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For my beloved children,
May you always believe the covenant promise

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Chapter 1: The Context of the Conversation

The debate over the biblical meaning, proper recipients, and valid mode of baptism has raged within the Christian community for hundreds of years. Scholarly and devout believers on both sides of the water have appealed to Scripture to support their practices. In fact, entire denominations have formed on the basis of a particular view of baptism.

One result of this division is that some of the most gifted men in the history of the church have been prevented from ministering in the same ecclesiastical body. Just imagine. Men such as Augustine, John Calvin, Martin Luther, Jonathan Edwards, Francis Schaeffer, and preachers today including Tim Keller, R.C. Sproul, and Randy Pope, would not be permitted to serve in a Baptist Church. Conversely, men such as Charles Spurgeon, William Carey, John Gill, and preachers today including, John Piper, D.A. Carson, and Matt Chandler would not qualify for ordination in a Presbyterian Church due to their baptismal positions. This is the reality of how baptism has divided Christians, churches and denominations.

We need a bridge over troubled water. That is what I want to build for you with this booklet.

In the summer of 1999, I was on vacation in our family cottage on the Cumberland Plateau in Tennessee and began to read a recently published book on systematic theology. I became engrossed. The text was so well-written and informative that I couldn't put it down—until I came to the chapter on baptism. Up to that point, I had agreed with the author lock, stock and barrel. However, as I began to read this chapter, I became challenged, because he was presenting a perspective on the topic that I had not before considered. That experience began a three-year immersion (yes, pun intended) into a study of baptism. I read every book and article that I could find in print and on the web.

Exploring more deeply, I came away not only with a conviction of where I stand on the subject, but also with an empathetic understanding for the other side of the river. As I studied, I had changed my position back and forth several times and wondered, after what felt like fifteen rounds of intellectual boxing, if I would be able to make a decision or would end up calling it a draw.

When the dust cleared, it was close, but not a draw. There were a few lynch-pin passages and theological implications that enabled me to see the subject more clearly and with more confidence that I had before that summer day when I was thrown into the ring. Although the study was mentally and emotionally exhausting, it was worth it.

So, my goal in this small book is to save you those years of study by creating a bridge for you to consider crossing. You will notice that my presentation is not comprehensive. This is because I wanted to produce a readable, accessible and thus usable resource. Hopefully, there is enough material to make the subject clear without going too far into unnecessarily technical details.

And it's okay if you don't agree with my conclusions. My desire is just for you to have the basic information on the subject of baptism so that you can make a well-informed decision as you consider the practice in your own life.

Chapter 2 The Meaning of Baptism

The place to begin with a study of baptism is to define what baptism is. In fact, how we define baptism is the Continental Divide for the subject, giving us a lens through which we will see every other facet in the conversation. In other words, where we begin will significantly influence where we end. So, as we consider a starting place, there are two primary options: baptism as a profession of faith or as a promise of grace.

The view that water baptism primarily symbolizes my profession of faith is the classic “Baptist” perspective, which would rule out the baptism of infants or small children because they would be unable to make a credible profession of faith at their age. According to this position, a new convert “goes public with his faith through baptism.” In other words, baptism represents the Christian’s profession.

This is why those who affirm this position will say that baptism is an essential act of obedience to Jesus. For them, the focus of baptism is on what I promise to God more than about what God promises to me. This leads to the second option.

Rather than symbolizing my profession of faith, another view is that baptism primarily symbolizes God's promise of grace. This is the perspective in most Presbyterian churches.

According to this view, baptism does not primarily represent something that I promise to God, but something that God promises to me. Baptism is not primarily about me. It primarily is about Jesus.

Therefore, baptism is not primarily an act of my obedience, but a proclamation of Jesus' obedience for me. While the role of faith is how we receive the benefits of baptism, it is the promise of God in the gospel that is the *essence* of baptism.

Baptism does not represent something that we do, but something that God does. It does not primarily represent my profession, but God's promise. It is not primarily an act of my obedience, but a proclamation of Jesus' obedience for me.

So, using the second option as our definition, we can say that Baptism is a ceremonial washing with water that represents God's promise of grace in the gospel that is to be received by faith. From this perspective, baptism is saved from becoming a

man-centered rite, and retains its God-centered purpose in the life of the church.

Now, I would totally understand if you are saying, "Okay, so I've never heard it this way before. How do we know this about baptism? How can we be sure that it represents God's promise rather than my profession?" The answer is found in the purpose of the sacraments, which we'll examine in the next chapter.

Chapter 3 The Purpose of Sacraments

A sacrament is an outward sign that serves to represent an event or a promise. In the Old Testament, there were two sacraments: circumcision and the Passover. In the New Testament, there are two, corresponding sacraments, baptism and the Lord's Supper. Two represent events to remember, the Passover and the Lord's Supper, and two represent promises, circumcision and baptism. Our focus will be on the two that represent promises, starting with circumcision.

Circumcision was the sign of God's covenant promise to be Abraham's God and the God of his descendants. The Apostle Paul defines this even more clearly for us in Romans 4:11, saying, "[Abraham] received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised."

If you remember, Abraham had "believed God," and the Lord credited it to Abraham as (imputed) righteousness. Meaning, Abraham believed in the promise of a miracle child in his family line who would bless the nations. In the short term, that

would be Isaac. But Isaac would only be a shadow of the ultimate miracle child, Jesus.

This tells us that circumcision was the Old Covenant sign of justification through faith alone. It was the sign of spiritual cleansing, righteousness, and an identity as the people of God through faith in the promise. Circumcision was not merely a *fleshly* sign, but a profoundly, and primarily, *spiritual* sign.

That is the same promise we have in baptism, as the New Covenant sign of justification in the same way that circumcision was in the Old Covenant. In fact, the New Covenant promise of gift-righteousness which is symbolized in baptism is the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham. As Paul writes in Galatians 3:13-14, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree'—so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith."

Did you notice how the work of Jesus is connected to the blessing of Abraham? What is that blessing? It is righteousness through faith and the promise of receiving the indwelling presence of God in the Holy Spirit. The emphasis is on the

promise. *God* works and *God* promises. We *receive* through believing and resting in his work.

When we understand baptism's sacramental counterpart, circumcision, which represented God's promise of grace to Abraham and his children we are prepared to understand the full import of baptism's meaning for the baptism of infants in the covenant community.

Yet, as you probably know, it is God's covenantal promise to the children of God's people that causes so much of the controversy in the baptism conversation. We'll examine that hot potato next.

Chapter 4: The Recipients of Baptism

The argument that most *credobaptists* (believer only baptism) bring against their *paedobaptist* (believer and infant baptism) siblings is that, in the New Testament, the examples of baptisms seem to be those who believe first and are baptized second, not in the reverse order.

This would seem to undermine the practice of what some call infant baptism. The point is well taken. In fact, it is this point that had me swayed for some time that credobaptism was preferable to paedobaptism.

Then I came across Romans 4:11.

Romans 4:11, which we read in the last chapter, is the lynchpin verse in the conversation, not only for understanding the meaning of baptism, but also for determining the proper recipients of baptism. For if circumcision is the sign of the gospel (of justification/righteousness through faith) in the Old Testament and baptism is the sign of the gospel (of justification / righteousness through faith) in the New Testament, then the implications are significant.

Here is why.

Abraham was given a sign that represented God's promise of grace being received by faith. Then, the Lord commanded Abraham to apply that sign to his infant son before he is able to profess faith himself. This means that criticisms of infant baptism on the grounds that they cannot yet profess faith for themselves are groundless, because God himself commanded that a sign that required faith for an adult to receive be given to his infant child before he could believe.

It is important to note that the inclusion of infants in the faith community was a covenantal practice that never was repealed. Many things under the Old Covenant were repealed or abrogated, but not the promise to the children of believers. Maybe this is because the application of the covenant sign upon infants pre-dates the Old Covenant.

After all, circumcision as the sign of God's promise was not given to Moses, but to Abraham, before the establishment of the Mosaic administration of the covenant. Yet both of these covenants show us that God always has dealt with his people as a covenant community, never merely as individuals. Just as

there was an Old Covenant community, there is a New Covenant community.

There is some analogy here with churches that use instruments in worship, although there is no command to nor example of using instruments in the New Testament. However, we know that God commanded instruments to be used in worship by the old covenant community. He was delighted by it and never changed his mind.

Yet, if we would be consistent, demanding that what we practice today must have a New Testament command or definite example, then we must prohibit the use instruments in worship. And yet we know that our Bible is not just a New Testament and that the people of God did not begin in Acts 2, but in Genesis with Abraham.

So, just as the Lord was and still is delighted with instruments in worship, we can say that God was and still is delighted to offer the promise of grace to his children's children from their earliest days and that the children of believers are given a rich privilege of growing up in the atmosphere of the gospel.

This means that those who practice covenantal baptism of the infants of believers can have full confidence that the Lord is pleased for us to place the sign of saving grace upon infants born into the covenant family before that infant can profess faith.

Believers can have full confidence that the Lord is pleased for us to place the sign of saving grace upon infants born into the covenant family before that infant can profess faith.

The question we must ask is this: If God didn't repeal the covenant promise to his children's children, why would we?

And yet, however strong the logical theological inference is for infant baptism, we really need to know that applying the sign of the covenant promise and including the children of God's children in the covenant community actually was the practice of the New Testament church. That is the subject we'll tackle in the next chapter.

Chapter 5: Covenantal Church Membership

The earliest Christians were exclusively Jewish converts. We know from passages such as James 2 that these disciples of Jesus even continued to use Jewish meeting houses, called synagogues, as their meeting places. We also know that these early Christians continued to view their children as members of the covenant community from their birth as they had for two-thousand years, since the days of Abraham.

Church leaders such as the apostle Paul affirmed this view of the covenantal inclusion of children, for when he addressed young children in his letters, he spoke to them in unmistakably covenantal terms.

For example, in Ephesians 6:1-3, Paul says, “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. ‘Honor your father and mother’ (for this is the first commandment with a promise), ‘that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land.’”

If these children were not considered members of the household of faith, the church, why would Paul use the phrase “in the Lord” and allude to the original covenantal document of the Old Covenant, the ten commandments?

Furthermore, when we look at the majority of the specific baptisms in the New Testament, we note that they are baptisms of entire households, much like the practice of circumcision in the Old Testament.

In Acts 10, Cornelius and his household are baptized. In Acts 16, we observe the conversion of a business woman named Lydia and a Roman jailer. In this chapter, we learn that Lydia was baptized, along with her household, and that the jailer professed faith, and as the head of his household, the rest of his family was baptized as well. As Paul and Silas preached to the jailer, they said, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.”

The text doesn’t mention specifically whether there were infants or young children in these household baptisms or not. However, the Greek word used for household, *oikos*, is revealing.

Scholar, Joachim Jeremias, collected every instance of *oikos* in Scripture, both the Old Testament Greek Septuagint and the New Testament in Greek, and made a remarkable discovery. He writes,

“Whoever takes the trouble to check the examples in their context will confirm the fact that repeatedly the presence of children and infants is specially mentioned and at times their omission is particularly emphasized ... not simply the children in addition to the adults, but the children quite especially, and not least any little children who might be present... The phrase ‘he and his (whole) house’ denotes the complete family; normally husband, wife and children. In no single case is the term ‘house’ restricted to the adult members of the house.”

This is consistent with Paul’s use of covenantal language in 1 Corinthians 7:14 that the children of a believer are “clean,” but that those born outside of the covenant community are “unclean.”

He didn’t mean saved versus unsaved. He just meant that a child of a believer has the privilege of being a member of the

covenant community, the church, and as such, is entitled to the sign of promise, baptism.

An analogy is that of a fraternity legacy. A legacy is the child of someone who was initiated into a particular fraternity.

Because of his unique relationship to the fraternity through a parent, he is automatically given a bid to join the fraternity of his father. Now, the child may become “apostate” and reject that bid by pledging a different fraternity or by not pledging any fraternity at all. Nevertheless, legacies get bids. The same is true with God’s covenant of grace. And the bid is made in baptism.

We need to emphasize that baptism does not save a child any more than it saves an adult. The rite of water baptism itself is not salvific. It is symbolic, and not of the believer’s faith, but of God’s promise.

Another analogy is the way we raise our children. I’ve seen babies wearing a red outfit with a huge G on the front, with Bulldogs written underneath, as well as a baby with a K on his onesie, as the parents were Kentucky fans. We nurture our children to love what we love and to be what we are, and we give them signs to represent those things. It’s true with sports and in the church.

This may be why some churches that do not practice infant baptism offer a ceremony of infant dedication instead. And yet, in the Bible, we do not witness infant dedication. Nevertheless, parental desire to acknowledge a special relationship between their child and God is understandable.

My suggestion would be that parents consider the means that God has provided to express that relationship. In the Old Testament, the means was circumcision. In the New Testament, the means was and still is baptism.

And yet, what happens to a baptized infant when he gets older? Is he to express his faith publicly, and how? And what happens when a baptized child is not converted and lives a life of unbelief? Those are important questions with which we will deal in the next chapter.

Chapter 6 Embracing the Promise

Some people object to infant baptism because they believe that those who baptize infants are suggesting that the practice saves the child. While some denominations do affirm that teaching, we believe that teaching to be an error. Baptism does not save a child any more than it saves an adult. This is because rite of water baptism itself is not salvific. It is symbolic, and not primarily of the believer's faith, but of God's promise.

It is the symbolic nature of baptism that calls for the recipient to receive the promise by faith, whether as an adult or an infant. For the adult who is baptized, God is saying, "I promise this if you will believe," and the recipient says, "I believe." For the infant in the covenant community whose parents have already received the promise, God says the same thing as to the adult, "I promise this if you will believe."

And so the responsibility of the parents and the rest of the covenant community is to help that child understand the promise and to respond with faith. This is why in a

covenantally minded church, at some point, the baptized child will stand before the congregation to affirm his or her baptism. In fact, affirming our baptism is what all believers continue to do, whether privately or publicly.

That is one reason why we partaking in communion. It is an ongoing, continual public profession of faith where the believer says, "I still believe the promise because it was fulfilled in the event of the crucifixion, where Jesus takes on my sin and gives me his perfect righteousness." This is why a baptized child waits to take communion until the time when he has made a public profession of faith, which is his public affirmation of God's promise in his baptism—a promise which has permeated the atmosphere of his entire life.

Since the Lord has given us and our children great, staggering promises in the gospel, we must use all the means that he has given us to disciple our children, from the earliest age, to put no confidence in the flesh, but to trust in Jesus as their sin bearer and righteousness provider.

But what about the child who never comes to a point of affirming his baptism, or does so as a child and then rejects God's promise later in life? Of course, the same could be said

about anyone who is baptized at any age and eventually walks away from the faith.

It is to this issue that the apostle Paul wrote in Romans 11, where he speaks of branches being “cut off” of the covenantal vine. This does not mean that they had at one time been saved, but since have lost their salvation.

What Paul is saying is that God’s covenant community is like branches attached to a vine. They are intended to produce fruit through faith. But when those branches fail to produce fruit, they show themselves to be faithless and dead, and subsequently are cut off from the covenant.

They are not cut off from salvation because they were never genuinely saved. They would be removed from the roll of a church and cease to be members, not because of a moral lapse, but because they have rejected the promise represented in baptism. And having been cut off, they are no longer candidates for taking communion, since partaking is to express faith in the promise of God’s grace in Jesus.

This is why a child in a covenantal church context must affirm his or her baptism publicly. If they do not, then by the time of

their maturity, they formally should be removed (or in Paul's language, "cut off") from the covenant community, lest they possess a false hope in a counterfeit faith.

This is a sobering reminder that we are never to assume the salvation of our children. The Lord has given us and our children great, staggering promises in the gospel. Therefore, it is our joy to use all the means that he has given us to disciple our children, from the earliest age, to put no confidence in the flesh, but to trust in Jesus as their sin-bearer and righteousness provider.

So far, we have examined the meaning of baptism. Rather than a sign of my profession of faith, baptism is the sign of God's promise of grace to those who believe. We have journeyed through a discussion of why covenantal, infant baptism is a biblical practice, rather than merely a historical or traditional practice. However, there are a couple more angles on the subject that we need to cover. One of these is the mode of baptism. That is what we'll discuss in the next chapter.

Chapter 7: The Mode of Baptism

When someone is baptized, should we immerse them in water, pour water upon them, or sprinkle them with water? This is the question. What we will discover may surprise you.

The Greek word which our English Bibles translate baptism is *baptizo*, which, when used ceremonially, means “to wash clean.”

For example, in the New Testament this word is used in reference to the Jewish practice of ceremonially washing one’s hands before a meal. On two occasions, the word that is used to describe this hand-washing process is a form of *baptizo*.

The question for us concerns how the hand-washing, or hand baptism, was enacted. According to Jewish tradition, the washing ceremony involved pouring water over the hands, not immersing the hands in a basin.

This example alone shows us that baptism does not require immersion. In fact, if the Bible is our guide, rather than church

tradition, then the most biblically accurate mode of baptism seems to be some form of pouring of water over or sprinkling water upon the baptismal candidate, especially when we consider that the baptism of Jesus most likely was not performed by immersion.

Okay, that may shock you. Hang on and I'll explain.

First of all, if Jesus didn't need to repent, why was he baptized? What did his baptism mean? When we understand Jesus' baptism as his consecration and ordination, or formal launching of his ministry, then the picture becomes clear.

The Bible tells us that Jesus approached his cousin, John, for baptism when Jesus was thirty-years-old. His age is an important detail, because it was at thirty that Jewish priests were ordained. Since a priest could only be ordained by another priest, Jesus went to John, who, as the son of a priest, had been ordained just six months previous and would have known what Jesus meant when he said that his baptism must be done "to fulfill all righteousness."

As Jesus tells us in Matthew 5, he came not to abolish, but to fulfill the law of God. And for him, as our High Priest, he had to

be ordained in the way that would fulfill the ceremonial ordination requirements for a priest. What were those requirements?

Leviticus 8 describes the ordination, or consecration, ceremony, which included a ceremonial washing with water followed by anointing.

The instruction to wash with water takes place in verse 6, "Then Moses brought Aaron and his sons forward *and washed them with water,*" followed by the anointing in verse 30, which reads,

"Then Moses took some of the anointing oil and some of the blood from the altar and sprinkled it on Aaron and his garments and on his sons and their garments. So, he consecrated Aaron and his garments and his sons and their garments."

To fulfill all righteousness, Jesus' consecration as a priest required a ceremonial washing with water and then anointing, which we see takes place not with oil, but with the Holy Spirit, who descended upon him in the form of a dove.

In light of this evidence, we believe that Jesus' baptism, as a ceremonial washing, would not have been through immersion, but rather through the method of ceremonial washings that take place throughout the Old Testament, where the administrator would pour or sprinkle blood or water.

Another element of the ordination process of priests in the Old Testament was a ceremonial sacrifice. But where is it at Jesus' ordination? You may have noticed that the sacrifice is standing front and center. You can't miss it. Or better, you can't miss *him*.

Remarkably, Jesus himself, as the ultimate High Priest, does not sacrifice an *animal*, but *himself*, the perfect lamb of God, who would be nailed upon the altar of the cross, by whose blood we are now cleansed.

It is with that blood that he has promised to sprinkle the nations clean. Isaiah 52:13-15 prophecies this amazing picture of redemption through the coming Messiah:

13 Behold, my servant shall act wisely; he shall be high and lifted up, and shall be exalted. 14 As many were astonished at you— his appearance was so

marred, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of the children of mankind —15 so shall he sprinkle many nations.

To Jewish ears in the first century, they would have understood that ceremonial washings and symbolic consecrations took place through sprinkling. For example, the blood of the sacrificial bull was “sprinkled on the altar,” and even David said in Psalm 51, “Sprinkle me with hyssop and I shall be clean.”

Therefore, the most biblically accurate mode of baptism seems to be some form of pouring water over or sprinkling water upon upon the baptismal candidate.

Chapter 8: Common Objections

Those who object to the idea that Jesus was not immersed point to the statement in Matthew 3 that says, “Therefore, having been baptized, Jesus immediately went up from the water.”

On first glance, it seems as if Jesus is coming up from being immersed. Yet, the text says that he had already been baptized before he went up from the water.

Without having to debate the exegetical details of this passage, we can turn to Acts 8 and the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch, where we read, “They both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away.”

Did you notice that “they both” went down and came up, not just the Ethiopian? This means that if we require Jesus’ coming up from the water to mean up from an immersion, then in Acts 8, both the one being baptized (the Ethiopian) and the

baptizer (Philip) were immersed at the same time, since they both come up from the water.

From what we know about the region, not only was that river too shallow to sustain an immersion, but the context of the passage in Isaiah that the eunuch had been reading in his chariot before Philip showed up spoke of God “sprinkling the nations clean” through the coming Messiah.

As a ceremonial cleansing ritual, he would not have expected the mode to be immersion, but some form of pouring or sprinkling.

Others object that pouring or sprinkling does not symbolize the death and resurrection emphasis that Paul puts on baptism in Romans 6. And yet, when we study how burials were commonly performed in the first century, we discover that they were not buried under the ground, but commonly interred inside of tombs, like Jesus.

It is also commonly objected that the chariot would have had a canteen of water that could have been used for a pouring or sprinkling for baptism. However, as Philip explained baptism to the eunuch, he probably would have explained the

significance of using “living or flowing water” for the event, not the potentially stale water from a canteen.

In the Bible, there is much precedent for ceremonial washings being performed by pouring or sprinkling, but not by immersion. Yet many people today are baptized through immersion. Should that be considered an “unbiblical” mode of baptism? I do not think so.

Not only does the word baptize allow for immersion, but also the picture of immersion captures a significant aspect of baptism’s meaning for a culture that is accustomed to burial being in the ground rather than in a tomb. Even though it appears as if pouring or sprinkling was the common mode for performing various baptisms throughout Scripture, if you have been baptized by immersion, you can have full confidence that the Lord is pleased. After all, baptism is not about your resolve of faithfulness to God, but God’s resolve of faithfulness to you. The meaning is primary, not the mode.

Chapter 9: What about Re-Baptism?

As a pastor, I have spoken with many people who want to be re-baptized for a variety of reasons. Some were baptized as infants and feel as if they have missed out on the existential experience. Others were baptized in later years but have come to a deeper understanding of the gospel, claiming to have been converted after their baptism.

Since they were too young or didn't know what they really were doing or didn't really understand or didn't really mean it, those seeking re-baptism usually believe that their previous baptism must somehow be invalid, and they want to make it right.

It is at this point that understanding the meaning of baptism is so helpful. If baptism primarily represents my faith promise to God rather than God's grace promise to me, then it might be appropriate to experience countless re-baptisms.

However, if baptism represents God's promise, then it could be that re-baptism would be an unintentional denial of God's faithfulness to his promise.

This means that if baptism is God's promise to me, then I can receive that promise as an infant and the promise remains the same. If I am baptized at ten years old and walk away from the faith in high school and college, but come back in my twenties, God's promise remains the same.

I don't need to be re-baptized. Rather, I need to re-embrace the meaning of my baptism as God's promise of grace and faithfulness to me in Jesus that I am to receive and embrace by faith.

About the Author

McKay Caston (B.A., M.Div., D.Min., Ph.D.) is a pastor, writer, and speaker whose passion is to help people come alive to the wonder, beauty, and transforming power of God's grace by living all of life in union with Jesus.

Over the past twenty-five years, some of the most popular topics he has addressed concern the believer's identity in Christ, the centrality of grace, what it means to embrace the love of God and live in view of the sovereignty of God, as well as the practical significance of the gospel for marriage and parenting.

Having served churches in Missouri, Tennessee, and Mississippi since 1993, Dr. Caston ministers as Founding and Lead Pastor for Creekstone Church in Dahlonega, GA, and teaches on the faculty of Metro Atlanta Seminary. He and his wife, Kristy, have three children, 22, 20 and 14.

When not preparing weekly sermons for Creekstone Church, writing, or spending time with his family and folks in the church, he enjoys exploring the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Georgia.

Follow his blog at www.mckaycaston.com.

