless the rite is understood in terms of God's covenant with his people, God's covenant people may misappropriate infant baptism, and engage in sacramental malpractice. The purpose of this study is to examine the Presbyterian understanding of infant baptism through research in the areas of church history, theology and biblical studies, and to apply that research to the circumstances of the present-day church.

⁵ Schenck, Lewis Bevens. *The Presbyterian Doctrine of Children in the Covenant* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2003), 2.

⁶ Booth, Randy. "Covenant Transition" in *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*. Gregg Strawbridge, Editor (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2003), 184.

CHAPTER 2

HISTORICAL UNDERSTANDINGS OF INFANT BAPTISM

The initial step in this study is to examine the Presbyterians' understanding of infant baptism in an historical context. Examining infant baptism in this way will enable Presbyterians to make connections with the practices of the past and deepen their understanding of the practices of the present.

Infant Baptism from the Church Fathers Through the Middle Ages

There is general agreement that direct evidence for the baptism of children is found in statements made by Tertullian in 200 A.D.¹ In these statements, Tertullian actually advocates for the delayed baptism of little children so that the sponsors of those being baptized do not risk failing to fulfill their baptismal promises, or become disappointed if the child were not to live up to baptismal expectations. Tertullian sees the critical importance of baptism as justification for its delay until the belief is evident in the individual.² These words mark the earliest direct reference to infant baptism in church history, but a logical assumption can be made that the practice originated before this time. Infant baptism may have been very well entrenched as a practice in the church at that point.³ The working of the

¹ Jeremias, Joachim. *The Origins of Infant Baptism: A Further Study in Reply to Kurt Aland* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2004), 9.

² Tertullian. *Concerning Baptism*. trans. Alexander Souter (New York: MacMillan, 1919), 69.

³ Leithart, Peter J. "Infant Baptism in History: An Unfinished Tragicomedy" in, *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*. Greg Strawbridge, Editor (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2003), 55.

Spirit is seen as being operative in baptism. As the Spirit of God hovered over the waters at creation, so he does over the waters of baptism. After the invocation of God is pronounced, the Spirit sanctifies the waters for himself, and the waters are endowed with sanctifying powers. In baptism, the individual's spirit is washed in the waters and the flesh is cleansed spiritually.⁴ Those baptized do not actually obtain the Holy Spirit at baptism, but "are cleansed and prepared for the Holy Spirit."⁵ There is an "application of hands" in the sacrament that is connected to the "old sacramental rite in which Jacob blessed his grandsons," and the waters are connected to those of the "deluge" from the time of Noah. The fire of judgment waits for those who have gone through the baptismal waters and return to sin. Baptism is also to be seen as a "sign of warning to us."⁶ The efficacy of baptism is found only in the work of Jesus Christ, "the passion and the resurrection," as without these there is no benefit to baptism.⁷ However, baptism is not salvific in itself as Tertullian is very clear that one is saved by faith.⁸

Hippolytus, in the *Apostolic Tradition* (215 A.D.), describes children being baptized as made up of "some who could speak and others who are not yet able to speak."⁹ The children were to be baptized first with those unable to offer a profession of faith themselves spoken for by their parents or relatives. The rite included a renunciation of Satan and an

⁴ Tertullian, 50, 51.

⁵ Ibid., 55, 56.

⁶ Ibid., 58.

⁷ Ibid., 60, 61.

⁸ Ibid., 63.

⁹ Hippolytus. *The Apostolic Tradition* (Ann Arbor, MI: Cushing-Malloy, 1962), 45 available from [http://www.chronicon.net/chroniconfiles/Burton_Scott_Easton_-_The_Apostolic_Tradition_of_Hippolytus_\(1934\).pdf](http://www.chronicon.net/chroniconfiles/Burton_Scott_Easton_-_The_Apostolic_Tradition_of_Hippolytus_(1934).pdf); Internet; 17 March 2014.

anointing with the “oil of exorcism.”¹⁰ There was a placing of a hand on the head of the individual being baptized during which a response to the creed was made by the person being baptized or those who spoke on the behalf of an infant after which the baptism was performed. The bishop then offered a prayer to God who had made those baptized worthy to obtain the “remission of sins through the laver of the Holy Spirit of regeneration.” Anointing with the oil of thanksgiving then took place.¹¹

Origen responded to questions about infant baptism and characterized it as originating in the “tradition from the apostles.”¹² The statements of Cyprian, in writing for the Council at Carthage (251-53 A.D.), provide evidence of theological positions regarding infant baptism being taken by the church during the same time.¹³ Ambrose of Milan (339-337 A.D.) justified infant baptism by connecting it with the Old Testament rite of circumcision. Cyril of Alexandria described the baptism of infants as “the anointing of initiation.”¹⁴

Augustine (400 A.D.) claimed the practice of infant baptism was based upon apostolic authority, but never cites the teaching of anyone earlier than Cyprian.¹⁵ Augustine acknowledges the practice had become widespread in the church, and that it had been handed down by apostolic authority.¹⁶ It is a sacrament of “remission of sins” from which “no one

¹⁰ Ibid., 45.

¹¹ Ibid., 47.

¹² Jewett, Paul K. *Infant Baptism and the Covenant of Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978), 31

¹³ Ibid., 19.

¹⁴ Jeremias, Joachim. *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2004), 94-95.

¹⁵ Jewett, 16.

¹⁶ Ferguson, Everett. *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 803.

should be barred” from infant to adult. Augustine describes the meaning of baptism as a dying to sin and a rebirth in the “baptismal font.” Infants die to original sin only, while adults die to the sins they have committed which are added to the sin “brought with them at birth.”¹⁷ This “washing of regeneration” has to do “more with the hope of future goods than with the retaining or attaining of present goods.”¹⁸

The ancient church recognized that the Holy Spirit was present and at work during the baptismal rite, whether it was being applied to an adult or an infant. It was believed that the Spirit endowed the waters with sanctifying power, thus the efficacy attributed to the sacrament was recognized by the church to be real. The symbolism of the rite spoke to the reality that the Spirit was working through the baptism of the individual.

The ancient church made connections with the Old Testament in developing its doctrine of baptism. The relationship between circumcision and baptism is found early in church history. The covenantal structures of blessing and curse are present. The blessing of children rooted in the actions of Jacob are viewed alongside the waters of judgment from the days of Noah.

The efficacy of baptism is not found in the water itself, but in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. One is not saved by baptism, but only by faith. Included in the early development of baptism was an element of exorcism, or renunciation of Satan, therefore the rite recognized both positive and negative spiritual elements that were at work. This sacrament of initiation was not just symbolic in nature, but signified the real working of God in the life of the one being baptized.

¹⁷ Augustine. *The Enchiridion in The Works of Aurelius Augustine, Bishop of Hippo*, vol. ix (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1892), 207.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 222.

As the understanding of infant baptism is examined during the Middle Ages, the doctrine derived from the early church is carried forward in development and is at points negatively affected during this period. Children are in need of baptism because of being born in original sin. Infants are nurtured in the “bosom of the mother Church” and receive salvation “through the act of the church” in baptism. Those who die in infancy without baptism are excluded from heaven. The sacrament of confirmation was added for adults to correspond with baptism for infants. Through confirmation, the baptized become full members of the Christian church.¹⁹

Infant Baptism from the Middle Ages Through the Reformation

The baptismal rites for infants that were in place just prior to the Reformation were adapted forms of those performed in ancient Rome. There was a reading of the gospel story where Jesus blessed the children who came to him, after which the priest said “through these sacred words our Lord remits all of our trespasses and sins.”²⁰ After admonishing the godparents to teach the child the Creed, the priest, placed his hand on the head of the child and recited it thus delivering the faith to the godparents who would then deliver it to the infant. The priest is confessing faith for the child. Baptism was seen as the entrance to, and foundation of, all the other sacraments which formed the system of salvation. In baptism,

¹⁹ Schaff, David. *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1907), 710-712.

²⁰ Old, Hughes Oliphant. *The Shaping of the Reformed Baptismal Rite in the Sixteenth Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 7-8.

God the Father regenerates the infant by water and the Holy Spirit, and has given remission of sins through Jesus Christ unto eternal life. This idea of baptismal regeneration caused many parents to seek baptism for their children shortly after birth even if it was to be conducted by a midwife.²¹

In this subjective view, baptism becomes essential for salvation. Baptismal regeneration would be a major area of revision when Reformed doctrines of infant baptism were developed as the Reformers held a much different understanding of justification and substitution.²² The Lutherans were the exception within those considered to be Reformation churches as they retained baptismal regeneration along with other elements of the Roman sacramental system.²³

As the initiator of the Reformation, Luther made three significant revisions the Roman sacrament of baptism. There was some omission of exorcisms and the insertion of the Lord's Prayer as the blessing of the child. There was no admonition for the godparents. The most significant change was Luther's use of his Great Flood Prayer in which both the stories of Noah and the Flood, and the Red Sea passage, are explained in the New Testament as types of baptism. The significance of this change is the indication that along with the blessing element of baptism, there is an accompanying indication of judgment (1 Peter 3:20-21; 1 Corinthians 10:1-4). Luther also brings emphasis to intercession as one of the most significant things the church can do for a child at baptism.²⁴

²¹ Ibid., 25.

²² Bromiley, Geoffrey W. *Sacramental Teaching and Practice in the Reformation Churches* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1999), 45.

²³ Schaff, Philip. *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 7 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1910), 603.

²⁴ Old, 37-40.

The doctrine of baptismal regeneration was rejected by those of the Reformed church of Strasbourg (1524-25).²⁵ Bucer drew special attention to the idea that baptism was an outward sign of an inward cleansing from sin. All who were present for the baptism prayed that Christ would baptize the child in the Spirit and purify him from all sin. The washing of water was a sign of both regeneration and sanctification in the infant.²⁶ The propriety of the rite was based upon the bond between the circumcision of infants under the law and the baptism of infants under the gospel. Parents were instructed that as they brought their children to be baptized, they were offering them up to God and promising before the church to raise them in the Christian faith. As the child of Christian parents, the infant was considered to be a member of the church and the parental promises were made in the presence of the congregation.²⁷

In Zurich, Zwingli placed great emphasis on the ecclesiology of baptism. It is the initiation, or entry point, into the church.²⁸ Zwingli saw ecclesiology in covenantal terms. God covenanted with his people in his divine, electing grace. Circumcision was a covenantal sign of God's people in the Old Testament, as baptism is a covenantal sign in the New Testament. Gentiles had now been added into God's covenant people (Acts 2:38-39).²⁹ After Zwingli, Bullinger taught that a covenantal sign contained within it an element of promise, and that baptism was a sign of God's "gracious promise" for the cleansing of sin that would be accomplished by the Holy Spirit. The unity between both covenantal signs is

²⁵ Ibid., 52.

²⁶ Ibid., 54-57.

²⁷ Ibid., 58-60.

²⁸ Ibid., 63.

²⁹ Ibid., 124-126.

found in the faith of parents which is required in order for the sign to be applied.³⁰ The sign of baptism was a badge that identified one as a child of God.³¹

The early Reformers were consistent in teaching that the Holy Spirit was at work applying the benefits of Christ's redemption from the very beginning of life before the ability to make a confession of faith was present. Jeremiah 1:5 and Luke 1:41, along with 1 Corinthians 7:14 were offered to support this position.³²

In agreeing with this view, Calvin taught that regeneration included manifestations of new life that occurred throughout the life of an individual.³³ Baptism marks the entrance of the infant into the visible church through a presumptive regeneration that was based upon the faith of believing parents. He did not teach baptismal regeneration, but baptized infants based upon their status as members of the visible church from before birth. There is a regenerative working of the Spirit throughout life resulting in the child growing into an understanding of his baptism.³⁴

Infant Baptism from The Reformation through Modernity

In 18th century Europe, the practice of baptizing infants as members of the Christian community had become distorted in that there was little regard for the requirement of faith among parents. The acceptance of the "Half-Way Covenant" in New England was reflective

³⁰ Ibid., 127-129.

³¹ Schenck, Lewis Bevens. *The Presbyterian Doctrine of Children in the Covenant* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2003), 27.

³² Old, 133, 135.

³³ Schenck, 8.

³⁴ Calvin, John. *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1960), 4.16.21.

of this mindset. In this arrangement, parents acknowledged God's claim on their lives and agreed to submit themselves to the church's discipline, but stopped short of professing conversion. Thus, some were admitted to the church that were "elect seed," while others were labeled "church seed."³⁵ This was a significant digression from the covenantal doctrine that was foundational to the Reformed view of infant baptism. In England, the Puritans took a stand against the practice of baptizing all infants, as well as the position that only adult converts should be baptized. John Owen, in representing the Reformed view, speaks for the baptism of infants that are born to believing parents in keeping with the biblical covenantal structure.³⁶ In New England, Jonathan Edwards identified two groups of individuals within the church as "members of the church general" and "members in complete standing."³⁷ Edwards rejected the practice of administering baptism to the children of "general" members of the church as they were not required to make a complete profession of the Christian faith. Only the children of those who were in "complete standing" were eligible to receive baptism. In taking the covenantal position, Edwards believed only adults were able to make a complete profession, and when they did so, those who were parents necessarily had their children baptized as members of themselves. In doing so, the parents were offering their child up to God in a sacrament which was a "seal of the covenant of grace," just as they offered themselves up to God when they professed faith in him and accepted the covenant he graciously provided.³⁸ The benefit of carrying the "outward badge" of Christianity was tied

³⁵ Schenck, 54, 55.

³⁶ Owen, John. *Of Infant Baptism*, iii, iv; available from http://www.covenantofgrace.com/owen_infant_baptism.htm; Internet, 13 August 2014.

³⁷ Edwards, Jonathan. *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 1 (Worcester, MA: Isaiah Thomas, 1808), 154, 155.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 321.

directly to one's actually being Christian.³⁹ In fact, the effect of carrying such a "badge" without the benefit of parents fully committed to raising an individual "in the nurture and admonition of the Lord," often results in the hardening of the individual by God.⁴⁰

The reaction of the Great Awakening against the formalism that had gripped the church in Europe and the American colonies caused an emphasis to be placed on the experience of conviction and conversion which was not only expected of adults, but also was expected of children as well. There was a shift away from the doctrine of presumptive regeneration as the church moved toward recognizing only those who gave a credible profession as being Christian.⁴¹ As revivalism gained a foothold within the church, covenant children were at best seen as "quasi" church members, and at worst were treated as "enemies of God."⁴² It is reported that within fifty years' time during the 1800s, the number of baptized infants had declined from one in five to one in twenty church members.⁴³

In the modern era, Reformed theologians sought to return infant baptism to predominance in Protestant churches. Charles Hodge saw the justification of infant baptism as being tied to the nature of the church. The sacraments belong only to church members. If membership in the church required a profession of faith, then infants would not be considered eligible to receive the sacrament of baptism. In order to defend infant baptism, it was necessary to "attain and authenticate" the understanding that the Church includes the

³⁹ Ibid., 322.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 327.

⁴¹ Schenck, 71.

⁴² Ibid., 80 and 95.

⁴³ Ibid., 88.

children of believers.⁴⁴ Scripture presents the fact that the church does not consist entirely of regenerate people. The church is a field in which both wheat and tares grow, and one in which Judas, the betrayer of Jesus, was given a privileged position of leadership.⁴⁵ According to Hodge, the church consists of both the nation of Israel in the Old Testament, and those in the New Testament who professed faith in Christ. Since children were included in the church of the Old Testament and were initiated into the church through the rite of circumcision, children of the New Testament church were included and initiated into the church through the rite of baptism. The children of church members are entitled to be baptized and the entire congregation assumed responsibility for their Christian education as members of the visible body.⁴⁶ Hodge emphasized children as members of the visible church as a covenant community which was a mixed group consisting of those who were elect and those who were reprobate. Although the church had a role in seeking a credible profession from its members, it ultimately rested in the knowledge that God alone is able to discern the heart.

Louis Berkhof described the covenant with Abraham as being spiritual with some national elements. This spiritual covenant is still in force and “essentially identical to the new covenant.” God chose to include infants in the benefits of the covenant and they received circumcision as a sign and seal. God replaced circumcision with baptism as the introductory sign and seal of the covenant of grace. Since children received the sign and seal of the covenant under the old epoch, the presumption is that they are to receive the sign and

⁴⁴ Hodge, Charles. *Systematic Theology* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 3:546.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 548.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 558.

seal under the new epoch.⁴⁷ The church is to view infants as potential heirs of salvation and treat them as being required to live under the condition of the covenant, and is required to treat them as covenant breakers if they fail to meet its conditions. Berkhof disagrees with those who baptize infants on the basis of presumptive regeneration, but only because they are included in the covenant by birth to believing parents.⁴⁸ In considering the baptism of infants as a means of grace, Berkhof acknowledges the possibility of regeneration in children as receiving the “seed of faith” at the earliest of times, and that the operation of baptism is not limited to the occasion of its administration. Baptism is also a means of grace for the parents as it serves to strengthen their faith in God, giving them assurance that their child has a right to participate in the covenant of grace, and to strengthen their resolve to provide for the Christian nurture of the child.⁴⁹

John Murray presents the basic argument for infant baptism as being the progressive unfolding of the New Testament system and the fulfilment of the Abrahamic covenant which implies a “unity and continuity” of the church throughout the Old Testament and New Testament periods. The church of the Old Testament included not just those who were old enough to confess faith but also their infant children, therefore the church of the New Testament included children as well. The command to apply the covenantal sign and seal to infants has not been retracted, and still remains in force.⁵⁰ Murray acknowledges that not everyone who receives the sign and seal of baptism actually participates in the grace it signifies and is an actual heir of eternal life, and therefore, sees no merit in the doctrine of

⁴⁷ Berkhof, Louis. *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 632-34.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 638-39.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 641-42.

⁵⁰ Murray, John. *Christian Baptism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), 45-50.

presumptive regeneration.⁵¹ He also sees the justification for baptism to found in the divine authority and command of God alone.⁵² The basis of baptism is the covenantal relationship that God had established with his people, the church, and the sustaining of that relationship through the children of those in the covenant community. In baptism, both union with Christ and membership in the church is signified.⁵³

Meredith Kline indicates that Reformed theology's tendency to focus on the judicial and spiritual blessings of baptism is "unduly restricted." Given the correspondence that Reformed theology recognizes between baptism and circumcision, Kline indicates that its theology of baptism should be enlarged to include both "benedictions and maledictions" in a more comprehensive symbol of eschatological judgment.⁵⁴

Infant Baptism from Modernity Through Post-Modern Times

In the post-modern era, the Presbyterian understanding of infant baptism appears to follow two general lines of thought. One group presents an understanding that is consistent with the Reformed doctrine of infant baptism that has developed over time. The appropriateness of infant baptism is linked to circumcision as a rite of initiation that is administered to adult converts and their children. Baptism represents the beginning of a life characterized by faith and discipleship in Christ.⁵⁵ It is not merely symbolic in meaning as it

⁵¹ Ibid., 52, 54.

⁵² Ibid., 58.

⁵³ Ibid., 77.

⁵⁴ Kline, Meredith. *By Oath Consigned: A Reinterpretation of the Covenant Signs of Circumcision and Baptism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1968), 50.

⁵⁵ Clark, R. Scott. "A Contemporary Reformed Defense of Infant Baptism," available from <http://clark.wscal.edu/baptism.php>; Internet; 5 April 2014.

initiates the recipient into a covenant relationship with God, brings them into the membership of the visible church and calls for an internal washing by faith.⁵⁶ Baptism is a sign of citizenship in the new covenant community in Christ, an act of obedience that is applied to both adults and children, and a sign of a promise of forgiveness of sin and adoption that is freely offered to all by faith.⁵⁷ Baptized infants are recipients of God's covenant grace, not saving grace. By having their child baptized, parents are trusting God for his provision, protection and deliverance of their child from sin's penalty and power. God's power and faithfulness are declared in the rite of infant baptism. The water serves as a physical sign that the covenant is real and that God will honor his covenant promise.⁵⁸

The other group expresses an understanding of infant baptism that they characterize as being historically Reformed, and one which Reformed churches have drifted away from over time. In this understanding, "baptismal regeneration" in the sense that it was used by Calvin and the early Reformers, is emphasized. The sign of baptism is not just a symbol of God's saving grace, but is a "powerful, transforming action of God." To say that baptism is just a symbol is to empty it of its efficacy." They argue for a broader understanding of regeneration which can begin at the earliest points of an individual's life and new creation becomes increasingly evident from that point forward. "God works powerfully and savingly" through baptism as a means of grace. The Spirit includes the child in the "elect community, the church" through it. It is an initiation into the covenant of grace, and

⁵⁶ Pratt, Jr. Richard L. "Baptism As A Sacrament of the Covenant" in *Reformed Perspectives Magazine*, vol. 7, Number 4, January 23 to January 29, 2005 available from http://thirdmill.org/newfiles/ric_pratt/th.pratt.baptism.pdf; Internet; 17 April 2014.

⁵⁷ Orner, *Why Baptizing Your Child Matters* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2014), 29.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 33.

therefore bestows privileges and enforces obligations to the one who is baptized.”⁵⁹ There is a power that is attributed to baptism.⁶⁰ As a “rite,” baptism changes one’s status, alters personal identity and expresses God’s favor as it penetrates the heart and cleanses the conscience.⁶¹ Baptism combined with faith brings about union with Christ.⁶² These individuals assert that baptism does not cause one to be automatically saved.⁶³ The saving grace offered through baptism is conferred by the Holy Spirit at the appointed time.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ Lusk, Rich. “Baptismal Efficacy and the Reformed Tradition: Past, Present, and Future,” available from <http://www.hornes.org/theologia/rich-lusk/baptismal-efficacy-the-reformed-tradition-past-present-future>; Internet; 5 April 2014.

⁶⁰ Leithart, Peter J. *The Baptized Body* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2007), 3.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 24, 31.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 35.

⁶³ Wilson, Douglas. “Sacramental Efficacy in the Westminster Standards” in, *The Auburn Avenue Theology: Pros and Cons*. E. Calvin Beisner, Editor (Ft. Lauderdale, FL: Knox Theological Seminary, 2004), 236.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 239.

CHAPTER 3

THEOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDINGS OF INFANT BAPTISM

When considering the brief review of theological literature undertaken for this study, four areas of theology emerge as being important to the understanding of infant baptism. In order to understand infant baptism from the Presbyterian perspective it is apparent that one explore Reformed theology as it pertains to the nature of the church, along with baptism in terms of it being a sign and seal of the covenant, how both blessing and curse are associated with the rite, and the efficacy that accompanies it.

The Church

John Calvin defines the church as including adults, infants and children, and containing both elect and non-elect individuals.¹ The visible church is the “mother of believers” through which one is conceived, given birth, nourished and kept until death. There are those in the church who reject spiritual food, and therefore, deserve to perish.² For this reason, the visible church is seen as a mixture of good and bad men, believers and unbelievers.³ All men who have been adopted by God into the visible church since the beginning of the world were covenanted into that relationship by the law and doctrine.⁴

¹ Calvin, John. *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1960), 4.16.21.

² *Ibid.*, 4.1.4, 4.1.5.

³ *Ibid.*, 4.1.12.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.10.1.

The Westminster Confession of Faith identifies the visible church as “all those throughout the world that profess the true religion, and their children.” It is the kingdom of Christ, the “house and family of God,” and there is “no ordinary possibility of salvation” offered outside of it (25.2). Christ has given the “ministry, oracles, and ordinances of God, for the gathering and perfecting of the saints (25.3). Following the theology of Calvin, the Confession affirms that the “purest Churches” are subject “mixture and error” (25.5).

Charles Hodge identifies the visible church as a divine institution that is a mixture of regenerate and unregenerate individuals. According to Hodge, the church that is described in the New Testament is a continuation of the church of the Old Testament.⁵ The Lord of the Old Testament is our covenant God and Father, and our savior, Jesus Christ, was the savior of those who lived before he came in the flesh.⁶ The conditions for admission to the church in the old epoch is the same in the new epoch. These conditions are a credible profession of faith, a promise of obedience and submission to the initiatory rite.⁷ Since infants were admitted to the church of the Old Testament, they are to be admitted to the church of the New Testament.⁸

Louis Berkhof comments that the visible church is the embodiment of the Kingdom of God in the world. It participates of the character of the invisible church as the Kingdom of God is realized through it. It also shares in the flaws that it is exposed to by the world. Jesus’ parable of the wheat and tares confirms this fact.⁹ There has always been just one

⁵ Hodge, Charles. *Systematic Theology* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 3:548, 549.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 551.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 552.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 555.

⁹ Berkhof, Louis. *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 570.

visible church that manifested itself in different epochs from the time of the patriarchs, to that of Moses and into that of the New Testament.¹⁰ In each epoch, the visible church has been identified by the pure preaching of the word, the right administration of the sacraments, and the faithful exercise of discipline.¹¹

R. B. Kuiper points out that only God in his omniscience knows who the regenerate and unregenerate are in the church, and that it is presumptuous for leaders to identify certain individuals as “born again ones” within the church.¹² The church is made up of people with whom God has established his covenant of grace. Those who profess faith in Jesus Christ, and their children, are considered to be full members of the church.¹³

According to George Eldon Ladd, the New Testament idea of church is rooted in the Old Testament concept of Israel as the people of God. The establishment of this fellowship by Christ is directly connected to the people of Israel of the Old Testament.¹⁴ This group was a mixed fellowship from Christ’s earliest inception of it, and that this characteristic will continue until the eschatological kingdom. It is the Kingdom of God, but is not the ideal kingdom as it includes some who are not God’s children. Ladd states that while entrance into the Kingdom means participating in the church, participating in the church does not necessarily mean participating in the Kingdom.¹⁵ Similarly, Donald Guthrie points out that

¹⁰ Ibid., 570, 571.

¹¹ Ibid., 576.

¹² Kuiper, R.B. *The Glorious Body of Christ* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2001), 27.

¹³ Ibid., 209, 210.

¹⁴ Ladd, George Eldon. *A Theology of the New Testament*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 107, 108.

¹⁵ Ibid., 111.

the term used by Christ for the church in the Matthew 16:18 (ekklēsia) is the same used in the LXX for the congregation of Israel.¹⁶

Peter Leithart takes a different approach in describing the church. He prefers the terms of “historical” over visible, and “eschatological” over invisible. According to Leithart, the traditional use of visible and invisible leads one to believe that these two churches co-exist, whereas it is more accurate to speak of one as the church of history which is mixed and imperfect, and the other as the church that is perfected when Christ returns.¹⁷ He sees the overwhelming number of references to the body of Christ that appear in the New Testament as pertaining to the historical church—“a visible, historical community of professing believers.”¹⁸ By using a historical/eschatological model, Leithart sees the historical church to be *in the process of glorification*, whereas the eschatological church is in the final state of glory. The historical church is the bride of Christ, united to him in one flesh, and is treated by Jesus as his own body. Therefore, the visible church is the body of Christ in a real sense. Membership in the visible church involves being united, or married, to Christ.¹⁹ Some who enter membership in the church may eventually fall away from it, but while they are in the church they share in the life which is the church’s salvation of the world.²⁰ Membership in the body of Christ doesn’t occur without being connected to the head, and no connection to the head is possible without being joined to the body.²¹

¹⁶ Guthrie, Donald. *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 1981), 711.

¹⁷ Leithart, Peter J. *The Baptized Body* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2007), 59.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 60.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 73, 74.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 75.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 78.

A Sign and Seal

Baptism is a sign and seal of the covenant of grace, and serves to put a visible difference between those who belong to the church and those who are outside the church (WCF 27.1). It is to be applied only to those who are in the visible church, and their children, who are considered to be included in God’s covenant people. (WLC, Q166).

Baptism is an outward sign that is a “testimony of divine grace” toward the covenant people of God, and an “attestation of piety” on their part toward him.²² It is the sign of initiation that represents that the individual has been received into the community of the church, engrafted in Christ, and can be considered among God’s people.²³ Baptism in the New Testament has the same significance as circumcision in the Old Testament. As the covenant sign of circumcision was administered to infants in the Old Testament, baptism is to be administered as the sign of the covenant to infants from the time of the New Testament forward.²⁴

As a sign, baptism serves as a “material element” that is tangible to the senses of what is being signified—a promise that has made to and accepted by those who are baptized. Through the sacrament, an inward spiritual grace is signified and sealed. The external sign becomes a means used by the Holy Spirit in communicating divine grace.²⁵ Baptism is a sign of the covenant initiated with Abraham that was primarily spiritual in nature and is essentially identical with the new covenant. God appointed infants to be included in the

²² Calvin, 4.14.1, 4.15.1.

²³ Ibid., 4.15.1.

²⁴ Ibid., 4.16.5.

²⁵ Berkhof, 617, 618.

benefits of the covenant and declared infants to receive circumcision as a sign and seal. They were considered to be an integral part of the people of Israel.²⁶ The sign served to remind Abraham and the Israelites of the covenant that was made with God, as well as the promises and obligations contained within the covenant. The sign adds nothing to the covenant, and God is not obligated to fulfill his promise because of the sign associated with it.²⁷ God appointed baptism to take the place of circumcision as the initial sign and seal of the covenant of grace in the New Testament era. Since children received the covenantal sign in the Old Testament era, it is presumed that they have a right to receive it in the New Testament era.²⁸

Calvin likens the sacramental seal to that which is placed upon government documents and other public acts.²⁹ As a seal, baptism serves as a mark of authenticity, security, ownership and authority³⁰ of a covenant relationship with God.³¹ The promise of God is sealed by the Holy Spirit who works salvation in all who believe. The seal of baptism is God's identifying mark on the sheep of his flock.³²

²⁶ Ibid., 633.

²⁷ Ross, Mark E. "Baptism and Circumcision as Signs and Seals" in, *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*. Greg Strawbridge, Editor (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2003), 86.

²⁸ Berkhof, 633, 634.

²⁹ Calvin, 4.14.5.

³⁰ Wood, D. R. W., and I. Howard Marshall. *New Bible Dictionary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 1072.

³¹ Packer, J. I. *Concise Theology: a Guide to Historic Christian Beliefs*. (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1993), 209.

³² Sproul, R. C. *What Is Baptism?* vol. 11. First edition. *The Crucial Questions Series* (Orlando, FL: Reformation Trust, 2011), 48.

The description of the sacraments as signs and seals includes a refutation of a purely symbolic interpretation. The terms “sign and seal” reference an act of God, the signifier and sealer of his promise.³³ Berkouwer, in quoting Bavinck, says the recipient of baptism is marked with “a spiritual sign, different from grace” through a “spiritual mark imprinted on the soul.”³⁴ According to Berkouwer, a “profound interrelationship” exists between the “sealing of the promise through baptism and the sealing of believers,” because the individual who recognizes the sacrament as sign and seal by faith, is then sealed in the sense that he has accepted God’s promise. Therefore, baptism is a sign and seal of God’s promise, and at the same time a seal of redemption for those whose belief rests on that promise.³⁵ For this reason, baptism is never an empty symbol, as there is an “und detachable” relation of the baptismal promise with regeneration and the renewal of the Holy Spirit, with justification and sanctification and with the incorporation into Christ’s Church.”³⁶

Blessing and Curse

A covenant is an oath-bound promise in which one party promises to bless or serve another party according to stated terms. The covenant of grace has been defined as being God’s unconditional promise to rescue man who has failed to fulfill the terms of the covenant of works by redemption through Christ. This covenant was to be an intimate relationship based upon love. This relationship would be maintained through the keeping of covenant

³³ Berkouwer, G.C. *The Sacraments* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1969), 136.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 142.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 155.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 157.

stipulations by the recipients of grace. Failure to keep the stipulations results in the loss of covenant blessing and the imposition of covenant curse.³⁷

A covenant oath is sworn formally through ritual. In the covenant enacted by God, there is an oath of self-malediction is offered by himself in guaranteeing that the promise would be fulfilled. Circumcision signified not only the blessings promised by God, but also the threat of curse for breaking the covenant.³⁸ The cutting-off of the foreskin in the ritual of circumcision is seen by some as being an oath of self-malediction that symbolizes the threatened curse of being cut-off by God for violating covenantal stipulations. As the covenant sign in the new epoch, baptism continues as a sign of consecration to the Lord, symbolizing not only the blessings of promise, but also the threat of curse.³⁹ Traces of self-malediction are seen in the New Covenant rituals of baptism and the Lord's Supper.⁴⁰

Baptism is a pledge to the promise that God had made with Abraham and now fulfills in Christ.⁴¹ For the elect, baptism marks the promise that in due time the baptized will respond in faith and repentance. Not all who receive the seal of baptism will respond positively to the benefits of covenant membership through repentance and faith in Jesus

³⁷ Cowan, Steven B. "Covenant." Edited by Chad Brand, Charles Draper, Archie England, Steve Bond, E. Ray Clendenen, and Trent C. Butler. *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), 355-357.

³⁸ Bavinck, Herman. *Reformed Dogmatics, Book 4* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 499.

³⁹ Kline, Meredith. *By Oath Consigned: A Reinterpretation of the Covenant Signs of Circumcision and Baptism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1968), 65.

⁴⁰ Hahn, Scott. "Covenant." Edited by John D. Barry and Lazarus Wentz. *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012), Logos Edition.

⁴¹ Hodge, 3:588, 589.

Christ.⁴² The elect claim the promise sealed in baptism while others are hardened against it.⁴³

Efficacy of Baptism

The efficacy of baptism is dependent upon the working of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, as it is a sign instituted by God and filled with his power.⁴⁴ Sacraments not only symbolize something, but actually do something by bringing a work of grace that cannot be separated from its essence.⁴⁵ Calvin, in pointing to the biblical examples of John the Baptist and Jesus Christ, teaches that the age of infancy is not disinclined toward sanctification. The seed of future repentance and faith lies hidden within the infant by the working of the Spirit.⁴⁶ Baptismal efficacy is not dependent upon any virtue in the sacrament itself, or in the individual who administers it, nor is it tied to the time of the administration but only the work of the Spirit which attends to it.⁴⁷

Douglas Wilson affirms that the blessings and curses attached to water baptism are appropriated by either faith or unbelief. It is the Holy Spirit which spiritually baptizes, seals and converts, and without this regeneration no one shall see the kingdom of God. This does not make the doctrine of water baptism dispensable, as when correctly understood, the doctrines of water baptism and baptism of the Holy Spirit establish one another. Baptism

⁴² Bromiley, Geoffrey W. *Children of Promise: The Case for Baptizing Infants* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), 44, 46.

⁴³ Bavinck, 4:532.

⁴⁴ Berkouwer, 78, 81.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁴⁶ Calvin, 4.16.18.

⁴⁷ Hodge, 3:579.

operates efficaciously to connect covenant members to a standing responsibility to repent and believe for both the faithful and the reprobate. Water baptism is covenantally efficacious as it brings a person into an objective and living covenant relationship with Christ. Baptism is to be taken as a sign and seal of engrafting to Christ; those who are reprobate and refuse to believe will be cut off, while those who are elect cannot be cut off. The covenant member who does not believe receives all the curses of the covenant, while those who believe receive all of the blessings.⁴⁸ This view is not held universally by all in the Reformed tradition.⁴⁹

R. C. Sproul comments that the benefits of baptism are not received apart from faith. God gives the sign of baptism as a promise that all the benefits of salvation come to those who believe. A person can be baptized and never come to realize all of the benefits that are contained within the baptismal promise. He holds a Reformed position that rejects any notion that the efficacy of baptism is automatic. Baptism serves as a reminder of the promises God has made regarding salvation that can be claimed by those who believe. It is a reminder that God preserves everyone who is engrafted into Christ. God does not promise any of the benefits of salvation to those who do not believe.⁵⁰ Sproul's position is that baptism only signifies life in Christ. It is an outward sign that a people are in covenant relationship with the Lord.⁵¹ In order for an individual to be in Christ there must be an

⁴⁸ Wilson, *Sacramental Efficacy*, 242.

⁴⁹ Richard Phillips, in responding to Wilson, views baptismal efficacy in terms of "sanctifying," not "saving" grace. Phillips assigns saving grace only to the efficacy of God's Word. In using the example of an infant, he sees sanctificational grace operating in baptism as the individual responds to his baptism with faith that saves him. Phillips takes great exception to the idea that baptismal efficacy results in unsaved individuals being in a covenant relationship with the saving God. (Phillips, Richard D. "A Response to Sacramental Efficacy in the Westminster Standards" in *The Auburn Avenue Theology: Pros and Cons*. E. Calvin Beisner, Editor. (Ft. Lauderdale, FL: Knox Theological Seminary, 2004), 250, 251.)

⁵⁰ Sproul, *What Is Baptism?*, 7, 8.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 37.

inward regeneration of the heart. In following Reformed theology, Sproul defines regeneration as the work of the Holy Spirit who brings spiritual life to those who are dead in sin. He sees regeneration as the first step of spiritual rebirth in Christ, not as the new life which begins at birth.⁵² Baptism is a sign of God's promise to regenerate his people.⁵³

In summary, there is a general consensus among Reformed theologians that the visible church consists of adults who profess faith in Jesus Christ, and their children. Throughout all of history, there has been just one people of God spanning both the Old and New Testaments. The church has been and continues to be a mixed group made up of both elect and non-elect, or believers and non-believers. None other than God knows who the regenerate and unregenerate are in the church. The visible church may also be seen as the historical church which will be made perfect when Christ returns. There is a sense that all individuals enjoy the benefits of life within the church, but only the elect receive the benefit of eternal life.

All individuals within the boundaries of the church are to receive the signs and seals of baptism and the Lord's Supper as distinguishing marks of those who are in covenant with the Lord. Baptism is an outward sign that is received by adults who profess belief in Christ, and their children. As the New Testament counterpart of circumcision in the Old Testament, baptism is applied to infant children. Baptism continues as a sign of consecration in the new epoch which symbolizes the blessings of salvation for the faithful and a threat of curse to the unfaithful. As a seal, baptism serves as a mark of God's sovereignty in the covenant relationship he has established with his people.

⁵² Ibid., 38, 39.

⁵³ Ibid., 40.

God's people are called to respond to God's gracious covenantal promises by swearing an oath of commitment. The covenantal relationship is maintained through the keeping of covenant stipulations by the people, who are threatened with covenant curse for failing to keep the covenant. The Old Testament rite of circumcision symbolized both blessing of redemption being offered to the people of Israel, and the threat of being cut off from God and his covenant people for disobedience. The New Testament rite of baptism symbolizes the promise of eternal life for those who respond in covenantal faithfulness, and the curse of divine judgment upon those who respond in disbelief.

Baptism is dependent upon the Holy Spirit alone for working its efficacy through regeneration. Some take the position that water baptism efficaciously brings a person into a covenant relationship with Christ, regardless of the individual's status as faithful or reprobate. Others reject the idea that any unsaved individual could enter into any type of covenant relationship with God. The classic Reformed position is that baptism serves as a reminder of the promises God has made regarding salvation, only those who believe are engrafted into Christ and persevere in the faith. The position taken by those who hold this Reformed view is that regeneration marks the first step in spiritual rebirth, whereas others see regeneration as beginning at birth.

CHAPTER 4

BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDINGS OF INFANT BAPTISM

The Nature of Covenants

Meredith Kline defines a covenant as “a relationship under sanctions” which is sworn by an oath of commitment. Kline’s research brings him to the conclusion that the covenant relationship between Yahweh and Israel was bilateral. Thus, the notion that the divine covenant with Israel was Yahweh’s pledging of himself without any human effort is refuted.¹ According to Kline, every divine-human covenant is based upon a “sanction-sealed relationship” where stipulations must be met in order to maintain the relationship. Commitments made to the covenant relationship are stated by sworn oath. The oath is so closely aligned with the covenant idea that it is considered to be synonymous with the act of entering into a covenant. *These oaths provide an identifying mark that can be used to distinguish the covenants in Scripture as being those of law or promise.* In covenants of promise God takes the oath, while man takes the oath in law covenants.²

Kline sees the law covenant as following the form of Near-Eastern vassal treaty which operated under the dual sanctions of blessing and curse as a means of kingdom rule. Generally, they were ratified by the oath of the vassal but there were occasions when the king added his oath to the treaty. *By swearing the oath, the vassal was placed under the dual sanctions of blessing and curse.* The rule of the king could be exerted by either protection or destruction of the vassal. Peace was maintained as long as the vassal submitted to the rule of the king, however, should the vassal seek to become independent or transfer his loyalty to another king, he would face the threatened destruction that he himself had sworn in the oath

¹ Kline, Meredith. *By Oath Consigned: A Reinterpretation of the Covenant Signs of Circumcision and Baptism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1968), 14, 15.

² *Ibid.*, 16.

of allegiance. The Lord of Israel described the covenant relationship with his people in the pattern of the Near-Eastern vassal treaty.³

Kline assigns priority to law covenant since God's initial covenant with Adam demanded obedience as the condition of life with the curse of death threatened for covenant breakers. This priority that is assigned to law does not void the covenant of promise made by God, as both law and promise are used in the process of securing life for his chosen ones as in Christ, law and promise cooperate for the salvation of God's people.⁴ The redemptive covenant is an administration of guaranteed blessings which depends upon obedience. For Kline, the covenantal administration that requires obedience is foundational.⁵ Promise has not been substituted for law, but has been added to it. Redemption is seen as having two sides in which the blessing of the covenant always comes through the covenant curse.⁶

Genesis 17 records the introduction of circumcision as the sign of God's covenant with the people of Abraham.⁷ The sign of circumcision was a permanent obligation for the community identified with Abraham. The Lord assumed certain obligations that were in the form of promises. The threat of curse was also made by the Lord for those who did not meet the covenant obligation of circumcision. Thus, the covenant with Abraham follows the pattern of vassal treaty as a rule of lordship which included blessing and curse.⁸ Circumcision was the ritual by which the covenant was "cut" as it symbolized the oath-bound curse under

³ Ibid., 21.

⁴ Ibid., 30, 31.

⁵ Ibid., 32.

⁶ Ibid., 35.

⁷ Ibid., 39.

⁸ Ibid., 40, 41.

which the Abrahamic community pledged to live under the authority and the sword of Almighty God. In the act of cutting off the foreskin, the curse of being cut off from the covenant community was also symbolized.⁹

Circumcision, therefore, took on the significance of an oath of allegiance as well as that of consecration.¹⁰ This oath of consecration was emphasized in Genesis 21 and 22 where Abraham was not only called to circumcise Isaac on the eighth day, but is called to cut him off from life as a sacrifice to the Lord in an act of total consecration. In this act, he who consecrates himself to God in covenant obedience must pass through the curse that circumcision symbolizes. However, Kline points out that “when the hour of darkness comes,” the Lord himself provides the sacrifice. In the “dilemma of circumcision as a sign of consecration,” we are reminded by God that all generations of men, including Abraham and his descendants, are covenant breakers and must be consecrated to God by “coming to the place of curse.”¹¹ As a sign of the redemptive covenant, circumcision symbolizes the importance of justification together with condemnation “as the blessing that may come through curse.” Kline summarizes the theology of circumcision in the ideas of malediction, consecration, identification, justification, and spiritual qualification. The primary, symbolic significance of circumcision is as an “oath-rite,” a “pledge of consecration,” and a “symbol of malediction.”¹²

Water was one of two common forces that operated in the ancient world as God’s instruments of judgment. Two biblical examples of water ordeal are the Noahic flood and

⁹ Ibid., 42, 43.

¹⁰ Ibid., 43.

¹¹ Ibid., 46.

¹² Ibid., 47, 48.

the Red Sea crossing led by Moses. These were acts of redemptive judgment as God vindicated the purpose of his people and judged their enemies.¹³ Kline comments that while it may be natural to think of the flood waters as being destructive, it must also be acknowledged that those waters were also the instrument of ordeal that God used to justify Noah.¹⁴ Similarly, the Israelites by passing through the sea in an ordeal of the elements, by which they were consecrated as servants in God's covenant under the mediator Moses.¹⁵

According to Kline, the symbolic cutting of the male foreskin then also symbolized the cutting off of the vassal's descendants for violating the covenant. Kline finds support for his idea in the fact that it was the "organ of generation" that was cut in the Old Testament rite.¹⁶ The consecration of descendants to the Lord of the covenant corresponded to the promise that God had established with Abraham in Genesis 17. In principle, a man who entered into God's covenant is held responsible to bind his subordinates to the covenant relationship as well, otherwise he would be going against the oath of allegiance. In a way similar to other vassal covenants, the Abrahamic covenant was used to bring an entire group of people who were under the authority of the one who entered into the covenant with the suzerain.¹⁷ Kline sees the principle of vassal authority as being essential to the rite of circumcision as a sign of initiation into the redemptive covenant of God. Personal confession of Yahweh's lordship provided the basis and beginning of the administration of circumcision, as well as the formal establishment of the covenant community, in a rite of

¹³ Ibid., 55, 56.

¹⁴ Ibid., 65, 66.

¹⁵ Ibid., 70.

¹⁶ Ibid., 87.

¹⁷ Ibid., 88.

inclusion.¹⁸ What is being represented is not just the authority over of an individual, but all who fall within that individual's sphere of authority.¹⁹ Old Testament passages pertinent to this study will now be examined.

Genesis 15

This passage records the covenant that God made with his servant Abram in which he promised a countless number of descendants to a man whose house had been barren of any blood heir (v. 3). The form of covenant (בְּרִית; b^orîyth)²⁰ is that which was prevalent in Near-East arrangements that existed between suzerain-lords and vassal-servants. The cutting of animals that is recorded in verses 9 and 10 is a common element in treaties, or covenants, that were initiated during that time. The Lord himself swore an oath of self-malediction in calling a curse upon himself if the covenant promises were not fulfilled (v. 17). Although this covenant can be characterized as divinely initiated and guaranteed, Abram was required to respond obediently by following God's directions, and his faith is acknowledged by God in the text (v. 6).

John Calvin indicates that it is probable that God had commanded Abram to follow the covenant ratification process that was prevalent among the ancient peoples at that time. Abram was being assured of God's promise of inheritance, but was also being taught that it would commence in death. Abram and his children would have to die before they would be able to enjoy dominion over the land that was promised. Calvin, therefore, sees the special purpose of the ritual was to illustrate that the "race of Abram" would be like a "dead carcass"

¹⁸ Ibid., 89.

¹⁹ Ibid., 91.

²⁰ Strong, James. *A Concise Dictionary of the Words in the Greek Testament and the Hebrew Bible*, vol. 3 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2009), 8.

that had been “torn and dissected.”²¹ Interestingly, Calvin sees the element of curse as being present, not only with regard to God’s threat of self-curse, but also with regard to the people of Abraham in the future that lays before them.

Victor Hamilton affirms that there is a large amount of evidence that animal sacrifice took place in treaty contraction ceremonies held in the biblical world.²² Abram followed procedures that dramatized a curse that would be enacted against the party who violated the covenant. In this instance, it is the superior party who places himself under the sanctions being presented.²³ Hamilton acknowledges the existence of curse in the covenant ceremony, but limits application to God, the superior party, against whom it would be enacted for violation of established terms.

John Currid agrees that verse 6 is to be interpreted in the context of the covenant ceremony outlined in the entire chapter, but also highlights Abram’s response as a confession of faith that was a practice common among Near Eastern covenants of the time as well.²⁴ In response to Abram’s request for a sign, God directs him to gather and sever animals in two separate parallel rows in following, once again following the ratification practices of Near Eastern covenants.²⁵ The Genesis 15 passage records God passing through the pieces of animals as he takes full responsibility for the covenant promises he has made. Although

²¹ Calvin, John. *Commentary on Genesis*. trans. John King (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1847), 1:413.

²² Hamilton, Victor. *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 1-17* in, *The New International Commentary of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 430.

²³ *Ibid.*, 431.

²⁴ Currid, John D. *Genesis*, vol. 1 in, *The Evangelical Press Study Commentary* (Webster, NY: Evangelical Press USA, 2003), 293.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 294, 295.

Abram is responsible for keeping the covenant, God is guaranteeing that there will be compliance. Literally, verse 18 states that Yahweh “cut” a covenant with Abram reflecting the ritualistic sealing of the treating by cutting animals in two. The significance of cutting is noted in that other covenant signs, like circumcision, are acts of cutting.²⁶ Currid provides detailed confirmation that the Genesis 15 records a covenant ceremony that follows the pattern of those in the ancient Near-East. His comments bring special attention to the element of curse as the focus of the ratification ceremony taking place. The comments regarding the covenantal responsibility of Abram are better understood when they are further delineated in Genesis 17 and the law that will be given to Abram’s descendants under Moses.

In reflecting on the passage and the comments by others that have been examined, it is clear that Genesis 15 provides an account of the initial covenant agreement forged by God with Abram. The event that is recorded in the passage fits the pattern of covenant arrangements that existed in extra-biblical covenants of that time, as well as other covenants that are found in Scripture. The covenantal elements of blessing, curse and the sign of confirmation all are evident in the passage, as is the response of faithfulness by the vassal-servant. Although the oath-curse is recognized as being sworn by the superior party in the agreement, Almighty God, there is a sense that the cutting ritual also holds meaning for the future of the people that would follow Abram.

Genesis 17

After twenty-three years have passed, and Abram now has a son to his wife’s servant Hagar, the Lord appears once again to extend the promises made to Abram to his offspring. God reminds Abram that he will be the father of a great multitude (v. 2.) The multitude

²⁶ Ibid., 298.

would include many nations, therefore Abram, the exalted father, became Abraham, the father of a multitude.²⁷ The covenant that God had initiated had implications beyond that of the people of Abraham. The term covenant carried with it the connotation of a cutting ceremony.²⁸ The covenant was to have eternal implications as it is “everlasting” (vv. 7, 13). The ratification of the covenant by Abraham was to circumcise (וּמַל; mûwl)²⁹ every male, including infants who were eight days of age (v. 12). This was to occur throughout the generations and included individuals in the household who were brought in by means other than birth (v. 13). Any male who failed to be circumcised was to be “cut-off” (כָּרַת; kârath) for destruction.³⁰

John Calvin notes that the marking the flesh was a solemn memorial of the adoption by which Abraham’s descendants were set apart as the peculiar people of God. The mark, however, was not just an external profession of men, but included with it the promise of grace calling the people to a response of faith.³¹ Using the sacramental language of his day, Calvin identifies circumcision as “an intervening pledge between God and the conscience of man.” The terms covenant and circumcision had been so closely identified with each other that they were used synonymously. Calvin indicates that the circumcision of males marked all of the people, male and female, as recipients of God’s promises.³² The rite of circumcision was to be applied to all male members of a household whether by birth or

²⁷ Strong, 8.

²⁸ Ibid., 24.

²⁹ Ibid., 63.

³⁰ Ibid., 57.

³¹ Calvin, 1:451. 452.

³² Ibid., 1:452.

through slavery, as Abraham was to see to it that all those under his power who were eligible to be circumcised received the sign of the covenant.³³ God denounced a severe punishment on those who would neglect circumcision. Calvin points out that while circumcision “shows God’s great care for the salvation of men,” it also “rebukes their negligence.” This is God’s response to those who exercise “foul ingratitude” in that they “either reject or despise the grace of God.”³⁴

Hamilton comments that circumcision is called both “my covenant” and a sign of God’s covenant (vv. 10-11). The description of circumcision as covenant is indicative of the obligation present, namely that it is an aspect of the covenant that must be kept. Circumcision is a visible sign by which the recipient is reminded that he is included in Yahweh’s covenant.³⁵ It is a confirmation sign that witnesses to Abraham’s belief that God would fulfill all of his promises regarding his descendants. Hamilton confirms that the range of covenant recipients is expanded to include not only to family members but to others in the household of the circumcised as well (v. 13).³⁶ The rite is not optional, nor is to be done only when convenient, as the consequence for not applying the sign was the “cutting off” of such individuals from their people. Failing to circumcise is to break the covenant through nullification. The uncircumcised individual is outside of the covenant relationship.³⁷

³³ Ibid., 1:453.

³⁴ Ibid., 1:457

³⁵ Hamilton, 470.

³⁶ Ibid., 472, 473.

³⁷ Ibid., 474.

Gordon Wenham adds that the permanency of the marking on the body reflects the eternal nature of the covenant between God and his people (vv. 7, 13, 19).³⁸ It is a sign that reminds the Israelite of the special spiritual relationship he has with God, and of the obligation to walk with God and be perfect. Total covenantal commitment is required of Abraham and his entire household, thus the sign is to be applied to every male, free and slave. Failure to circumcise is to “break the covenant” with the threat of being cut off in an untimely death to those who do not comply (v. 14).³⁹

Joyce Baldwin comments that God’s unconditional commitment required Abraham to commit himself and his heirs unconditionally to God and his covenant. The covenant was for generations yet to come, and included not just those born into one’s household, but also was extended to those brought in through other means. The indelible mark was an obligation for every male and was so closely associated with the relationship with God that it was referred to as his “covenant” (v. 10). Refusal of the sign was to break the covenant with God and to be stripped of its promises (v. 14).⁴⁰ A key point is noted in Baldwin’s comments that the essence of circumcision is what the Lord is saying to the infant because they are unable to say anything to him.⁴¹

Currid comments that Genesis 17 records the institution of circumcision as the covenantal seal to be worn on the flesh by Abraham and his descendants. All male participants in the covenant were required to be circumcised. Individuals who were not

³⁸ Wenham, Gordon. *Genesis 16-50*, vol. 2 in, *The Word Biblical Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1994), 24.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁴⁰ Baldwin, Joyce G. *The Message of Genesis 12-50* in, *The Bible Speaks Today Series* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), 66.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 66, 67.

circumcised were excluded from the covenantal relationship. Circumcision was a sign, a physical witness to a spiritual reality. The reality is the covenant relationship that God had with his people. Currid points out that many people groups in the ancient Near East practiced circumcision on both males and females. God limited it to just the males in the Israelite community. The sign of the covenant was open to Gentiles as evidenced by the inclusion of slaves who were purchased from non-Israelites. Currid states that circumcision is not a “racial badge” but a covenantal sign. It is a sign of a spiritual, not ethnic, reality.⁴² The threatened curse of cutting off those who reject the covenantal sign mirrors the common use of the Old Testament expression “to cut a covenant.” The Hebrew verb used is the same as used in verse 14 for the individual “who will be cut off” from the covenant community for not being circumcised. Currid, therefore, calls circumcision a “two-edged sword, it either cuts one into the covenant or cuts one out of the covenant.”⁴³

The text itself, along the comments that have been made by others, call for a strong interpretive connection between the ideas of covenant, cutting and circumcision. By applying circumcision, the Israelites were demonstrating their allegiance to God who had chosen them above all other people to be his own, thus separating (or cutting) them out from others. The command to circumcise the male foreskin not only signified the “cutting in” of Abraham’s people, but also the “cutting out” of those who refuse the covenant sign. Thus, the blessing and curse elements associated with covenants are in view within this passage. The covenant is permanent—it is eternal and everlasting—therefore, the body receives a mark which is permanent and cannot be removed. The covenantal sign of faith,

⁴² Currid, 315, 316.

⁴³ Ibid., 316.

circumcision, is applied to adults who have not received it, but also infants who were part of the household groups of those who had received the sign.

Genesis 21 and 22

Genesis 21:4 records that Abraham faithfully circumcised Isaac eight days after his birth. The blessing and curse aspects of circumcision are illustrated in the passage as Isaac, the child of promise, is “cut into” the covenant community of God’s people, and the other circumcised child, Ishmael, is functionally “cut off” from God’s people as he is sent away with his mother Hagar and ultimately travels to Egypt (v. 21). Isaac who had been conceived and born in faithful obedience is chosen over Ishmael who had been conceived in unfaithful disobedience. Thus, it is illustrated that within the covenant community, there are those who carry the covenant sign who are not of God’s chosen people and ultimately are cut off from them. While circumcision of Isaac symbolized the blessing of God’s promises, the circumcision of Ishmael carried with it the curse of exile.

In Genesis 22, God seeks to prove Abraham’s faithfulness to offer Isaac as a burnt offering. Abraham responds in faith by taking his son to the mountains of Moriah and erected a place of sacrifice in preparation for the sacrifice that God had commanded. While Genesis 21 presented the fact that Abraham had faithfully and obediently followed God’s command in circumcising Isaac, Genesis 22 speaks to the depth of faithfulness and obedience that God expected from his servant. The demand for obedience was not just concerned with the external act, but the level of commitment that was expected by God was one of deep spirituality and total consecration. Those who faithfully placed the covenant sign upon their children are called to dedicate their child completely to the building of God’s kingdom.

Calvin emphasizes the obedience of Abraham in commenting on Genesis 21:4 by pointing out the necessity of being obedient to God's commands in spite of the fact that pain was inflicted on his beloved son.⁴⁴ The depth of Abraham's obedience is underscored in Genesis 22 as Abraham was called to completely renounce himself in the act of sacrificing his son.⁴⁵ Calvin identifies Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his only son, the heir of promise, as a testimony of the obedience required of "all the pious, in acts of self-denial."⁴⁶

Wenham comments that "God's precise fulfillment of his promise is matched by Abraham's exact obedience" in performing the rite of circumcision on Isaac.⁴⁷ Wenham also identifies the Genesis 22 narrative as describing a test of Abraham in commenting on the strain put upon his faith and obedience "to the uttermost in order to reveal his deepest emotional attachment."⁴⁸ The overriding factor in Abraham's behavior was to do the will of God, and obey him above all other considerations.⁴⁹

Currid draws attention to the fact that the circumcision of Isaac, at eight days of age, was distinctly set apart from that of Ishmael who was circumcised at the age of thirteen.⁵⁰ Currid describes Genesis 22:1-19 as recording God's command to sacrifice Isaac as being a test of Abraham's obedience. Currid emphasizes the uniqueness of Isaac as adding to the severity of the test. Abraham had waited twenty-five years for the birth of a son in whom

⁴⁴ Calvin, 1:416.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 1:437.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 441.

⁴⁷ Wenham, 80.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 113.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 114, 115.

⁵⁰ Currid, 371.

God's promises would be fulfilled. The sacrifice of Isaac would appear to invalidate all of God's promises to Abraham.⁵¹ One may deduce from these comments that Abraham was being called to the total consecration of his son to God.

Water Ordeals

The Old Testament water ordeals of the Noahic flood and the Red Sea crossing under Moses are two events that are often seen as significant in understanding God's covenant framework.

With regard to the Noahic flood, Kenneth Matthews comments that God's promise to not "cut off" life by the use of flood waters can be connected by terminology to the command for excommunication for anyone who refused to enter Abraham's covenant by circumcision. The use of covenantal language in the Noahic passages indicates that God's covenants are interrelated with one another.⁵² Wenham points out that alliteration and repetition are used to describe a scene of watery chaos from which all life was wiped out beneath the waters.⁵³ From the waters, a new world emerges, God confirms his covenant and sets the rainbow as a sign that he will never again "cut off" all flesh by flood.⁵⁴ Hamilton includes in his comments that the "Sabbath, rainbow, and circumcision" mark the three great covenants

⁵¹ Ibid., 389.

⁵² Matthews, Kenneth A. *Genesis 1 – 11:26*, vol. 1A in, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 2001), 409.

⁵³ Wenham, 182, 183.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 187, 188.

established by God at three critical stages of human history.⁵⁵ God provides a physical sign that proclaims the reality of the covenant relationship.⁵⁶

With regard to the Red Sea crossing, Peter Enns identifies the event as a paradigm for understanding other events of deliverance throughout the history of Israel and into the New Testament era.⁵⁷ Among others, the deliverance from Egypt through the Nile River is seen as an allusion to the Noah event, another deliverance through waters of chaos, as each inaugurate a new beginning for God's people.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Hamilton, 317.

⁵⁶ Currid, 221.

⁵⁷ Enns, Peter. *Exodus* in, *The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 279.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 283, 284.

Summarizing Comments

In considering the work that has been reviewed regarding Old Testament connections to infant baptism, there is little doubt that those who practice the rite upon children find the roots of their practice in the rite of circumcision within the context of covenant relationship with God. Circumcision was the sign that marked the community of God's people who had been claimed by God as his own, and who now responded in obedience to his claim. Circumcision was the rite by which those in the covenant community pledged to live under the authority and rule of God.

In following the structure of covenants for ancient times, there were promises made by God as the conquering king which carried with them threats of curse for those who were not obedient subjects. Those who did not carry the sign of circumcision were outside of the covenant community. Both blessing and curse were necessary elements in these covenant relationships, and therefore should not be overlooked in the New Testament context.

In the Old Testament context, circumcision had implications for one's descendants as the individual who entered into God's covenant was duty bound to bring all those who were subordinate in his household under the sign as well. The personal confession of God's lordship was necessary to initiate application of the covenantal sign which was then extended to qualifying children and others (such as servants) within an individual's household.

The cutting rituals examined in Old Testament passages all carried with them the dual sanctions of blessing and curse. In Genesis 15, the initial cutting ritual carries with it the blessing of God's promise to Abraham, and the curse that God places himself under for not keeping this covenant promise. Genesis 17 records the response that God required of Abraham and his descendants in the cutting ritual of circumcision which carried with it the

blessing of being in covenant with God for those who obediently kept the covenant, and the curse of being cut off to those who disobeyed. Genesis 21 and 22 demonstrate the obedience that is required in keeping the covenantal sign, and the level of consecration that is required for those who are in covenant with God.

In each of the water ordeal passages, the element of water is used both as a divine blessing and curse as it serves as both an instrument of salvation and judgment. The Noah passage contains covenantal language and includes a sign, while the Red Sea passage illustrates God's deliverance and the consecration of his people. Understanding the concepts present within these passages is important as we move forward to examining the New Covenant practice of baptism and its application to infants.

New Testament Applications

N. T. Wright identifies baptism as a sacramental act that linked early Christians directly with the seeds of their movement that were found in John's baptism, and with the symbolism of "the Jewish sect." Wright links baptism directly to Israel's history, particularly to the symbolism of exodus through which all may enter, and sees it as being used in the assertions of a new sect, in particular as a way of joining the Christians to the history of Israel in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.⁵⁹

G. K. Beale comments that Paul, in Romans 6:3-11, sees baptism as being identified with the death and resurrection of Christ, as the "old self" is crucified and the individual has

⁵⁹ Wright, N.T. *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), 447.

risen in “newness of life.” Beale also points to 1 Peter 3:20-21 and 1 Corinthians 10:1-2 as two other significant passages in which the New Testament discusses baptism.⁶⁰

According to Beale, 1 Peter 3:20-21 identifies baptism as the New Testament reality that parallels the saving of those who were “brought safely through the water” in the ark built by Noah. It is also an “appeal to God for a good conscience through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.” The sacrament of baptism during which a person emerges from the water symbolizes the resurrection of Christ who emerged from death and the grave, with whom the baptized person is identified. As one identified with Christ, the believer now has a basis to make an appeal to God for a good conscience. The “symbolic emergence in resurrection” of the believer parallels the emergence of Noah’s family through the flood waters as those outside of the ark perished.⁶¹ The flood waters were a sign of blessing for those inside the ark, and a sign of judgment for those who were outside.⁶² The element of water as a sign of blessing and judgment is also noted by Paul in 1 Corinthians 10.⁶³

Kline interprets the baptismal rite of John the Baptist as symbolic water ordeal, “a dramatic reenactment of imminent messianic judgment,” as opposed to being just a washing of purification.⁶⁴ Kline finds further support for his interpretation in the biblical use of βαπτίζω to represent water ordeals by citing Paul in 1 Corinthians 10:2, as well as Peter in 1

⁶⁰ Beale, G.K. *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 803.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 328, 329.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 815.

⁶³ 1 Corinthians 10:1-2 speaks of those who “were all under the cloud and passed through the sea,” as being “baptized into Moses.” Israel’s baptism speaks to its identification with Moses as God saved them from Egypt. The “sea” speaks to the blessing on those who were saved through the waters, but also of the curse that was upon the Egyptians who were judged and perished in the sea (Beale, 815).

⁶⁴ Kline, 56.

Peter 3:21. John the Baptist also used the verb for the impending ordeal of fire to come under Christ.⁶⁵ In discussing baptism as ordeal, Kline indicates that Peter thought of Christian baptism as a sign of judicial ordeal by acknowledging its correspondence with the Noahic flood (1 Peter 3:21). Again citing 1 Peter, Kline points out that the flood, and baptism, do not just signify the cleansing of the flesh, but also the significance of a good conscience. Kline assigns a forensic interpretation of the text, as the “conscience has to do with accusing and excusing,” and thus arrives at the conclusion that baptism is concerned with the individual “in the presence of God’s judgment throne” and is a solemn vow of consecration.⁶⁶

Kline cites New Testament evidence that Christ’s authority of covenant Lord extends to his disciples and their descendants. In the new covenant relationship with Christ, obedience is commanded to believers and their children. Paul’s teaching in 1 Corinthians 7:14 demonstrates that one’s religious status was not determined solely by individual confession of faith, but also by the existence of a “cultural relationship” to a believer.⁶⁷ Holiness, or cultic affiliation, was ascribed to those who were in such a cultural relationship. The holiness being spoken of in the passage is the type that existed in the Old Testament theocracy where a blending of cultural and cultic models were used to describe the relationship that Israel had with the Lord. According to Kline, it was a holiness of inclusion in the covenant community in Israel which was now being used by Paul to describe the relationship that existed for children in the new covenant under Christ.⁶⁸ It is within this

⁶⁵ Ibid., 57.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 66-67.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 91.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 92.

context that Kline points to the episode of bringing children to Jesus as described in the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, as an example of Christ's approval of the exercise of parental authority as individuals brought their children and placed them under the authority of his ministry.⁶⁹

Another significant piece of evidence submitted by Kline is Paul's instruction to children to be obedient to their parents in the Lord which included the stipulation of the Sinai covenant along with its related sanction (Eph 6:1-3; Col 3:20; Ex 20:12). Kline provides "clear confirmation" of covenantal continuation in Paul's command to parents to raise their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord (Eph 6:4).⁷⁰

Kline sees scripture as expressly teaching that the follower of Christ is bound to bring those under his authority along with himself when he swears an oath of allegiance under the higher authority of his covenant King. Thus, there is sufficient warrant for the administration of baptism to the children of confessing Christians, as baptism is the New Testament rite of commitment to Christ's authority, and of inclusion into the community that falls under Christ's covenant lordship.⁷¹

Beale points out that Colossians 2:11-13 is the only passage in the New Testament that brings the ideas of circumcision and baptism together, but cautions that the linkage between the two ideas within the passage is not explicit.⁷² In the passage, the reference to "a circumcision made without hands," implies a contrast with a circumcision made with hands.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 93, 94.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 94.

⁷¹ Ibid., 94.

⁷² Beale, 803.

Using this contrast, Paul is teaching that it is idolatrous to continue to place one's faith in the Old Testament shadows since the fulfillment of them has come.⁷³

According to Beale, Paul appears to see the external rite of circumcision as pointing toward the superior redemptive truth that Christ and his followers were circumcised, or “cut-off” from the “old sinful world and set apart to a new one.”⁷⁴ Those who are in covenantal relationship with God are to identify themselves by circumcising themselves by being “circumcised in the flesh of uncircumcision.” Paul compares physical circumcision to the spiritual reality of being in relationship with Christ through the new covenant.⁷⁵ Paul is connecting this new spiritual reality with that of the past. Beale offers the references of Deuteronomy 10:16 and Jeremiah 4:4 as calling the covenant people of God to consecrate themselves to God through circumcision, not just of the flesh but also of the heart. Paul also expresses this idea of being consecrated in Romans where he speaks of Abraham's circumcision. Beale comments that several Old Testament and New Testament passages indicate that physical circumcision was not only a symbol of being cut-off from the sinful world which is cursed, but was an outer symbol of a the inner spiritual reality of blessing for the Israelites who were faithful.⁷⁶

Beale points out that commentators have seen the connection of circumcision and baptism in Colossians 2:11-13 as being analogous in that the “circumcision” of the believer is equated with “the circumcision of Christ.” Those who were circumcised, “not by hands,” but by the “circumcision of Christ,” are identified with Christ's death and resurrection (v. 13).

⁷³ Ibid., 804.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 805, 806.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 806.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 807.

The Old Testament type, circumcision, has been fulfilled in spiritual circumcision and is no longer relevant for initiation into the covenant community. The spiritual circumcision which is “made without hands” and baptism are continuing realities that designate entrance into the new covenant community.⁷⁷ According to Beale, there is a likelihood that spiritual baptism is equivalent to spiritual circumcision in the passage, or at a minimum is seen to be a critical, but subordinate part of circumcision. While it is possible to conclude that baptism and circumcision are not precise equals, there is enough overlap between the two as both representing death and resurrection for them to be roughly equivalent.⁷⁸ Taking the position that physical and spiritual circumcision are likely identified with physical and spiritual baptism in the passage, Beale sees baptism as the typological fulfillment of Old Testament circumcision. Furthermore, he points out that circumcision and baptism are sociological markers of entrance into the Old Testament people of God, and therefore, one would naturally expect that baptism is the New Testament equivalent to circumcision.⁷⁹

Beale comments that beyond being the main signs of initiation into the covenant community, baptism and circumcision also conveyed dual-oath signs that implied blessing and cursing.⁸⁰ Beale agrees with Meredith Kline that the rite of circumcision symbolizes not only being set aside from curse and set apart from blessing for the faithful Israelite, but also signified that the unbelieving Israelite is under the curse and is cut off from God. Baptism represents the separation of the believer from the world by identification with the death of Christ, and being set apart through the resurrection. The twofold positive meaning

⁷⁷ Ibid., 808, 809.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 811.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 812.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 812.

of circumcision is central in Colossians 2 and parallels baptism in the passage. Those who profess Christ, but fail to persevere in the faith are externally identified with Christ's death and resurrection, but the inward reality is never manifested in them. They do not overcome the curse of death because they do not possess the reality symbolized by the signs of Christ's substitutionary death and of the resurrection which is spoken of in the liturgy of baptism. These individuals are identified with the baptismal curse of spiritual death, but in no way identify with the spiritual sign of resurrection.⁸¹

Beale makes three suggestions with regard to how his observations relate to the issue of whether infants should be baptized. First, it is appropriate to include infants in the sacrament of baptism, just as infants were included in circumcision, the Red Sea deliverance and the second generation passage through the Jordan, infants are naturally included in the new covenant sign of baptism. Second, as the New Testament generally presents a widening of participation, as seen in the inclusion of women and gentiles, it would be unusual for the widening principle to not be extended to the rite of initiation into the new covenant people of God. Third, infants participated in circumcision, therefore they ought to participate in baptism.⁸² New Testament passages pertinent to the biblical understanding of infant baptism will now be examined.

Romans 6:1-4

Paul speaks of our participation in the death and the resurrected life of Christ that is illustrated by our baptism (ἐβαπτίσθημεν). He is speaking to directly to the Romans with whom he shares baptism and is questioning the Romans understanding of the rite. They do

⁸¹ Ibid., 813, 814.

⁸² Ibid., 815, 816 .

not appear to understand what it has signified and how they are to conduct themselves after having received the sacrament. As noted in the introduction of this paper, people of our day seem to lack understanding of baptism as well.

Paul is responding to this demonstrated lack of understanding by teaching that believers have shared in the death of Jesus Christ. This is significant as Christ's death satisfies divine justice which requires the payment of death for disobedience. Christ's death has atoned for all of our sins. His atoning death becomes our atoning death when we come to faith. We now stand in a justified position before God because of Christ's sacrifice. Paul also responds with a reminder that having been buried with Christ in his death, we now share in his resurrection as well. In order for us to walk in the "newness of life" as Christ did, we must partake in his resurrection.

All of this teaching is packed into the concept of baptism which virtually all believers at the time Romans was written had experienced. Having experienced death and resurrection in Christ, individuals were then initiated into the church through baptism. The baptism they experienced spoke to the death and resurrection in Christ that they had experienced. Paul was reminding them, and us, that as baptized individuals who professed Christ all believers are to the resurrected life by being obedient to Christ. The resurrected life is lived out in the Body of Christ, the church, which all believers are baptized into. The topic of baptism is also discussed by Paul in 1 Corinthians in regard to its correspondence to the Red Sea crossing.⁸³

⁸³ In 1 Corinthians 10:1-5, Paul relates the spiritual realities symbolized in physical baptism to the experience of the Israelites in the Red Sea crossing. The cloud and sea represent elements of blessing and curse (salvation and judgment), and the elements of food and drink as God's provision for his people are also discussed. Standing behind all of the elements is Jesus Christ, the Rock from whom the Israelites, and the Corinthians drank.

John Calvin speaks of this in very practical terms when he points out that Paul is showing how Christ destroys sin in Christians through the church which is his body. It is through the church that Christ's death brings forth its fruit as Paul teaches us that the "fellowship as to death" is the main point of baptism. It is within the fellowship of the body of Christ that the putting to death and the dying of the old self takes place, and when we share in of the grace of Christ, the efficacy of his death follows.⁸⁴ In baptism, we are admitted into the participation of grace where Christians are exhorted to respond to their calling.⁸⁵

In commenting on Romans 6, John R. W. Stott highlights Paul's teaching that the baptism spoken of is water baptism, this baptism signifies our union with the crucified and risen Christ, and that baptism does not by itself secure what it signifies.⁸⁶ In particular, the verses speak to the death, burial and resurrection of Christ and the participation of Christians in all three events. Stott points out that the first half of Romans 6 teaches that the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ are not only historical facts and significant doctrines, but are also personal experiences as we share in them through "faith-baptism." Although Paul alludes to the symbolism of baptism in these verses, one must keep in mind that the significance of the symbols are real. The truth behind the symbolism pertains to "dying to the old life and rising to the new."⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Calvin, John. *Commentary on Romans*. trans. Francis Sibson (London: L. B. Seeley and Sons, 1834), 247, 248.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 249.

⁸⁶ Stott, John R. W. *The Message of Romans* in, *The Bible Speaks Today Series*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994), 173.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 174, 175.

Douglas Moo points out that Paul is referencing the Roman Christians' water baptism as the outward initiation they received in their Christian experience. Paul is restating what has already been taught to them as Moo points out that by the date of Romans "baptize" was close to becoming a technical expression for the Christian initiation by water.⁸⁸ In commenting on verse 3, Moo favors the position that Paul teaches that Christians are baptized into union with Christ, and therefore they are joined with Christ in his death. In verse 4, Paul then concludes that if we have died with Christ through baptism, then we have also been buried with him through it. This burial marks the end of the old life and transition into the new life that the believer is now called to live.⁸⁹ Verses 3 and 4 speak to the reality of spiritual baptism which physical baptism represents. Christians are empowered and exhorted to live a new kind of life through their participation in Christ's death, burial and resurrection. Paul is speaking about an ongoing conformity to Christ as we are united to him in his death, burial and resurrection.⁹⁰

1 Peter 3:20-22

Peter relates the baptism that Christians receive to the experience of Noah in the flood. Baptism (βάπτισμα)⁹¹ corresponds to (ἀντίτυπον)⁹² the flood. The flood serves as a copy of what was to be fulfilled. Baptism represents an experience similar to that of Noah.

⁸⁸ Moo, Douglas J. *The Epistle to Romans* in, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 359.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 360, 361.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 369, 370.

⁹¹ Strong, 1:18.

⁹² Thomas, Robert L. "ἀντίτυπον" in *New American Standard Hebrew-Aramaic and Greek Dictionaries: Updated Edition* (Anaheim: Foundation Publications, Inc., 1998).

The Christian has been saved as Noah and his family were saved as each have been brought through the waters of judgment. Baptism as an act does not save in itself, it is a rite which serves as the response of faith to being saved by God. The appeal referenced in the text is not a request to God for a good conscience, but a reference to the pledge of belief that occurred during the sacrament. Although not spoken of directly, there is a sense in which the ordeal a person passes through on the way to salvation is called to our attention. Water serves as an instrumental symbol of the fact that the believer is brought through an ordeal where the elements of salvation and judgment are present, and through which the believer passes by the grace of God.

Calvin points out that Peter unambiguously teaches that Noah had a sort of baptism. Our baptism is an antitype to the baptism of Noah as there a likeness, or correspondence between the two. The likeness is represented by the fact that Noah had obtained life from death, along with his family, as others outside the ark perished, and in the fact that today death that is represented in baptism is an entrance to life. Peter presents this truth to the greater number of people who profess the name of Christ, the majority of whom were introduced into the church by baptism.⁹³ Peter sets forth baptism in this way so that it may not be misinterpreted as a “naked and empty sign” in which people cling to the element of water, but to Christ alone from which it flows. Furthermore, Calvin comments that the death of Christ is included, not excluded, in his resurrection, and that we cannot derive benefit from our baptism unless all our thoughts are fixed on these things.⁹⁴

⁹³ Calvin, John. *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles* (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1855), 116, 117.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 119.

In his commentary on the text, Peter H. Davids indicates that Peter is stating that those reading his letter have experienced salvation as Noah did, “by passing through water to safety, the water of baptism.”⁹⁵ The event being recalled by Peter was a “type” of baptism as it was a copy or shadow of what was to come in fulfillment. As it did in the time of Noah, salvation separates the few who were saved from the many who will experience judgment, and is experienced through water as it was by Noah. Baptism now saves those who believe through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, not by the water itself, but through a “pledge” or “answer to God” from a good conscience.⁹⁶ Davids interprets the passage as teaching the salvific aspect of baptism that arises from the pledge of the individual in response to the questions posed by the baptizer.⁹⁷ Even so, Peter teaches that the efficacy of baptism is not based upon the water, or a pledge that is made by an individual, but on the resurrection of Christ who now reigns in heaven.⁹⁸

Edmund Clowney speaks of the provisional character of judgment in the flood, and Noah’s salvation as a pre-figuring of the “final and full salvation” to come in Christ. The “full and final salvation is sealed to Christians in baptism, not in the outward application of water, but in the new existence that is based upon the resurrection of Christ. The outward sign of baptism symbolizes the putting off of sin’s pollution and the start of new life in Christ.”⁹⁹ Clowney notes that the waters of Noah’s flood was an instrument of both salvation

⁹⁵ Davids, Peter H. *The First Epistle of Peter* in, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 143.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 144.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 145.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 145, 146.

⁹⁹ Clowney, Edmund. *The Message of First Peter* in, *The Bible Speaks Today Series* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 1988), 164, 165.

and judgment. Noah and his family were saved within the ark, while those who were outside the ark were destroyed.¹⁰⁰

In taking a covenantal approach in his interpretation, Clowney points to the thoughts of Meredith Kline in viewing the text in the context of oath as was applied in the Old Testament. The blood that was shed in circumcision implied not only cleansing, but an oath taken that involved a person's descendants. The same element is found in baptism when it is compared to the waters of the flood as a threatening symbol is brought to light. As Noah was brought through the waters of the flood, Christians are brought through the waters of death, "the flood of destruction," in order to secure the life of resurrection in Christ. According to Clowney, Peter's mention of the pledge made in baptism is significant in that it implies a solemn oath that made by believers in response to baptismal questions. Baptism, like circumcision, symbolizes cleansing but also identifies those who are joined to Christ in his death and resurrection.¹⁰¹

I. Howard Marshall identifies the flood narrative as serving as a type to show the parallel events and people in the Old Testament with those who were living in Peter's time. The people in the ark were parallel to Christians, the flood waters parallel to the water of baptism, and the escape of Noah's family from the waters parallel the spiritual salvation of believers. The Old Testament type was a salvific event that is now being repeated differently in the lives of Christians.¹⁰² Although Peter says that baptism saves Christians, he does not mean this in a material sense as though the external rite itself can convey salvation, or in a

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 166.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 166, 167.

¹⁰² Marshall, I. Howard. *1 Peter* in, *The IVP New Testament Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 1991), 130.

magical sense where the water itself possesses some type of spiritual power, or automatically where the person being baptized is saved. Nor is the importance of baptism limited to the exact moment and action of being immersed or sprinkled with water. Instead, Peter is teaching that baptism symbolically represents the entire process where the gospel comes to people and they accept it by faith. Peter emphasizes that baptism is not to be equated with the removal of outward defilement, but internal spiritual renewal instead. Baptism must represent or communicate the pledge of a good conscience toward God in a prayer for forgiveness and cleansing.¹⁰³ Baptism saves only by the efficacy of Jesus' resurrection. As the normal means of initiation for Christians, baptism does not represent salvation to those who merely submit to it outwardly, it is for those who come to God with a longing to be set free from sin and have the desire for a pure conscience.¹⁰⁴

Karen Jobes indicates that Peter connects the Christian gospel with Noah through typology between the flood and Christian baptism.¹⁰⁵ The Noahic flood was used by God to display his salvation of a few righteous people, and his judgment of destruction upon those who refused to repent. It is a type of eschatological judgment that has been fulfilled in Christ but yet remains unfulfilled as it looks toward the final judgment of history. Jobes comments that Peter's readers have escaped the second "flood" of judgment because they have passed through the waters of Christian baptism which saves them through the vindication of Christ's resurrection. In the typology used, the waters are an instrument of salvation and not salvation itself. The waters contain within them both the means of salvation and the means of

¹⁰³ Ibid., 130, 131.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 131, 132.

¹⁰⁵ Jobes, Karen H. *1 Peter* in, *The Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005), 251.

judgment.¹⁰⁶ According to Jobes, Peter contrasts the nature of Christian baptism with other religious rituals, likely those of Judaism, and says that the baptism they have received is much more than an outward ritual. The contrast of “flesh” and “good conscience” suggest that Peter is teaching that Christians must be concerned with how they live after they have been baptized.¹⁰⁷ Christian baptism is a pledge to live rightly from that point forward. By referencing the pledge, Peter is reminding his readers of the question posed to them about their faith at their baptism, to which they were required to give a positive response.¹⁰⁸

Simon J. Kistemaker identifies the flood as representing baptism and baptism characterizing salvation. As the waters of the flood cleansed the earth of sin, so the waters of baptism cleansing from sin. The flood waters served to separate Noah and his family from the evil of his day, while baptism separates believers from the evil of our day. Baptism, therefore, is a counterpart of the flood.¹⁰⁹ Baptism is a symbol for cleansing the believer from sin, but the baptismal waters do not save a person. It is a symbol of Christ’s blood shed to cleanse the believer from sin.¹¹⁰ Kistemaker confirms the opinion of some that a connection between the Old Testament rite of circumcision and the New Testament sacrament of baptism is made in the “removal of dirt from the body.” The “pledge of a good conscience” is a reference to the believer’s response to the baptismal questions and represents a promise to live conscientiously to honor and glorify God.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 252.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 254, 255.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 255.

¹⁰⁹ Kistemaker, Simon J. *James, Epistles of John, Peter and Jude* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1987), 146, 147.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 147, 148.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 148, 149.

Colossians 2:11-13

Paul speaks to a circumcision that the Colossians have already received. It is the “circumcision made without hands,” of what has been called spiritual circumcision. The “putting off of the flesh” may be more accurately translated as a “removal, or stripping off” (ἀπεκδύσει)¹¹² which takes it closer to the concept of “cutting off” that is associated with circumcision. This circumcision is the “circumcision of Christ” which the Old Testament rite pointed toward. The believer has been cut-off from the flesh through participation in the death, burial and resurrection of Christ which are all symbolized in baptism. Thus, Paul is stating that circumcision is the Old Testament equivalent of baptism. The physical circumcision of the Colossians is inappropriate because they have already been “circumcised” internally by Christ, and that internal “circumcision” has been marked upon them through the rite of baptism.

Calvin’s commentary highlights Paul’s teaching that the circumcision that was given to the Old Testament people to prefigure something that was not yet fulfilled, and that those who held to the practice of circumcision within the church deny Christ what it prefigured. Therefore, there was no longer any “fruit or advantage” in outward circumcision, but what remains is the “circumcision of the heart,” or the “circumcision of Christ” which is the reality that the type symbolized.¹¹³ The nature of spiritual circumcision is explained as being “buried with Christ” in our baptism, and partaking in his death. Baptism is now given to

¹¹² Thomas, “ἀπέκδυσις.”

¹¹³ Calvin, John. *Commentary on Philippians, Colossians and Thessalonians*. trans. John Pringle (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1851), 184.

signify the “circumcision of Christ.” Since we not only partake of Christ’s death but also his resurrection, baptism is a greater sign than circumcision.¹¹⁴

F. F. Bruce teaches that the symbolic nature of circumcision emphasized not just the external sign, but the “circumcision of the heart” (Deut 10:16; 30:6; Jer 4:4) which was an “internal purification” that Paul emphasized as the “true circumcision.” The work of Christ has so completely fulfilled the significance of circumcision that it is now superseded by Christian baptism.¹¹⁵ The inward “circumcision of Christ” is the cleansing that is wrought by his “death, resurrection and inward dwelling in those united to him by faith.”¹¹⁶

N. T. Wright makes note of Paul’s teaching that the Colossians were circumcised spiritually, and physical circumcision was not necessary for them. Wright speaks of “Christian circumcision” as being the point of entry into the “community of Christ’s people” through baptism.¹¹⁷ Wright comments that Paul is transferring the identity of the people of God from a racial group, the Jews, to a diverse group consisting of “every family under heaven,” the church of Jesus Christ. The outward, visible point of entry into this group is baptism.¹¹⁸ According to Wright, the candidate for baptism is placed into a “family where Christ is loved and served,” and is in “the best possible position to grow into mature Christian faith and life.” Wright goes on to say that if we find such statements about baptism strange, it is likely because we have lost Paul’s vision of the church as a loving and

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 185.

¹¹⁵ Bruce, F. F. *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, in *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984), 103, 104.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 104.

¹¹⁷ Wright, N. T. *Colossians and Philemon* in, *The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 1986), 109.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 111, 112.

welcoming family of God.¹¹⁹ Paul is teaching that baptism demonstrates that the Christian life means dying to old relationships and habits, and becoming alive to the new family of God and its new lifestyle. Faith in Christ does not simply mean an assent to the knowledge of Christ, but recognizes a truth about God. Paul is reminding the Colossians of the profession made at their baptism.¹²⁰

Summarizing Comments

The New Testament passages examined in this section speak directly to the understanding of baptism and how it relates to Old Testament circumcision. Circumcision pointed toward baptism which represents the superior truth of redemption in Jesus Christ. Those who are in covenant with Christ identify themselves with baptism. The circumcision of the heart and baptism are entry points into the new covenant community. A logical interpretation of Scripture leads one to believe that as circumcision marked entrance in to the old covenant community, baptism marks entrance into the new covenant community. Thus, it is logical to equate baptism in the New Testament to circumcision in the Old Testament.

As rites of covenantal initiation, baptism and circumcision convey both blessing and curse to those who apply the signs. Baptism contains a two-fold meaning in which those who profess Christ and are faithful to him identify with the promise of spiritual life, while those who fail to persevere in the faith are identified with spiritual death. We are initiated into faith through baptism as we put on Christ and are united with his body. It is within the fellowship of the body, the church, that we put to death the old self and the new self becomes manifest. Baptism with water is evident in the texts examined, as it is in other New

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 112.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 112, 113.

Testament texts. It is an instrument through which our burial and resurrection in Christ are signified, and marks the starting point at which spiritual progress can be measured.

The New Testament writers made a connection between two Old Testament water ordeals and baptism. Paul teaches that the Israelites were baptized into Moses, while Christians are baptized into Christ. Moses was the covenant mediator in the Old Testament who foreshadowed the covenant mediator Christ in the New Testament.

The Colossians passage points out that circumcision, which was outward, prefigured the “circumcision of Christ,” which was inward. The nature of the spiritual circumcision is explained as being “buried with Christ” in our baptism and partaking of his death. Baptism is now given as a sign of what was formerly prefigured, the circumcision of the heart, which stood behind circumcision. It is baptism, the “Christian circumcision,” which serves as the entry point into the new covenant community in Christ where the newly baptized individual is loved, nurtured, and the person matures in the Christian faith and lifestyle.

CHAPTER 5

RESPONDING TO PRESENT CHURCH CONTEXTS

As noted in Chapter 2, revivalism has had a negative impact upon the practice of infant baptism within the church in America. It can be said that the practice, which was once the norm in the American church, is now openly questioned, and has declined in its use, especially in evangelical churches.

Another issue affecting the practice of infant baptism is that of “brand disloyalty” with regard to individual denominational affiliation, or one’s background of religious tradition. One source reports that while 78% of Americans claim to belong to the Christian tradition, 28% are now part of a religious tradition (i.e. Catholicism, Protestantism, Judaism, or “no tradition”) that they were not raised in. When switching within particular traditions (i.e. Protestantism) is considered, as many as 44% of those claiming the Christian tradition are attending churches outside of the particular Christian tradition that was in their background.¹

Therefore, those within particular Protestant traditions such as Presbyterianism are often unfamiliar with, or question, practices within that tradition. Infant baptism is one of the areas where a lack of understanding among congregants is a problem that must be addressed by leaders of Presbyterian churches. One reaction within conservative Presbyterian churches is to offer parents the choice of having their children baptized or having a non-water infant dedication.² Therefore, the practices in place in many conservative

¹ “Brand Disloyalty,” *The Economist*, February 28, 2008 available from <http://www.economist.com/node/10766838>; Internet; 20 July 2014.

² St. John, Marshall C. “The Future of the PCA” in *The Aquila Report*, June 2, 2010 available from <http://theaquilareport.com/the-future-of-the-pca>; Internet; 20 July 2014.

Presbyterian congregations are becoming aligned with those of evangelicalism that has been influenced by Baptist theology.

Gentry and Wellum

Peter Gentry and Stephen Wellum, in their book *Kingdom Through Covenant*, expound upon this evangelical position in presenting a challenge to the traditional view of Presbyterians. Gentry and Wellum use the categories of “new covenant theology” or “progressive covenantalism” to identify their position.³ The ecclesiology that Gentry and Wellum propose presents a challenge to Presbyterians who hold to infant baptism from the covenantal perspective. What follows is an interaction with their work from the Presbyterian perspective.

Gentry and Wellum take exception to the covenantal idea that in the administration of the covenant of grace throughout the biblical timeline there are many who are members of the covenant community who enjoy the covenant privileges of membership but are not among the elect. They are critical of covenant theology which stresses “the unity of the people of God across the ages.”⁴ Importantly, they argue for a *discontinuity* between the people of God under the old covenant and the people of God under the new covenant.

Gentry and Wellum argue for a “believer’s church view” that advocates for one people of God through the ages but acknowledges a “redemptive-historical difference between Old Testament Israel and the New Testament church.”⁵ In their view, the new covenant community is unique in that it is comprised of only regenerate, believing people,

³ Gentry, Peter J. and Wellum, Stephen J. *Kingdom Through Covenant, A Biblical-Theological Understanding of Covenants* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 24.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 73.

and is not a mixed group as Israel was in the Old Testament.⁶ They argue for discontinuity between Old Testament Israel and the new covenant community in this regard. Therefore, they argue against the position of covenant theology that the continuity of the covenant of grace leads to the notion that covenant signs carry essentially the same meaning.⁷ Gentry and Wellum criticize covenant theology for moving too fast in its analysis of how Scripture illustrates the progression of the covenants as it applies to the nature of the church and the application of the covenant sign of baptism.⁸

Rather than seeing the biblical covenants as either being unconditional or conditional, Gentry and Wellum see the unilateral and bilateral elements blended together. This blend creates a deliberate tension with the covenants which increases as the story of the Bible and the biblical covenants progress toward fulfilment in Christ.⁹ As the biblical covenants progress through redemptive-history, the tension increases as it becomes clear that only the Lord remains as the faithful covenant partner. This tension leads to the “unbreakable new covenant” that is grounded in the obedience of God’s Son, Jesus Christ.¹⁰ A severe tension in the covenantal relationship is caused by the necessity of God to judge the sins of humans, a problem that can only be solved God himself.¹¹

Gentry and Wellum see the Abrahamic Covenant as the means that God uses to fulfill his promises for humanity. In their view, the covenant with Abraham has a “universal,

⁶ Ibid., 73.

⁷ Ibid., 77, 78.

⁸ Ibid., 122.

⁹ Ibid., 609.

¹⁰ Ibid., 610, 611.

¹¹ Ibid., 625, 626.

creation” focus which pushes toward the new covenant. It is in this context that God promises to make Abraham’s offspring into a great nation. It is through this nation that God will bring God’s initiative of salvation and demonstrate what God had intended for humanity to the entire world.¹² The Abrahamic covenant includes not only spiritual elements but also national/physical and typological elements which when carefully unpacked reveal a significant amount of discontinuity with the new covenant. The “seed of Abraham” refers to a natural, physical seed consisting of his physical descendants. This is a natural, physical seed that was also “special” as it was tied to God’s elective purposes. The “seed of Abraham” also refers to a “true/unique” seed in a typological way both physically as the Messiah, Jesus, is the seed in a physical way and as the antitype of all the covenant mediators of the Old Testament.¹³

All of the Old Testament covenants anticipate and typify the new covenant, therefore, the new covenant supersedes all of the previous covenants. The people of God are no longer under the preceding covenants in the same way that they were in the Old Testament. Israel is related to the church typologically through Christ, and while the two cannot be completely separated from one another, the two cannot be seen as equal either. According to Gentry and Wellum, the most distinguishing difference between the two communities is that Israel was a mixed community, while the church is a *regenerate* community.¹⁴

For Gentry and Wellum, a profession of faith must precede baptism. They acknowledge that some may make false professions, and when apostasy takes place in the

¹² Ibid., 631, 632.

¹³ Ibid., 632, 633.

¹⁴ Ibid., 645, 646.

church, an individual's profession and covenant status must be reevaluated. They see a difference in the situation that presented itself under the old covenant where many individuals did not profess faith in God. The church does its best to discern true saving faith of its covenant members. They see this as more legitimate than thinking that people who do not profess faith, in particular infants, are full covenant members in faith union with Christ.¹⁵

Finally, they are critical of those who hold the paedobaptist position because there is no express command in scripture to baptize infants, and there is no record of any clear case of infant baptism.¹⁶ They conclude that circumcision, a type, pointed to spiritual regeneration in anticipating new covenant realities. In presenting the Baptist position, they see baptism as being a new covenant sign which communicates God's grace to individuals who have faith, which was not the case in old covenant circumcision.¹⁷

¹⁵ Ibid., 693.

¹⁶ Ibid., 694, 695.

¹⁷ Ibid., 703.

A Response to Gentry and Wellum

Gentry and Wellum's view on covenantal unity and continuation is at odds with Scripture and its application by many in history and theology. Gentry and Wellum seek to strike a *via media* between the positions of dispensational and covenant theologies with regard to the covenants, but their interpretation of the Abrahamic covenant has a distinct dispensational flavoring in their position that this covenant has a universal/creation focus with spiritual elements. The making of a great nation from the seed of Abraham has a limited focus of witnessing to the world God's intention for humanity. The spiritual aspect of the covenant is limited to national/physical and typological elements which prove discontinuity with the new covenant. The idea that the seed was natural, physical with regard to descendants, but only typological in the spiritual sense with regard to Christ (a physical descendant) who is the anti-type of Abraham, is confusing and is skirting the issue that is presented in Reformed covenantal theology. The covenant is everlasting (Genesis 17:7, 13). God's covenant with his people does not discontinue but finds its fulfillment in Christ within the framework of the new covenant. The physical marking of descendants was not just an external profession, but also included the promise of grace by calling individuals to faith.

Peter certainly sees the unity and continuity between the old and new covenants as being in operation when he speaks to the men of Judea at Pentecost (Acts 2:14-41). He speaks of one old covenant mediator, David, in the passage, and refers to the prophets who were messengers that reminded the people of covenant terms, and foretold of covenant fulfillment. He speaks of one promise given to the children of both covenants. As was noted in Chapter 4, Peter uses old covenant imagery to explain the significance of baptism in

1 Peter 3:20-21. This indicates, among other things, that Peter recognized the connections that exist between the old covenant people of God and the new covenant people of God.

Paul makes numerous connections between the old covenant and new covenant epochs. He references the covenant under Moses by repeating the legal expectations of it as though they were still in force (Ephesians 6:1-4). As noted in Chapter 4, Paul makes a direct connection between the signs of the old and new covenants, circumcision and baptism. One source indicates that Paul includes quotations from the Old Testament 104 times in his writings.¹⁸

Jesus said that he did not come to abolish the law but came to fulfill it (Matthew 5:17). The New Testament is filled with connections to the Old Testament. Christ and his apostles made reference to the old covenant in terms that point to unity, not disunity, and continuation, not discontinuation.

It is logical to think that such biblical data led many in the church throughout history to the conclusion that the old and new covenants were connected. As noted in Chapter 2, there were signs as early as 200 A.D. that infant baptism was prevalent in the church. Church fathers Origen and Ambrose made comments suggesting that infant baptism in the “tradition of the Apostles” was linked to the old covenant practice of circumcision. Reformers Bucer and Zwingli directly connected the rites of the two covenants. Owen identified infant baptism as being in keeping with biblical covenantal structures. Modern theologians Hodge and Berkhof concur on this point as well.

In response to Gentry and Wellum’s criticism of the covenantal view of “one people of God,” it is noted that they claim that they hold to a “one people position” but see a

¹⁸ Köstenberger, Andreas J. “Use of the Old Testament in the New Testament.” John D. Barry and Lazarus Wentz, eds. *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012.

“redemptive historical difference” between the people of the old covenant and those of the new covenant. In other words, Scripture speaks of one people of God but the nature of that people changes radically in shifting from the old to the new covenants. As stated earlier, the difference is that the old covenant people were a “mixed” group, whereas the new covenant people are a “regenerate” group. This a view that is very problematic from the Presbyterian perspective and must be rejected outright. As pointed out in Chapter 3, Christ referred to the church using the same term that was used to describe Israel in the Old Testament (ekklesia; Matthew 16:18). The idea of church finds its origin in Old Testament Israel. Christ makes this connection in establishing his church and it was a mixed fellowship. Judas was a full member in the new covenant who held a leadership position. He proved to be a covenant-breaker by his betrayal of our Lord. Christ’s teaching of the wheat and tares speaks to the reality of a church that is a mixed people. It is a reality that is presented in the New Testament itself in the Epistles which address heresy that had come into the church.

So, as we consider Gentry and Wellum’s rejection of infant baptism based upon their perceived discontinuity between the peoples of the old and new covenants, we must reject their view. The pattern for initiation into God’s kingdom was established in the Old Testament. Entry was based upon a profession of faith and circumcision of the adult representatives and then their offspring. Although the old covenant application of this concept was directed to males only, Christ instituted a widening to all individuals as he spoke of all children without gender distinction. Therefore, the children of professing adults are eligible to be baptized regardless of gender.

Gentry and Wellum speak clearly against the idea that infant children are baptized into a covenant relationship which is a faith union in Christ. Their objection begs the

question, “what is a faith union in Christ?” If they are alleging that covenantal infant baptism results in the regeneration of the infant, we must disagree. Again, what does it mean to be “in Christ”? The majority, if not all, of the Reformed theologians represented in this project would speak against baptismal regeneration. Infant baptism itself does not regenerate, the Holy Spirit regenerates. When does this regeneration take place? The Spirit works as it pleases. It is difficult to argue against the idea of some within Presbyterianism that this can begin at the earliest stages of life—even infancy—however, this must be conditioned by the fact that saving faith is marked by profession and obedience. Circumcision only marked an individual’s entrance into God’s people; individual faith marked by profession and obedience was required. The same is true of baptism. The infant is marked as a member of the new covenant and receives the benefit of covenant care and nurture, but faith and obedience are its own responsibility. The child is “in Christ” in the sense that he has entered into Christ’s body, the church, the people of the new covenant. The child must believe and obey in order to maintain this covenant relationship.

Those who hold to covenant theology will have no problem acknowledging the claim made by Gentry and Wellum that there is no express command in scripture to baptize infants. The absence of direct evidence for infant baptism in the New Testament has been long acknowledged as being a product of the newness of the Christian church and its focus on adult converts. The incident of household baptism recorded by Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:16 does not specifically mention infant members, but it does offer the potential that the pattern of administering the covenant sign given to Abraham was being followed. It is commonly argued that more than Stephanas may have been converted at that time, but plainly, it is only his conversion that has been referenced in the text. It is just as plain to interpret that the

household was baptized in keeping with the covenantal practice of administering the sign to those under the authority of the confessing head of household. While none can say with perfect accuracy that infants were baptized in this situation, it is just as true to say that none can accurately refute that they were. Those holding to covenant theology do not base their convictions on proof texting alone, but do so through careful analysis of Scripture as a whole.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

A right understanding of infant baptism is necessary for Presbyterians to apply it correctly to infants in their churches. The fact that infant baptism is declining in churches where covenantal theology has been the dominant force in interpreting and teaching Scripture suggests that the understanding of the practice is lacking in many conservative Presbyterian churches. The attainment of a right understanding of infant baptism is gained through knowledge of the practice from the historical, theological and biblical perspectives. This conclusion presents the application of research in presenting a fuller understanding of infant baptism to Presbyterians in the church today.

From the perspective of history, it is to be understood that infant baptism as a practice dates back 200 A.D. with some historical evidence dating it to the time of the apostles. From a very early time, the church acknowledged the working of the Holy Spirit through baptism. The relationship of new covenant baptism to old covenant circumcision was also taught very early on. The ancient church based the efficacy of baptism on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ alone. Unfortunately, the church of the middle ages began to move away from the teaching of the church from the ancient period which resulted in the development of baptism as a regenerative rite. This teaching was refuted by many during the Protestant Reformation and a return to covenantal baptism resulted from those who were

to be identified as being in the Reformed camp of Protestantism. The foundation for what Presbyterians believe about infant baptism was laid during the Reformation period.

From the perspective of theology, it is of critical importance to understand that the church is made up of professing Christians and their children. This understanding is based upon the recognition that there is one people of God that spans both the Old and New Testaments. God's people are in covenant with him and receive the sign of the covenant. Circumcision, the sign of the old covenant, was applied to infants, therefore baptism, the sign of old covenant is applied likewise. It is a sign of consecration which symbolizes the blessings of salvation for the faithful and the curse of eternal death to the unfaithful. Baptism is the rite of initiation by which the individual enters into a covenant relationship with Christ's church with only those who remain faithful actually grafted into Christ himself.

From the biblical perspective, it is important to understand that those who practice infant baptism see the practice as rooted in the covenant relation with the people of God as recorded in the Old Testament and as culminating in the New Testament. The old covenant rite of circumcision was replaced with the new covenant sacrament of baptism. In old and new covenants, the sign of the covenant was placed upon confessing adults and their children. In the covenantal context, the rites of initiation symbolized both the blessing of inclusion for covenant faithfulness (cutting in), and exclusion (cutting off) for unfaithfulness.

The mobility of Christians between church traditions poses a great challenge for Presbyterians in maintaining the practice of infant baptism within their congregations. The covenantal perspective on baptism needs to be taught in the spirit of grace and truth. We must be graceful when presenting the conviction that covenantal baptism is biblical truth. We must trust that the Spirit of God will convict the hearts of believing parents, and pray that

their children be brought into the covenant people of God as has been the practice of his church in both the old and new covenants.

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