



BAPTISM AND COVENANT  
THEOLOGY

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by Walter Chantry

No Baptist begins to seek an answer to the question “Who should be baptized?” by studying the Bible’s doctrine of the covenants. Rather, he begins with New Testament texts which deal directly with the term “baptize.” In a later study of Covenant Theology, he finds confirmation and undergirding of his conclusions.

1. In the New Testament, we discover the *nature of baptism defined*. In the definition, something must be said about the person baptized. Its central significance is that the one baptized is said to be savingly joined to Christ. We agree that the definition in the Westminster Confession of Faith is essentially biblical:

“Baptism is a sacrament of the New Testament, ordained by Jesus Christ, not only for the solemn admission of the party baptized into the visible church, but also to be *unto him* a sign and seal of the covenant of grace, of *his* ingrafting into Christ, of regeneration, of remission of sins, and of *his* giving up unto God through Jesus Christ, to walk in newness of life . . .” (Chapter XXVIII).

2. *In every clear New Testament example*, the person baptized made a credible confession of faith in Jesus Christ prior to receiving the sacrament. This has been called the Baptist’s argument from silence. But that is an unfair charge. To refrain from a practice on which the Bible is silent is not wrong. But to build a positive practice on supposed but unwritten premises is to build on silence.

Every New Testament text cited to support infant baptism appears empty apart from a strong predisposition to find such texts and presuppositions to impose upon them.

A) Amazingly, *Matthew 19:13*: “*Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not, for of such is the kingdom of heaven,*” has been used frequently by serious theologians to support infant baptism. We share the indignation of B. B. Warfield who said, “What has this [verse] to do with infant baptism?” Some point has been made of the related passage in Mark where Jesus is said to bless the children, and note has been taken of his placing his hands upon them. But, again, we find no solemn ceremony in this passage indicating that the children were acknowledged to be in the covenant of grace. Prayerful calling of God’s blessing upon any child would be most natural apart from such restricted signification.

B) Acts 2:39 has also been pressed into service to support infant baptism. “*For the promise is unto you and to your children . . .*” Usually the sentence is not completed. But the Scripture goes on, “*and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call.*” The context has in view specifically spiritual promises, namely remission of sins and filling with the Holy Spirit. These promises cannot be said to attach themselves to all the crowd before Peter (the “you” of the text), but only to “*as many as the Lord our God shall call.*” They could not be said to belong to ‘*all that are afar off*’, but only to “*as many as the Lord our God shall call.*” If that phrase qualifies the first and third parties mentioned, it must also qualify “your children”. The promises do not belong unto the children of believers apart from effectual calling. Only those children who receive this saving grace of God may be conceived of as being heirs of the spiritual promises.

C) Household baptisms are called upon, by paedobaptists, as evidence of infant baptism in the New Testament. There are four references: Cornelius (*Acts 10*), Lydia (*Acts 16*), the Philippian jailor (*Acts 16*), Stephanas (*1 Corinthians 1*). None of the references say that infants were in these houses. Finding infant baptism here is built upon the dual assumption that there were infants in the houses and that household must have meant every individual in the household without exception. The last of these is a road we Calvinists have been down with the term “world” in Scripture. The first is very untenable. But the two together cannot be held; for we find in the Bible itself, the pattern of these household baptisms. All Cornelius’ house gathered to hear Peter’s preaching. The Holy Ghost fell upon all - they all received the extraordinary gifts of the Spirit. Then, all were baptized. Paul first preached to the jailor’s household. Then, all were baptized. After the baptism, all rejoiced *believing* in God. Hearing the Word and believing upon that preaching can scarcely be attributed to infants. No doubt, the same pattern adhered to other cases of household baptisms. In Lydia’s case, there is the most doubt that a woman in business would be nursing an infant. The Bible does not tell us she had a husband, let alone children. Infant baptism can be found here only by those most anxious to do so.

D) *1 Corinthians 7:14* is another favorite verse. There we are told that children are “holy”. The text does not have even vague reference to church membership or baptism. It is talking about mixed marriages

in which one spouse is a believer and the other is not. The question is whether such a relationship is proper, moral, or holy for those who were converted after marriage to the unbeliever. Paul reasons from the obvious to the doubtful. It is obvious that your children are not bastards. They were born in wedlock. They are holy. Therefore, it ought to be clear to you that your marriage relationship is holy. Don't feel guilty about it or wish to be free from your obligations. If the word "holy" suggests a covenant relationship or cultic purity, making the children proper objects for baptism, then the unbelieving spouse is also a valid candidate for the sacrament. The verb "sanctify" has precisely the same root and signification as the adjective "holy." And it is the holiness of the spouse that the passage belabors.

With such an appalling lack of New Testament evidence for infant baptism, those who support such a practice have rapidly retreated to Old Testament texts and an argument from the unity of the covenants. The practice of baptizing infants of believers is founded on Old Testament Scripture, or upon texts of the New Testament where suitability for baptizing infants is read into them with a predisposition and presupposition drawn from the Old Testament.

## I. HISTORIC COVENANT THEOLOGY AND INFANT BAPTISM

The argument has hung upon a syllogism that goes something like this: There is a unity between the Old and New Covenants. Circumcision in the Old is parallel to baptism in the New. Infants of believers were circumcised in the Old. Therefore, infants of believers should be baptized in the New. Many tell us that this syllogism is so strong that New Testament silence is a major argument in favor of their position. The New Covenant is so like the Old, and baptism so parallel to circumcision, that unless the New Testament absolutely forbids the baptism of infants, it must be practiced.

As B. B. Warfield said, "It is true that there is no express command to baptize infants in the New Testament, no express record of the baptism of infants and no passage so stringently implying it that we must infer from them that infants were baptized. If such warrant as this were necessary to justify the usage, we would have to leave it completely unjustified. But the lack of this express warrant is something far short

of forbidding the rite; and if the continuity of the church through all ages can be made good, the warrant for infant baptism is not to be sought in the New Testament, but in the Old Testament where the church was instituted and nothing short of an actual forbidding of it in the New Testament would warrant our omitting it now.”

**1. THE HERMENEUTICAL FLAW.** Immediately we Baptists raise our first objection. There is here a serious *hermeneutical flaw*. How can a distinctively New Testament ordinance have its fullest - nay, its only foundation - in Old Testament Scripture? This is contrary to any just sense of Biblical Theology and against all sound rules of interpretation. To quote Patrick Fairbairn in *The Interpretation of Prophecy*, “There cannot be a surer canon of interpretation, than that everything which affects the constitution and destiny of the New Testament church has its clearest determination in New Testament Scripture. This canon strikes at the root of many false conclusions and on the principle which has its grand embodiment in popery, which would send the world back to the age of comparative darkness and imperfection for the type of its normal and perfected condition.” If you allow Old Testament examples to alter New Testament principles regarding the church, you have hermeneutically opened the door to Rome’s atrocities. It is upon such rules of interpretation that the priest and the mass have been justified. We must find the clearest expression, of that which is normative for the New Covenant’s ordinances, in the New Covenant relation.

**2. THE THEOLOGICAL FLAW.** Beyond this, there is a theological flaw. It is nothing new for Baptists to adhere to Covenant Theology. They have done so since the Seventeenth Century. We conceive of God’s dealings with man in a covenantal structure. We believe that every covenant made with man since the Fall is unified in its essence. In all ages there has been one rule of life - **God’s moral law**. God’s standard of righteousness was the same before Moses received the Ten Commandments, and it is the same today. There has been but one way to salvation in all historic covenants since the Fall. The Gospel by which Adam was saved is the same as that by which we are saved. Genesis 3:15 declares a salvation that is wholly of grace through faith in Christ. The basic differences between the covenants of history in these essential matters are those of Biblical Theology. The promises of the Gospel have become more clear with each succeeding age of

revelation, though the promises have been identically the same. The moral law has been more fully expounded, though never changed. So we agree about the unity of the historic covenants recorded in the Bible. But paedobaptists have been negligent in defining the diversity in the administrations of the Covenant of Grace. As dispensationalism has erred when it has failed to see the essential unity of the covenants since the Fall, many serious errors have arisen from a failure to acknowledge diversity in these historic covenants. An example may be seen in the Reformers' failure to distinguish church and state. In the administration under Moses, the church was coextensive with the state. In the administration of Christ, the extent of church and state are not to be thought identical. In the Mosaic economy, magistrates administered the church and prophets made their authority felt in government. In the Christian administration of Grace, a strict sense of the church separate from the state must be maintained. We must define the diversity as well as the unity.

Paedobaptists have unconsciously recognized a difference between the Old Testament and New with respect to the constitution of the church and subjects of their ordinances. In the Old Covenant, adult sons and servants were circumcised, and thus incorporated into the visible church. Now, only the infants of believers are baptized. In the Old, children came to the Passover at a very young age. Now small children are not admitted to the Lord's Table. Whence this change? When the principle of diversity is formulated, it will exclude infants from the sacrament of baptism. Jeremiah 31:31-34 is pivotal to expressing the diversity of covenant administrations. It is quoted in Hebrews 8 and again in 10 to prove that "Christ is mediator of a better covenant." There is an emphatic contrast made in verses 31 and 32. The differences are so striking and dramatic that one covenant is called "new" and it is implied that the other is old. The Jews under the Old Covenant were warned that revolutionary changes would be made. The covenant in force was inadequate except to prepare for the New. So surpassing is the glory of the New, that it should lead them to look for the demolition of the Old. The passage suggests two vital distinctions ushered in by the effusion of the Spirit. This effusion made a change in administration possible.

The first difference is found in verse 33 of Jeremiah 31. The Old Covenant was characterized by outward formalism. The New would be marked by inward spiritual life. This is not an absolute distinction

but it is a marked contrast. Of course, there was spiritual religion and heart commitment to God in the Old Testament. Abraham's faith would put ours to shame. We must wonder if any but Christ Himself ever equaled the prayer life of David addressed in the Psalms. Moses spoke to God as face to face. Yet, these are refreshing streams in the midst of Old Testament attention to outward, formal, national religion. There is a mass of outward rules, a history of formal religion, a ponderous identification of church and nation. Relatively little attention is given to inward life. If a man is circumcised, he is counted a Jew. If he is conformed to outward practices, he is called clean and welcome at the ceremonies of worship. Paul tells us that this system of religion was like the strict tutor who tells a child what to do at every turn.

But the New Testament church is come of age. It is, by way of contrast, inward, spiritual and personal. Certainly there is outward formality in the New Covenant, but it is minimal; and the most formal ceremony calls attention to the inward. The New Testament presses personal self-examination everywhere and constantly makes spiritual application of its truths. There is a notable shift to questioning experience of grace at every point.

Verse 34 of Jeremiah 31 suggests the second distinction. There will be a marked contrast in the knowledge of those in the New Covenant. As the coming of the Spirit will add a new dimension of life to the church, so He will add a new dimension of light. *"From the least to the greatest"* in the New Covenant will know the Lord. The subject matter of their knowledge will not be shadows but the living reality of Christ. The mysteries hidden in the Old will be made known to them. The manner of instruction will shift from repetitious ceremonies, for they will all know the Lord. So then, we will expect the New Covenant to stand in contrast with the Old in that its members have greater life and light.

This diversity is nowhere more evident than in the ceremonies of worship. New Testament worship presents us with a most striking contrast with Old Testament ordinances. This can be illustrated by looking at the Lord's Supper, which finds a counterpart in the Old Testament Passover. The great spiritual truth of redemption by blood is figured in the Passover, but it is somewhat obscured beneath an outward and formal atmosphere. Then, too, the ceremony mixes the figures of personal redemption and national deliverance. Even



those who had no acquaintance with spiritual redemption, observed it. This they should have done; for their national life arose from the historic event remembered. Very young children came to the Passover as participants that, by it, they might ask the significance and as they grew older, come to understand the redemption figures. (cf. Exodus 12:24-27, etc.)

In the New Testament, things are quite different. 1 Corinthians 11:23-30 gives instruction for the most formal ceremony of the New Covenant. Here very young children must not come. Only the “worthy” with “discernment” are welcome at the feast remembering our redemption. It is not marked by any of the nationalism of the Old Covenant. Each person is charged to “*examine himself*” before daring to partake. He must find himself “*worthy*” - a personal recipient of grace. He must have “*discernment*”- that inward, spiritual light that peculiarly marks this covenant. Light and life are prerequisites of joining this most outward and formal act of worship.

The same is true of the waters of baptism. This ceremony does not desert the New Covenant’s pattern to revert to the Old. It belongs to those who are “worthy” and have “discernment”. Repentance and faith are everywhere demanded as prior conditions for baptism.

To summarize: IN THE OLD COVENANT, ALL THAT WAS SPIRITUAL WAS IDENTIFIED WITH AN OUTWARD NATION. IN THE NEW COVENANT, ALL THAT IS OUTWARD IS IDENTIFIED WITH A SPIRITUAL NATION.

**3. THE EXEGETICAL FLAWS.** Then, there are a number of *exegetical flaws* in the paedobaptist theology.

A) Many have reasoned thus: “Infants of believers were circumcised in the Old Covenant. Therefore, infants of believers should be baptized in the New.” Though in Abraham’s case faith preceded circumcision of his children, this cannot be said to be the rule of the Old Covenant rite. There were times when faith in the subjects of circumcision or in their parents was all but ignored. In the time of Joshua, an entire nation was circumcised in a day. There was no concern for personal election or personal faith. It was clearly administered as a sign of the outward privileges in belonging to the elect nation. Circumcision was never withheld because a parent had no faith. Even when the prophets denounced the Jews for being uncircumcised in heart, they did not suggest that the sons of these unconverted Jews be excluded from the rite of circumcision. To attempt to find a warrant for seeking faith in

the fathers of those who are baptized in these Old Testament texts is wholly unsatisfactory.

B) It is also said that just as baptism is a sign of heirship to the spiritual promises of grace in the New Covenant, circumcision was a sign of heirship to the same spiritual promises in the Old. This is only partially true. Baptism is a sign of spiritual blessing in Christ and only that. Circumcision, too, depicted unity with Christ in His death and heirship to spiritual blessings (cf. Colossians 2:11-13). But there was more to its significance. The distinctive aspects of the covenants cling to their signs just as surely as the common elements of the covenants do. In the Lord's Supper and the Passover, redemption by blood is signified. Yet, they differ in this: The Old ceremony suggested the outward and national aspect of that administration. The New ceremony stresses the inward and personal aspect in its administration. So circumcision could be given to 13-year-old Ishmael, who, Abraham was assured, would not be a partaker of the spiritual blessings. But for him and other non-elect Jews, it was proper by circumcision to be identified with the outward aspects of blessing and administration. It was proper to be circumcised as the literal seed and heir of the literal land and as one by whom, according to the flesh, the Messiah would come, while not being of the spiritual seed and heir of heaven. Baptism has no merely earthly significance. There are no blessings figured in it that can be conceived of apart from an experience of grace.

C) Much weight has been placed on the formula "*Thee and thy seed*" in Genesis 17. Paedobaptists insist upon an outward, literal significance of the term "*seed*." In their scheme, the New Covenant counterpart to Abraham's seed is the physical offspring of believers. This is done while totally ignoring the fact that the New Testament says a great deal about the Covenant with Abraham, for it is central to New Testament religion. Romans 4, Romans 9, and Galatians 3 and 4, especially Galatians 3:7, belabor the point that believers, and believers alone, are the seed of Abraham. These texts further insist that the promises which are spiritual and eternal belong to no physical seed.

Romans 9 discusses Abraham's immediate, physical offspring. Some were of the flesh; some of the spirit. There was a personal election within the family election. Abraham could not look upon his own immediate seed as heirs of the promises. "*They which are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God: but the children of the promise are counted for the seed.*" (v. 8). How can believers today

lean upon the promise to Abraham which is clearly interpreted in the New Testament and find for themselves a greater expectation for their children than Abraham had a right to? The New Testament is not silent about this seed. It tells us they are believers alone!

**4. THE PRACTICAL FLAWS.** Lastly, there are *practical flaws* in the paedobaptist theology. Those who sprinkle infants are on the horns of a dilemma. Either they must tamper with the definition of baptism to make it signify something less than personal spiritual union with Christ as the Bible clearly teaches; or they will be driven to teach infant salvation or presumptive regeneration. If the first course is chosen, one must also corrupt the New Testament view of the church and its discipline. If some who are less than saved are properly to be considered as members of Christ's body, there is a great deal of stress with the New Testament's view of membership and fellowship. If the second course is chosen, one's pedagogy [teaching] will be affected. How are parents and pastors to address the children if they are viewed as joined to Christ? Unfortunately, much paedobaptist literature written for children reflects a tendency to address them as believers, not as in need of evangelism. Note the interesting historic dispute on this subject by paedobaptist theologians J.H. Thornwell and R.L. Dabney on one hand, and Charles Hodge on the other.

## II. HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

I can sympathize with students who are wrestling with the problem of baptism. I can remember when I wished to be convinced of the paedobaptist position. There would be many practical advantages. Another forceful factor is the great history of godly men who were paedobaptists, especially the Reformers and Puritans. But as history gave me the problem, so it has suggested a solution. Paedobaptism is clearly tied to sacralism in church history. After Constantine and his associates succeeded in getting across the idea that church and state are coextensive, baptism identified a person not only as a member of Christ's church but also as a citizen of the state. The Anabaptists in the Middle Ages were not so concerned about the subjects and mode of baptism as they were about the purity of the church. Believer's baptism has always naturally followed the concept of a believers' church. When Zwingli worked closely with Anabaptists (whom he later helped

to condemn to death), he had a rather different view of the church from that which he adopted later. Consequently, he had a believers' baptism view. But when he moved to the concept of a state church, he vigorously defended infant baptism.

So, too, in England. So long as the concept of a state church reigned, there was very little interest in a baptism position. But as soon as the separatist movement arose, the Baptists emerged naturally from the paedobaptist midst. Just as the sacralist principles were drawn from the Old Testament improperly, so the retreat from national religion to family religion has rested upon Old Testament practices. Once the constitution and discipline of the New Testament church has been rightly conceived, the hangover of infant baptism must fall away.

These are issues over which we do not wish to lose fellowship with paedobaptist brethren. Yet, they are principles which we will not jettison for the sake of fellowship.

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