

For You...
and for Your Children

The Church and Christian Baptism

Jeff Hatton

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The subject of discussion here is akin to an onion. The more one peels away, the more one wonders where the center is. When the center is finally reached, the response is a bewildered head-scratching, "How do I put this all back together?" The subject is the Church and the question belongs to the relative pronoun "Who?" Who makes up the assembly or gathering of people called the Church? Believers only, or Believers and their children?" This question leads to some difficulty because it is only one of many vital issues that wrap themselves around a sometimes hidden, and yet all-encompassing, central core. In other words the center of this onion is hard to get to, which is one of the reasons why this topic is so significant.

What Is At Stake?

What is at stake here is not only one's perception of the nature of the church (which alone is enough to take one's breath away) and thus the many offshoot implications that deal with the church's worship, faithfulness, and life, but also the nature of one's *theological hermeneutic*. In other words a discussion of the nature of the church is not only significant in its own right but also because it points to the center of the onion. It forces one to peel away the layers in order to expose *the central theological grid* by which an individual, church, denomination, or tradition sees through in order to fulfill its chief end - "to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever."¹

Therefore in order to answer the question, *Who makes up the assembly or gathering of people called the church?*, one must face their theological hermeneutic, their irreducible core, the center of the onion. In other words the answer is largely determined by a presuppositional pair of theological glasses that one looks through when they examine the Scriptures and live in God's world around them.

Make no mistake about it, every one of us, believer and unbeliever alike, looks through a biased pre-understood worldview or theological grid. To say otherwise is either *foolish* or arrogant.² You might say that in one sense the most important thing about you is your *theological grid*. For it not only reveals and shapes what you hold to be true concerning what the Scriptures teach and how you live your life before God in His world, but it also reveals and shapes *who you are* - "For as he thinks within himself, so he is" (Prov. 23:7). There are no clean slates waiting to be written upon by the Word of God. No one is in neutral when he/she approaches the Scriptures, we are all in gear. The sooner one realizes this the more integrity he/she will bring to the task of properly understanding and applying the Scripture.

For those who accept the Bible as a sacred text, the church's book, the record of God's unique self-revelation, its interpretation cannot be conducted on the grammaticohistorical level alone. That level is fundamental, but there is a theological level. The books of the Bible do not simply constitute an anthology or a library; they make up a canon - a canon in two stages: the canon of the Hebrew scriptures...and the canon of the Greek New Testament. Thus, in addition to the forms of context of which grammaticohistorical exegesis takes account, the whole canon provides a theological context within which each document may be viewed and its contribution to the record of divine revelation may be assessed. Whereas grammaticohistorical exegesis may bring out the variety of viewpoint and emphasis represented in the Bible, *theological exegesis presupposes that there is an overall unity in the light of which the diversity can be appreciated in its proper perspective.*³

Properly viewed, there is a continual give and take or an interdependent relationship that exists between **analysis** (the grammaticohistorical level) and **synthesis** (the theological level) when it comes to exegesis and its desired goal of accurate interpretation and application of the Scriptures ("a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth" - 2 Tim 2:15). Both analysis and synthesis are needed and it appears that much error within the church has

arisen out of the overdevelopment of the one and/or the underdevelopment of the other. One can just as easily see the tree but miss the forest as possess a wrong map of the forest and be totally lost amidst the trees. Both should work together to shepherd us along the road to Emmaus where “beginning with Moses and with all the prophets,” the Living Word explains “the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures” (Luke 24:27). Therefore the issue in exegesis when dealing with analysis and synthesis is not an “either or” but a “both and”. We come to the text not only to gain understanding but to chip away all our misunderstanding.

My Theological Hermeneutic

I will be approaching the question of “*Who makes up the assembly or gathering of people called the church ... Believers only or Believers and their children?*”, from the vantage point of a Reformed Covenantal Synthesis. Therefore my desire is to present what I believe at this point to be the strongest arguments grammaticohistorically and theologically speaking for the *Covenantal* or *Believers and their children* answer to the question at hand. It is my intent during the course of presenting my argument to dialogue with what I understand at this time to be some of the major grammaticohistorical and theological arguments against a *believers and their children* answer to the question of visible church membership, thus addressing some of the arguments of a *believers only* theological framework.

COMING TO A DEFINITION OF THE TERM “CHURCH”

“We believe in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church - The Nicene Creed.”⁴

The Church Universal

The church is called “catholic,” or “universal,” because there could not be two or three churches unless Christ be torn asunder (1Cor. 1:13) - which cannot happen! But all the elect are so united in Christ (Eph. 1:22-23) that as they are dependent on one Head, they also grow together into one body, being joined and knit together (Eph 4:16) as are the limbs of a body (Rom. 12:5; 1Cor. 10:17; 12:27) - *Calvin*.⁵

The word catholic means universal, and therefore is the proper title of the true Church of Christ, viewed as one body, composed of many members, existing in different places and at different times...” - *A.A. Hodge*.⁶

The church as it exists in the plan of God, and as it is realized only in the course of the ages, was conceived as consisting of the whole body of the elect, who are in course of time called unto life eternal - *Berkhof*.⁷

The Community of Saints

The church as it actually exists on earth - *Berkhof*.⁸

The Universal Church and the Community of Saints as Invisible

Holy Scripture speaks of the church in two ways. Sometimes by the term “church” it means *that which is actually in God’s presence*, into which no persons are received but those who are children of God by grace of adoption and true members of Christ by sanctification of the Holy Spirit. Then, indeed, the church includes not only the saints presently living on earth, but all the elect from the beginning of the world - *Calvin*.⁹

The Church as God sees it... because she is essentially spiritual and in her spiritual essence cannot be discerned by the physical eye; and because it is impossible to determine infallibly who do and who do not belong to her - *Berkhof*.¹⁰

The church is therefore circumscribed by the facts of regeneration and faith, facts which in themselves are spiritual and invisible. For this reason no man or organisation of men is able infallibly to determine who are regenerate and who are not, who are true believers and who are not. No man or organisation of human composition, therefore, is able to define the precise limits of the church in any one place or generation. *The Lord knows them that are His and He alone perfectly and infallibly* - *Murray*.¹¹

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 - *The Westminster Confession of Faith*.¹²

The Universal Church and The Communion of Saints As Visible

Often, however, the name “church” designates the whole multitude of men spread over the earth *who profess to worship one God and Christ*. By baptism we are initiated into faith in him; by partaking in the Lord’s Supper we attest our unity in true doctrine and love; in the Word of the Lord we have agreement, and for the preaching of the Word the ministry instituted by Christ is preserved - *Calvin*.¹³

The visible Church is the Church as man sees it, consisting of those who profess Jesus Christ with their children and therefore adjudged to be the community of the saints...*The invisible Church naturally assumes a visible form...*The Church becomes visible in Christian profession and conduct, in the ministry of the Word and of the sacraments, and in external organization and government - *Berkhof*.¹⁴

Yet it must not be thought that the church, as Scripture knows it, is ever an invisible entity. The church may not be defined as an entity wholly invisible to human perception and observation. The church is the company or society or assembly or congregation or communion of the faithful... Union with Christ and the faith through which that union is effected, though in themselves invisible and spiritual facts, are nevertheless *realities which find expression in what is observable* - *Murray*.¹⁵

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 - *Westminster Confession of Faith*.¹⁶

The Church: Visible and Invisible

Thus there is a *distinction* and yet an *inseparable reality* between the “Visible” and “Invisible” Church. They are not two separate Churches, but rather *one* Church of Jesus Christ with two separate aspects. One aspect must take into account that which is only fully perceivable to God, and the other aspect must take into account that which is fully visible and observable to people.

Why is this important to this discussion? Because “we must recognize that there is an aspect of invisibility that attaches to the concept of the church.”¹⁷ This helps to knock down the ladders that sinful human nature instinctively erects in order to climb into heaven, or in the case of our discussion into God’s Church. Just as God’s sacrament of baptism can be abused as some “superstitious rite that automatically guarantees salvation,”¹⁸ so also can the human-made extrabiblical rites of “making a decision”, raising a hand, praying a prayer, and other external phenomenon used to depict an internal reality, namely faith, be abused as some “superstitious rite”. At least the first error is over a God appointed sacrament, unlike the second error. The invisible aspect of the Church reminds us that salvation is of the Lord and His mercy alone, and that one’s faith is in Christ and not in itself. Faith does not save, God saves through faith. Grace always reigns! With this understanding movement can be made toward the analytical and then synthetical aspects of my thesis: *The Church is for believers and their children*, for “the invisible Church naturally assumes a visible form.”¹⁹

GRAMMATICOHISTORICALLY SPEAKING, WHAT SHOULD THE CHURCH LOOK LIKE IN LIGHT OF THE NEW COVENANT?

Does History Speak?

What is apparent from the start is that both sides attempt to argue their position from history. The “believers only” camp finds the “notable silence of the witnesses the nearer they are to the apostolic age” combined with what appears to them to be more awkward silence in the New Testament itself, to be a big red flag that should “evoke questions in the inquiring mind.”²⁰ Jewett builds this case by working back from Augustine (400 A.D.) to the New Testament.²¹

The “believers and their children” camp build their position upon the strong testimony of the early church’s use of infant baptism. In fact Jeremias points out that of all the sources in the whole period of the first four centuries of the Church “there were to be found only two theologians who advocated a postponement of baptism.”²² One had reservations about baptizing the children of pagan parents (Tertullian), and the other recommended postponing baptism to the age of three years (Gregory of Nazianzus).²³

Does history seem to tip the scales in one direction or the other? It seems to me that the burden of proof is upon the “believers only” position. **Irenaeus**, the disciple of Polycarp, “who himself had been John’s closest pupil, along with **Origen**, **Tertullian**, **Justin Martyr**, and **other Church Fathers**, referred to the practice as of *apostolic origin*.”²⁴ Jewett (a believers only advocate) even notes that **Cyprian** and **the North African council** (251 or 253 A.D.), which consisted of 66 bishops, *unanimously viewed infant baptism as the practice of the apostles*. Therefore because this council was only 150 years after the apostles it “might seem there could be no accounting for their unanimity were the usage of infant baptism not apostolic in its origins (notice that this is a quote from Paul Jewett!).”²⁵

Would the disciples of the Apostles themselves have universally embraced the practice of infant baptism *without any debate* if the baptizing of infants were an innovation not first witnessed

among the Apostles? “How could it not have been the apostle’s custom if such universal claims to that effect did not spark the slightest controversy?”²⁶ Who should really be burdened by the “silence”?²⁷

Are the Scriptures Really Silent?

Think of it this way, there are several passages that have been disputed for years by scholars, theologians, pastors, and laypeople concerning whether they are referring either *directly* or *indirectly* to the membership of the church as such that it includes *believers and their children*. But how many passages tell the reader and/or believer reading the Scriptures that what everybody knows was true for Israel under the one Covenant of Grace has now changed for the Church under the same Covenant of Grace, namely the inclusion of believers’ children? Silence. To whom does the burden of proof reside?²⁸

Acts 2:39

For the promise is for you **and your children**, and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God shall call to Himself.

Once again analysis and synthesis collide to give understanding. Payton explains:

Both baptist and paedobaptist readily admit that there is a historical character to revelation, that there is diversity as well as unity between the Old Testament and the New Testament. The question whether, in that historical development, the “and your children” principle of the covenant given to Abraham *belongs in the unity or diversity is, then, a main difference between them.*²⁹

Payton agrees with Jewett that we all must “recognize the historical character of revelation”, but he also reminds us that revelation takes place in history,

to people living not in theological ‘never-never’ land of *Geschichte*, but in *Historie*. There people do, after a fashion, think historically: they continue to think and express themselves as they have historically been conditioned to think until they learn better, and they rightly expect others - including messengers from God - to speak thus.³⁰

Therefore Acts 2:39 is a very vital passage for determining whether the “*and your children*” principle of the covenant with Abraham falls under the category of unity or diversity when one comes to the New Testament.³¹ One question: What would a “devout” (verse 5) Jew have understood Acts 2:39 to mean? If there was ever a time to make clear the diversity between the Old and New Covenant under the One Covenant of Grace, this was it. But if there was ever a time to continue the principle of “and your children” into the unity of the Old and New Testament, “he could not have picked better words.”³²

Matthew 19:13-15/Mark 10:13-16/Luke 18:15-17: Jesus Blessing Children and/or Infants.

“There is no question about what Jesus said and did on this occasion; the historical facts are plain. But the implication of what He said and did is another matter.”³³ First, Jesus **commands** the disciples to not forbid the bringing of children and/or infants to Him (paidion or “infant”--see BAGD, 604). Second, Jesus declares **the kingdom of heaven** to be for such as these. The issue is

not that the kingdom of heaven is just for the childlike, but that it is made up or belongs *to them* and *those who come like them*.³⁴ In other words it is not an “either-or” but a “both-and”. And third, Jesus **blesse**s them by “pronouncing God’s name upon them.”³⁵ “Blessing is always in the divine name”, as is Christian baptism. Christian baptism is a naming ceremony of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.³⁶ Jesus did not baptize them because the sign of the New Covenant did not go into effect until Pentecost, and they had already received the sign of the Old Covenant, circumcision.³⁷

To pronounce the holy name of God upon fallen creatures without a sign of cleansing would not be a blessing at all, for it would call down judgement.³⁸

Do the above three facts give any clues to whether children of believers are included among God’s people and thus entitled to the sign of belonging to Him (baptism) in the New Covenant?³⁹ What else could they indicate? For the “believers only” position their answer seems to be tied more to their view of the sacrament of baptism (as well as a theology of children that includes “infant dedication” - but this topic is not part of the sphere of this paper) than to an adequate explanation of the meaning of these passages. Jewett explains:

To practice believer baptism, then, is not to keep children from Christ, unchurch and disenfranchise them. In order to bring their children up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, parents need not start by bringing them to baptism...baptism is not something to which a person is *brought*, but to which he *comes*...⁴⁰

I only have one question to Jewett’s above comment, were the babies, infants, children *coming* to Jesus, or were they *brought* to Him? “Then some children were *brought* to Him” (Matt 19:13), “And they were *bringing* children to Him...” (Mark 10:13), “And they were *bringing* even their babies to Him...” (Luke 18:15). One cannot help but wonder what kind of disunity there is between the “you and your children” promise/principle proclaimed to Abraham in Gen. 17:7 and Jesus’ actions in these passages of not only permitting the bringing of children/infants *to Himself*, but also the pronouncement of God’s Name upon them. There does not seem to be a reduction in the scope of the covenant promises or the form of the covenant community from the old to the new (i.e. the “and your children” part) in Jesus’ mind.

Even if the *believers only* position finds a way to not “disenfranchise” their children, the issue is still, “Who is included in the Church (the nature of the church)?”, and how one comes down on this will not only exercise an interpretation of the Scriptures but also a theological practice.

The covenantal view requires us to treat our children as the Heritage of the Lord, not as consumers to be entertained to death in youth groups.⁴¹

Rather than apparently building a theology of children around the child’s testimony (or profession of individual faith), the covenantal view builds a theology of children around the accommodating or condescending testimony of God, that God administrates His grace mostly through families rather than simply individuals.

To be sure, we must bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord (Eph 6:4). His nurture is nurture that he conducts and directs, in which parents are but his instruments. Through his blessing and his promise, we look for our children to confess the Lord for themselves, but they will confess him who knew them from the beginning and whose name has been on their lips from their first babbled words.⁴²

Household Baptisms (Acts 10: Cornelius; Acts 16:15: Lydia; Acts:16: 33: Philippian Jailor; ICor. 1:16: Stephanas; cf. Acts 10:47, 48; 11:14)

Baptisms must have been very numerous during the ministry of the Apostles, but it is very interesting that the Scriptures recorded so few - 12 to be exact.⁴³ Out of 12 recorded baptisms, 4 refer to household baptisms.⁴⁴ This is significant because the Apostles were in a missionary period when the gospel was first going out. Thus the majority of people being baptized at that time would be adults because they were able to hear and therefore able to respond to the gospel. The Apostolic period was a period of proclamation, the gathering of the elect of God, and the establishment of the *visible* Church. Yet 4 out of 12 references to baptism mention household baptisms. Both sides go back and forth at this point as to whether anyone who did not believe was baptized, and/or whether “households” include in its circle of meaning infants or not.⁴⁵ However, even though neither side can use these passages as certain proof texts for their position, it must be noted that “house churches were first of all family churches, and the place of children in the families of God’s people was well understood (i.e. look at Israel and how God gave the sign and seal of the covenant promises to *Israel and their children*). It is difficult for us, in our culture of isolated individualism, to understand what was **self-evident** at the time of the apostolic church.”⁴⁶

Other New Testament Passages

Ephesians 6:1, 4 and **Colossians 3:20, 21** refer to Paul’s including children among those he addresses as **saints**. Two questions: (1) Were not saints in the New Testament age set apart from the world by baptism?⁴⁷ (2) Has Paul become a moralist or legalist when he exhorts these children to obey their parents because they would thus please the Lord? Or is he instructing them based upon their being set apart from the world by baptism (as ones who have “received the grace of their covenant Lord”) and were now “to demonstrate their faith in and faithfulness toward Him?”⁴⁸

I Corinthians 7:14 seems to address the issue of whether the children of a believing parent and an unbelieving parent are “clean” or “unclean.” *First* of all why would there need to be such a distinction if the Church is for believers only and not believers and their children? Obviously there would be no need. The covenantal position sees this as referring to the fact that even these children (because of the one believing parent) have the claim of God upon them and that they are “the children of His covenant”.⁴⁹ They belong to the New Covenant community, the Church. Thus they are not to be treated as unregenerate (unclean) pagans but as *members of the covenantal community* (clean), the church.⁵⁰

THEOLOGICALLY SPEAKING, WHAT SHOULD THE CHURCH LOOK LIKE IN LIGHT OF THE NEW COVENANT?

Here is where most collisions occur in the discussion of Church membership, and so it should because parts always belong to a whole, *they always have a context*. The context of each book, section, paragraph, passage, and verse in Scripture is ultimately the whole Bible. In a very real sense how one sees the whole of Scripture will determine how one sees its parts.

The issue at this point in discussing Biblical synthesis or theology and the question of Church membership is usually not whether one side or the other does not acknowledge unity and/or disunity between the old covenant (Old Testament) and the new covenant (New Testament), but rather to what extent or to what degree they do.⁵¹ Given that there is **one covenant of grace**, promised and fulfilled in Jesus Christ, what in terms of Church membership in the visible Church discontinues and/or continues? In other words does the specific covenant administration of the one covenant of grace under which Israel operated (“to you and your children” - Gen. 15), continue in the new covenant administration of the one covenant of grace under which the Church operates (“for you and your children” - Acts 2)? Does the old form of “to you and your children” under Israel continue in the new form called the Church?

What is the Bible’s Context?

And I will establish My covenant *between Me and you and your descendents after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant*, to be God to you and to your descendents after you
Gen. 17:7 (see also Gen. 17:13, and 17:19).

God established an *everlasting* covenant with Abraham and his children that by definition is still in effect today. It actually began in the Garden of Eden when God promised a *Seed* to Adam and Eve who will redeem them in the future (Gen. 3:15). The everlasting covenant continued into the New Testament with its fulfillment in Christ. “If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Gal 3:29). Except now in the New Testament era the seed of Abraham has *expanded* to include the Gentiles or “people from all nations who share Abraham’s faith” (those “who are far off” (Acts 2:39)); and where the old covenant “looked forward to Christ and was therefore an era of types and shadows, the new covenant looks back to Christ and is therefore an era of fulfillment.”⁵²

Now when they heard this, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brethren, what shall we do?” And Peter said to them, “Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall 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 shall call to Himself.*”
Acts 2:37-39

When God announced the covenant of grace to Adam and Eve through the promise of the *Seed*, the Christ, He then sealed His covenant with them by covering them in the skins of animals that He Himself had sacrificed (Gen. 3:21).⁵³ When God proclaimed the covenant of grace to Abraham and his children to be their God and they His people through the same promise of the Seed, the Christ, He also gave a sign and seal of His covenant promise - **circumcision**.

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. 17:9-10

With the arrival of the *Seed*, Jesus Christ, God had fully revealed and fulfilled His covenant of grace (complete application of its accomplishment awaits in glory) and ordained a **new sign** and **seal for the age of fulfillment, baptism**. *Circumcision* as the sign and seal of the covenant of grace under the age of promise was replaced by *baptism* as the sign and seal of the everlasting covenant in the age of fulfillment (or the Church age).⁵⁴

In Him (Christ) you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with Him in baptism and raised with Him through your faith in the power of God, who raised Him from the dead (Col. 2:11-12).

Yes baptism is a sacrament of faith and repentance (just as circumcision was), but it is also the **divinely instituted sign of the covenant** (just as circumcision was). To see or ground baptism *only* as a witness to individual faith instead of to the grace of God does not appear to do justice to the New Testament data.⁵⁵

Therefore as Murray indicates we must give full “allowance” to the fact that a new “form of structure and administration” has been established by the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, but this does not warrant the denial of the “generic unity and continuity of the church in both dispensations” (see Acts 7:38). For the Church is “founded upon the covenant made with Abraham,” it is the “*extension and unfolding of the Abrahamic covenant*.”⁵⁶

Thus the Bible’s context is the promise and the fulfillment of the one everlasting covenant, it is promise and fulfillment in Christ.

And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “All the nations shall be blessed in you.” - Gal 3:8.

Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God!... For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen. Rom 11:33, 36

This being the case, it seems that two questions can be asked and two implications can be drawn to help give clarity to the issue of whether the Church is for believers only or believers and their children.

Towards Clarity

Question One. If the Church age is the unfolding of the covenant made with Abraham, “the extension and enlargement of the blessing conveyed by this covenant to the people of the Old Testament period,”⁵⁷ then should we be led to think that the form and/or scope of the new covenant is *lesser* or *greater* than the form/scope of the old covenant? Does the covenant of grace in its travel from promise to fulfillment enlarge in scope or shrink? Murray explains:

If children born of the faithful were given the sign and seal of the covenant and therefore of the richest blessing which the covenant disclosed, if New Testament economy is the elaboration and extension of this covenant of which circumcision was the sign, are we to believe that infants in this age are excluded from that which was provided by the Abrahamic covenant? In other words, are we to believe that infants now may not properly be given the sign of that blessing which is enshrined in the new covenant? Is the new covenant in this respect less generous than was the Abrahamic? *Is there less efficacy, as far as infants are concerned, in the new covenant than there was in the old?*⁵⁸

Calvin goes for the throat on the same issue:

The covenant is common, and the reason for confirming it is common. Only the manner of the confirmation is different - what was circumcision for them was replaced for us by baptism. Otherwise, *if the testimony by which the Jews were assured of the salvation of their posterity is taken away from us, Christ's coming would have the effect of making God's grace more obscure and less attested for us than it had previously been for the Jews.* Now, this cannot be said without grievously slandering Christ...we must admit that at least it should not be concealed with more malign intent, nor revealed with weaker testimony than under the dim shadows of the law.⁵⁹

Implication One. The unfolding and fulfilling drama of redemptive history does not lead us to expect *retraction* but *expansion* in regard to the blessings of God's everlasting covenant.⁶⁰ While the gentiles have been included into the "more abundant scope" of the covenant of grace in the Church age, are we to believe that the children of believers have been excluded?⁶¹ Is the New Testament economy less beneficial than the Old?⁶²

Question Two. If children of believers have been excluded, then this is a reversal of the "earlier divinely instituted practice". "Do we find any hint or intimation of such reversal in either the Old or New Testament?"⁶³

More pointedly, does the New Testament revoke or does it provide any intimation of revoking so expressly authorized a principle as that of the inclusion of infants in the covenant and their participation in the covenant sign and seal?⁶⁴

Implication Two. Membership in the form of the Church of the Old Testament (Israel) was for believers and their children. This principle established by divine authority for administering the covenant of grace was practiced for some 2,000 years. Was it discontinued?⁶⁵ Murray explains that "evidence of revocation or repeal is mandatory if the practice or principle has been discontinued under the New Testament" because of: (1) The new covenant is based upon the unfolding of the Abrahamic covenant (2) The basic identity and meaning of circumcision and baptism as signs and seals of their respective covenant economies (3) The unity and continuity of the everlasting covenant of grace administered in both dispensations.⁶⁶ A.A. Hodge introduces a very timely "maxim" at this point as well:

The universal maxim is that every law continues binding until it is abrogated, or until the reason for it has ceased. This command has never been recalled, and the reason for its observance remains precisely what it was when the command was given.⁶⁷

Once again silence seems to argue more strongly for *believers and their children* than for *believers only* in the **new covenant**. The burden of proof at this point lies **not** in needing a command to baptize infants or to state that the Church is still for believers and their children as it was in Israel, but *in needing a command not* to baptize infants or to include children in this new and greater administration of the covenant of grace. The burden of proof once again is upon the believers only position.

CONCLUSION

History is not silent, the Scriptures are not silent, Biblical theology is not silent. The issue is one's interpretation of the silence. Analysis and synthesis should work together to weave biblical interpretations or theological convictions. What is at stake in the matter at hand is on the surface theological convictions concerning the form or structure of the administration of the covenant of grace in the Church era. Does the *visible* Church consist of *believers only* or *believers and their children*? One position seems to elevate and proclaim the *response of the individual* or what takes place inside of the individual (the subjective) in the context of the individual's life situation, while the other seems to elevate and proclaim the *initiative of God* or what takes place outside of the individual (the objective) in the context of community. What is at stake below the surface is whether the unfolding and expanding of the Abrahamic covenant (the one everlasting covenant running from promise to fulfillment -from Adam to Christ) ***continues to include the children of believers, or whether it now shrinks in scope*** or sphere so as to become less beneficial by excluding the children of believers. The burden of proof for this writer rests clearly upon the shoulders of the believers only position.

Endnotes

- ¹ Westminster Shorter Catechism, Q.1., *The Confession of Faith*, 3rd ed. (Atlanta: Committee for Christian Education & Publications, 1990), 3.
- ² Those who quietly or loudly proclaim “No creed but the Bible!”, usually fall into this category.
- ³ *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. by Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 566.
- ⁴ Nicene Creed, in *Creeds of the Churches*, ed. by John H. Leith, 3rd ed. (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1982), 33.
- ⁵ John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 volumes, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), iv.1.2.
- ⁶ A.A. Hodge, *The Confession of Faith* (Carlisle: Banner of Truth, 1992), 310.
- ⁷ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1939), 564.
- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ Calvin, iv.1.7.
- ¹⁰ Berkhof, 564, 566.
- ¹¹ John Murray, *Christian Baptism* (Philadelphia: The Committee on Christian Education, 1952), 34.
- ¹² Westminster Confession of Faith, in *The Confession of Faith*, 3rd ed. (Atlanta: Committee for Christian Education & Publications, 1990), xxv.1.
- ¹³ Calvin, iv.1.7.
- ¹⁴ Berkhof, 564, 566.
- ¹⁵ Murray, 36-37.
- ¹⁶ The Westminster Confession of Faith, xxv.2.
- ¹⁷ Murray, 35.
- ¹⁸ Michael Horton, “God’s Grandchildren: The Biblical Basis for Infant Baptism” *Modern Reformation* (March/April 1995): 12.
- ¹⁹ Berkhof, 566.
- ²⁰ Paul K. Jewett, *Infant Baptism and the Covenant of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1978), 69.
- ²¹ Payton rightfully points out, however, that if we adopted Jewett’s working backwards approach to the doctrines of the Trinity or of Christ’s two natures and one Person it “could produce quite misleading results, depending on the presuppositions the author brings to the research and the questions he expects his sources to answer” (James R. Payton, review of “Infant Baptism and the Covenant of Grace”, by Paul Jewett, *Westminster Theological Journal* (Spring 1980): 408).
- ²² Joachim Jeremias, *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries*, transl. by David Cairns (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 98.
- ²³ Ibid.
- ²⁴ Horton, *MR*, 16.
- ²⁵ Jewett, 18. Jewett then proceeds with a weak argument of “rapid change” and “rapid expansion” in Christianity to account for this unanimity at such a staggering early date (19). See Payton’s response to this argument in *WTJ*, 408 - 409.
- ²⁶ Horton, *MR*, 16.

27 This is also part of the theological argument because if one views the Old and New Testament as a unity in terms of one covenant of grace having a different sign and seal for each administration of God's grace, circumcision and baptism respectively, then the kind of silence that comes from having no debate on whether to include children or not in the Church is a compelling silence. For the old covenant assembly (Israel) included believing Israel and her children, why wouldn't the new covenant assembly (the Church) include believers and their children? If there was a change of this magnitude (i.e. not including the children of believing parents in the new covenant when they were included in the old) in the administration of grace in the New Testament, **then silence would be the last thing you would expect to hear in the Scriptures** (it would appear that God would inform us of the change on this one) or in the early church when such a universal notion of the church being for believers and their children is running rampant with no resistance. *Silence sure wasn't the way the early Church historically dealt with incorrect doctrines of such magnitude* (i.e. the nature of the Church) such as the Trinity, and the Person and work of Jesus Christ.

One other point, the abuse of some in the early church to *sacramentalize* infant baptism is not an argument against infant baptism from history. Faulty views of God's sacrament does not necessitate either the throwing out of the sacrament altogether or that infant baptism must be wrong.

28 Also many unnecessary inflammatory arguments against "infant baptism" are easily eliminated at this juncture as well. Why? Because God commanded the Israelites to circumcise their children, to give them the sign and seal of the covenant of grace. Is God a "liberal theologian"? To this writer it would seem very constructive for *believers only* advocates to first check their arguments against God's clear command to Israel to circumcise their children, before they proceed to put forth their arguments against children of believers in the NT receiving the sign and seal of baptism for the covenant of grace.

29 Payton, 413.

30 Ibid, 413-414.

31 Ibid, 414.

32 Ibid. Some argue that this passage, when used by the Covenantal position for *believers and their children*, proves to much because of the "and for all who are far off" mentioned in the verse. Thus it really is nothing more than a declaration that the Gospel is for everyone. In other words the emphasis in what Peter is saying is upon the offer of the gospel being for everyone, not upon who make up the promise of the New Covenant. I find this argument lacking for several reasons: (1) **Exegetically** it lacks persuasion because Peter used the Greek word *eipaggelia* ("Promise") instead of *eujaggelion* ("Gospel"). *Eujaggelion* would have been used it seems to me if Peter's emphasis was just upon the universal offer of the gospel. *Eipaggelia*, however, "by way of Judaism...has become a specific term for the word of divine revelation in salvation history. It is a word which *expresses not merely the promise but also the fulfillment of what is promised*" (TDNT, vol. 2, 582). It is a word that communicates more than just the offer, it communicates the summation of promise and fulfillment in Christ. In other words if Peter was emphasizing the "promise" found in the old form of the Covenant of Grace to Abraham being "fulfilled" in Jesus Christ, and the continuing administration of that promise to *believers and their children* in this New Covenant form of the people of God, then selecting *eipaggelia* over *eujaggelion* was a wise choice. For it communicates "divine revelation in salvation history" or the "promise and fulfillment" motif of divine revelation in salvation history, not just the general call or offer of the gospel. Also those who are "far off" refers to the Gentiles (TDNT, vol 4, 373-4. See Eph 2:13, 2:17; Isaiah 57:19), which would communicate what is *different* in the fulfillment aspect of this New Covenant form of the people of God. The covenant's sphere of gracious influence has expanded to include even Gentiles, regardless of how "poorly they (and Peter!) may have realized the implications regarding all those 'far off'" (Payton, WTJ, 414). Finally, even though Peter enumerates the promise from the narrow to the broad (you, your children, those far off etc.), he tightens it up again or goes narrow with *oJsouß*. For ultimately the promise is to "*as many as the Lord our God shall call to Himself*". Peter knows the **promise** of the gospel is for them (as opposed to the invitation of the gospel being for them) because they were cut to the heart and asked, "What shall we do?" *They were being called*. They fit into the sphere of "all whom the Lord shall call to Himself." The issue is not, "Do this because the offer of the gospel is for everyone...", but "Do this because the promise (of the gospel/covenant) is for you, your children, and the Gentiles, to all whom the Lord calls to Himself." *The emphasis is once again on who exactly the promise is for, not just that it is offered to such and such people.* (2) **Contextually** it is found wanting as well. Such an interpretation does not take into account: (a) The historical context of where this was in relation to redemptive history (i.e. promise and fulfillment of One Covenant of Grace in Jesus Christ and the transition between the old form of the covenant of grace under Israel and the new form of the covenant of grace under the Church. Thus issues concerning what would continue and discontinue - see the above comments on this passage)

(b) The audience being addressed (devout Jews), who most certainly would have understood Peter's words in light of their understanding of *God's people and their children*, and (c) That Peter is responding to the Jews question of "What shall we do?". The better anticipated answer to, "What shall we do?", would seem to cover not only what they should do at this very moment as individuals (i.e. *repent and be baptized*), but also what they should do in light of an explanation of what the "promise" looks like in the age of fulfillment in Christ or in the New Covenant (gar - "additional information is being given about what is being described", Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar: Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Thus issues concerning what would continue and discontinue - see the above comments on this passage) (b) The audience being addressed (devout Jews), who most certainly would have understood Peter's words in light of their understanding of *God's people and their children*, and (c) That Peter is responding to the Jews question of "What shall we do?". The better anticipated answer to, "What shall we do?", would seem to cover not only what they should do at this very moment as individuals (i.e. *repent and be baptized*), but also what they should do in light of an explanation of what the "promise" looks like in the age of fulfillment in Christ or in the New Covenant (gar - "additional information is being given about what is being described", Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar: Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1964), 673). In other words *baptize your children!* For example: "*Repent...For (additional information is coming) the promise is for, your children, and the Gentiles*". Rather than to repent and then give a "deduction, conclusion, or summary to the preceding discussion" (Wallace, 673), which the explanation of a general offer of the gospel would seem to force the "For" or gar to mean. For example: "*Repent...For (to summarize or conclude/better translated "therefore") the offer of the gospel is for you, your children, and those who are far away (everybody)*". The use of "for" or gar as explanatory (additional information) is furthered in its case because of the more fully developed meaning associated with the use of "promise" (promise and fulfillment) or *eipaggelia*, whereas the use of "for" as inferential (summary) would seem to have gone very well if "gospel" or *eujggelion* was used instead.

³³ Jewett, 55.

³⁴ Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church*, Contours of Christian Theology, gen. ed. Gerald Bray (Downers Grove: IVP, 1995), 283.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Jewett, 63.

⁴¹ Horton, 17.

⁴² Clowney, 284.

⁴³ Acts 2:41; 8:12, 13, 38; 9:18; 10:48; 16:15, 33; 18:8; 19:5, ICor 1:14, 16 - Murray, 68-69.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 69.

⁴⁵ Jewett, 51.

⁴⁶ Clowney, 282-3.

⁴⁷ Payton, 411.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Clowney, 282.

⁵⁰ Some argue this proves too much, that the unbelieving spouse by this logic should also be included in the Church. The problem with that reasoning, however, is that the unbelieving spouse is unbelieving. He doesn't believe. Membership of the New Covenant Church is for *believers and their children*. Faith is required for entrance into the Visible Church. The parent's faith is what is required for children to be included into the Visible Church. As a covenant child grows he/she will either be faithful to God's covenant or unfaithful, will either embrace Christ in faith and walk in that same faith or will not, or will either be a professing follower of Christ or a covenant breaker - wandering in unbelief outside the covenant, refusing to exercise faith in Christ (i.e. Ishmael and Esau).

⁵¹ This is usually where most arguments develop and focus when dealing with a synthetic hermeneutic or theological world view (i.e. like between "covenantalists" and "dispensationalists"). For the purpose of this paper I will not discuss the issues of those that see *strong* discontinuities between the old and new covenant.

By “strong” I mean those that border on or blatantly see discontinuity in terms of *kind* or nature as opposed to *degree* or variants of the same nature. For instance those that hold such a strong distinction between Israel and the Church that they compose two ontologically different redemptive plans of God, and/or people of God. Instead I will be addressing or discussing issues within one everlasting covenant of grace that has and is being administered in two different forms or structures at two different historical times, Israel and the Church.

⁵² Anthony A. Hoekema, review of “Infant Baptism and the Covenant of Grace”, by Paul Jewett, *Calvin Theological Journal* (April, 1978): 102.

⁵³ Horton, 13.

⁵⁴ Some argue at this point that there is not a one-to-one relationship with circumcision and baptism. They are correct if they refer to a one-to-one relationship in *degree* not *kind* (i.e. only males were circumcised but in baptism all are baptized into Christ; see Joel 2:28-29 and Gal 3:26-28). In other words the *degree* of differences that would occur between a covenant of promise and a covenant of fulfillment, or between shadow and reality are appropriate - the degree of differences one would expect in a progressive unfolding of the redemptive drama. But there seems to be no warrant to disregard the one-on-one relationship in *kind between circumcision and baptism*: (1) Baptism replaced circumcision as the token of the covenant in the Church age (Matt 28:19, Col 2:11-12) (2) Baptism is Christian circumcision (Col 2:10-12), signifying spiritual regeneration (Deut 10:16; 30:6; Titus 3:5), the “washing” or purifying of the soul by the Spirit of Christ (Matt 3:11; Mk 1:8; Lk 3:16; Jn 1:26-33; Acts 1:5; 11:16; Titus 3:5) (3) They had the same purpose: to indicate membership in the Covenant Family (Gen 17:10; Acts 2:38, 41; 22:16; Gal 3:28) (4) The symbolism of the two are the same: cleansing of the flesh (5) They both represent the work of the Holy Spirit (Deut 30:6; Matt 3:11; Acts 1:5; 2:38; 10:45, 47, 48; 8:15-16; 22:16) (6) Circumcision of the flesh was man’s work and circumcision of the heart was the Spirit’s work. Baptism with water is man’s work and baptism of the Spirit is the work of the Spirit (7) Faith is a prerequisite for both (Rom 4:11; 8:12). Note that in the old covenant it was the faith of the parent that qualified the seal of the covenant upon their children. (8) The covenant with Abraham continues into the New Covenant (Gen 17:7; Acts 3:25) (9) The Great Commission specifically commands baptism, not circumcision, for converts (Matt 28:19) - The Reverend Paul G. Settle, *Why Baptize Infants?* Park Cities Presbyterian Church, Dallas, 1996, 1-2.

⁵⁵ Payton explains: “For Reformed theology, however, salvation - of which baptism is the sign and seal - is solely of the Lord. The “little bit” of anthropocentrism in semi-Augustinian soteriologies is rejected by Reformed theologians, without jeopardizing the Gospel call to faith and repentance. To ground the validity of an administration of baptism in something within the recipient is also a departure from the *solus deo gloria* of Reformed theology. The idea of a “prerequisite” for baptism ought, then, to be questioned, and can, in fact, be rejected without in the least drifting into a sacramentalist theology of baptism (416).” Payton goes on to explain that the simple reason anyone receives baptism is because God has commanded it, and His covenant stipulations therefore determine its administration (416). It is a sign and seal of God’s good pleasure “to number the recipient among the covenant community” (417). “Baptism (as was circumcision) is given for and unto faith” not just unto faith (417). **Unto faith** to those who hear and profess Christ, and **for faith** to the children of believers. According to Payton, *to make the sign and seal of a salvation that God alone accomplishes dependent upon what exists at “the particular time of its reception is a significant misreading of both the covenant and the covenant’s demand for life-long faith and repentance”* (418).

⁵⁶ Murray, 46.

⁵⁷ Murray, 51.

⁵⁸ Murray, 51-52.

⁵⁹ Calvin, iv, 16.6.

⁶⁰ Murray 53.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid, 52.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 53.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ A.A. Hodge, quoted in “Why Baptize Infants?”, Reverend Paul Settle, Park Cities Presbyterian Church, Dallas, 1.