

God of Promise

The Beauty of Covenant Theology

The Covenant Signs (2)

Baptism as sign of judgment

Returning to the prior assertion that circumcision signified the curses of the covenant, we can see the same is true of baptism. While baptism does signify washing in some New Testament contexts (e.g. **Acts 22:16**), it is also a sign with multiple meanings some of which signify a judgment ordeal in certain contexts. In drawing the parallel between Noah's flood, through which Noah's family "were brought safely through water," (**1 Peter 3:20**) Peter wrote "Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ..." (v 21). Peter's point is clear. Baptism is to be understood, in part, as a deliverance through judgment based on our being united with Christ in his resurrection.

Similarly, the Red Sea through which Israel passed (but not in which they were immersed) is represented in "baptism" (**1 Cor 10:2**):

[1] For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, [2] and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea...

Even more explicit is **Romans 6:3-5**:

[3] Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? [4] We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. [5] For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.

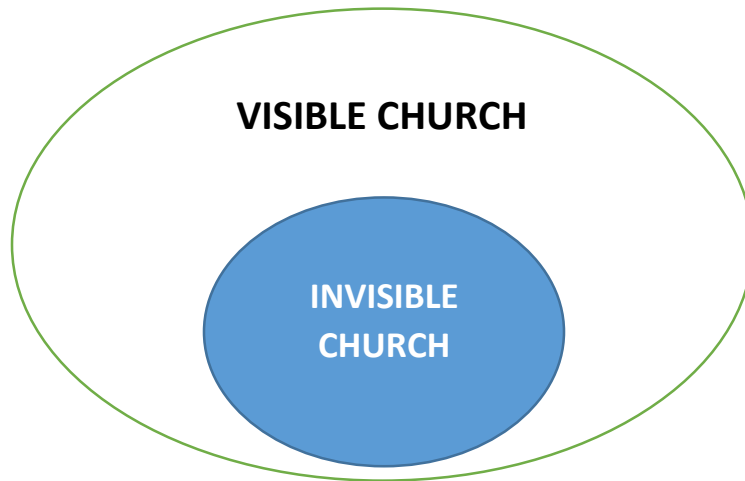


Baptism signifies the curse of death; joining Christ in burial. Reformed Baptist and Presbyterians agree that baptism is not a guarantee of deliverance from sin and death. The sign must be joined with saving faith. Even the person baptized as a believer must be justified by faith in order to rise with Christ through those waters of baptism signifying the judgment of death. The unbelieving baptized person is no less lost than the unbaptized unbeliever. The baptized unbeliever is, however, more accountable for having professed belief.

So, New Testament baptism functions the same way as circumcision in the Old Testament. It signified the potential of either curse or blessing contingent upon whether it is joined with faith. When it is joined with faith, the person is united to Christ both in death and resurrection. When it

is not, baptism signifies the tragic destiny of the unbeliever. The reason this is significant to our discussion of the validity of placing the sign on infants is that baptism was never intended to be only a sign of the washing of regeneration. Like circumcision, baptism points to the possibility of judgment as well. This dual meaning makes sense only if the sign is applied to those who have not yet professed faith (the children of believers). The sign, therefore, declares the recipient's responsibility to God and the covenant community to believe all that the sign signifies.

Baptism and the Church



One's view of baptism is closely linked to one's understanding of the church. The paedobaptist sees the New Testament church as the natural and inevitable development of redemptive history, the fruition and fulfillment of the progress of redemption, in light of the coming of Jesus Christ. Natural (Jew) as well as grafted in branches (Gentile) may still be cut off (**Rom 11:20-21**). The New Testament acknowledges the presence of tares among the wheat, a reality which Baptists and Presbyterians acknowledge. Thus, both credo and paedobaptists call for repentance and faith even among those who have been baptized.

From *the Westminster Confession of Faith* Chapter 25:1-2:

- **Invisible Church** – "The catholic or universal church, which is invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the Head thereof; and is the spouse, the body, the fullness of him that filleth all in all."
- **Visible Church** – "The visible church, which is also catholic or universal under the gospel (not confined to one nation, as before under the law), consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; and of their children: and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation"

The Church invisible is made up of true believers, and of none else; whereas the Church visible is composed of those who outwardly profess their faith in Christ, and may include not only true believers, but also hypocrites.¹ – James Bannerman

¹ James Bannerman, [The Church of Christ](#)

Reformed theologians emphasize that this distinction does not mean that God has two separate churches. Indeed, they assert that Jehovah has founded one church, that Jesus has only one bride, people, church, or body. Our Lord does not have two churches but only one. The terms "invisible" and "visible" are used to describe two distinct aspects of the one church; or, to put it another way, the church is considered from two different perspectives. It is not that there are two separate air tight categories with one group on heaven and another on earth. On the contrary, there is a great overlap between both categories. All genuine believers are members of the invisible church whether they are living in heaven or on earth, whether they are alive or dead (i.e., have died physically). Not all professing Christians, however, who are members of the visible church, are members of the invisible church. Some people who make a profession of faith and are baptized are hypocrites. Such people do not truly believe in Christ (thus are never truly united to Him by faith) and are not part of the invisible church...

The term invisible as defined by the Reformed symbols and theologians does not mean that some Christians are invisible like ghosts floating around in the spirit realm. It refers to the fact that the invisible church cannot be fully discovered, distinguished or discerned by the eyes of men, by empirical means. There are a number of reasons why this statement cannot be denied. (a) No one has the ability to look into the human heart and see if a person is truly united to Christ and regenerated by the Holy Spirit. That reality is the reason that, historically, Presbyterian churches have admitted members upon a credible profession of faith. (b) The inward, effectual calling of the Spirit and the application of redemption to the human soul are all spiritual, unseen events. Further, the Holy Spirit gives genuine saving faith only to the elect. The counterfeit faith of unregenerate professors of religion often is indiscernible to mere mortals. We can only perceive outward signs, statements and actions. No person has the ability to determine or observe the whole body of God's elect irrespective of time (i.e., throughout human history prior to the last judgment) or place (i.e., there are many real believers in the world of which we are not aware). Williamson writes: "It is invisible to us because it has extension in both time and space. It reaches from one end of the earth to the other, and from the beginning to the end of the age. But it is invisible only to us. It is not invisible to God. He who infallibly discerns the hearts of men, knows them that are his. 'The foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal: 'the Lord knoweth them that are his' (**II Tim. 2:19**)." Jesus prayed for the invisible church—the elect present and not yet born in **John 17**. Christ is speaking of a special company which had been given to Him. The reference, then, is to the sovereign election of God, whereby He chose a definite number to be His 'peculiar people'—His in a peculiar or special way. These are eternally His: 'chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world' (**Eph. 1:4**); and by the immutability of His purpose of grace (**Rom. 11:29**), they are always His.

The visible church is designated "visible" because it is discernable by the senses, by empirical means. It consists of everyone who professes the true religion along with their children. Because men do not have the ability to see into the minds of men and read the human heart, anyone who professes Jesus Christ in credible manner (i.e., he has a knowledge of the gospel, he is orthodox in doctrine, he professes faith in Christ and repentance toward God, he is not as far as anyone is aware committing habitual or scandalous sins) is allowed to join the church along with his children. In the visible church there are genuine believers who are truly united to Christ and false professors or hypocrites who only taste of heavenly gifts but do not really partake of the Savior. Their relationship to Him is only outward. "On this account the church is compared to a floor, in which there is not only wheat but also chaff (**Matt. 3:12**); to a field, where tares as well as good seed are sown (**Matt. 13:24, 25**); to a net, which gathers bad fish together with the good (ver. 47); to a great house, in which are vessels of every kind some to honour and some to dishonor, (**2 Tim. 2:20**). People who are members of the visible church yet who never truly believe in Christ receive the outward privileges of membership (fellowship, the word, the sacraments and the guidance of church government), but are never regenerated, saved, forgiven, united to Christ and spiritually sanctified. The blood of Jesus never washes away their sins.²

² <https://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/articles/onsite/visible.html>

When the credo-baptist insists that the church – or visible community of God’s people – be made up only of those who possess saving faith, he is saying that the two circles above must be identical—that there is no Visible / Invisible Church distinction. But this was not the case when the covenant of grace was solemnized and given its first sign. It was acknowledged that there would be those in Israel who bore the sign of the covenant of grace who nevertheless were not true sons of Abraham. This was understood from the very beginning because the practice of giving the sign to infants did not guarantee that the recipient would later join saving faith to that sign. The question therefore, is where does the New Testament offer any substantial change to that reality? Where in the New Testament is it stated that among the visible community of God’s people there will only be those who are old enough to profess faith prior to receiving the sign of the covenant?

But there is also a practical matter to consider. Credobaptism in no way prevents unbelievers from receiving the covenant sign of baptism—especially as commonly practiced under revivalistic methods. Our Baptist brothers and sisters must admit that their practice of baptism is based upon a professed decision, not proof of conversion. Certainly the hope is that these decisions are representative of genuine conversions, but this is clearly not always the case. So even our Baptist friends must, at least practically, acknowledge a distinction between a visible and invisible church. They must acknowledge that even within the church there are those who are not yet actually regenerate.

The church is to view itself as the true circumcision. “For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh.” (Phil 3:3) Physical circumcision is set aside as a requirement for believers in the New Testament because the Jewish-Gentile, male-female followers of Christ constitute the consummated people of God (Gal 5:6).

But even as he shows that circumcision has been replaced by baptism as the appropriate sign of the covenant of grace, Paul nevertheless connects it to baptism as the new sign specifically in relation to its signification of potential covenant curse and blessing in what may be called “the true circumcision of Jesus.”³

Circumcision was always intended to be a temporary sign. Jesus fulfilled the sign of circumcision by being our bloody sacrifice on the cross. Therefore, the sign of inclusion into the covenant of grace changed.

In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. (Colossians 2:11-12)

The covenantal sign administered for initiation into the new covenant community is baptism. It is a sign that identifies us with Christ’s death, burial and resurrection. Like circumcision, baptism is a once given sign identifying the one who receives it as a member of God’s covenant people.

The Inclusion of Children

God includes the children of believers in the covenant community (**Genesis 17:9-14**). All male children received circumcision. They were not aware of what was happening. They did not

³ Glodo, <https://journal.rts.edu/article/covenant-sign-seal/>

understand it. Only later would they understand the significance of the sign they had received. It would serve the rest of their lives to remind them of the fact that they belonged to the Lord and were members of his covenant people.

1. The continuity of the covenant of grace

There is one everlasting covenant of grace first announced in **Genesis 3:15** and then solemnized with Abraham (**Genesis 12, 15, 17**). The substance of the covenant has not changed one iota. The covenant with Abraham announced a salvation that comes by grace through faith. The Old Testament saints were saved in the very same way that men and women are saved today. Circumcision points toward the work of Christ that was yet to come. Baptism points to the accomplished work of Christ. The sign of circumcision and the sign of baptism both point to the work of Christ, only from different vantage points. In the former case, it was commanded that the children of believers were to receive the covenant sign. Why, therefore, would those who live in the era of fulfillment no longer give the sign of the same covenant to their children?

2. The lack of a command to do otherwise

There is no command in the Bible for God's people to cease doing what was commanded when the covenant of grace was solemnized with Abraham in terms of including children. We must not minimize the importance of this silence. Those things abrogated in Christ are made clear in the New Testament. They were the various ceremonial regulations attached to the Mosaic administration. Those ceremonies and practices were intended from the beginning to point to the person and work of Christ.

But the covenant sign was part of the Abrahamic administration. And while circumcision has given way to baptism (made clear in the N.T.) there is never a single instruction to begin withholding the



sign of God's covenant of grace from the

3. The expansive nature of the new covenant

Unlike circumcision, baptism is given to both males and females. In the era of the new covenant it makes sense that the sign represents a greater level of inclusion (**Galatians 3:28**). This greater level of inclusion would seem to be contradicted, however, if God's people began withholding it

from their children. Of course, had God intended for his people to no longer include their children in the visible covenant community then there would be good reasons for it. But this begs the question: where in all the Bible does God tell his people to cease the practice of giving their young ones the covenant sign of grace and welcoming them into the visible church?

We conclude that, like circumcision, baptism is for believers and their children. In the new covenant in Christ God still claims for himself a covenant people, not merely adult converts. The pattern of family inclusion under the Abrahamic covenant is never abrogated but continues to this day. That is why at Pentecost Peter preached:

Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself (**Acts 2:38-39**).

4. Expectations of children in Christian homes

In both Old and New Testaments, the children of believers are addressed as members of the covenant community with an expectation that they will obey. In **Ephesians 6:1** Paul commands the children of believers:

If the children of believers are not considered members of the covenant community, bound by the expectations which govern that community, then this command makes no sense for they cannot obey their parents “in the Lord.” Or are children that have not yet “professed faith” or “been saved” not expected to obey their parents? From their earliest years, the children of believers are expected to obey their parents “in the Lord.”

What of corporate worship and prayer? Do Christians not encourage their children to sing the church’s songs of praise even before they have made a public profession of faith? Are they not encouraged to say the words of the Lord’s Prayer along with the rest of the church? If the children of believers are covenant outsiders until such time as they profess faith would this not be inappropriate? Would you encourage a lost friend you bring to church to pray, “Our Father...”? Certainly not for he does not have God as his father yet nor is he part of the “Our.”

Why would both the expectations and blessings for children under the Old Covenant be greater than those under the New Covenant? Why would the blessings of the covenant of grace be less expansive under Christ than they were under Abraham? Why is there no commandment for God’s people to begin withholding the covenant sign from their children? Would not such a significant change require a clear command?

5. The practice of household baptisms

Those who oppose paedobaptism will often support their position by pointing out that all the New Testament examples of those being baptized are adults. How do we respond to this? First, it should not surprise us that the examples of those being baptized in the Apostle’s ministry were overwhelmingly adult converts. At that time, the church consisted primarily of first generation adult converts. The New Testament was written at a time in which the gospel was being proclaimed in various places for the first time.

Secondly, we would answer this objection by pointing to the examples of household baptisms. The fact is, there is only one example of a sole adult being baptized. That was the Ethiopian eunuch who could not have a family. The other examples of baptism in the New Testament are

household baptisms of which there are three examples, two in Acts 16 and one in 1 Corinthians 1. The example from 1 Corinthians provides us with no details. But we do learn from the examples provided by Luke in Acts 16.

When Lydia was converted she and her whole household were baptized (**Acts 16:11-15**). Likewise when the Philippian jailor was converted he and his household were baptized (**Acts 16:25-34**). The concept of household included children and in some cases servants. And the practice of the entire household receiving the sign of the covenant in accordance with the head of the household is exactly what we would expect after reading the Old Testament (**Genesis 17**).

Someone may say, "Wait! The Bible does not provide the ages of the members of the household. How do we know that they weren't all adult converts?" To which we would respond, "We don't need to know because at no time does the Bible ever suggest that God reordered the nature of a household." That there is no claim that all the members of the households were adults who, like Lydia and the Philippian Jailor had professed faith, indicates that we are to take the notion of household in the same sense it had always been taken among God's people.

Just as in the case with the Noahaic and Abrahamic administrations of the covenant, the New Covenant administration confers the covenant blessings upon the household of believers. This very principle is proclaimed by Peter in his Pentecost Sermon. In a way that makes abundantly clear the continuity of the one covenant of grace and its inclusion of the children of believers, Peter preached to the gathered crowd:

And Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself." (Acts 2:38-39)