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PAEDOBAPTISM VERSUS BELIEVER'S BAPTISM

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## Introduction

The doctrine of baptism lies at the intersection of two important areas of theology: ecclesiology and soteriology. Christians throughout history have viewed baptism as an important practice, and both paedobaptists and so-called “credobaptists” agree that baptism signifies entrance into the new covenant and the church. However, baptism is closely connected to salvation in the New Testament; therefore, baptism has great implications for how Christians understand the gospel and salvation. Since baptism is attached to salvation and the life of the church, it is imperative that all Christians, regardless of their personal position on this issue, know the arguments for infant baptism and believer’s baptism.

Both sides of the issue offer several lines of evidence for their respective positions. Both paedobaptists and Baptists<sup>1</sup> appeal to Scripture. Both develop a theology based on covenants between God and man. Both parties appeal to Christian history. Of course, both sides of the issue cannot be correct: there must be one, true, biblical baptism.

How do we determine which position is correct? Presbyterian theologian John Frame offers some advice for determining the truth of a theological argument. “Frequently in a theological argument, it is important to establish where the burden of proof lies.”<sup>2</sup> He then continues:

An obvious example is the question of infant baptism. Because the New Testament is relatively silent on this question, we are faced with two alternative approaches. We can assume continuity with the Old Testament principle of

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<sup>1</sup> I will use the term “Baptist” for anyone who believes that the only proper candidates for baptism are those who have made a credible profession of faith in Jesus, with the acknowledgement that not all who affirm believer’s baptism are affiliated with Baptist denominations.

<sup>2</sup> John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillippsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1987), 270.

administering the sign of the covenant to children, unless New Testament evidence directs us otherwise, and this is the paedobaptist approach. Or we can assume that only adult believers are to be baptized, unless there is New Testament evidence to the contrary, and this is the antipaedobaptist (= “baptist”) approach. On the first approach, the burden of proof is on the baptist to show New Testament evidence against infant baptism. On the second approach, the burden of proof is on the paedobaptist to show New Testament evidence for it. In this case, determining the burden of proof pretty much decides the question, since there is little explicit New Testament evidence on either side and since the two parties are pretty much agreed on the Old Testament data. It seems to me that the first approach is correct: the church of the New Testament is essentially the same as the church of the Old.<sup>3</sup>

Frame’s argument here is typical of the one presented by many paedobaptists. They assume great continuity between the Old and New Testaments. They see the New Testament church as being roughly the same as Old Testament Israel. They also believe baptism is the equivalent of circumcision, which is why they baptize infants.

However, it seems to me that much of the New Testament (including the new covenant and the practice of baptism), though in continuity with the Old Testament, is indeed new. Therefore, it seems best to put the burden of proof on both Baptists and paedobaptists. Both sides should present their arguments carefully, relying on exegetical, biblical, systematic, and historical theology to state their respective cases.

In order to understand these two theological positions well, we will examine two similar, multi-author works. On the paedobaptist side is *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*, edited by Gregg Strawbridge.<sup>4</sup> The Baptist position is represented by *Believer’s Baptism: Sign of the*

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Gregg Strawbridge, ed., *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2003).

*New Covenant in Christ*, edited by Tom Schreiner and Shawn Wright.<sup>5</sup> Both works are similar in composition, length, and scope, which makes them suitable for comparison. After considering the case each book makes, I will evaluate the positions and provide my own views on the subject.

### **The Case for Infant Baptism**

Many Baptists might be surprised at how complex the case for infant baptism is. Paedobaptists believe, no less than Baptists, that their practice is biblical and commanded by God. They are sincerely trying to obey what they understand to be the Bible's teaching on baptism. The core of their argument is summarized by Mark Ross: "I would maintain that the case fundamentally rests on establishing two principal contentions: first, that baptism and circumcision have essentially the same meaning; and second, that the covenant community is similarly constituted in the Old and New Testaments (specifically, that children are members of the covenant community in both)."<sup>6</sup> The paedobaptist argument focuses on the composition of the covenant and its attendant signs.

In order to understand the case for paedobaptism, one must understand how they view the covenants. According to the Westminster Confession of Faith, "The first covenant made with man was a covenant of works, wherein life was promised to Adam; and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience."<sup>7</sup> Adam failed to obey the terms of the

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn D. Wright, eds., *Believer's Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> Mark E. Ross, "Baptism and Circumcision as Signs and Seals," in Strawbridge, *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*, 100.

<sup>7</sup> Westminster Confession of Faith 7.2, quoted in Cornelis P. Venema, "Covenant Theology and Baptism," in Strawbridge, *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism* 205.

covenant of works (obedience), so this covenant proved to be ineffective. Only a covenant of grace, made by our sovereign God, would endure. Paedobaptists believe the first hint of that covenant came in Genesis 3:15, when God promised that a descendant of Eve would crush the head of Satan.

The covenant of grace was inaugurated by God in the presence of Abraham in Genesis 15, after God promised to bless Abraham in Genesis 12. The mark of covenant came in Genesis 17, when God told Abraham the covenant was for him and his children: “And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you” (Gen. 17:7). This covenant required circumcision of all males; infants were to be circumcised on the eighth day (Gen. 17:9-13). Male descendants of Abraham who were not circumcised would be cut off from the covenant community (Gen. 17:14).

Paedobaptists believe this covenant of grace made with Abraham and his offspring continued through the Old Testament under various administrations. They also believe that the current iteration of the covenant of grace is the new covenant. Thus, they see all the covenants as being united, flowing from the Abrahamic covenant. They rightly state that God’s plan of salvation has not changed<sup>8</sup> and salvation has always been by grace through faith.<sup>9</sup> They also observe that the basic covenant language—“I will be your God and you will be my people”—appears throughout the Bible (Gen. 17:7; Exod. 19:5; Deut. 29:13; 2 Sam. 7:14; Jer. 31:33/Heb.

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<sup>8</sup> Randy Booth, “Covenant Transition,” in Strawbridge, *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*, 177.

<sup>9</sup> Venema, “Covenant Theology and Baptism,” 217.

8:10; Rev. 21:3).<sup>10</sup> Finally, Ezekiel 37:24-26 connects the Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic, and new covenants, showing their unity.<sup>11</sup>

One might ask at this point how the various covenants of the Old Testament are unified, and how they connect to the new covenant. Paedobaptists believe these covenants, all belonging to the overarching covenant of grace, offer the same promise. According to Cornelis Venema,

The one great promise [of the covenant of grace] is the promise of salvation in communion with God through Christ. This promise includes such blessings as the forgiveness of sins and acceptance with God (free justification), the renewal of life in obedience by the working of the Spirit, and the final glorification of life in unbroken fellowship with God. These promises are sure and certain of fulfillment, for they are as immutable as God himself, who extends them and secures their realization by the work of Christ through the Spirit.<sup>12</sup>

However, this does not mean that everyone in the covenant is saved. Ross writes, “We must point out that, in the position taken here, *to have a place in the covenant does not mean that one is in fact saved and in possession of all the covenant blessings.*”<sup>13</sup> More succinctly, Doug Wilson writes, “No covenant child is automatically saved.”<sup>14</sup>

Paedobaptists believe that this covenant will always consist of a mixed group of believers and unbelievers. A distinction is often made between the visible church and the invisible church. The visible church consists of believers and unbelievers, all those visibly part of the local church. The invisible church consists solely of the elect, those whom God has regenerated. At the

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 216.

<sup>11</sup> Booth, “Covenant Transition,” 188.

<sup>12</sup> Venema, “Covenant Theology and Baptism,” 209.

<sup>13</sup> Ross, “Baptism and Circumcision as Signs and Seals,” 98; original emphasis.

<sup>14</sup> Douglas Wilson, “Baptism and Children: Their Place in the Old and New Testaments,” in Strawbridge, *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*, 291.

consummation of all things, there will be judgment, and in the eternal state, the new covenant community will consist solely of the redeemed.<sup>15</sup>

Those who affirm infant baptism find support for a mixed covenant community in the Old Testament and in the New Testament. One does not have to read much of the Old Testament to know that not all of Israel had a saving knowledge of God. In the New Testament, paedobaptists assert, various warning passages (such as in Hebrews 6 and 10) presuppose that there can be covenant breakers, those who fail to believe. According to Strawbridge, “Many passages teach that the new covenant has stipulations for judgment (Matt. 16:19; 1 Cor. 11:29-30, 34; Heb. 10:30-31; 1 Peter 4:17), so membership in it cannot be exclusively for the elect.”<sup>16</sup> The warning passages in Hebrews are frequently invoked by paedobaptists to prove this point, as are John 15 and Romans 11, both of which speak of breaking branches off of the covenant tree.<sup>17</sup>

As we will see, the paedobaptist conception of the new covenant is very different from the one held by Baptists. How do paedobaptists view the new covenant? Curiously, there are two different interpretations of Jeremiah 31:31-34 in this book. These two different readings are found in different chapters authored by Jeffrey Niell and Richard Pratt. The former believes that the new covenant is not very new. “God has implemented no change whatsoever in covenant membership in the new covenant.”<sup>18</sup> What is new, in his estimation, is that Jesus has fulfilled the

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<sup>15</sup> Richard L. Pratt Jr., “Infant Baptism in the New Covenant,” in Strawbridge, *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*, 173.

<sup>16</sup> Gregg Strawbridge, “The Polemics of Anabaptism from the Reformation Onward,” in Strawbridge, *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*, 283.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 282.

<sup>18</sup> Jeffrey D. Niell, “The Newness of the New Covenant,” in Strawbridge, *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*, 132.

sacrifices and temple worship of the Mosaic covenant. “To state it negatively: the newness of the new covenant is seen in *the cessation of the ceremonial aspects of the law*. To state it positively: Jesus Christ has fulfilled the law.”<sup>19</sup> He then argues that the knowledge of God mentioned in Jeremiah 31:34 is the knowledge that the old covenant priests had of God. In the new covenant, all members have this knowledge that had previously been limited to priests.<sup>20</sup> This does not mean that all members of the new covenant have a saving knowledge of God.

Pratt views the new covenant differently. He acknowledges that the Baptist view of Jeremiah 31:31-34 includes regeneration, salvation, and forgiveness of sins. Furthermore, this new covenant is not like the old one, which was broken (Jer. 31:32). “Without a doubt, Jeremiah distinguished the new covenant as one that would not be broken, but this aspect of Jeremiah’s prophecy poses a serious challenge for infant baptism.”<sup>21</sup> This is certainly true if all members of the new covenant are the elect, and baptism signifies entrance into the new covenant. Pratt offers a creative solution to this potentially problematic reading of the new covenant. He sees the covenant as inaugurated by Jesus (Luke 22:20), but he sees the fulfillment of the covenant as a future event. In the end, the new covenant will consist only of the redeemed, but now, it contains a mixed membership of believers and their children.<sup>22</sup> In other words, this is an “already-but-not-yet” situation. He believes that the consummation of Jeremiah 31:31-34 will occur with the fulfillment of the promise to bring the redeemed into the promised land (Jer. 31:27-30) and to

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 142; original emphasis.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 148-153.

<sup>21</sup> Pratt, “Infant Baptism in the New Covenant,” 159.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 173.



rebuild the holy city (Jer. 31:38-40). “In a word, the fulfillment of the new covenant depended on the fulfillment of the other predictions of chapter 31.”<sup>23</sup>

Paedobaptists believe that children of believers are members of the new covenant. Certainly, the physical offspring of Abraham were in the old covenant (Gen. 17:7). In the New Testament, children of believers are part of the new covenant community. An appeal is often made to Acts 2:39, in which Peter says, “For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.” Joel Beeke and Ray Lanning believe that the Jewish audience that Peter addressed would have understood that this was a reference to Genesis 17:7.<sup>24</sup> Paedobaptists believe that the children of believers are in view when the “offspring of Israel” are mentioned (Jer. 31:36-37).<sup>25</sup> They also find evidence for their position in the fact that children are addressed in letters to churches (Eph. 6:1-3; Col. 3:20), and that Paul calls the children of one believing parent “holy” (1 Cor. 7:14). This last verse is used frequently throughout the book. Bryan Chapell, writing with reference to that verse, claims, “Few verses in Scripture more forcefully indicate that God communicates his grace to children while they are in the household of a covenant parent.”<sup>26</sup> Paedobaptists also assume that the various household baptisms described in Acts include children, possibly even infants.

Paedobaptists believe that baptism, like circumcision in the Old Testament, is the sign and seal of the covenant. In Romans 4:11, circumcision is referred to as both a sign and a seal of

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>24</sup> Joel R. Beeke and Ray B. Lanning, “Unto You, and to Your Children,” in Strawbridge, *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*, 56.

<sup>25</sup> Strawbridge, “The Polemics of Anabaptism,” 284-85.

<sup>26</sup> Bryan Chapell, “A Pastoral View of Infant Baptism,” in Strawbridge, *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*, 13.

the righteousness that Abraham attained by faith. Paedobaptists believe circumcision initiated individuals (males, of course) into the covenant. Furthermore, this action had spiritual significance. According to Chapell, “The removal of the foreskin from the male reproductive organ signified the removal of spiritual uncleanness from God’s people and communicated that God’s provision for blessing was being passed on to all the children of Abraham from generation to generation.”<sup>27</sup> Circumcision also pointed forward to Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross. “The bloody sign of circumcision that prefigured the shedding of Christ’s blood no longer remains appropriate after the Lamb of God has shed his blood once for all in order to remove our sin (cf. Heb. 10:10; 1 Peter 1:18). . . . Baptism with water is the sign of the washing away of our sin.”<sup>28</sup>

Paedobaptists believe that Colossians 2:11-12 shows that baptism has replaced circumcision. “These words remind us that salvation comes through faith and also that *the rite of circumcision that once signified the benefits of Abraham’s covenant has been replaced by baptism.*”<sup>29</sup> In this view of baptism, the action does not signify that one has already been born again of the Holy Spirit and forgiven one’s sins. Rather, “The function of the sign is to confirm the promise to us, making it, as it were, more firm in our minds.”<sup>30</sup> In other words, baptism confirms the promise made by God that all who put their faith in him will be forgiven. It is future-oriented. It marks the infant’s entrance into the new covenant and the church; should he or she have faith, he or she will then receive all the blessings of the covenant, including forgiveness of sins and salvation.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 17; original emphasis.

<sup>30</sup> Ross, “Baptism and Circumcision as Signs and Seals,” 86.

Finally, it should be noted that paedobaptists appeal to church history to justify their position. Peter Leithart believes that the apostles must have practiced infant baptism, for if they did not, it would have been a radical departure from covenant administration. “A sudden shift from inclusion of infants in Israel to exclusion of infants from the new Israel would have left identifiable skid marks on the historical record.”<sup>31</sup> Leithart believes that the practice of infant baptism became less prevalent in early church history as “alien influences” from Greco-Roman culture changed views on baptism.<sup>32</sup> However, “The church was rescued from Baptist theology and practice by Augustine of Hippo,”<sup>33</sup> and by the sixth century, Emperor Justinian mandated infant baptism within the Christian empire.<sup>34</sup> Infant baptism then became the norm until the Anabaptists and Baptists of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries challenged this practice.

### **The Case for Believer’s Baptism**

The case for believer’s baptism is relatively straightforward. As Mark Dever writes, “The Christian church is commanded to practice baptism by immersing in water a person who both professes and evidences conversion. This baptism is performed in obedience to Christ as a confession of sin, a profession of faith in Christ, and a display of hope in the resurrection of the body.”<sup>35</sup> Baptists and paedobaptists agree that baptism marks the entrance of an individual into

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<sup>31</sup> Peter J. Leithart, “Infant Baptism in History: An Unfinished Tragicomedy,” in Strawbridge, *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*, 249.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 255.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 258.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 248.

<sup>35</sup> Mark E. Dever, “The Church,” in Daniel L. Akin, ed., *A Theology for the Church* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2007), 785.

the new covenant and the church and they also agree that adult converts should be baptized. Baptists, however, do not believe that infants are proper candidates for baptism because they cannot express faith in Jesus.

The case for believer's baptism is laid out quite systematically in *Believer's Baptism*. The editors define what baptism is in the introduction to this volume: "Baptism, as this book will demonstrate, is the initiation rite into the Christian church."<sup>36</sup> They believe that this rite reflects the gospel. "Believer's baptism accords with the gospel because it teaches that the objective work of God in salvation necessarily leads to the subjective response of faith."<sup>37</sup> These views are supported through careful exegesis of the relevant passages in the New Testament, an examination of covenant theology, and an assessment of various views of baptism throughout Christian history.

Andreas Köstenberger provides analysis of baptism in the Gospels. He observes that the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20) presupposes that those baptized by the disciples would be of "a sufficient age and maturity" to choose to be baptized and instructed in the tenets of Christianity.<sup>38</sup> He also believes it is striking that Jesus does not teach about infant baptism or about baptism replacing circumcision. Additionally, he observes that the mode of baptism was that of immersion, given the fact that these baptisms were conducted in the Jordan River.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Schreiner and Wright, "Introduction," in *Believer's Baptism*, 1.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>38</sup> Andreas J. Köstenberger, "Baptism in the Gospels," in Schreiner and Wright, *Believer's Baptism*, 24.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 33-34.

Robert Stein examines baptism in Luke and Acts. He makes the following important observation regarding Luke's writing:

When he refers to Christian baptism in Acts (and in his Gospel as well), he describes the experience of baptism as it is related to the process of becoming a Christian. In addition, Luke illustrates how in that process repentance, faith, confession of Jesus as Christ and Lord, baptism, and receiving the Spirit are interrelated and are all integral parts of the experience of becoming a Christian.<sup>40</sup>

Anyone who has studied Acts knows that Luke presents these elements of conversion in different combinations, yet when he mentions one element, he intends them all. Furthermore, one cannot separate one element from the rest. "For Luke 'repentance' is an example of synecdoche in which 'repentance' refers to 'repentance-faith-baptism.'"<sup>41</sup> After listing a number of examples in which Luke writes of belief in Acts, Stein observes, "In these examples 'believe' serves as an example of synecdoche and is a shorthand expression for 'believed-repent-ed-confessed Christ-received the Spirit-were baptized.'"<sup>42</sup>

The important point that Stein is making is that Luke could not imagine an individual being baptized without also repenting, believing, confessing Jesus as Lord, and receiving the Spirit. If that is so, then infant baptism is effectively ruled out.

Schreiner arrives at a similar conclusion in his chapter on baptism in the epistles. He looks at several verses that mention baptism. With respect to 1 Peter 3:21, he observes, "The one receiving baptism also appeals to God for a good conscience, which means that he asks God to

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<sup>40</sup> Robert H. Stein, "Baptism in Luke-Acts," in Schreiner and Wright, *Believer's Baptism*, 36.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 51, note 33.

cleanse him of his sins on the basis of Christ's death and resurrection."<sup>43</sup> Obviously, infants cannot make such an appeal.

Ephesians 4:5 states that there is one baptism. This fact may seem obvious, but two different authors in *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism* try to make a distinction between passages that address the baptism of adult converts, the baptism of infants who grow up to be believers, and the baptism of all children.<sup>44</sup> First Corinthians 12:13 also refers to the unity of believers in baptism. According to Schreiner's analysis, "The gift of the Spirit is the mark of the induction into the people of God (Gal 3:1-5), and hence Jesus' work of baptizing with the Spirit occurs at the threshold of the Christian life. Once again we should not separate Spirit baptism from water baptism as if Paul were attempting to segregate the one from the other."<sup>45</sup>

One of the clearest passages from the New Testament on the significance of baptism is Romans 6:3-4: "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life." In Schreiner's words, "To say that those who are baptized with Christ is just another

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<sup>43</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, "Baptism in the Epistles: An Initiation Rite for Believers," in Schreiner and Wright, *Believer's Baptism*, 70.

<sup>44</sup> Daniel M. Doriani, "Matthew 28:18-20 and the Institution of Baptism," in Strawbridge, *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*, 41; Joseph Pipa, "The Mode of Baptism," in Strawbridge, *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*, 115, note 5. Doriani claims that the Great Commission has adult converts in mind and Pipa believes that Romans 6:3-4 does not discuss infant baptism, "but rather the role of baptism as a believer reflects on his baptism."

<sup>45</sup> Schreiner, "Baptism in the Epistles," 72.

way of saying that *all* Christians have died with Christ.”<sup>46</sup> It is a clear picture one’s old self dying and one’s new self rising, something that only the regenerate experience.

Schreiner also examines Colossians 2:11-12 carefully, since this passage is used to justify baptism as the replacement of circumcision. The text states, “In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.” Schreiner observes that believers are united to Christ through “the only circumcision that is necessary—one made without hands, that is accomplished by God himself.”<sup>47</sup> This circumcision is a circumcision of the heart, something that the Old Testament mentions (Deut. 10:6; Jer. 4:4) and the New Testament clarifies (Rom. 2:28-29). Physical circumcision pointed to spiritual circumcision, or regeneration. It is spiritual circumcision that is associated with baptism, which is clearly linked to faith in this passage.<sup>48</sup>

Perhaps the most helpful chapter in *Believer’s Baptism* is the one written by Stephen Wellum on covenant theology.<sup>49</sup> For nearly thirty pages, he accurately and fairly presents the paedobaptist argument concerning the covenants. He then presents an evaluation and critique of their position. “Paedobaptists rightly emphasize the unity and continuity of God’s salvific plan across the ages. They fail to do justice, however, to the progressive nature of God’s revelation,

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 77-78.

<sup>49</sup> Stephen J. Wellum, “Baptism and the Relationship between the Covenants,” in Schreiner and Wright, *Believer’s Baptism*.

especially in regard to the biblical covenants, the covenant community, and the covenant signs.”<sup>50</sup> He also observes that the Bible does not speak of one covenant of grace, but rather of multiple covenants. “To continue to speak of one ‘covenant of grace’ too often leads to a flattening of Scripture; indeed, it results in a reductionism which has the tendency of fitting Scripture into our theological system rather than the other way around.”<sup>51</sup>

When discussing the covenants, paedobaptists often fail to realize that the Abrahamic covenant finds its fulfillment in Jesus. He is the true offspring of Abraham (Gal. 3:16) and the true Israel. According to Wellum, “Christ, as the true seed of Abraham and the fulfillment of Israel, unites in himself both spiritual Jews and Gentiles as the ‘Israel of God’ (Gal 6:16).”<sup>52</sup> Therefore, true children of Abraham are those who have faith, not those who have faith and all of their children. The Abrahamic covenant finds its fulfillment in Christ and all who are in him.

Equally important is the fact that circumcision and baptism are not the same. “The covenant sign of circumcision did not require faith for all those who received it, for a variety of reasons, even though it marked a person as a full covenant member. However, the same cannot be said of baptism.”<sup>53</sup> Wellum also observes that the new covenant era is eschatological in nature, marked by the reception of the promised Holy Spirit.

One of the most important contributions Wellum makes to the debate is the recognition of progressive revelation in the Bible. God’s revelation of himself and his plans moves from the Old Testament, full of foreshadowing events and figures, known as types, to their fulfillments in

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 136.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 138.



the New Testament, known as antitypes. “The person and work of Jesus, the new covenant head, requires a change. As we progress across the canon, we move from type to antitype, from covenant heads such as Adam, Noah, Abraham, and David to Christ; and with Christ, we have change.”<sup>54</sup> Of course, Jesus is greater than any of these types. Therefore, the new covenant must be greater, and differences in the new covenant need to be acknowledged and appreciated.

Subsequent chapters in *Believer's Baptism* focus on the history of baptism. Steve McKinion reports that, prior to the third century, no defense of infant baptism was written.<sup>55</sup> On the contrary, all writings concerning baptism seemed to indicate that candidates for baptism underwent catechesis, prayer, and fasting—activities that could not be expected of infants. The practice of infant baptism was strongly advocated by Augustine, who believed that baptism removed original sin. He argued that infants who died without receiving baptism were lost. A high infant mortality seems to have driven this fear, helping establish the institution of infant baptism.

Another important chapter in *Believer's Baptism* concerns the logic of three paedobaptists (John Calvin, John Murray, and Pierre Marcel) and their writings on the sacraments in general, baptism in specific, and the nature of the church. Wright observes that these paedobaptists are often inconsistent in their definitions and, in the end, they do not do justice to the New Testament. According to Wright, “The NT everywhere assumes that those who are members of a local fellowship are believers.” He continues:

The longing of the OT (e.g., Jer 31:31-34; Ezek 36:25-27), as well as the common assumption of the NT, is that when the new covenant became a reality God's

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 147.

<sup>55</sup> Steve McKinion, “Baptism in the Patristic Writings,” in Schreiner and Wright, *Believer's Baptism*, 169.

people would be composed of those who are regenerate, that is, who have been born again by the Holy Spirit. Everywhere the NT addresses churches as those composed of “saints,” who not only are regarded by the apostles as “holy” but who have had certain objective things done for them because of God’s grace.<sup>56</sup>

While the New Testament is consistent, the paedobaptists analyzed here are often inconsistent. For example, Calvin defines baptism in a way that would please Baptists: “Baptism serves as our confession before men. Indeed, it is the mark by which we publicly profess that we wish to be reckoned God’s people; by which we testify that we agree in worshiping the same God, in one religion with all Christians, by which finally we openly affirm our faith.”<sup>57</sup> While Reformed paedobaptists deny baptismal regeneration (the *ex opere operato* position, which states that the act of baptism imparts God’s saving grace), they also sometimes state that God can regenerate an infant, perhaps even in conjunction with the child’s baptism.<sup>58</sup>

### Evaluation

I did not grow up in a Baptist church. Rather, I grew up in a Congregational church (in my home state of Massachusetts) that practiced baptism by sprinkling. I do not recall whether infants were baptized, but I do know that my two brothers were baptized when they were teenagers, following some type of catechetical class. At any rate, the church did not emphasize baptism. Therefore, when I came to learn about baptism, I did not carry with me preconceived notions about the practice that were formed by a strong tradition. Instead, I studied the Bible.

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<sup>56</sup> Shawn D. Wright, “Baptism and the Logic of the Reformed Paedobaptists,” in Schreiner and Wright, *Believer’s Baptism*, 226.

<sup>57</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. J. T. McNeill, trans. F. L. Battles, Library of Christian Classics, Vol. 21 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 4.15.13, quoted in Wright, “Baptism and the Logic of the Reformed Paedobaptists,” 214.

<sup>58</sup> Doriani makes this point in “Matthew 28:18-20 and the Institution of Baptism,” 42.

Wellum makes a wise observation when he writes, “The true test for anyone’s theology is this: Does it do justice to *all* the biblical data?”<sup>59</sup> My conclusion is that the Baptist position is most biblical.

The covenants of the Bible are indeed united—united in Christ. Jesus fulfills the Abrahamic, Mosaic, and Davidic covenants, because he is the true seed of Abraham (Gal. 3:16) the fulfiller of the Old Testament law (Matt. 5:17), and the true son of David (Matt. 1:1; Rom. 1:3). Jesus inaugurated the new covenant, and it is substantially new. Any plain reading of Jeremiah 31:31-34 shows that new covenant members will have God’s law written on their hearts and minds, that they would know God (which must mean they have a salvific relationship with him), and are forgiven of their sins. Jeremiah 31:29-30 make clear that this new covenant will deal with each person individually, not generationally. When we look at Ezekiel 36:25-27, a passage related to the new covenant, we see that cleansing of sin and empowering to obedience are works of the Holy Spirit. Only true Christians—those regenerated by God and possessing faith—are part of this new covenant.

Paedobaptists, in presenting their argument, sometimes use Ezekiel 37:24-26 to show the unity of the covenants. As already stated, I would grant the unity of the covenants in Christ. However, verse 24 of this passage mentions that the people will have “one shepherd.” We know that this shepherd is none other than Jesus. If Jesus is the shepherd, his flock must consist of sheep. We know that his sheep are those who know him, and they cannot be taken out of his hand (John 10:27-29). Paedobaptists state that the new covenant membership consists of sheep and goats, the latter breaking the covenant by their unbelief. This position is not supported by the New Testament.

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<sup>59</sup> Wellum, “Baptism and the Relationship between the Covenants,” 153.

Paedobaptists like to state that circumcision was a sign and seal of the old covenant, and baptism is a sign and seal of the new covenant. There are two problems with this view. One, Roman s 4 says that circumcision was a sign and seal of Abraham's righteousness, which was acquired by faith. The whole point of the passage is to say that Abraham had faith before he was circumcised, which is why he is the father of all who have faith, regardless of whether they are circumcised or not. Two, the New Testament does not refer to baptism as a seal. Rather, the Holy Spirit is the seal, proof that one is a Christian (Eph. 1:13-14; 2 Cor. 1:21-22). Paul says, rather boldly, that those who worship by the Spirit are the true circumcision (Phil. 3:3).

I found it interesting that the authors of *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism* did not carefully exegete many New Testament passages. Unfortunately, they did not examine how Jesus treated the Pharisees and other Jewish leaders of his time. In John 3, for example, he tells Nicodemus that one must be born again to be a part of the kingdom of God. The point is clear: no one is born naturally into the kingdom of God, which must also mean that no one is born into the new covenant. Rather, Jesus tells him, one must be born of water and the Spirit, a reference back to Ezekiel 36:25-27. Regeneration is necessary. Faith is necessary. Without these, no one becomes part of God's people.

Those who baptize infants frequently appeal to Acts 2:39 to prove that the offspring of believers are part of the new covenant. However, if read carefully, the verse states that the promise of the Holy Spirit (v. 38) is for all whom the Lord calls, whether that is "you" (the Jewish audience present at Pentecost), "your children" (subsequent generations), or those who are "far off" (Gentiles). Peter did not mean that all children are immediately in the new covenant. In a similar fashion, paedobaptists use 1 Corinthians 7:14 to indicate that the children of believers are "holy" and therefore part of the new covenant. That same verse claims that the

unbelieving husband of a Christian woman is also holy. Yet no one believes that he should be baptized as well.

It seems that the paedobaptist position fails in light of serious exegetical and theological examination. It also seems not to have the best historical support. At one point in his writing on the history of baptism, Leithart admits, “Paedobaptism is a classic case of the axiom that ‘the law of prayer is the law of faith’ (*lex orandi, lex credendi*). A practice in search of a justification, infant baptism was the rule long before there was much of a coherent theology to explain why it was done.”<sup>60</sup> Augustine and other Church Fathers justified infant baptism through an argument that concerned original sin, baptismal regeneration, and infant mortality. Ulrich Zwingli, one of the Protest Reformers, separated baptism from faith, and relied on a covenantal argument that likened baptism to circumcision.<sup>61</sup> It seems suspicious that infant baptism would be supported by such very different arguments. Yet inconsistent arguments are found throughout *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*, as illustrated by the fact that it contains two completely different readings of Jeremiah 31:31-34.

My greatest concern regarding infant baptism is that it distorts the gospel. God’s people, members of the new covenant, are those who have been transformed by him, through the inner working of the Holy Spirit, which is manifest in their confession of Jesus as Lord and their lives of faith and obedience. It is true that Baptists often baptize people who are not true Christians, but they do not intentionally do so. (And it is true that Baptists ought to be much more careful about their theology, particularly with regard to the gospel and regeneration, and their practice of

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<sup>60</sup> Leithart, “Infant Baptism in History,” 251.

<sup>61</sup> Jonathan H. Rainbow, “‘Confessor Baptism’: The Baptismal Doctrine of the Early Anabaptists,” in Schreiner and Wright, *Believer’s Baptism*, 197-199.

baptism.) Paedobaptists, on the other hand, intentionally baptize those without faith. Theologian Gerald Bray, a paedobaptist, asks, “Adolf Hitler was baptized, but would anyone say he was a Christian? So was Josef Stalin, but what different did that make?”<sup>62</sup> In asking these questions, Bray shows the obvious weakness of infant baptism, because it will invariably include people who never have faith in Christ. The rite of baptism is meant to accompany faith, not to be divorced from it. When we allow people to become official church members without faith, we weaken the church and we tamper with the gospel, which requires repentance and faith.

I would encourage all Christians to learn more about both sides of the baptism debate and to take baptism more seriously. We should know why we baptize and whom we should baptize. Baptists are often eager to baptize those who have not made a credible profession of faith, those who neither truly understand the gospel nor produce distinctly Christian fruit. This, too, does damage to the church and the gospel. Baptism should be reserved for those whom God has transformed by the Spirit. It should be reserved for those who put their faith in Jesus and have repented of their sin.

On a final note, Baptists should take the instruction of their children seriously, recognizing that they are not born into God’s kingdom. Children are a blessing from God, but they are also sinners in need of salvation. Christian parents should pray for their children’s salvation and should be evangelized with the hope that they will one day have faith and will joyfully and obediently be baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>62</sup> Gerald Bray, *God Is Love: A Biblical and Systematic Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 630.

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