

INFANT BAPTISM OR BELIEVER'S BAPTISM?

by

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Baptists have always shared a perplexing relationship with the teachers and teachings of the Reformation. On the one hand, they gladly affirmed the five *solas* of the Reformation: faith alone (*sola fide*), Christ alone (*solus Christus*), grace alone (*sola gratia*), Scripture alone (*sola Scriptura*), and glory to God alone (*solus deo gloria*). Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli were all staunch advocates of these five great theses, and all true believers wholeheartedly supported them. On the other hand, Baptists and other "stepchildren"¹ differed greatly from the Reformers in regard to the nature of the church. While the Reformers affirmed strongly the need for a Church that consisted of regenerate believers, they also desired to maintain the long-held view that the Church should include *everyone* in a given locality. This church-state connection began to take shape when the Roman emperor Constantine legalized Christianity in AD 313. Apparently for the Reformers, the pull of tradition proved so strong that the biblical evidence for a regenerate church membership was trumped by the desire to maintain this union of church and state.

Because they held to the State Church mentality, the Reformers were compelled to baptize every child into the Church. Thus, infant baptism continued as a rite in the Reformed churches for the same reason that it had been used in the Catholic Church—to guarantee that everyone in a given locality belonged to both the Church and the State.

Of course, there were differences between the Reformers and the established Church in regard to the *theological* meaning of infant baptism. The Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church² believed that baptism washed away the guilt of original sin so that anyone who died without it was in danger of eternal damnation.³ The Reformers would have none of this sort of teaching, holding as they did to the five *solas* mentioned above. Rather, they argued for infant baptism from the standpoint of its function as the sign and seal of the covenant which God established with all Christian believers.

To summarize: Baptists and their fellow "stepchildren" differed with the Reformers in regard to the practice of infant baptism (among other things). The Reformers maintained this rite for *political* and *theological* reasons. Baptists have never been compelled by either of these reasons. They have always claimed that the Bible clearly teaches believer's baptism, i.e., only one who has trusted in Christ for salvation should be baptized.

Before examining the biblical passages which provide theological support for believer's baptism, I will investigate the Reformed claims used to support infant baptism. Particularly, I will discuss the *theological* reasons they have used. Others have dealt with the *political* reasons, and I would direct the reader to Verduin's work for a most informative treatment of these.

This investigation of the theological basis of infant baptism teaching among Reformed evangelicals will include a discussion of the following: 1. The covenantal basis of the teaching; 2. The rationale behind the covenantal defense of infant baptism; and 3. The defense or meaning of baptism as the sign and seal of the covenant. This will be followed by a critique of this teaching.

The Covenantal Basis of Infant Baptism. Using Calvin's theology as a basis, covenant theology developed during the sixteenth century. Its major teaching is that God established a "covenant of grace" with sinners by which he pledged to save any who trust in Jesus Christ for salvation. The divine-human covenants in the Bible (Noahic, Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic, and New Covenant) are commonly viewed as expressions or successive stages of the one over-arching covenant of grace. Since the earthly ministry of Christ, believers participate in the New Covenant as the current expression of the covenant of grace. For this reason, the church has now replaced Israel as God's covenant people. Promises made to Israel under the old covenant arrangement (the Mosaic covenant) now belong to the church. This is why most covenantalists are amillennialists; they believe that the promises made to Israel are now being fulfilled spiritually in the church so that there is no need to hold to a future Kingdom (Millennium) for Israel. Since the church has replaced Israel in God's program, covenantalists believe that there are certain aspects belonging to the OT covenant(s) which are manifested differently in the New Covenant. One of these is the sign of the covenant.

In Abraham's day the sign of the covenant was circumcision; under the New Covenant the sign of the covenant is infant baptism.

The Rationale Behind the Covenantal Defense of Infant Baptism. Building on the covenantal basis of infant baptism, we are now in a position to provide the core logic used to defend infant baptism. All of the seven propositions listed here are attested by multiple Reformed authors.⁴

1) There is in fact *one* saving "covenant of grace" between the Old and the New Testaments (and the Abrahamic covenant is one of the phases of this covenant).

2) Circumcision was the *sign* and *seal* of this covenant in the OT.

3) This covenant of grace applies to believers/covenant members *and their children*.

4) In the OT, circumcision was commanded for Abraham's household, for adult converts, and for infants of covenant members. To reject this sign was to break the covenant.

5) Baptism in the NT replaces circumcision in the OT as the sign and seal of the covenant.

6) There is no NT command which sets aside the OT command to circumcise the infants of covenant members, no command which reads, "*no longer infants, but now believers only*."

7) Therefore, so also now in the NT, infants of Christians are to be baptized; Christians are in effect commanded to baptize their infant children.⁵

This argument is very logical; it is clearly based on the covenantal teaching of the one covenant of grace in which the New Covenant replaces the old; and it places strong emphasis on the need for and reality of a sign and seal of the covenant of grace. It is noteworthy that the function of baptism as *sign* and *seal* holds a significant place in this whole argument, and it is to this subject that we now turn.

The Meaning of Infant Baptism as the Sign and Seal of the Covenant.

The sign aspect of circumcision is clearly attested in Genesis 17:11: "You shall be circumcised . . . and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you." Similarly, God also provided signs in regard to other OT covenant arrangements: the rainbow for Noah (Gen 9:12) and the Sabbath for Israel at Sinai (Exod 31:13). From these three examples we see two functions of the covenantal sign: first, it provides a visible testimony or reminder that there is a covenant; and second, it symbolizes something of the content or nature of the covenant. Thus, circumcision symbolizes the inward condition of the heart which should characterize those who receive it (Deut 10:16; 30:6; Jer 4:4). Likewise, baptism in the NT pictures the washing away of sin (Acts 22:16), regeneration (Titus 3:5), and dying and rising with Christ (Rom 6:3-4).

No one, including Baptists, disagrees with covenantalists on the sign aspect of circumcision. But this is the point where our unity ends because Reformed teachers hold that circumcision is not only a *sign* but is also a *seal* of covenant promises. On this twofold basis they argue that infant baptism functions as an equivalent sign-seal of the covenant of grace in the NT.⁶ But does the Bible support the concept of circumcision (or infant baptism) acting as a *seal*?

Before answering this question we must explain the meaning of "seal." To seal a covenant means two things. First, it means that one is *confirmed* in the covenant, i.e., the seal provides the assurance that one is in the covenant. Second, it means that the seal *conveys* or *confers* the blessing of the covenantal promises themselves, i.e., the seal transmits, imparts, transfers the blessings of the covenant to the recipient. There is ample evidence of both of these aspects of the "seal" meaning of circumcision/infant baptism in Reformed writings.

But there is a problem. Nowhere in the OT is circumcision referred to as a *seal* or transmitter of any OT covenant. What we do find when studying the OT covenants is that they are usually ratified by some form of ritual (e.g. the sprinkling of blood on the people by Moses in Exod 24:6-8) and that one or both of the parties obligate themselves to the terms of the covenant by means of an oath (e.g. Neh 10:28-29; Josh 9:18-20). But circumcision is never referred to as a "seal" of the

covenant. Circumcision did act as a sign of the Abrahamic covenant and as a symbol of the need for a circumcised heart; it also served as a physical identity marker of the Jewish race. But none of these functions of circumcision comes close to the confirming and conferring aspects of a "seal" that Reformed theologians attach to it.

There is one NT verse which suggests that Abraham's circumcision served to "seal" his reception of God's righteousness: Romans 4:11 — "He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised." How is Paul using the idea of "seal" in this verse? He is teaching that Abraham's circumcision was a confirmation (one of the aspects of "seal") of Abraham's righteous standing before God which he already had prior to his circumcision. But we must notice what Paul does *not* say here. He does not say that Abraham's circumcision conveyed or "sealed" anything to Abraham; he already had God's righteousness beforehand. Also, the sealing nature of his circumcision was not seen as the seal or confirmation of any covenant. Finally, the sealing nature of the circumcision was not applied in any way to Abraham's offspring; it belonged to him alone. Thus, Romans 4:11 does not provide any evidence that circumcision functioned as a *seal* of the Abrahamic covenant.

Is baptism ever referred to as a *seal* of the New Covenant? No. The New Covenant is ratified by the shed blood of Christ (Luke 22:20; Heb 9:11–14); it is sealed or confirmed to us by the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit (2 Cor 3:18; Titus 3:5–6). But nowhere in the NT do we find that the New Covenant is confirmed or conveyed to us by means of baptism.

Critique of Infant Baptism. Thus far we have seen how Reformed teachers seek to defend infant baptism. They do so along two lines: covenant theology with its overarching covenant of grace and the (supposed) sign-seal nature of circumcision and infant baptism. I will not seek to refute the covenant of grace idea because it is not inherently connected to the defense of infant baptism even though it is used as a logical starting point by Paedobaptists (infant baptizers). There are, in fact, many who hold to covenant theology while rejecting infant baptism.⁷

But in regard to the second line of reasoning, we have already seen its weaknesses in the previous section. There we learned that

circumcision is never regarded as the "seal" of the covenant in the OT or in the NT (despite some interpretations of Rom 4:11). Likewise, baptism in the NT is never called a seal of the New Covenant. Thus, if circumcision is not the *seal* of the covenant in the OT, there is no reason to commend infant baptism as *sealing* anything in the NT. Since this is the primary argument used to support infant baptism, we can see that it has no biblical basis.

Other critiques of the Reformed teaching on infant baptism can be included in the form of questions: 1) Why baptize all babies when only males were circumcised in the OT? 2) How can circumcision and baptism convey the blessings of the covenant (which is a function of the "seal") when faith has always and ever been the only way to Christ? 3) Why require infant baptism (circumcision was required for *all* male Jews) if it does not actually convey salvation or confirm one's standing in salvation? 4) Why argue that infant baptism does not guarantee that infants will eventually believe but still require baptism as necessary for their confirmation in the covenant family? 5) Why argue that infant baptism is necessary when people can be saved without it?

Part 2: Believer's Baptism

Perhaps the best way to refute the teaching of infant baptism is to investigate the NT teaching about believer's baptism. This discussion will move us into Part 2 of this article in which we begin with a very significant question: "How do you know that someone is a believer in Jesus?" The Bible is actually quite consistent in its answer to this question: he or she has been baptized.

Note, however, that I am not saying the Bible teaches baptismal regeneration. The Bible never states that the *means* by which someone becomes a believer is baptism. Quite the contrary. The Bible clearly states that the means by which someone becomes a believer is *faith* (Rom 3:28; 4:5; Gal 2:16; Eph 2:8–9). But the Bible affirms that baptism is the public testimony, the external demonstration, of the inner reality of faith. This is why the first believers at Pentecost were baptized (Acts 2:41). The same thing is true for the Samaritans (Acts 8:12), the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:38), Saul (Acts 9:18), Cornelius (Acts 10:48), the Philippian jailer and his family (Acts 16:33), and many others. In all of

these cases people were baptized *after* they believed in order to publicly proclaim their faith. We should also notice that this external act of faith was so important that every believer in the New Testament was baptized. In fact it is quite evident that there were no un-baptized believers in the entire New Testament except for the thief on the cross. Thus, if someone wanted others to know that he or she was a Christian, baptism was the means.

Baptism was significant to the believers in the NT church. It was so important that we continue the practice today, and we even trumpet it in the Baptist name. The reason we carry on the rite of baptism goes back to the command of our Savior. Jesus expressly demanded that believers be baptized (Matt 28:19). This is why we refer to baptism as an ordinance;⁸ it is a command from Christ for the church. If Christ commanded us to be baptized, we certainly need to be sure that we have an accurate understanding of this rite. In order to help us in our comprehension we will look at the meaning, the subjects, and the mode of baptism.

The Meaning of Baptism. The meaning of baptism carries both historical and theological significance. Historically, baptism provided the individual with the opportunity to identify with a person or movement. If a Gentile desired to join the Jewish religion, he would submit himself to proselyte baptism. Similarly, when John the Baptist called upon people to repent of their sins, they showed their willingness to do so by submitting to baptism (Matt 3:11; Mk 1:5). Thus, in the early church there was a cultural awareness of baptism as the means of identifying with Christianity, and this historical meaning of baptism is retained today. Almost every Christian denomination requires baptism for membership.⁹

But baptism also has a theological meaning, and this prompts the question, "What exactly does baptism symbolize or illustrate?" When someone is baptized, he is providing a picture, a "word in water," of several important theological truths. First, baptism illustrates the believer's union with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection (Rom 6:3-4; Col 2:12). Second, baptism pictures the washing and purification from sin that occurs in regeneration (Titus 3:5; Acts 22:16). Third, baptism symbolizes that believers have passed safely through the waters of judgment by virtue of their union with Christ in his death and resurrection (1 Pet 3:21). Fourth, because of the similar terminology used to describe

water baptism and Spirit baptism (in the former "baptism" is used literally whereas in the latter it is used figuratively), it would appear that water baptism also exemplifies Spirit baptism, which is the placing of the believer into the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:13).

What a cause of great rejoicing! The baptismal service provides a wonderful opportunity for the local church, for it is here that we observe the public proclamation of an individual's faith in Christ. This is the place where one publicly identifies with the local assembly; this is the place where we are reminded of the Christian's union with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection; and here we are reminded that we have been delivered from judgment, have had our sins washed away, and have been placed into the body of Christ.

Baptism possesses significant meaning both historically and theologically, and this meaning suggests two important implications. First, as the outward expression of the inward change wrought by the Holy Spirit, baptism is the first public act of obedience expected of the Christian. It precedes partaking of the Lord's Supper, ministry to fellow Christians in the assembly, witness of the Gospel to lost sinners, and all other acts of obedience. Second, since regeneration is a work accomplished once for all, the baptism which symbolizes it (regeneration) is not to be repeated. Thus, if one has been scripturally baptized following salvation, he or she should not be baptized again.¹⁰

The Subjects of Baptism. The proper subjects of baptism can only be those who have been regenerated by the Holy Spirit. The NT provides clear instruction on this matter. First, the command and example of Christ and the apostles shows that only disciples who have repented and believed can be baptized (Matt 28:19; Acts 2:38, 41; 8:12; 18:8). Thus, baptism always followed upon saving faith. Second, the symbolism of the ordinance requires believers' baptism. Since baptism pictures one's union with Christ in his death, burial and resurrection and since baptism proclaims one's desire to follow Christ, only someone who understands and acknowledges the saving work of Christ as applied to himself can be baptized. An infant is incapable of giving a testimony in water about his or her belief in Christ; yet, this is precisely what one does who submits to water baptism.

The household baptism texts (e.g. Cornelius [Acts 10:2, 48], Philippian jailor [Acts 16:29–34], Stephanas [1 Cor 1:16]) are used by some to contradict the teaching of believers' baptism. Yet, none of these texts makes reference to children. Also, each instance speaks of belief preceding baptism (Acts 11:17; 16:34; 1 Cor 16:15). Therefore, these texts do not support infant baptism at all.

Two inferences flow from the believer's baptism position. These include the following: 1) since only believers who have been regenerated can be baptized, baptism itself is not the means of regeneration; and 2) the church should expect credible evidence of regeneration prior to baptism (this is especially significant for children who have grown up in the church).

The Mode of Baptism. Does "baptize" mean sprinkle, pour, or immerse? There is actually little question regarding the mode of baptism in the New Testament. The very meaning of the word *baptizō* in Greek means "to plunge, dip, immerse" something in liquid.¹¹ The NT examples of baptizing indicate that immersion was the mode practiced by John the Baptist, Christ and his disciples, and the early church. In Mark 1:5 John baptized people "in the river Jordan" (not near or by). Jesus "came up out of the water" (Mk 1:10) after he was baptized. John required a "plentiful" amount of water for baptizing (Jn 3:23). When Philip evangelized the Ethiopian eunuch, they stopped near the road to baptize the eunuch when "they came to some water" (Acts 8:36); there would have been no need to stop at a water source if only sprinkling were required (undoubtedly the eunuch had drinking water with him). After stopping, Philip and the eunuch "went down into the water" and they "came up out of the water" after the baptism (Acts 8:38–39).

Not only do the meaning of the Greek word and the NT examples point to immersion as the proper mode of baptism, but the symbolism behind baptism also demands immersion. Romans 6:3–4a states: "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death." How can burial with Christ and rising with Christ be pictured by sprinkling or pouring? They cannot. The union of the believer with Christ is symbolized in water baptism, and only immersion aptly demonstrates this spiritual truth.

What if someone were baptized by sprinkling or pouring after being converted? Does it really matter what the mode was if belief preceded the baptism? While we can rightly say that this is an example of a *believer* receiving pouring or sprinkling, we cannot agree that this was a scriptural *baptism* since immersion did not take place. Part of our problem in this whole discussion about mode is the translation of *baptizō*. Beginning with the early English translations, translators opted to transliterate this Greek term (e.g. "baptize") rather than giving it the proper English equivalent (e.g. "immerse"). For this reason confusion about the mode of baptism continues to the present day. The mode does matter: sprinkling is not immersing or plunging; nor is pouring. This is why any mode other than immersing cannot be considered to be scriptural baptism.

Finally, I would make an observation and an appeal. Since baptism follows faith and is not the means of faith, it is, therefore, not necessary for salvation. The thief on the cross and many great Christians (e.g. Jonathan Edwards and John Calvin) who were sprinkled as infants will be in heaven. Yet this should not keep us from seeking to be obedient to the Bible's demands concerning believer's baptism. My appeal is directed to my fellow brothers and sisters in Christ who have not yet submitted to baptism. Why wait? If you are truly a Christian, you will want to proclaim this truth to everyone. In fact, if you will not be obedient to the clear teaching of the Bible, how will any of us know that you are a Christian? I trust that all un-baptized believers who attend a Gospel-preaching church will joyfully follow in the steps of our Savior and be baptized just as he commanded.

(Endnotes)

¹¹Baptists are ideological descendants of a diverse group of Christians who stood up against the prevailing Reformed doctrine of the State Church. Leonard Verduin in his book entitled, *The Reformers and Their Stepchildren* (Eerdmans, 1964) refers to all of these "non-Reformed evangelicals" as the "Stepchildren of the Reformation." Other authors have labeled this group the "Radical Reformation." By whatever name, these Christians rejected the notion of the State Church that the Reformers so adamantly supported. Today, these "stepchildren" are represented in such denominations as the Baptists, Evangelical Free Church, Evangelical Covenant Church, Assemblies of God, Church of

God, Brethren churches, Christian Missionary and Alliance, Bible churches, and other denominational groups.

²It is important to realize that the Eastern Orthodox Church affirms the same basic theology as the Roman Catholic Church in regard to the sacramental nature of infant baptism, the Lord's Supper, and the other sacraments. We typically hear little of the Orthodox Church because the Reformers sparred almost exclusively with the Roman Church. Hence, most of our concentration in regard to the issue of baptism relates to the Roman Church, but the Orthodox Church deserves the same scrutiny on this point.

³To some degree this same sacramental perspective is found in Lutheran and Anglican teaching on infant baptism as well. But our concern is not with these blatantly incorrect views of the conferring of grace through baptism. Our attention will be directed more toward those Protestant churches where infant baptism is still practiced apart from this strong sacramental emphasis. In particular we are speaking of Presbyterian and Reformed churches in America today.

⁴One of the clearest books supporting infant baptism and affirming most if not all of these propositions is by Pierre Marcel, *The Biblical Doctrine of Infant Baptism*, trans. Philip Edgcumbe Hughes (London: James Clarke & Co. Ltd., 1953).

There are two sources where the reader can find ample citation of the supporters of infant baptism through the centuries following the Reformation. 1) Paul K. Jewett, *Infant Baptism and the Covenant of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978). 2) Daniel C. Lane, "Was Circumcision the 'Seal' of the Abrahamic Covenant?" An unpublished paper presented in 2 parts at the National ETS Conference (Nov 17, 2004 in San Antonio, TX and November 17, 2005 in Valley Forge, PA). Lane's paper is so well done that I hope he tries to publish it formally. Both of these sources are seeking to support believer's baptism by showing the unbiblical nature of infant baptism.

⁵Lane, "Was Circumcision the 'Seal'?", Part 1," 7.

⁶This argument is key for Reformed teachers, and all who support infant baptism affirm it wholeheartedly. The following quotes from Lane, 10, provide evidence of this thinking: Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 638, states, "It will be observed that all these statements [about the

"sealing" nature of baptism] are based on the commandment of God to circumcise the children of the covenant, for in the last analysis that commandment is the ground of infant baptism." Calvin, *Institutes* 4.16.9, "Yet, if it enters anyone's mind to jest at infant baptism. . . he is mocking the command of circumcision given by the Lord." Marcel, 90, "The efficacy of the sacraments of the Old Testament is identical with that of the sacraments of the New, because equally they are signs, seals, and confirmations of the good will of God for the salvation of men." Marcel, 198, "The covenant, together with its promises, constitutes the legal and objective basis of infant baptism. Infant baptism is the sign, seal and pledge of all that these promises imply."

⁷Jewett, 233-43, in a chapter entitled, "Covenant Theology Implies Believer's Baptism," argues that covenantalists who hold to infant baptism are being inconsistent.

⁸A. H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Judson Press, 1907), 930 defines "ordinance" as an "outward rite which Christ appointed to be administered in his church as a visible sign of the saving truth of the gospel." Christ established two ordinances: baptism and the Lord's Supper. Baptism is the initiatory rite of the church and the Lord's Supper is the continuing rite.

⁹This is true of paedobaptists and immersionists. There are some evangelical denominations who do allow non-baptized believers to become members, e.g. Evangelical Free Church. While the practice of accepting non-baptized believers into church membership was seldom practiced even 100 years ago, recent trends demonstrate that this is occurring more frequently in Western evangelical churches.

¹⁰Of course, the debated term here is "scripturally." Some Baptists (e.g. Landmark Baptists) define scriptural baptism as that which is administered by someone in the line of John the Baptist. Other strains of Baptists define scriptural baptism as that conducted by a NT Baptist church which would exclude baptism received in a Free church or an Assemblies of God church or other non-Baptist church. I do not have the space to address these aberrant ideas, but I would point the reader to the sections above (regarding the subjects and mode of baptism) for an answer: baptism is for believers only and by immersion. If these two

elements are true of one's baptism, then a "scriptural" baptism has taken place.

¹Every Greek lexicon provides this meaning regardless the denominational persuasion of the authors. It is notable that the Greek Orthodox Church continues today to baptize infants by immersion. They know what the Greek word means!

THE CHRISTIAN'S GREAT SALVATION (I PETER 1:13-25)¹

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Peter is not Paul. The statement is obvious, of course, but worth noting nonetheless. Paul is a rabbi, schooled at the feet of Gamaliel; Peter is a fisherman. Paul is a strategist; Peter is impulsive. Paul's Greek is flowing and lyrical; Peter's is direct and occasionally difficult. We might be tempted to expect, then, that the two biblical writers would be very different in the way they frame their inspired messages. As we know, Paul likes to lay a philosophical, theoretical, doctrinal foundation in his epistles, on which he then carefully builds the practical application. The most well-known example of this method is the book of Ephesians, which precedes three chapters of application (chapters 4-6) with three chapters of soteriology and ecclesiology (chapters 1-3). Surely Peter the fisherman wouldn't begin with philosophy; surely he would be more direct and "practical."

But contrary to our expectations,³ Peter structures his letter just as Paul does. He begins with a doctrinal section that amounts to a hymn of praise to the greatness of our salvation. Only after he has made his doctrinal case does he turn to application.⁴

He will spend the remainder, and indeed the greatest part, of his epistle making characteristically direct application of his doctrinal basis. He will demonstrate the need for the believer's submission in all three of life's divinely ordained institutions: the state (2:13-20), the home (3:1-12), and the church (4:7-5:11). Along the way he will state and then twice reprise the dominant theme of suffering (2:11-12; 2:21-25; 3:13-4:6), thereby making his major teaching that submission must continue in the face of great opposition.

How is the believer to accomplish such a thing? How is he to subordinate his mind, will, and emotions in every area of his earthly