

**“The Recipients of Baptism”
(WCF 28.4)**

WCF 28.4 Not only those that do actually profess faith in the obedience unto Christ, but also the infants of one, or both, believing parents, are to be baptized.

IV. Who should receive baptism?

A. Those who make a credible profession of faith in Jesus Christ.

1. They must profess the true faith.
 - a. “Baptism is not to be administered to any that are out of the visible Church, and so strangers from the covenant of promise, till they profess their faith in Christ, and obedience to him.” (LC, 166).
 - (i) “And He said to them, ‘Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned’” (Mark 16:15-16).
 - (ii) “As they went along the road they came to some water; and the eunuch said, ‘Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?’ And Philip said, ‘If you believe with all your heart, you may.’ And he answered and said, ‘I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.’ And he ordered the chariot to stop; and they both went down into the water, Philip as well as the eunuch, and he baptized him” (Acts 8:36-38).
 - b. To profess faith in Christ, they must understand the fundamentals of the faith, and believe them to be true.
 - (i) The nature of God.
 - (ii) The person and work of Christ.
 - (iii) Their own condition apart from Christ.
 - (iv) Their need of faith and repentance.
2. To be a credible (believable) profession, they must also live a life that is consistent with their profession.
 - a. “No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God. By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor the one who does not love his brother” (1 John 3:9-10).
 - b. They must practice what is good.

B. The children of those making such profession should also be baptized.

1. Why did the Westminster Assembly believe the children of believing parents should be baptized?
 - a. Did they believe baptism would save the child? No. Baptism points to the reality, but is not the reality, as we’ve seen (27.1; 28.1).
 - b. Did they believe the child was already saved? No. They will go on to say that baptism is effectual only in God’s time and to God’s elect (28.6).

- c. Did they presume the child was regenerate? That is, not knowing whether he was or not, because of the character of the covenant, did they assume the child was regenerate until proven otherwise and on that basis baptize them? No. They did not believe that the new birth was necessary for a child to be admitted to baptism, but only that the child have one or more believing parents.
 - d. Why did they baptize children? Because they believed that the children of believing parents are included in God's covenantal dealing with His people.
 - (i) They didn't believe they were necessarily partakers of the real spiritual blessings of the covenant, or that they necessarily would be, but that they were included in the visible representation of that covenant society on earth – the visible church – and therefore were the heirs of the promises.
 - (ii) God is their God, and they are His people, in the same sense that He was the God of His Old Covenant people.
 - (a) All Israel was in covenant with God; but not all Israel was saved (Rom. 9:6-8).
 - (b) Westminster believed that God had the same relationship with the children of New Covenant believers, as He had with the children of those who were believers throughout each preceding epoch of church history.
2. Prior to the New Covenant, throughout the history of God's redemption, whenever God entered into a relationship with man, He dealt with his whole family, and not just the man as an individual.
- a. When He entered into covenant with Adam and Eve, He also did so with their children:
 - (i) Both Cain and Abel sacrificed to the Lord (Gen. 4:3-4); when Cain murdered his brother, he was excommunicated (v. 14).
 - (ii) God also had dealings with Seth (v. 25), and with his son, down many generations.
 - b. Noah was the only righteous man of his day. Yet when God entered into covenant with Noah, He also did with his whole household.
 - (i) "These are *the records of* the generations of Noah. Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his time; Noah walked with God" (Gen. 6:9).
 - (ii) "But I will establish My covenant with you; and you shall enter the ark – you and your sons and your wife, and your sons' wives with you" (Gen. 6:18).
 - (iii) "Then the LORD said to Noah, 'Enter the ark, you and all your household, for you *alone* I have seen *to be* righteous before Me in this time'" (Gen. 7:1).
 - c. We call this principle *covenant solidarity*:
 - (i) God views the family as one with the man, or as one unit, though it is still true that each will be judged as individuals.

- (ii) A household is the most basic of societal units. When God brings the head of the household in, He necessarily brings in the whole household, since he can't really deal with the head without also dealing with its members.
 - (iii) When He blesses the head of the household, the whole household is blessed, or when He curses, they are all cursed to some degree.
 - (iv) Hodge writes, "In constituting human nature and ordaining the propagation of infant children from parents, God has in all respects made the standing of the child while an infant to depend upon that of the parent. The sin of the parent carries away the infant from God; so the faith of the parent brings the infant near to God."
- d. This is why when He entered into covenant with Abraham, He entered that covenant with Abraham's seed or offspring as well.
- (i) God made His covenant with Abraham, but it also included his seed:
 - (ii) "Now the LORD said to Abram, 'Go forth from your country, and from your relatives and from your father's house, to the land which I will show you; and I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great; and so you shall be a blessing; and I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed'" (Gen. 12:1-3).
 - (iii) "By Myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this thing and have not withheld your son, your only son, indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies. In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice" (Gen. 22: 16-18).
- e. Because children are included, when God gave the sign of the covenant, He applied it not just to Abraham the believer, but to all the male children of his household.
- (i) "I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you. I will give to you and to your descendants after you, the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.' God said further to Abraham, 'Now as for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: every male among you shall be circumcised'" (Gen. 17:7-10).
 - (ii) This appears to be the first time the covenant relationship from the parents to the children is said to extend forever. This is important to consider in what follows.

- f. The Old Testament is full of examples of the Lord's dealings with the offspring of His people and His blessing them on account of their parents.
- (i) "Who is the man who fears the LORD? He will instruct him in the way he should choose. His soul will abide in prosperity, and his descendants will inherit the land" (Ps. 25:12-13).
 - (ii) "I have been young and now I am old, yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken or his descendants begging bread. All day long he is gracious and lends, and his descendants are a blessing" (Ps. 37:25-26).
 - (iii) "I say, 'O my God, do not take me away in the midst of my days, Your years are throughout all generations. Of old You founded the earth, and the heavens are the work of Your hands. Even they will perish, but You endure; and all of them will wear out like a garment; like clothing You will change them and they will be changed. But You are the same, and Your years will not come to an end. The children of Your servants will continue, and their descendants will be established before You'" (Ps. 102:24-28).
 - (iv) "Praise the LORD! How blessed is the man who fears the LORD, who greatly delights in His commandments. His descendants will be mighty on earth; the generation of the upright will be blessed" (Psalm 112:1-2).
 - (v) "You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments" (Ex. 20:5-6).
 - (vi) Paul's comments about unbelieving Israel in Romans indicates that this relationship still holds: "From the standpoint of the gospel they are enemies for your sake, but from the standpoint of *God's* choice they are beloved for the sake of the fathers; for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable" (Rom. 11:28-29).
- g. We also have examples in Scripture of how this relationship which brings blessing to the children of the covenant can also bring curse, showing covenant solidarity.
- (i) When Achan sinned, his house was judged.
 - (a) "Then Joshua and all Israel with him, took Achan the son of Zerah, the silver, the mantle, the bar of gold, his sons, his daughters, his oxen, his donkeys, his sheep, his tent and all that belonged to him; and they brought them up to the valley of Achor. Joshua said, 'Why have you troubled us? The LORD will trouble you this day.' And all Israel stoned them with stones; and they burned them with fire after they had stoned them with stones. They raised over him a great heap of stones that stands to this day, and the LORD turned from the fierceness of His anger. Therefore the name of that place has been called the valley of Achor to this day" (Joshua 7:24-26).

- (b) Was Achan's family judged for Achan's sin? Yes and no. They were judged for their own sins (Deu. 24:16), but it was Achan's sin that caused the judgment to fall at that time on each of them.
- (ii) This relationship of covenant solidarity also held true for the nations surrounding Israel.
- (a) When Darius' officials deceived him into passing an irrevocable law that would eventually force him to throw Daniel into the lion's den, after Daniel's miraculous delivery, the king punished the officials by throwing them and their households into the den where they were immediately destroyed (Dan. 6).
- (b) God not only destroys His enemies in judgment, but also their offspring:
- (1) "Your hand will find out all your enemies; Your right hand will find out those who hate you. You will make them as a fiery oven in the time of your anger; the LORD will swallow them up in His wrath, and fire will devour them. Their offspring You will destroy from the earth, and their descendants from among the sons of men" (Ps. 21:8-10).
- (2) "For the LORD loves justice and does not forsake His godly ones; they are preserved forever, but the descendants of the wicked will be cut off" (Ps. 37:28).
- h. When God called the Gentiles into His church in the Old Covenant and they were circumcised, they became just as much children of Abraham as the Jews. The promises then pertained to them and to their children.
3. God's way of dealing with families before the New Covenant is the way He continues to deal with families in the present epoch of redemptive history.
- a. The Lord said He would continue to include the children of His people in the New Covenant.
- (i) "Moreover the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, so that you may live" (Deu. 30:6).
- (ii) "Just as a father has compassion on *his* children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear Him. For He Himself knows our frame; He is mindful that we are *but* dust. As for man, his days are like grass; as a flower of the field, so he flourishes. When the wind has passed over it, it is no more, and its place acknowledges it no longer. But the lovingkindness of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear Him, and His righteousness to children's children, to those who keep His covenant and remember His precepts to do them" (Ps. 103:13-18).
- (iii) "For I will pour out water on the thirsty *land* and streams on the dry ground; I will pour out My Spirit on your offspring and My blessing on your descendants" (Isa. 44: 3).

- (iv) “A Redeemer will come to Zion, and to those who turn from transgression in Jacob,’ declares the LORD. ‘As for Me, this is My covenant with them,’ says the LORD: “My Spirit which is upon you, and My words which I have put in your mouth shall not depart from your mouth, nor from the mouth of your offspring, nor from the mouth of your offspring’s offspring,” says the LORD, “from now and forever”” (Isa. 59:20-21).
 - (v) “They will not labor in vain, or bear *children* for calamity; for they are the offspring of those blessed by the LORD, and their descendants with them” (Isa. 65:23). This is during the millennium, but it’s still part of the New Covenant.
- b. One example of God’s fulfilling His promises made to the children in the context of the New Covenant is found in the prophecy of Joel.
- (i) The Lord made a promise to His people through the prophet Joel that included a blessing on their children: “It will come about after this that I will pour out My Spirit on all mankind; and your sons and daughters will prophesy, Your old men will dream dreams, Your young men will see visions. Even on the male and female servants I will pour out My Spirit in those days” (Joel 2:28-29).
 - (ii) This promise was fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost.
 - (a) Peter tells us this prophecy was fulfilled in the outpouring of the Spirit on that day, “For these men are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is *only* the third hour of the day; but this is what was spoken of through the prophet Joel” (Acts 2:15-16).
 - (b) He tells us this promise of the Spirit was not only for them, but for their children, “Peter *said* to them, ‘Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself” (vv. 38-39).
 - (c) The promise of Joel had to do with the children of Israel because of their covenant relationship. When He would call those far off – the Gentiles – the promise would pertain to them as well, and to their children, since they would then also be the children of Abraham (see below).
- c. The children of believers are called holy, which indicates that they are set apart in some sense to Him.
- (i) “For the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her believing husband; for otherwise your children are unclean, but now they are holy” (1 Cor. 7:14).
 - (ii) Here, Paul appears to be answering a question regarding the status of children in the New Covenant if there is only one believing parent. His answer is that it only takes one for the child to be included.

- (iii) The fact that one or the other parent is an unbeliever does not make the child unclean or an outcast from the church; he is holy or included with God's covenant people.
 - (iv) Whatever unholy or unsanctifying influences an unbeliever may have are cancelled out by the believer's relationship with God – they are sanctified for the sake of the child.
 - (v) This doesn't mean the child is saved or necessarily will be saved, but it does mean that he is set apart from the world to God.
 - (vi) Notice this holds true whether one or both parents are believers.
- d. Jesus refers to the children of His people as being the heirs of the kingdom of heaven.
- (i) "And they were bringing children to Him so that He might touch them; but the disciples rebuked them. But when Jesus saw this, He was indignant and said to them, 'Permit the children to come to Me; do not hinder them; for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it *at all*.' And He took them in His arms and *began* blessing them, laying His hands on them" (Mark 10:13-16).
 - (a) Jesus didn't say these children were saved, but that the kingdom of heaven belonged to them.
 - (b) These children were a part of God's covenant, and therefore the promises and blessings of God's kingdom belonged to them by right.
 - (c) This is also why He took them in His arms and was blessing them, laying His hands on them.
 - (ii) And as to the fact that these children were not old enough to exercise faith, Luke tells us He did this to their infants as well: "And they were bringing even their babies to Him so that He would touch them, but when the disciples saw it, they *began* rebuking them. But Jesus called for them, saying, 'Permit the children to come to Me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. 'Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it *at all*'" (Luke 18:15-17).
- e. Children are addressed in the New Covenant as being under the obligations of the covenant.
- (i) "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right" (Eph. 6:1).
 - (ii) The reason Paul gives is this is what the Law requires: "Honor your father and mother" (v. 2).
 - (iii) The promise connected with that command is also still intact and in force: "(Which is the first commandments with a promise), so that it may be well with you, and that you may live long on the earth" (vv. 2-3).
 - (iv) Paul could have addressed the parents alone regarding their obligation to raise the children in the ways of the Lord, but he addressed the children directly since they were under obligation.

- f. This relationship the Lord has with the children of believers appears to continue in some sense even if some of the generations of parents are unfaithful and if the children themselves are unfaithful.
- (i) There appears to be a priority to the natural branches of the covenant tree: “Behold then the kindness and severity of God; to those who fell, severity, but to you, God's kindness, if you continue in His kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off. And they also, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. For if you were cut off from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and were grafted contrary to nature into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these who are the natural *branches* be grafted into their own olive tree?” (Rom. 11:22-24).
 - (ii) God’s affection for them still remains from His relationship with their fathers: “From the standpoint of the gospel they are enemies for your sake, but from the standpoint of *God’s* choice they are beloved for the sake of the fathers; for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable” (vv. 28-29).
 - (iii) Even though the Jews didn’t believe, they were still beloved for the sake of the fathers. In other words, God’s promise was true even though they weren’t.
- g. These things shouldn’t surprise us since both the Old and New Covenants are built on the promises made to Abraham, which included the children, as we’ve already seen.
- (i) The Old Covenant was a legal and typological covenant built on the Abrahamic Covenant: “What I am saying is this: the Law, which came four hundred and thirty years later, does not invalidate a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to nullify the promise. For if the inheritance is based on law, it is no longer based on a promise; but God has granted it to Abraham by means of a promise. Why the Law then? It was added because of transgressions, having been ordained through angels by the agency of a mediator, until the seed would come to whom the promise had been made” (Gal. 3:17-19).
 - (ii) The New Covenant is what the Old Covenant pointed to and the fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant.
 - (iii) The New Covenant is not essentially a different covenant from the Abrahamic: “So then those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer. . . . Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us – for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree’ – in order that in Christ Jesus *the blessing of Abraham* might come to the Gentiles, so that we would receive the promise of the Spirit through faith” (Galatians 3:9, 13-14; emphasis added).
- h. In the New Covenant, those who believe become the children of Abraham, as those who proselytized to the Old Covenant.

- (i) “And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised, so that he might be the father of all who believe without being circumcised, that righteousness might be credited to them, and the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also follow in the steps of the faith of our father Abraham which he had while uncircumcised” (Rom. 4:11-12).
- (ii) “But *it is* not as though the word of God has failed. For they are not all Israel who are *descended* from Israel; nor are they all children because they are Abraham’s descendants, but: ‘Through Isaac your descendants will be named.’ That is, it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants” (Rom. 9:6-8). This was true of Old Covenant believers, as well as New.
- (iii) “And you brethren, like Isaac, are children of promise” (Gal. 4:28).
- (iv) When Gentiles believe, they become children of Abraham – his real spiritual children – and just as God was a God to Abraham and his seed, so He is a God to the Gentiles and to their seed.
- (v) The Lord brings the children into the covenant community.
 - (a) This means that the promises of the covenant and the outward blessings become theirs.
 - (b) What promises and blessings?
 - (1) The same promises and blessings the members of the Old Covenant possessed.
 - (2) “For I could wish that I myself were accursed, *separated* from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh, who are Israelites, to whom belongs the adoption as sons, and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the *temple* service and the promises, whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen” (Rom. 9:3-5).
 - (3) The promises pertain to the blessings of the Gospel; the blessings have to do with the means by which one is lead to those promises (the means of grace).
 - (4) They are a tremendous privilege to have: many have lived and perished without them.
 - (5) They are a tremendous responsibility to possess: those who have them and reject them are more severely judged as seen in God’s judgment on Israel (Matt. 23).
- i. Though the New Covenant is more spiritual and less physical in nature than the Old Covenant and the types and shadows have been fulfilled and have passed away, the inclusion of children remains, showing that it was not a type and shadow of spiritual things, but God’s typical way of dealing with His people as a family unit.
- j. “This Church [Old Covenant] is identically the same with the New Testament Church. It has the same foundation; the same condition of membership, faith and obedience; sacraments of the same spiritual significance and binding

force. The ancient prophecies declare that the same old Church is to be enlarged, not changed. (Isa. 49:13–23; 60:1–14.) The ancient covenant, which was the fundamental charter of the Church, included “many nations” (Gen. 17:4; Rom. 4:17, 18; Gal. 3:8), which was never fulfilled until after the expansion of the Church in the New Testament dispensation. And Paul says that the Jewish Church, instead of being abrogated, remains the same through all change—the Jewish branches being cut off, the Gentile branches being grafted in; and that hereafter the Jews are to be restored, not to a new Church, but “*into their own olive tree.*” (Rom. 11:18–24. See also Eph. 2:11–22.)” (Hodge).

4. Since children are included in the visible expression of God’s covenant – the church – they are to receive the sign of that inclusion.
 - a. Circumcision was given to the male children of the Old Covenant because they were included – the promise was to Abraham and his seed.
 - b. Baptism is to be given to the children of the New Covenant because their standing is the same and because baptism and circumcision represent the same thing and are signs of their respective covenants.
 - c. “And in Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ; having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead” (Col. 2:11-12).