

## BAPTISM AND THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE COVENANTS

by Stephen J. Wellum - a Review by Gregg Strawbridge

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Stephen J. Wellum's chapter in *Believer's Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ* (Shreiner & Wright) is an argument against the well-worn pattern of covenant theology to press the continuity of the covenant to the application of infant baptism. For the most part, Wellum fairly summarizes the standard arguments from the Presbyterian and Reformed world and mounts a sustained argument that the inclusion of the physical seed of Christians in the new covenant is erroneous because of the structure and nature of the new covenant. In a word, the "newness of the new covenant" precludes the "generational principle" of the inclusion one's children in the new covenant.

In this review, I will not address all that Wellum says, but what I take to be the core argument and his interaction with my argument in *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism* (Presbyterian & Reformed, 2003).

### Wellum's Citation of Reisinger

An important part of the logic of Wellum's argument is drawing distinctions between the way Abraham relates to his "children," physical and spiritual. Following, John Reisinger's argument, he develops the idea that there are four senses of "Abraham's Seed." Paedobaptists miss the diversity of Abraham's relation to his offspring and flatten out the spiritual nuances into a brute covenantal inclusion of their children, which is excluded in the nature of the new covenant. Covenantal paedobaptists miss the discontinuity intended for the new covenant. Before responding directly to Wellum's criticism of my own arguments, I will briefly address "New Covenant Theology" as formulated by the source of this argument Wellum uses to garner a strong support for antipaedobaptism.

In Reisinger's seminal manuscript, *Abraham's Four Seeds*, he argues that Abraham had (1) a natural seed (all physical descendants, including Ishmael), (2) a special natural seed (the natural children of Jacob), (3) a spiritual seed (those from any nation who have the faith of Abraham), and (4) a unique seed (Christ) (Reisinger, "Abraham's Four Seeds," p. 9).

The major argument which follows is that:

1. There are separate and distinct promises and blessings for each "seed."
2. Each seed receives those blessings promised because of their connection to Abraham as a "seed," respective to their kind of "seed."
3. Only the "spiritual seed" (from any nation or time period) receives salvation.
4. Since no promise of salvation is made to any other seed than the spiritual seed, it is wrong to claim any spiritual promise for the physical seed of a believer (in the Old Testament or New Testament).

Ergo, the claim that the infant children of believers are given some covenant promise signified in baptism is an error. Reisinger stated, "The real difference between a historic Baptist and a Paedobaptist (those who baptize babies) is not the mode of baptism, but rather 'who is the true heir of God's promise to Abraham and his seed'" (p. 3). He goes on to argue that even Abraham could not claim that his own children were part of the "spiritual seed." "Paedobaptists actually claim for their physical children through the Abrahamic covenant more than Abraham himself could claim for his physical children in the same covenant" (p. 60).

I think I have a fundamentally different reading of the meaning of the Abrahamic covenant. God was not creating separate seeds with separate blessings, etc. God's covenant purpose with Abraham was God's restoration program after the fall of Adam. Thus, the original creation mandates are retold to Abraham as blessings to unfold through him. Abraham's fidelity to nurture his children is integral to the process and fulfillment: "For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep

the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, *so that* the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him” (Gen. 18:19, emphasis added).

Abraham is the new Adam and his seed are to be a new Adamic race restored in a renewed creation. J.G. Dunn observes, “The blessing promised to Abraham and his seed (including ‘the nations’) is the restoration of God’s created order, of man to his Adamic status as steward of the rest of God’s creation” (Romans Commentary, 213). The fall created a dominion-vacuum. God’s call and covenant to Abram given in the unfolding means of grace provided, *undo the fall*. While Israel failed, True Israel, Jesus, fulfilled Israel’s role. Jesus, thus, is the new Adam or last Adam, shaping “a new humanity” from the failed Israel and the fallen Gentiles made after His image (Eph. 2:15). That, I believe is the Pauline story of Abraham. “The covenant is fulfilled in the creation of a worldwide family marked out by Abraham-like faith,” urges N.T. Wright.

Thus, there is no intended bifurcation of the the physical and spiritual in the unfolding covenant redemption. It also seems obvious reading the warnings of the prophets that “physical blessings” were not granted to the physical seeds regardless of spiritual qualifications. For example, the wilderness generation was laid low for their hardness of heart (Psa 95; Heb 4) and they did not enter into the “physical blessing” of the promised land. On the other hand, this did not mean that they were not, even in this state of unbelief, given spiritual blessings of some sort: 1 Corinthians 10:3-5 says, “[They] all ate the same spiritual food; and all drank the same spiritual drink, for they were drinking from a spiritual rock which followed them; and the rock was Christ. Nevertheless, with most of them God was not well-pleased; for they were laid low in the wilderness.”

While it is certainly true that mere physical birth did not guarantee eternal salvation, still the promise of salvation is made *ostensibly to the physical descendants of covenant members*. Originally the language of this is “to be your God and the God of your descendants after you” (Gen. 17:7). This cannot be “de-spiritualized” into a mere physical (?) promise to be God to you and yours. But what of the renewal promises, “I will pour my spirit upon thy seed, and my blessing upon thine offspring” (Is. 44:3) - Surely this cannot be a “physical” blessing for the “natural” seed only.

What of circumcision then? Was it not a mere physical rite for physical seed? I think not. It was a covenantal sign and was for those outside Israel who wished to be identified under the terms of the covenant. Circumcision as the sign of the “righteousness of faith” (Abraham’s faith) called for fidelity to God, or at least Moses, Jeremiah, and Stephen thought so. Moses warned, “Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer” (Dt. 10:16). Jeremiah preached, “Circumcise yourselves to the LORD, circumcise your hearts” (Jer. 4:4) and [The Lord] “I will punish all who are circumcised only in the flesh” (Jer. 9:25). Stephen chided, “You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit!” (Acts 7:51).

On my understanding of the Abrahamic and subsequent covenants, covenant fidelity (included in the “covenant of circumcision”) called for faith and repentance of each individual. After all, individuals who did not live in covenant fidelity, were judged as covenant breakers. In no way could Ahab stand before God claim immunity as one in only “physical seed” status. Therefore, an argument which negates the salvific blessings ostensibly offered to Abrahamic covenant members, also must negate any basis for God’s judgments (temporal and eternal) on the disobedient in that covenant.

The means God provided for covenant fidelity included the identity of each individual in covenant from the infancy. They were to be raised in the knowledge of God and taught the way of the Lord in every aspect of life (Gen. 18:19; Deut. 6). Thus, the Abrahamic rite of circumcision, whether given in infancy or to an adult was never meant to signify merely a physical connection to Abraham -- whatever that would mean regarding later proselytes. It was always, well -- *covenantal*. It always held forth promises and obligations. God’s promises included the fidelity of Abraham’s offspring. This is inferred in Genesis 17, but explicitly stated in Genesis 18:19 “For I have chosen him, in order that he may command his children

and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice; in order that the LORD may bring upon Abraham what He has spoken about him."

The real argument of Reisinger, et al, appears to be just this, since only the truly spiritual seed received the promises, then only the spiritual seed(s) have a right to the sign. But this argument is clearly fallacious. It is simply not true nor was it intended by God's command that only the true "spiritual seed" (the elect, according to Reisinger) are to receive the sign of the covenant. But this is what must be proved in infant baptism is to be dismissed. It is not enough to prove that only the elect are elected. This is granted. God, who knew about Esau, still commanded the sign of circumcision on him, even though he did not have a circumcised heart. Thus, one is still warranted in putting the sign on those that we do not have infallible assurance of their election, so long as they meet the initial qualifications of being children of those in the covenant -- just as Isaac was also warranted by God's command in putting the sign on both his children, Esau and Jacob. Indeed, judgment at some level would have been due Isaac if he had not circumcised Esau, since that would have been direct disobedience to the Word of the covenant. They would be "cut off" (Gen. 17:4).

### **Wellum's Citation of Strawbridge**

In my chapter in *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism* entitled, "The Polemics of Anabaptism from the Reformation Onward," I sought to address the claim that infant baptism is an "error in biblical theology," a claim made by Paul K. Jewett in *Infant Baptism and the Covenant of Grace*. Jewett urged that the paedobaptist argument "involves the fundamental error of failing to recognize the historical character of revelation" (p. 8). This is the same point that Wellum argues. The proof of this is that circumcision was different than baptism precisely in its lack of any spiritual criterion for reception. The physical and/or household connection was all that was needed in order to grant the propriety of receiving this sign and no spiritual qualification was necessary to receive circumcision, even for the adult proselytes. On the other hand, the singular criterion for baptism is spiritual in the NT. In taking on this argument, I addressed the spirituality of the OT recipients of circumcision and the carnality of the new covenant recipients of the sacraments.

At this point, Wellum, developing the idea of the "natural seed" of Abraham, cites my argument. He writes,

The "seed of Abraham" first refers to a natural (physical) seed, namely, every person who was in any way physically descended from Abraham such as Ishmael, Isaac, the sons of Keturah, and by extension Esau, Jacob, etc. In each case, all of these children of Abraham received circumcision even though many of them were unbelievers, and even though it was only through one of the "seeds," Isaac, that God's promises and covenant was realized (Gen 17:20-21; cp. Rom 9:6-9). Circumcision also marked out those who were not physically Abraham's descendants, but who were related to him either through a household birth or purchased as a slave (Gen 17:12). In the latter case, circumcision enabled those who were not biologically related to Abraham to become his children and thus benefit from the divine blessing mediated through him." (p. 141-142)

Directly citing my chapter, he writes:

G. Strawbridge, "The Polemics of Anabaptism from the Reformation Onward," in *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*, 277-80, disagrees with this assertion. Contrary to all biblical evidence he speculates that Ishmael and the sons of Keturah possibly were people of faith, like their father Abraham. Thus, for them, circumcision did not signify a physical demarcation, but a spiritual one. He appeals to the fact that circumcision cannot be viewed as a "national sign" since Ishmael was not part of the nation of Israel and so it must mean that in Ishmael's case (as well as Keturah's sons), circumcision carried a spiritual significance. But this misses the point. Strawbridge fails to distinguish between the physical and physical/special seed of Abraham who were both linked to Abraham and that is why they received the covenant sign, regardless of their personal faith. In fact, the entire household of Abraham was to be circumcised showing a

“physical” link to Abraham, and Scripture gives no evidence that in their case, circumcision had a spiritual meaning. One cannot deny that circumcision marks out a physical seed (Ishmael, Isaac, Israel) and nowhere is there evidence in the case of this physical seed that their circumcision necessarily carried a spiritual significance. No doubt, more must be stated about circumcision, but this point cannot be dismissed. (Note: 76, p. 142)

### **Lack of Clarity**

In response, first let me note the lack of clarity of the note and its intended referent. Wellum says, Strawbridge “disagrees with this assertion” - but the assertion of Wellum of which I am dissenting is unclear. I do not disagree with the final sentence of Wellum, immediately preceding the footnote, “circumcision enabled those who were not biologically related to Abraham to become his children and thus benefit from the divine blessing mediated through him.” And I do not disagree with the sentence before that which is a rather factual point, “Circumcision also marked out those who were not physically Abraham’s descendants, but who were related to him either through a household birth or purchased as a slave (Gen 17:12).”

The sentence before this is not exactly an assertion with which I disagree, actually there are several assertions: “...the sons of Keturah, and by extension Esau, Jacob, etc. In each case, all of these children of Abraham received circumcision even though many of them were unbelievers, and even though it was only through one of the “seeds,” Isaac, that God’s promises and covenant was realized (Gen 17:20–21; cp. Rom 9:6–9).”

I agree that “all of these children of Abraham received circumcision.” I also agree that there could be unbelievers (and ultimately reprobates) among those who were first circumcised. While that is possible, and many throughout Israel’s history were judged for their unbelief (because they were covenant breakers), etc. - exactly how does Wellum know that of those individuals listed “many of them were unbelievers”? The Bible does not say they they were unregenerate or unbelievers. Apparently the power to see the regenerate in the new covenant extends back in time. On what biblical basis is he confident that the many of the sons of Keturah or Ishmael were eternally lost? At any rate, the argument does not rest with the eternal state of these individuals, the same way all the “believer’s baptized” apostates do not invalidate the meaning of baptism.

### **Typological Confusion**

The broader hermeneutical point is that the Pauline use of Sarah and Hagar, or Jacob and Esau, or Isaac and Ishmael are *typologies*. This is different than the individual election or reprobation of souls. Such types are not any automatic spiritual barometer of the individual’s lives. Solomon was a type of Christ (Ps. 72) and of the Antichrist (with his 666 talents of gold 1 Kgs 10:14). Based on a mere typology, we cannot, jump to conclusions about the spiritual status of the individual. I rather think that Solomon was saved, but least in the kingdom. Whatever the case, that he received “666 talents of gold” and violated all the laws regarding a king (Deut. 17:16-17) does not necessarily mean that he was eternally lost. Remember righteous Lot. Think of Hagar, who is the type of “Mount Sinai in Arabia” which is the Judaistic Jerusalem of the first century “in bondage with her children” (Gal. 4:25). In terms of the individual person (not the allegoreo - Gal. 4:25ff), the text says that, the angel of the Lord met her needs (water) and “God opened her eyes” (Gen. 21:19). God dealt kindly with Hagar.

Typologically, through Isaac, “your seed shall be called” (Rom. 9:7), implying that Ishmael stands for “children of the flesh” (Rom. 9:8). But consider what the Bible actually says about the individual, Ishmael: “God has heard the voice of the lad” (Gen. 21:17). “God was with” Ishmael (Gen. 21:20). Finally, *Ishmael* and Isaac buried Abraham (Gen. 25:9). The text about Ishmael the individual do not represent an unbeliever or reprobate, though the typology is in distinction to the unique son of promise, Isaac.

A careful reading of my argument in the chapter above will show that I did not make my argument depend upon the elect status of these individuals. Rather the actual argument is an “ad hoc” argument to Jewett. I

said, “Arguing from Jewett’s premises” (p. 278). I believe that the covenant is a unified operation to bring renewal into the world after the fall and the purposes do not reflect a dualist, “physical” and “spiritual” manifesto as in Scofield, enthroned on high. Rather the covenant purpose is and ever has been redemption of the cosmos and the image bearers of God in it (Rom. 4:13, Heb. 13:20, Rom. 8:20-21, 2 Cor. 5:17). That is why the covenant operation must include the offspring of God’s people (Jer. 31:36-37).

However, to address Jewett, I used his premises (as I said). He indicates that circumcision had a two-fold meaning, signifying both “the temporal, earthly, typical elements of the old dispensation” (p. 91) because of Abrahamic physical descent and it was “a symbol of renewal and cleansing of heart” (p. 86) because of Abrahamic spiritual descent. Therefore I asked, “Why must we presume that Ishmael and the sons of Keturah signify merely the former and not the latter? Could it not be that the circumcision of Abraham’s physical, but non-Israelite offspring, Ishmael and the sons of Keturah, signified the spiritual, not physical covenant blessings?” (Strawbridge, 278). And I proceed to show the spiritual side of circumcision. I provide then six lines of support for this.

Wellum dismisses the arguments I actually made in favor of a truncated misreading of my argument. He says,

[Strawbridge] appeals to the fact that circumcision cannot be viewed as a “national sign” since Ishmael was not part of the nation of Israel and so it must mean that in Ishmael’s case (as well as Keturah’s sons), circumcision carried a spiritual significance. But this misses the point. Strawbridge fails to distinguish between the physical and physical/special seed of Abraham who were both linked to Abraham and that is why they received the covenant sign, regardless of their personal faith.

I do not see how I “miss the point,” unless it is not following the question-begging (*petitio principii*) that I fail to “distinguish the physical and physical/special seed of Abraham.” My argument, not my assertion, was that the OT and NT teach that circumcision place a spiritually binding obligation on those who received it and that the institution came with express terms of a relationship to God.

What he cites is not my complete argument, of course. Though I do not deny the point, Ishmael was not an Israelite and therefore any claims about the nationalistic purpose of circumcision obviously do not apply to the meaning of Ishmael’s circumcision.

I argued that the covenant is relational between Abraham and God. The “covenant of circumcision” (Acts 7:8) signifies Jehovah is “to be God to you and to your descendants after you” (Gen. 17:7). It is a sign “between Me and you” does not sound temporal or “earthly.” Moreover, Paul teaches that the sign of circumcision is a “seal of the righteousness of the faith” (Rom. 4:11). Also Ishmael was circumcised on the very same day as Abraham: “In the very same day Abraham was circumcised, and Ishmael his son” (Gen 17:26). It would be strikingly inconsistent if the very same ritual act, administered the very same day by the same person was “a seal of the righteousness of the faith” for Abraham, but for teenage Ishmael (age 13) it was a mere sign of being a physical, albeit virtually bastardly, descendant of Abraham; thus signifying only the alleged earthly aspects of the covenant (which was after all through Isaac[?]).

Let us imagine ourselves with father Abraham, performing the rite of circumcision on his beloved son Ishmael. To him it was a seal of the righteousness of faith, but it was not intended to have that meaning for Ishmael? If Jewett, Reisinger, and Wellum are correct perhaps this is what Abraham said:

Children of my flesh and not of any spiritual relation, this rite of circumcision is performed on you only and exclusively because you are my physical offspring or happen to be under my dominion; do not mistake that there is any spiritual significance to this act whatsoever; it calleth you not to any spiritual obligation; it calleth you not to any covenantal recognition of the covenantally faithful God who only relates to man by way of covenant; think not that by it you are being called upon to believe in a God who circumcises hearts or saves the fallen sons of Adam

from natural heart-uncircumcision; nay, nay, it calleth you not to keep the way of the Lord; think not that I am declaring that you are the Lord's; you are my mere flesh and blood or servants, as the case may be, without a relation to the God who has granted me justification by faith; however, I will give you a few constellation prize-like gifts, even to you who cannot have the faith of your father and master and cannot be spiritually identified as the Lord's . . .

Even though this is a dripping sarcastic portrayal, I maintain it is theologically on point.

A particularly strong text with which I completed my argument (not dealt with by Wellum) is found in Genesis 18:19. Let me cite it for the third time, so that perhaps by sheer force of repetition someone will actually respond the argument made. “For I have chosen him [Abraham], in order that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice; in order that the LORD may bring upon Abraham what He has spoken about him.” Was Abraham faithful? Does he deserve the title “father”? Yes. We can be sure that our father Abraham did indeed command “his children [including Ishmael and the sons of Keturah] and his household [including those “unspiritually qualified” adults] “to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice.” If “doing righteousness and justice” are dependent on the “righteousness of faith” or a “circumcised heart” etc. — Abraham surely taught all who were under his headship to follow the Lord.

I cannot imagine that Abraham in teaching this would have taught what Jewett, Reisinger, Chantry, and Wellum (et al) are saying circumcision meant. But even so, the express statements of Moses, Jeremiah, Stephen, and Paul do not accord with this “new covenant theology” on a biblical theology of circumcision. For they all explicitly taught the “spiritual” obligations made clear by circumcision. And every other writer implicitly taught the same obligations of faithfulness.

In spite of this kind of argumentation, all that Wellum had to say was “contrary to all biblical evidence he speculates” and “Scripture gives no evidence that in their case, circumcision had a spiritual meaning” and “nowhere is there evidence in the case of this physical seed that their circumcision necessarily carried a spiritual significance” ( p. 142). I would have preferred that Wellum address the arguments that I made than assume omniscience over the text -- “nowhere is there evidence . . .” -- when, in fact, I provided the evidence very fairly on pages 278-280. I am not assuming that the evidence I provided is all that is needed to render a clear judgment in this case, but I would like to have the evidence considered before it is so “out of hand” dismissed.

By dismissing the evidence of covenant fidelity which unfolds from Abraham’s restoration covenant into the new covenant era and which is iterated on the inclusion of future generations, Wellum falls back toward the old dualistic categories.

Wellum writes,

But now, in Christ, under his mediation, the relationship between Christ and his seed is no longer physical but spiritual, which entails that the covenant sign must only be applied to those who in fact are the spiritual seed of Abraham. Is this not what is at the heart of the promise of the new covenant in Jeremiah 31 now fulfilled in Christ? (p. 145)

These categories “physical” and “spiritual” are problematic, to say the least. The first and completely sufficient rebuttal to this kind of thinking is found in the central fact of Christianity: Resurrection. *I believe in the physical resurrection of Jesus. I believe in the resurrection of the body.* The resurrection of Jesus fulfills, as the first fruits of the harvest, the restoration motif of the Abrahamic covenant - i.e., death through the fall has been abolished (1 Cor. 15:22ff). In light of this, why should Christian theologians ever say: “the relationship between Christ and his seed is no longer physical but spiritual.”

I know that brother Wellum does not deny the resurrection, but if his argument has advanced beyond circularity, he must be saying that there are no “physical blessings” extended to new covenant members.

But I think the resurrection of bodies should be considered a physical blessing. This “physical” vs “spiritual” hermeneutic fails to see how the resurrection fulfills the Abrahamic promise.

Please note Wellum’s bold claim, “the covenant sign must only be applied to those who *in fact* are the spiritual seed of Abraham” (my emphasis). As I said before, the real argument is -- since only the spiritual seed received the promises, then only the spiritual seed have a right to the sign. This is to say that only the elect are to be baptized. Since even the apostles were incapable of baptizing only the elect (e.g., Simon the Sorcerer), then perhaps Wellum’s views are mistaken.

In one sense, Wellum’s is a perfectly cogent argument. The covenant sign should be given to those in the covenant. The new covenant consists of only regenerate (elect) people, thus only they should be baptized. However, I maintain the second premise is wrong. I maintain that it is *an error in biblical theology* that the new covenant consists of only regenerate (elect) people. Baptism, among the other means of grace, are the means to bring about the covenant fidelity of those who, *not infallibly known to us*, are elect. Wellum’s argument reduces to a presumption to know “the spiritual seed of Abraham” (e.g., regenerate elect individuals) and only apply the sacrament of entering into covenant to them. But baptism is part of the means of discipleship (Matt. 28:19-20).

Going back to my earlier point on the nature of the Abrahamic covenant as a restoration after the fall, if the new covenant was intended as this supra-spiritual covenant made with only elect individuals, perhaps it would have been good to castrate all the members of this new covenant. For in the present state, believers have children who may not be elect. Such children are to be raised in the “culture” of Christ (Eph. 6:4, *paedeia* in Greek) and they are to obey “in the Lord” (Eph. 6:1). This sounds like a “physical” connection to our offspring which requires “spiritual” obligations completely consistent with the Abrahamic covenant. Further they are told to keep the Fifth commandment with the promise to live long “on the earth” (Eph. 6:1-4). This really sounds Abrahamic. Paul writes appealing to the Abrahamic covenant as still operative, with the inclusion of believers’ children in the saints. He addresses the “saints” in Ephesus, including husbands, wives, slaves, masters, and children (Eph. 1:1/6:1-4). The Abrahamic covenant is still in full force, though we have the light of the Seed/True Israel’s fulfillment in Christ - God is still remaking a new Adam (a new humanity) who still procreate through Abraham’s [fulfilled] covenant promises.

### **Conclusion**

The new covenant view of Wellum ignores the profound Biblical reading of the Abrahamic covenant’s restoration motif, that the fallen sons of Adam and daughters of Eve would be redeemed in covenant succession flowing from Abraham’s promise. Wellum’s view is contradictory to the actual terms of the Abrahamic covenant (God to your seed) which is restated as the purpose of the gospel (Gal. 3:8). His view is in explicit conflict with the clear statements that the children of believers are included in the new covenant (Deu. 30:6, Jer. 31:36-37), in the church (Eph. 1:1/6:1-4, Col. 1:2/3:20, 1Cor. 7:14), and in the kingdom of Christ (Matt. 19:14, Mark 10:14, Luke 18:16). And his view is in tension with many passages which teach the possibility of apostasy from the covenant community (Heb. 6:1-4, 10:28-30, John 15:2, 6, Rom. 11:21). Thus for these reasons, I believe that he has provided us with a misguided and erroneous view of “baptism and the relationship between the covenants.”