

BAPTISM AND THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE COVENANTS

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Introduction

At the heart of the advocacy and defense of the doctrine of infant baptism is the argument that it is an implication drawn from the comprehensive theological category of the “covenant of grace,” a category which, it is claimed, unites the Scriptures and without which the Bible cannot be understood correctly. In many ways, all other arguments for infant baptism are secondary to this overall line of reasoning. If one can establish the basic continuity of the “covenant of grace” across the canon, then it is the belief of most paedobaptists that their doctrine is biblically and theologically demonstrated. It does not seem to bother them that in the NT there is no express command to baptize infants and no record of any clear case of infant baptism.¹ Rather, as John Murray admits, “the evidence for infant baptism falls into the category of good and necessary inference”² and ultimately this inference is rooted and grounded in a specific covenantal argument. Covenant theology, then, according to the paedobaptist, *requires* infant baptism. In fact, specific details in their argument such as the “mixed” nature of the church,³ the relationship between circumcision and baptism,

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¹ Most paedobaptists acknowledge this point. See for example, J. Murray, *Christian Baptism* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1980), 69; L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (1941; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 632; R. L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 936.

² Murray, *Christian Baptism*, 69. The language of “good and necessary inference” is drawn from the *Westminster Confession of Faith* 1:6. For a helpful Baptist discussion of this point see F. Malone, *The Baptism of Disciples Alone: A Covenantal Argument for Credobaptism Versus Paedobaptism* (Cape Coral, FL: Founders Press, 2003), xvii–xix, 18–47.

³ The “mixed” nature of the church refers to the belief that under both the old and new covenants, the locus of the covenant community and the locus of the elect are distinct; hence the “visible” church, by its very nature, is constituted by both believers and unbelievers or, as

and various NT passages utilized to support their view such as the household texts, are all dependent on their understanding of the continuity of the covenant of grace across redemptive history. Ultimately, if Baptists want to argue cogently against the paedobaptist viewpoint and for a believer's baptism, we must, in the end, respond to this covenantal argument.

The goal of this chapter is to do precisely this and I will proceed in a twofold manner. First, I will outline and then unpack briefly the covenantal argument for infant baptism as given by the proponents and defenders of the view. Second, I will attempt to evaluate their argument, albeit in a summary fashion, both in terms of critique and positive construction.

The Covenantal Argument for Infant Baptism

An Outline of the Argument

Let me first sketch the overall argument for infant baptism from the continuity of the “covenant of grace” before I unpack it in more detail. Two examples will suffice to give the basic outline of the argument, even though many more examples could be given.⁴

Our first example is taken from a former Baptist, Randy Booth, who has written a popular defense of paedobaptism in *Children of the Promise*. Booth succinctly summarizes under five major headings

covenant theologians like to say, “believers and their children”—children, who may or may not, constitute the elect. Baptist theology, on the other hand, argues that the NT church, by definition, is constituted by a regenerate community, so that under the new covenant the locus of the covenant community and the elect are the same. This difference between a paedobaptist and credobaptist understanding of the church will be discussed in greater depth below.

⁴ In addition to the books already mentioned see for example, J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 2:1303–1359; F. Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. G. M. Giger, ed. J. T. Dennison, Jr. (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1997), 3:377–420; C. Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 3:526–611; B. B. Warfield, *Selected Shorter Writings*, ed. J. E. Meeter (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1970), 1:325–331; G. W. Bromiley, *Children of Promise: The Case for Baptizing Infants* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979); H. Hanko, *We and Our Children: The Reformed Doctrine of Infant Baptism* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1981); R. C. Sproul, *Essential Truths of the Christian Faith* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1992), 225–229; E. Clowney, *The Church* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1995), 276–284; D. Wilson, *To a Thousand Generations: Infant Baptism—Covenant Mercy for the People of God* (Moscow, ID: Canon, 1996); G. Strawbridge, ed. *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2003).

what he believes is the biblical case and theological warrant for the practice of infant baptism.

1. *Covenant Theology*. Throughout the Bible, God relates to his people by way of a covenant of grace. Covenant theology provides the basic framework for rightly interpreting Scripture.
2. *Continuity of the Covenant of Grace*. The Bible teaches one and the same way of salvation in both the Old and the New Testaments, despite some different outward requirements.
3. *Continuity of the People of God*. Since there is one covenant of grace between God and man, there is one continuous people of God (the church) in the Old and New Testaments.
4. *Continuity of the Covenant Signs*. Baptism is the sign of the covenant in the New Testament, just as circumcision was the sign of the covenant in the Old Testament.
5. *Continuity of Households*. Whole households are included in God's redemptive covenant.⁵

Along with most defenders of the Reformed view of paedobaptism, Booth is clear that infant baptism does not entail any kind of *ex opere operato* view⁶ of the sacrament or ordinance.⁷ Just because an infant receives the covenant sign, whether in the OT or NT, does not entail that the infant is regenerated, nor does it guarantee a future regeneration, that is, a kind of presumptive regeneration. Rather, as Booth contends, “the covenant sign was God’s indication that its recipients were *set apart* for his special blessing and use. They therefore stood in need of cleansing, regeneration, and justification. The benefits of the covenant were to be appropriated by faith in the promised Redeemer.”⁸ Hence, to be a “child of the covenant” does not necessarily guarantee one’s salvation. Rather, it makes available to the infant all the benefits and privileges of the covenant which must, in the end, be appropriated by faith; otherwise this same

⁵ R. R. Booth, *Children of the Promise: The Biblical Case for Infant Baptism* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1995), 8.

⁶ *Ex opere operato* means that baptism (or any other sacramental action) saves by virtue of the action itself being performed.

⁷ Historically, evangelicals have differed over whether to apply the term “sacrament” to baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

⁸ Booth, *Children of the Promise*, 9. There is some dispute within the paedobaptist community over whether infant baptism leads to a kind of “presumptive regeneration.” See D. J. Engelsma’s seven articles entitled, “A Candid Confession of the Character of a Conditional Covenant,” in *The Standard Bearer* (January 1–April 1, 1997).

“covenant child” will be found to be a covenant breaker and thus stand under the covenantal curse, namely, the condemnation and judgment of God.

Our second example is Reformed theologian, Louis Berkhof. In a similar fashion to Booth, Berkhof lays out five summary propositions—all of which are intimately related to his understanding of the “covenant of grace” across redemptive history—which he believes supports and warrants the claim that infant baptism is a biblical doctrine.⁹

1. Although the Abrahamic covenant had national aspects to it, at its heart, it was a *spiritual* covenant which signified spiritual realities, including its sign and seal, that is, circumcision.

2. The Abrahamic covenant is still in force and is essentially identical with the “new covenant” of the present dispensation. The unity and continuity of this *one* covenant of grace in both testaments follows from the fact that the Mediator is the same; the condition of faith is the same; and the blessings are the same, namely, regeneration, justification, spiritual gifts, and eternal life.

3. By God's appointment, infants share in the benefits of the Abrahamic covenant and therefore received circumcision as a sign and seal. Since the “new covenant” is essentially identical with the Abrahamic covenant, infants of believing parents who receive the sign of the covenant are not excluded from covenant or church membership.

4. Even though the Abrahamic covenant is essentially identical with the new covenant there are some changes that have taken place. In the new dispensation, baptism is by divine authority substituted for circumcision as the initiatory sign and seal of the covenant of grace. Baptism corresponds with circumcision in *spiritual* meaning so that both signs signify the washing away of sin and the need for regeneration. Furthermore, given the essential unity of the covenant across the ages, baptism, as the new sign and seal of the new covenant age, does not exclude infants of believing parents.

5. Although the NT contains no direct evidence for the practice of infant baptism in the church this is due more to the fact that the apostolic age was primarily a missionary period which focused on the baptism of adults. But, given the unity of the covenant of grace, there is also no text in the NT which specifically abrogates the demand that the covenant sign be applied to the infants of believing parents in the new covenant era. Household baptisms probably, though it cannot be established with certainty, bear witness to this fact.

⁹ The following summary points are taken from Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 632–34.

By briefly outlining the basic argument for infant baptism, it should now be clear that at the heart of the Reformed polemic for paedobaptism is an explicit view of the covenants. For defenders of infant baptism, central to their argument is the essential continuity of the “covenant of grace” across redemptive history and the entailments that they believe result from this continuity such as the essential unity of the people of God (Israel and the church) and the covenant signs (circumcision and baptism). In the final analysis, this particular understanding of the covenants provides the primary basis for the defense of paedobaptism as a biblical doctrine. Booth states it well when he admits, “There are also other evidences in the pages of Scripture that support the truth of infant baptism. Nevertheless, *the foundation of the argument consists of the unified covenant of grace evident in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments.*”¹⁰

Now with that basic argument in mind, we will direct our attention to three interrelated aspects of the paedobaptist argument: their understanding of the nature of the covenant community, whether that community is Israel or the church, and to whom the covenantal signs should be applied today. The foundation for their argument in each of these three arenas is their understanding of the covenants.

The Nature of the “Covenant of Grace” and Infant Baptism

As already stated, the heart of the defense of infant baptism centers on a particular understanding of the covenant of grace. As B. B. Warfield memorably responded to Baptist theologian A. H. Strong, “The argument in a nutshell is simply this: God established His church in the days of Abraham and put children into it. They must remain there until He puts them out. He has nowhere put them out. They are still then members of His Church and as such entitled to its ordinances.”¹¹

We notice in Warfield’s response a twofold conviction regarding the subject of the covenant. First, we discover the belief that one of

¹⁰ Booth, *Children of the Promise*, 10 (emphasis his).

¹¹ B. B. Warfield, “The Polemics of Infant Baptism,” in *Studies in Theology* (1932; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 9:408. See the citation in C. P. Venema, “Covenant Theology and Baptism” in Strawbridge, ed., *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*, 201.

the most important unifying themes of Scripture is God's redemptive work across the ages through the biblical covenants. Most people would not dispute this point.¹² Secondly, however, we also notice the conviction that the biblical *covenants* are merely an expression of the *one* covenant of grace. It is this latter contention, which is at the heart of covenant theology, that is under dispute in the baptism debate. Why? Because covenant theology has attempted to conclude from this particular understanding of *the* covenant of grace a fairly strict continuity between God's saving work across redemptive history, regardless of the specific covenant in question. This is especially true in regard to their understanding of the nature of the covenant community (Israel and the church) and the essential similarity and application of the covenant signs (circumcision and baptism) to the covenant community throughout the ages.

Let us examine the main contours of covenant theology. The "covenant of grace" is contrasted to the first covenant made with Adam, the "covenant of works."¹³ The covenant of works was made with Adam as the head and representative of the entire human race. To him and his entire posterity, eternal life was promised upon the condition of perfect obedience to the law of God. However, due to his disobedience, he, along with the entire human race, was plunged into a state of sin, death, and condemnation (see Rom 5:12–21). But God, by his own sovereign grace and initiative, was pleased to make a second covenant—the covenant of grace—with human beings (specifically, the elect),¹⁴ wherein the God of grace freely offered to

¹² For an excellent treatment of how God's saving plan progresses across the ages through covenants, see W. J. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation: A Theology of the Old Testament Covenants* (1984; reprint, Carlisle: Paternoster, 1997) and S. G. Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty: A Theology of the Hebrew Bible* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003).

¹³ On the teachings and variations of covenant theology, see P. Golding, *Covenant Theology: The Key of Theology in Reformed Thought and Tradition* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2004); G. Vos, "The Doctrine of the Covenant in Reformed Theology," in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. R. B. Gaffin, Jr. (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1980), 234–67; J. Murray, "Covenant Theology" in *Collected Works* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1982), 4:216–40; and O. P. Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1980).

Not all covenant theologians accept a "covenant of works." See G. Van Groningen, *From Creation to Consummation* (Sioux Center, IA: Dordt College Press, 1996), 98. Robertson, *Christ of the Covenants*, 54–57; Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation*, 44–46.

¹⁴ Within covenant theology there is a dispute over the identification of the parties of the covenant of grace. Does God covenant only with the elect or does he covenant with believers

sinners life and salvation through the last Adam, the covenantal head of his people, the Lord Jesus Christ (*West. Conf.* 7.2–3).¹⁵ Thus the covenant of grace began immediately after the Fall with the promise of grace in Gen 3:15. This promise was then progressively revealed and fulfilled in history through variously administered covenants with Noah, Abraham, Israel, and David. Ultimately it was brought to fulfillment in the new covenant inaugurated by Jesus Christ in his victorious cross work on our behalf.

But it is important to stress that for covenantal theologians even though there are different covenants described in Scripture, there is, in reality, only *one* overarching covenant of grace. That is why one must view the relationships between the covenants in terms of an overall continuity. Booth underscores this point in his comments on the “newness” of the covenant inaugurated by our Lord. He states, “The new covenant is but a new—though more glorious—administration of the same covenant of grace.”¹⁶ Thus, under the old covenant, the one covenant of grace was administered through various promises, prophecies, sacrifices, rites and ordinances (e.g., circumcision) that ultimately typified and foreshadowed the coming of Christ. Now in light of his coming, the covenant of grace is administered through the preaching of the word and the administration of the sacraments. But in God’s plan there are not two covenants of grace, one in the OT and the other in the NT, but one covenant differing in administration but essentially the same across the ages (see *West. Conf.* 7.6).

This brief overview of covenant theology raises several issues that we will address in four points. First, how is the new covenant new? Second, whether the covenant of grace is conditional or unconditional. Third, who are the parties to the covenant of grace? Fourth, the relationship between the covenant of grace and the Abrahamic covenant. Examining these four issues will show us the rigorous logic of covenant theology’s argument for paedobaptism.

and their children? On this issue see below.

¹⁵ Within covenant theology there is also a distinction made between the “covenant of grace” and the “covenant of redemption. On this distinction see Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 2:354–73; Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 265–83; and Murray, “Covenant Theology,” 216–40.

¹⁶ Booth, *Children of Promise*, 9. For the same emphasis also see Murray, “Covenant Theology,” 223–34.

The “Newness” Of The New Covenant. Covenant theology does acknowledge that there are changes that have come about due to the coming of the “new covenant.” However, these changes are only changes that God himself has explicitly revealed to us and even in these changes there is a basic underlying continuity from age to age. Thus, for example, the sign of baptism is one of the several administrative changes that have taken place under the new covenant. As Randy Booth admits, “under the older administrations of the covenant of grace, circumcision was the sign and seal of covenant admission. Under the final administration of the covenant of grace (the new covenant), water baptism has replaced circumcision as the sign of covenant admission.”¹⁷ But even though the form of the covenant sign has changed, given the underlying continuity of the covenant of grace, the *spiritual* significance of the covenant sign has not changed and hence the meaning and application of the sign is essentially the same in all eras.

Of course, this discussion raises an important question: What is “new” about the new covenant? What is the main difference, if any, between the older and newer administrations of the covenant of grace given the basic continuity of the covenant? Within Reformed theology the answer to these questions is not monolithic.¹⁸ However, despite various nuances, most covenant theologians agree that the main difference is that of “promise and fulfillment” (or “shadow and substance”). In other words, what the older administration promised through types, ceremonies, and sacrifices have now come to fulfillment in Jesus Christ. It is with this understanding that most covenant theologians view the “newness” of the new covenant in terms of a *renewal* rather than a replacement or such a strong sense of fulfillment that would lead to a discontinuity between the covenants.¹⁹ That is why most argue that the new covenant

¹⁷ Booth, *Children of Promise*, 10.

¹⁸ For differences within Reformed theology over the “newness” of the new covenant see, for example, the chapters in Strawbridge, ed. *Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*, by J. D. Niell, “The Newness of the New Covenant,” 127–55, and R. L. Pratt, Jr. “Infant Baptism in the New Covenant,” 156–74. Also see Robertson, *Christ of the Covenants*, 271–300; Wilson, *To a Thousand Generations*, 21–38; and Booth, *Children of Promise*, 49–95.

¹⁹ See for example, Booth, *Children of the Promise*, 51; Niell, “Newness of the New Covenant,” 127–55; W. C. Kaiser, *Toward Rediscovering the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan,

administration simply expands the previous era by broadening its extent and application and bringing with it greater blessing. Yet it leaves intact the fundamental elements of the covenant of grace—hence the assertion of the continuity of the covenant of grace across the ages.²⁰

But covenant theology's discussion of "newness" fails to reckon that in the coming of Christ the *nature and structure* of the new covenant has changed, which, at least, entails that *all* those within the "new covenant community" are people, by definition, who presently have experienced regeneration of heart and the full forgiveness of sin (see Jer 31:29–34). Obviously this view of "newness" implies a discontinuity at the structural level between the old and new covenant—a view which is at the heart of the credobaptist position—but which covenant theology rejects. So, for example, paedobaptists continue to view the nature of the new covenant like the old, namely, as a mixed covenant which includes within it both the elect (covenant keepers) and the non-elect (covenant breakers) simultaneously. Suffice it to say, how one understands the nature and structure of the new covenant vis-à-vis the previous biblical covenants takes us to the heart of the baptismal divide.

The Nature of the "Covenant of Grace": Conditional or Unconditional? This present discussion raises two related issues that are crucial to understand why paedobaptists consider that the

1987), 25–26.

²⁰ Specifically, but not limited to these points, covenant theology views the "newness" of the new covenant in the following ways.

1. On the basis of Christ's finished cross work and through the application of that work to us by the Holy Spirit a greater power of obedience is possible in the new covenant.
2. An extension of the knowledge of God to all nations. Under the new covenant more people will know more about the Lord which fulfills the Abrahamic promise of blessings to the nations.
3. The promise of redemption is now accomplished in Christ with the full payment of sin. The old Levitical administration, along with the ceremonial law, has now been fulfilled.
4. The new covenant is the final manifestation of God's redemptive plan. There are no more covenant administrations to be revealed.

These points are taken from a variety of sources. See Booth, *Children of the Promise*, 63–66; Wilson, *To a Thousand Generations*, 22–34; Niell, "The Newness of the New Covenant," 127–74; Pratt, "Infant Baptism in the New Covenant," 127–74; G. W. Bromiley, "The Case for Infant Baptism," *CT* 9:1 (1964): 7–10; Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 299–301; and R. S. Clark, "A Contemporary Reformed Defense of Infant Baptism," http://public.csusm.edu/public/guests/rsclark/Infant_Baptism.html, 1–29.

covenant of grace *requires* infant baptism. The first issue has to do with the *nature* of the covenant of grace. Even though it is difficult to define the exact meaning of the word “covenant,” most within covenant theology are pleased to define it somewhat as O. Palmer Robertson proposes: “a bond in blood sovereignly administered.”²¹ In a covenant, especially a biblical covenant, God promises to be our God by his own sovereign initiative and grace. In response to God’s grace, we promise to be faithful to the Lord in terms of covenant obligations, namely, repentance, faith, and obedience. But this raises a thorny issue as to the *nature* of the covenant, especially whether the covenant is conditional or unconditional.

On the one hand, covenant theology has rightly argued that the covenant is *unconditional*. God acts in a sovereign and unilateral fashion to establish the covenant. Furthermore, he not only sovereignly establishes the covenant relation but he maintains and fulfills completely the promises that he makes to his people. In the end, everything God demands of his people in terms of repentance, faith, and obedience, he graciously grants them by sovereign grace in Christ and by the power of the Spirit. As Cornelius Venema nicely summarizes:

Not only are the covenant’s obligations preceded by God’s gracious promise, but these obligations are fulfilled for and in believers by the triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—in their respective operations. God’s demands are born of grace and fulfilled in us by grace. In these respects, the covenant of grace is unconditional, excluding every possible form of merit, whereby the faith and obedience of God’s people would be the basis for their obtaining life and salvation.²²

On the other hand, covenant theology has also argued that the covenant is *conditional* in at least two senses. First, the blessings of the covenant are totally dependent upon the work of Christ, since

²¹ See Robertson, *Christ of the Covenants*, 3–15. For a further discussion regarding the biblical meaning of “covenant” in Scripture see M. G. Kline, *By Oath Consigned* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 13–25; T. E. McComiskey, *The Covenants of Promise* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 15–93; P. A. Lillback, “Covenant,” in *NDT*, ed. S. Ferguson, et al. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1988), 173–76; J. H. Walton, *Covenant* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 13–23; P. R. Williamson, “Covenant” in *NDBT*, ed. T. D. Alexander, et al. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000), 419–29; D. L. Baker, “Covenant: An Old Testament Study,” in *The God of Covenant*, ed. J. A. Grant and A. I. Wilson (Leicester: InterVarsity, 2005), 21–53.

²² Venema, “Covenant Theology and Baptism,” 211.

the last Adam fulfilled the conditions of obedience first set down in the covenant of works as both the representative and substitute of his people. Second, in order to benefit from the covenant, we are obligated to believe and obey. No doubt, these covenant obligations are not viewed as meritorious conditions; rather they are “necessary responses to the covenant’s promises” and, as such, are “instrumental to the enjoyment of the covenant’s blessings.”²³

Most covenant theologians contend that the covenant of grace always involves a “conditional promise.” Thus, every biblical covenant, as part of the *one* covenant of grace, carries with it a conditional promise “with blessings for those who obey the conditions of the covenant and curses for those who disobey its conditions.”²⁴ In other words, in principle every biblical covenant, including the new covenant, is conditional in the second sense described above and is thus *breakable*.²⁵ It is precisely at this point that most covenant theologians argue for the “mixed” nature of the people in the covenant of grace. That is, the covenant community is comprised of both covenant-keepers and covenant-breakers. So the circle of the covenant community, whether in the old or new era, is wider and larger than the circle of election.²⁶ Thus paedobaptists argue that, in principle, there is nothing objectionable in viewing unregenerate people as part of the covenant community and applying the covenant sign to them.²⁷

The Parties of the Covenant. This understanding of the nature of the covenant leads to another important and related issue that also pertains to the subject of infant baptism. Given the question of whether the covenant of grace is conditional, with whom does God covenant in the covenant of grace? In other words, who are the parties of the covenant? Does God covenant with the elect only, or

²³ Venema, “Covenant Theology and Baptism,” 211. For a further discussion of this point see Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 280–81 and Murray, “Covenant Theology,” 223–34.

²⁴ Booth, *Children of the Promise*, 24 (emphasis his).

²⁵ For a development of the “conditional” and “breakable” nature of every biblical covenant including the new covenant see Wilson, *To a Thousand Generations*, 81–96; Pratt, “Infant Baptism in the New Covenant,” 169–74.

²⁶ On this point see Venema, “Covenant Theology and Baptism,” 214.

²⁷ Also see Pratt, “Infant Baptism in the New Covenant,” 170, for an affirmation of this point.

does he covenant with “believers and their children”—children who may or may not be the elect? One might suppose, given what has been stated above, that the unanimous answer would be the latter because of the mixed nature of the covenant community. However, within covenant theology, there has been a significant debate over this question. For example, the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (7.3) and the *Westminster Larger Catechism* (question 31) opt for the first option, namely that God covenants with the elect only in the covenant of grace. Venema succinctly summarizes the Confession at this point when he writes, “In the strictest sense of the covenant as a saving communion with God, the parties of the covenant of grace are the triune God and his elect people”²⁸ and the condition of reception into that covenant is repentance and faith. Thus, all those who reject the free offer of the gospel stand *outside* the covenant of grace and it would also seem to imply, the covenant community.

But if this is so, then a legitimate question must be asked: How does a commitment to this understanding of the “covenant of grace,” specifically that the parties of the covenant are God and his elect people, *require* a doctrine of infant baptism, as many paedobaptists contend? Would it not be legitimate to conclude that, if the parties of the covenant are God and the elect, the covenant sign, especially in the new covenant era, should only be applied to those who are actually members of the covenant community since God’s sovereign grace has brought them to faith in Christ? On this issue, nothing in the formulation of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* leads us to think otherwise. However, covenant theology does not stop at this point. It further states that the parties of the covenant of grace also embraces “all believers and their children”—children who, we know in reality, are not necessarily brought to saving faith and thus may constitute the non-elect. This is what is referred to as the “dual aspect” of the covenant. As Venema correctly notes, “These theologians, while acknowledging that the life and salvation promised in the covenant of grace are inherited only by the elect, argue that the covenant promise, together with its accompanying obligation, is extended

²⁸ Venema, “Covenant Theology and Baptism,” 212.

to Abraham and his seed.”²⁹ This latter emphasis on the parties of the covenant including “believers and their children” is central in the baptism discussion. That is why a standard contention of paedobaptists is that “the children of believers were always included in the covenant of grace under the older covenant administrations. In deference to this established biblical pattern, *we must assume that, apart from explicit biblical warrant to the contrary*, the children of believers are still included in the covenant of grace.”³⁰ Thus, infants, like their adult believing parents, are to be circumcised and baptized because they are both members of the covenant community.

The Relationship between the Abrahamic Covenant and the Covenant of Grace. For our purposes, what is crucial to note in this debate within covenant theology is how covenant theologians, in reality, understand the relationship between the biblical *covenants* vis-à-vis the *one* covenant of grace. Generally speaking, covenant theology tends to equate the “covenant of grace” (an overarching theological category) with the Abrahamic covenant (a specific historical covenant which includes within it national, typological, and spiritual aspects). Covenant theology does this by reducing the national (physical) and typological aspects of the Abrahamic covenant to the *spiritual* aspects, which then becomes the grid by which all other biblical covenants are viewed, specifically the new covenant. Thus, to speak of the “covenant of grace” is really to speak in terms of the Abrahamic covenant reduced to its spiritual aspects alone. That is why in the discussion regarding the parties of the “covenant of grace,” Reformed theologians can speak of the “dual aspect” of the parties of the covenant, even though “believers and their children” is a genealogical formula specifically tied to the Abrahamic covenant (primarily interpreted in physical terms). This genealogical principle is certainly picked up in later covenants but, as I will argue below, it is also modified in light of the fulfillment which has now come in Christ (now reinterpreted in spiritual terms).

²⁹ Ibid., 214. For a further discussion of this “dual aspect” see Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 272–89.

³⁰ Booth, *Children of the Promise*, 10 (emphasis mine).

Examples of this equation abound. For example, Louis Berkhof admits, at least in theory, that the Abrahamic covenant has both national and spiritual aspects to it,³¹ but in reality the national aspects of the covenant fall by the wayside and the *spiritual* aspects are treated as primary. That is why he can say that circumcision is “the initiatory sign and seal of *the covenant of grace*” (when in truth it is the sign of the Abrahamic covenant and not all the biblical covenants) and that “this covenant [Abrahamic] is still in force and is *essentially identical* with the “new covenant” of the present dispensation.”³² He shows little regard for the redemptive-historical *distinctions* between the biblical covenants. Similarly, John Murray argues that we are under divine command, derived from the continuity of the covenant of grace, to baptize our infant children because “the new covenant is the fulfillment and unfolding of the Abrahamic covenant,” and “the covenant made with Abraham included the infant seed and was signified and sealed by circumcision,” and “circumcision is the sign of the covenant in its deepest spiritual significance.”³³ The infant children of believing church members, therefore, are full members of the church. In the end, what Berkhof, Murray, and most covenant theologians do is to strip the Abrahamic covenant of some of its aspects, identify it as a pure gospel covenant, and then equate it, almost in a one-to-one fashion, with the new covenant inaugurated by our Lord Jesus Christ.

³¹ See Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 632.

³² Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 633 (emphasis mine). In fact, Berkhof argues that what is normative for Christians today is not the Mosaic (Sinaitic, old) covenant, but that of the Abrahamic covenant (interpreted in light of its spiritual aspects). The Sinaitic, argues Berkhof, “is an interlude, covering a period in which the real character of the covenant of grace, that is, its free and gracious character, is somewhat eclipsed by all kinds of external ceremonies and forms, which, in connection with the theocratic life of Israel, placed the demands of the law prominently in the foreground, see Gal. 3. In the covenant with Abraham, on the other hand, the promise and the faith that responds to the promise are made emphatic” (296–297). In a similar fashion, R. Scott Clark argues that the new covenant is “new” because it is contrasted with Moses (old covenant), but not with Abraham (or Adam), and it is the covenant with the latter that continues in the new covenant ushered in by our Lord Jesus Christ. See “A Contemporary Reformed Defense of Infant Baptism,” 4.

³³ See J. Murray, “Baptism,” in *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Carlisle: Banner of Truth, 1977), 2: 374. Also see this same emphasis in Venema, “Covenant Theology and Baptism,” 222, and B. Chapell, “A Pastoral Overview of Infant Baptism,” in *Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*, 11–18.

But, to anticipate my argument below, this understanding of the relationship between the biblical covenants vis-à-vis the “covenant of grace” may produce the desired continuity the covenant theologian requires for his defense of infant baptism. But, in the end, it fails to do justice to the biblical *distinctions* between the covenants which lead us to affirm some crucial covenantal *discontinuities*—all of which have massive implications for the baptismal discussion.

Before I turn to that critique, however, I want to continue to unpack the paedobaptist position by turning to the second pillar of their argument, namely their view of the nature of the church, that the circle of the covenant community is wider than the circle of election.³⁴ This view of the nature of the church, which is also an implication of their understanding of the covenant of grace, is foundational to their advocacy and defense of infant baptism.

The Nature of the Church and Infant Baptism

Intimately related to the unity of the covenant of grace is the unity of the people of God across the ages. Instead of viewing the relationship between OT Israel and the NT church in ways that preserve an emphasis on both continuity and discontinuity, covenant theology tends to emphasize the element of *continuity* at the expense of discontinuity, even though it must be admitted that there are fine nuances within covenant theology.³⁵ Randy Booth, for example, strongly asserts that a Reformed and covenantal understanding of the people of God entails that “God has had one people throughout all the ages. Although this *one church* has developed through various stages, she is still the *same church* from age to age.”³⁶ Obviously, one of the crucial implications drawn from this view for infant baptism is the argument that if God, in the OT, included “believers and their

³⁴ For this statement see Venema, “Covenant Theology and Baptism,” 214.

³⁵ See for example the very nuanced discussion of the relationship between OT Israel and the NT Church in E. Clowney, *Church*, 27–70, and O. P. Robertson, *Christ of the Covenants*, 271–300, and id., *The Israel of God: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2000), 33–51.

³⁶ Booth, *Children of the Promise*, 73 (emphasis mine). For this same point see Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3:549–52; Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 565–72; Bromiley, “Case for Infant Baptism,” 8–9; and Murray, *Christian Baptism*, 31–44.

children” into the membership of the covenant community (Israel) then nothing has changed in the NT era (in the church). Booth draws this exact conclusion when he states, “*Since God has not changed the terms of church membership, new covenant believers and their children are likewise included in his church.*”³⁷

This stress on the *continuity* of the people of God throughout the ages takes us back to an earlier observation: covenant theology not only views the OT covenant people of God (Israel) and the new covenant people of God (church) as one people, but it also views the NT church, in its very nature, to be like Israel of old. It is a “mixed” community comprised of believers and unbelievers simultaneously. Thus, parallel to OT Israel, the circle of the church is wider than the circle of true believers, born of the Spirit of God, united to Christ by faith, justified, and sanctified.

The Invisible And The Visible Church. At this point in the discussion covenant theology employs the famous “invisible/visible” distinction in relation to the church. The *invisible* church refers to the church as God sees it, that is, the elect. It is those from all times and places whom the Lord knows are his and his alone, perfectly and infallibly. In this sense, the church, whether in the OT or NT era, is a spiritual entity, invisible to the natural eye. It is the one people of God throughout the ages. Louis Berkhof states it this way:

The Church is said to be invisible, because she is essentially spiritual and in her spiritual essence cannot be discerned by the physical eye; and because it is impossible to determine infallibly who do and who do not belong to her. The union with Christ is a mystical union; the Spirit that unites them constitutes an invisible tie; and the blessings of salvation, such as regeneration, genuine conversion, true faith, and spiritual communion with Christ, are all invisible to the natural eye—and yet these things constitute the real *forma* (ideal character) of the Church.³⁸

However the invisible church manifests itself in history in a *visible*, local form. As John Murray reminds us, “The church may not be

³⁷ Booth, *Children of the Promise*, 73 (emphasis his). In the same vein, remember the response of B. B. Warfield to A. H. Strong quoted above on the subject of the validity of infant baptism.

³⁸ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 566. For a similar discussion of the invisible/visible distinction as applied to the church see Booth, *Children of the Promise*, 88–90, and Murray, *Christian Baptism*, 31–33.

defined as an entity wholly invisible to human perception and observation. The church is the company or society or assembly or congregation or communion of the faithful.”³⁹ The church is a divinely created bond between God and his people and between other human beings. It becomes visible in the ministry of the word, in the practices of the sacraments, and in external organization and government.⁴⁰ But as a visible entity it is a “mixed” one including within it both believers and unbelievers.

This view of the *nature* of the church differs substantially from a Baptist view and from those who identify themselves as part of the believer’s church tradition. In a Baptist view, at least in the one I will defend, even though there is only one people of God throughout the ages, there is a redemptive-historical difference between OT Israel and the NT church. No doubt, there is a significant amount of continuity in the one people of God, but there is also a significant amount of discontinuity as well, by virtue of our Redeemer’s work which has inaugurated the entire new covenant age and who has brought to fulfillment all the promises, types, and covenants of the OT. That is why in a Baptist view of the church, what is unique about the nature of the new covenant community is that it comprises a regenerate, believing people, not a mixed people like Israel of old. That is why Baptists only view those who are true members of the new covenant community as those who have actually entered into union with Christ by repentance and faith and as such are partakers of all the benefits and blessings of the new covenant age. Furthermore, for Baptists, it is for this reason that baptism, which is the covenant sign of the new covenant church, is reserved for those who have entered into these glorious realities by the sovereign work of God’s grace in their lives. However, in contrast to a Baptist view, the paedobaptist argues for the “mixed” nature of the church. The members of the visible church are all those who “are marked out by baptism and actual membership in a local church”⁴¹—which, in the end, includes “all believers and their children.”

³⁹ Murray, *Christian Baptism*, 32.

⁴⁰ See Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 566.

⁴¹ Booth, *Children of the Promise*, 88.

What does this understanding of the nature of the church have to do with infant baptism? Everything. As the argument goes, since, in the OT, infants of believing households were included in the “visible church” (Israel) by their circumcision *prior to a personal profession of faith* and, additionally, by that act they were considered full members of the covenant community even though they were not yet regenerate, the same is true under the new covenant. Hence, the covenant sign of baptism is applied to the infants of believing parents even though these infants have not yet exercised faith, and even though this practice disrupts the biblical order of baptism in the NT—first, repentance towards God and faith in Christ, and second, a confession of that faith publicly in water baptism.⁴²

Evidence for the Paedobaptist View of the Church. What evidence is given for the paedobaptist view of the church? There are at least three pieces of biblical and theological evidence often cited.⁴³

1. *The most foundational evidence is the paedobaptist appeal to the essential continuity of the covenant of grace across redemptive history.* For them, this entails two truths: first, there is only *one* people of God throughout the ages, and second, the nature of the covenant community is essentially the same. Hence, what may be said about the nature of the covenant community with Abraham and his children and the nation of Israel is also true of the nature of the new covenant community, the visible church, which includes within it both believers and unbelievers.

It must be acknowledged that most people today, whether they are credo- or paedobaptists, would have no problem affirming that Scripture teaches that there is only *one* people of God throughout the ages.⁴⁴ Appeal to textual data which supports such a claim is not

⁴² On the issue of the biblical order of baptism, namely, first conversion then baptism, and the close relationship between the two see the excellent treatment in G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 93–305, and R. H. Stein, “Baptism and Becoming a Christian in the New Testament,” *SBJT* 2:1 (1998): 6–17.

⁴³ These three pieces of evidence are fairly standard in paedobaptist literature. See for example, Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 632–35; Murray, *Christian Baptism*, 31–68; Booth, *Children of the Promise*, 71–95; and Wilson, *To A Thousand Generations*, 13–96.

⁴⁴ Historically, certain varieties of Dispensationalism (namely, classic) might disagree with this point, but even within Dispensationalism, as represented by Progressive Dispensationalism, this point would not be disputed. For more on the differences between those who identify themselves as Dispensationalist see C. A. Blaising and D. L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*

really at dispute. For example, when the language of “assembly” (*qāhāl* and *ekklēsia*) is applied to Israel and the church (e.g., Deut 4:10; Josh 24:1,25; Isa 2:2–4; Matt 16:18; 1 Cor 11:18; Heb 10:25), or when OT language describing Israel (e.g., Exod 19:6; Isa 43:20–21; Hos 1:6,9; 2:1), or OT texts that were applied to Israel (e.g., Jer 31:31–34; Hos 1:10–11) are now applied to the church (e.g., 1 Pet 2:9–10; Heb 8:6–13; Rom 9:24–26), this is strong evidence in favor of the claim that there is only one people of God throughout the ages. However, what is at dispute between credo- and paedobaptists is the nature and structure of the covenant community as one moves across redemptive-history and whether the nature of the church is a “mixed” community like Israel of old or whether it should be described as a regenerate, believing community. This leads to the second piece of evidence often cited.

2. *The corroboratory evidence often given to support the claim that the new covenant community is a “mixed” community like Israel of old, is an appeal to the warning passages of Scripture, especially those warnings that speak of the possibility of apostasy* (e.g., Heb 6:4–6; 10:28–30). These texts are cited because, it is argued, they seem to imply that it is possible for a person to be a member of the new covenant community (i.e., the visible church), but then, sadly, to depart from the faith thus demonstrating that they never were a regenerate, believing person even though they were externally and objectively members of the covenant community. Thus, whether one thinks of the nature of the covenant community in the OT (Israel) or NT (church), it is essentially the same in both eras. That is why OT Israel and the NT church may include within them the elect and non-elect, believers and unbelievers, that is, those who by receiving

(Wheaton: Bridgepoint Books, 1993), 9–56; id., ed. *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: The Search for Definition* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992); and R. D. Moore, *The Kingdom of Christ: The New Evangelical Perspective* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004). At this point, it must also be stated that in contemporary paedobaptist literature there is often a sad caricature of Baptist theology. For the most part, Baptist theology is put in the category of classic Dispensationalism without any recognition that even within Dispensational theology there are fine nuances which distinguish positions (e.g. Revised and Progressive) and that there are many Baptists, such as the present author, who are neither Dispensational nor Covenantal (in the paedobaptist sense of the term). It does not further discussion to treat all Baptist theology with the same brush, to erect a straw man, and then attempt to shoot it down. Probably the clearest example of this reductionistic treatment of Baptist theology and hermeneutics is R. Booth, *Children of the Promise*, 14–30.

the covenant sign (circumcision or baptism) are externally brought into covenant membership but who may never exercise saving faith. Given this situation, so the paedobaptist argues, there is nothing objectionable in applying the covenant sign of baptism to infants and viewing them as full members of the church apart from explicit faith in Christ.

Obviously, at this point someone could dispute this particular interpretation of the warning and apostasy passages. In fact, one could contend that this line of argument leads to the interpretation that it is possible for true, regenerate Christians to lose their salvation. After all, has not Arminian theology repeatedly argued this exact point from these texts?⁴⁵ Needless to say, most paedobaptists, especially those in the Reformed tradition, counter by arguing that the Arminian understanding of these texts is unbiblical *as applied to the elect*.⁴⁶ The Bible does not teach that true Christians (the elect) can lose their salvation. Ironically, however, paedobaptists agree with the Arminian exegesis and conclusion *as applied to full covenant members who are not the elect*. Thus, in the hands of most paedobaptists, these texts do not imply that it is possible for the elect to lose their salvation; rather, they demonstrate that “unregenerate members of the visible church can be covenant breakers in the new covenant”⁴⁷ and that the new covenant is a breakable covenant like the old. In commenting on the implications of the warning texts for understanding the nature of the church, Douglas Wilson confidently asserts, “The *elect* and the *covenant members* are not identical sets of people.”⁴⁸ Hence, according to the paedobaptist, the warning texts of Scripture are corroboratory evidence supporting their view that the covenant community across the ages is a “mixed” community. Wilson nicely summarizes the debate between credo- and paedobaptists:

The baptistic assumption is that the covenants are *unlike* in this respect. Some Old Covenant members were regenerate, some were not. All New

⁴⁵ For example see C. Pinnock, ed. *Grace Unlimited* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1975) and id., *The Grace of God and the Will of Man* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989).

⁴⁶ See Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 545–49; Reymond, *New Systematic Theology*, 781–94; cp. W. Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 788–809.

⁴⁷ See G. Strawbridge, “Introduction,” in *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*, 4–5.

⁴⁸ Wilson, *To a Thousand Generations*, 34.

Covenant members are regenerate. The paedobaptist assumption is that the covenants are *alike* in this respect. Some Old Covenant members were regenerate, some were not. Some New Covenant members are regenerate, some are not. The paedobaptist holds that the *difference* between the covenants is that the promises in the New are much better—meaning that the ratio of believer to unbeliever will drastically change. The history of the New Israel will not be dismal like the Old Israel.⁴⁹

What does all this have to do with infant baptism? Simply this: if membership in the covenant community (Israel, church) is essentially the same in all ages, then this provides the needed rationale to view and apply the covenant signs in a similar manner, regardless of which covenant is in view. In other words, even given the NT pattern of baptism (repentance, faith, and baptism) and the lack of any specific NT command to baptize infants, the paedobaptist believes that the covenant provides the biblical grounds to practice infant baptism in the church. To be sure, the covenant sign does not save an individual, but it does mean that those who receive the sign—including infants—are viewed objectively as full-fledged covenant members in the body of Christ.

3. *Further supporting evidence to buttress the data already cited is claimed in the promise given in Acts 2:39—“for you and your children”—as well as in the household theme across the canon and the household baptisms in the NT* (see Acts 16:15,32–33; 18:8; 1 Cor 1:16). These passages are held to provide a strong biblical warrant to ground the practice of infant baptism. Wilson is emphatic at this point. He believes that when all the data is considered, it does not lead us merely to affirm that infant baptism is consistent with Scripture, nor even that a biblical case may be made for it. Rather, he believes that all the evidence combined demonstrates beyond question that the Scriptures *require* the practice of infant baptism.⁵⁰ For, as many paedobaptists assert, it is almost unthinkable that infants would not be considered part of the church through the covenantal sign of baptism given the continuity of the covenant of grace and given the importance of households and family solidarity in the OT. Infants in the church, especially of Jewish-Christian parents, would naturally

⁴⁹ Wilson, *To a Thousand Generations*, 34–35.

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, 9.

be regarded as subjects of baptism, just as they were of circumcision in the OT. Since infants of believers were always included in the covenant under older covenant administrations, then we must assume that apart from explicit biblical warrant to the contrary, infants of believers are still included in the church today. We do not need a specific command to baptize infants nor do we need any unambiguous example of infant baptism in the NT. The principle of continuity leads us to assume that infants are included in the church unless we are explicitly told they are not. As John Murray states,

Are we to believe that infants in this age are excluded from that which was provided by the Abrahamic covenant? In other words, are we to believe that infants now may not properly be given the sign of that blessing which is enshrined in the new covenant? Is the new covenant in this respect less generous than was the Abrahamic? Is there less efficacy, as far as infants are concerned, in the new covenant than there was in the old? ...

If infants are excluded now, it cannot be too strongly emphasized that this change implies a complete reversal of the earlier divinely instituted practice. So we must ask: do we find any hint or intimation of such reversal in either the Old or the New Testament? More pointedly, does the New Testament revoke or does it provide any intimation of revoking so expressly authorized a principle as that of the inclusion of infants in the covenant and their participation in the covenant sign and seal? ...

In the absence of such evidence of repeal we conclude that the administering of the sign and seal of the covenant to the infant seed of believers is still in operation and has perpetual divine warrant.⁵¹

Nevertheless, covenantal paedobaptists believe we have an explicit endorsement of the place of believers' children as recipients of the covenant promise in Acts 2:39. Joel Beeke and Ray Lanning state its importance in this fashion: "Peter's words in Acts 2:39 are therefore a covenantal formula. 'Unto you, and to your children' simply restates 'between me and thee and thy seed after thee' (Gen 17:7). These words assert the identity of the covenant of grace under all dispensations and the continuity of the covenant pattern in which promises made to believers are extended to their children."⁵² The

⁵¹ Murray, *Christian Baptism*, 48–50.

⁵² J. R. Beeke and R. B. Lanning, "Unto You, and to Your Children," in *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*, 56. Also see in *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*, J. M. Watt, "The Oikos Formula," 70–84, and D. Wilson, "Baptism and Children: Their Place in the Old and New Testaments," 286–302; and, cp. Booth, *Children of Promise*, 120–52.

burden of proof, then, we are told, is upon anyone who wants to overturn what was previously given.

Obviously, this standard argument has important implications for how one views the nature and function of the covenant signs. In the paedobaptist view, given the continuity of the covenant of grace and the covenant community, it is assumed that the covenant signs (circumcision and baptism) signify the same realities. Let us now turn to this last point.

The Nature of the Covenantal Signs: Circumcision and Infant Baptism

In order to make a biblical case for the doctrine of infant baptism, one must not only demonstrate the continuity of the covenant of grace and the covenant community across the ages, one must also establish that the covenant signs carry essentially the same meaning. In paedobaptist polemics, the relationship between circumcision and baptism is viewed in terms of *replacement*. No doubt, in replacing circumcision, baptism signifies that the promised era of the OT has now been fulfilled in Christ. In this sense, the new covenant brings with it change. However, the basic underlying meaning and significance of circumcision and baptism are essentially the same.⁵³

The two covenantal signs primarily signify entrance into the covenant community and all the blessings pertaining thereto. Thus, for example, paedobaptists argue that in the OT circumcision was the outward “sign and seal” of entrance into the covenant of grace and the covenant community. It was a “sign” in the sense that it signified something; it was a “seal” in that it confirmed the binding nature of the covenant, grounded in God’s promises to his covenant people.⁵⁴ Circumcision was administered to all infant male children when they were eight days old, but it was not effective on its own in any kind of *ex opere operato* fashion. It had to be combined with faith. If it was not, then one showed himself to be covenant-breaker

⁵³ For examples of this assertion see Booth, *Children of the Promise*, 96–119; Murray, *Christian Baptism*, 45–68; Wilson, *To a Thousand Generations*, 39–80; and Bromiley, “Case for Infant Baptism,” 8–9.

⁵⁴ For a helpful discussion of “sign and seal” see Booth, *Children of the Promise*, 98–99.

instead of a covenant-keeper. That is why many Israelites, who were circumcised externally, in the end showed themselves to be “covenant-breakers,” precisely as they did not believe and persevere in an obedient faith. That is why, as already noted, within the covenant community of Israel, one could legitimately distinguish between the covenant members (those who were externally circumcised) and the spiritual remnant or elect (those who were externally circumcised and internally regenerated). In the same way, so the argument goes, what may be said about circumcision is also true of baptism. In the NT, baptism *replaces* circumcision as the covenant “sign and seal.” In baptism, as with circumcision, we are brought into the *visible* church, identified with Christ, and considered full covenant members. But, as with circumcision, baptism does not effect a saving union in and of itself. It is only by God’s grace, when God’s Spirit makes us alive, grants us faith and repentance, and unites us with Christ that we experience true salvation—the reality to which baptism points. That is why, parallel to the OT, even if infants are baptized under the new covenant and considered covenant members, they are only truly the remnant or part of the *invisible* church if they exercise saving faith in our Lord and persevere in him.

The Spiritual Meaning Of Circumcision. Most of the paedobaptist discussion of circumcision attempts to demonstrate the *spiritual* meaning and significance of the rite. Why? Because central to the paedobaptist argument is the *continuity* of the covenantal signs—a continuity that seeks to point to the *spiritual* realities of such things as: regeneration, justification, union with Christ, and ultimately the cross work of Christ. Hence, for baptism to *replace* circumcision, as the paedobaptist argument demands, it must be shown that both circumcision and baptism signify the same realities. But, to anticipate my argument below, no one disputes the fact that baptism signifies *spiritual* realities won by Christ and applied to us as his people. The point of contention is whether circumcision, in its OT covenantal context, and baptism in the NT, convey identical realities. Does not circumcision also convey national and typological, as well as spiritual realities? If so, then circumcision and baptism may be similar in meaning but not identical. It is my contention, following

the argument of Paul Jewett, that the paedobaptist attempt to reduce the meaning of circumcision merely to its *spiritual* significance is a classic example of reading new covenant realities into the old without first unpacking the OT rite in its own covenantal context and then carefully thinking through the issues of continuity and discontinuity between the covenantal signs.⁵⁵

But first, we should note how paedobaptists limit and reduce the meaning of OT circumcision to its *spiritual* significance alone. For example, Berkhof admits that the covenant made with Abraham has a national aspect to it, but then he contends that the Abrahamic covenant must be viewed primarily as a *spiritual* covenant, parallel to the new covenant, including the rite of circumcision.⁵⁶ Or, as Booth contends, “The argument that circumcision had a purely natural or physical reference cannot stand the test of biblical teaching. Circumcision carried primarily a spiritual significance (i.e., justification by faith), and therefore may not be regarded as simply a physical sign of descent. It represented cleanliness (see Deut. 30:6; Isa. 52:1). Circumcision was an outward sign of the fact that God required a ‘circumcised’ or cleansed heart.”⁵⁷ Or, as Murray writes:

With reference to circumcision it must be fully appreciated that it was not essentially or primarily the sign of family, racial, or national identity. Any significance which circumcision possessed along the line of national identity or privilege was secondary and derived. . . . Circumcision is the sign and seal of the covenant itself in its deepest and richest significance, and it is the sign of external privileges only as these are the fruits of the spiritual blessings which it signifies.⁵⁸

In paedobaptist literature the *spiritual* meaning of OT circumcision is usually understood in at least three ways—ways that ultimately

⁵⁵ For a development of this argument see P. K. Jewett, *Infant Baptism and the Covenant of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 89–137.

⁵⁶ See Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 632–633. Berkhof writes, “The spiritual nature of this covenant [Abrahamic] is proved by the manner in which its promises are interpreted in the New Testament, Rom. 4:16–18; 2 Cor. 6:16–18; Gal. 3:8,9,14,16; Heb. 8:10; 11:9,10,13. It also follows from the fact that circumcision was clearly a rite that had spiritual significance, Deut. 10:16; 30:6; Jer. 4:4; 9:25,26; Acts 15:1; Rom. 2:26–29; 4:11; Phil. 3:2; and from the fact that the promise of the covenant is even called “the gospel,” Gal. 3:8” (*Systematic Theology*, 633).

⁵⁷ Booth, *Children of the Promise*, 99–100.

⁵⁸ Murray, *Christian Baptism*, 46–47.

link it to baptism under the new covenant, so what may be said about circumcision may also be said about baptism.⁵⁹

1. *At the heart of the Abrahamic covenant is the covenantal formula—“I will be your God, and you shall be my people”—which speaks to the blessing of union and communion with the Lord.* As a sign of the covenant, circumcision signifies and seals this blessing. Objectively, it makes one a member of the covenant community. The same may be said of baptism, which signifies that the recipient has objectively entered into faith union with Christ in his redemptive work. As Booth summarizes, “Baptism unites believers and their children with God’s promised Redeemer, Jesus Christ, and secures their position as his people.”⁶⁰ Obviously, Booth is quick to add that baptism must also be followed by faith before covenant blessings may be appropriated. Failure to do so brings covenant curses instead of blessings. But note: like circumcision, baptism is viewed as a sign which promises and anticipates gospel realities; it does not, as credobaptists affirm, testify that these same gospel realities have already taken place in the recipient.

2. *Circumcision, as a physical act, signified the removal of the defilement of sin, the cleansing from sin, and it pointed to the need for a spiritual circumcision of the heart* (see Exod 6:12,30; Lev 19:23; 26:41; Deut 10:16; 30:6; Jer 4:4; 6:10; 9:25). Likewise, baptism is an outward sign of the inward, spiritual need for the grace of God in the heart of the covenant member—“it points to the necessity of spiritual regeneration.”⁶¹ It does not testify that regeneration has already taken place.

3. *Circumcision was the seal of the righteousness of the faith Abraham had while he was uncircumcised* (Rom 4:11). As such, in circumcision, “God signified and sealed the fact that he justifies believers by faith and considers us as righteous through faith.”⁶² Circumcision is not a guarantee that Abraham has faith, nor even that Abraham (or anyone

⁵⁹ For a discussion of these points see Murray, *Christian Baptism*, 45–68; Booth, *Children of the Promise*, 96–119; M. E. Ross, “Baptism and Circumcision as Signs and Seals,” in *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*, 85–111.

⁶⁰ Booth, *Children of the Promise*, 107.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 102.

else for that matter) has righteousness. Instead, “what circumcision guarantees is the word of God’s promise: that *righteousness will be given on the basis of faith*.”⁶³ The same may be said of baptism. That is why both circumcision and baptism testify to God’s promise to justify the ungodly by faith. This is also why one can circumcise or baptize an infant before faith is present. The covenant sign is simply a promise that righteousness will be given when a person believes the promises of God.

The Parallel between Circumcision and Baptism. Thus, when thinking of the significance of circumcision and baptism, the defender of infant baptism argues that essentially they signify the same gospel realities, namely, regeneration (Col 2:11–12; Rom 2:29), union with Christ (Rom 6:4; Gal 3:27–29), and all the blessings related to that union (Acts 2:38). Because the signs are parallel in meaning and application, if it was legitimate in the OT to apply the sign to “believers and their children,” then the same is true in the new covenant era. In fact, Booth draws such a tight relationship between circumcision and baptism that he emphatically contends, “This clear connection between the two covenant signs of circumcision and baptism creates a difficult problem for the opponents of infant baptism, for *any argument against infant baptism is necessarily an argument against infant circumcision*.”⁶⁴

Wilson goes even further and argues that even up until AD 70, circumcision still continued to have covenantal significance for Jewish Christians as an initiatory rite. Wilson, in appealing to such texts as Acts 21:18–25, argues that the apostles permitted Jewish Christian infants to be circumcised under the new covenant, even though this was not required for Gentile Christians. For a period of time, according to Wilson, circumcision continued to be the means by which Jewish infants of believing parents were brought into the church. Paul himself, Wilson speculates, “if he had gotten married as a Christian, and if he had had a son, *he would have circumcised him*”⁶⁵ in a covenantally significant way. From this assertion, Wilson

⁶³ Ross, “Baptism and Circumcision as Signs and Seals,” 94 (emphasis his).

⁶⁴ Booth, *Children of the Promise*, 109 (emphasis his).

⁶⁵ Wilson, *To a Thousand Generations*, 69.

concludes that “we know with certainty that some first century Christian churches had infant members”⁶⁶ and that “the apostles approved and taught this practice”⁶⁷ during this time of covenantal transition. Obviously these last points are highly debatable and not all paedobaptists would agree with them, but they do nicely illustrate how infant baptists conceive of the parallel relationship between circumcision and baptism.

But one may legitimately ask why circumcision disappeared as a covenant sign, especially for Jewish Christians, if circumcision and baptism are parallel in significance? Most paedobaptists argue that the change was due to the greater blessings that the new covenant has ushered in, especially in terms of extending more blessings to more people than before (e.g., male and female, Jew and Gentile). As we have noted above, as we move from old to new covenant, we also move from promise to fulfillment. Now that Christ has come, some of the rites of the OT have been changed to reflect the completed work of Christ. Baptism has replaced the bloody rite of circumcision, just as the Lord's Supper has replaced the bloody Passover lamb.⁶⁸

Conclusion

Here, then, is the basic argument for the doctrine of infant baptism. I have shown that the advocacy and defense of infant baptism as a biblical doctrine is rooted and grounded in an explicit view of the covenants. It is an argument which centers on a particular understanding of the relationship between the covenants across the canon and the amount of continuity and discontinuity between them. If this interpretation of the “covenant of grace” along with its understanding of the continuity between Israel and the church and the covenant signs can be maintained, then we have a strong case

⁶⁶ Ibid., 71.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 72.

⁶⁸ Some paedobaptists like Wilson, *To a Thousand Generations*, 59–80, even argue that the change occurred to show and maintain the unity of the church. Theoretically, he argues, even though the Jewish Christian could have kept circumcising and baptizing their infants in a covenantally significant way, for the sake of unity, what was required of Gentile Christians was now required of Jewish Christians as well. Once again this is a highly debatable point. It assumes that in the new covenant era, circumcision was allowed to be practiced among Jewish Christians in a covenantally significant way.

for the practice of infant baptism. However, if this understanding of these areas is faulty and inaccurate, then the entire biblical and theological warrant for the practice of infant baptism evaporates. It is my contention that the latter is true and it is to this critique and evaluation of the covenantal argument which I now turn.

An Evaluation and Critique of the Covenantal Argument for Infant Baptism

Central to my critique of the covenantal argument for infant baptism is that it fails to understand correctly the proper relationships between the biblical covenants and the degree of continuity and discontinuity between them. 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, especially in regard to the biblical covenants, the covenant community, and the covenant signs. In the end, this leads them to misunderstand the proper degree of discontinuity inaugurated by Christ's coming and to which the OT points, namely, the arrival of the promised new covenant age. I basically agree with many who argue that paedobaptists, due to their stress on continuity, tend to read new covenant realities into the OT and vice versa, without first unpacking the covenants, the nature of the covenant community, and the covenantal signs in their original redemptive-historical context before thinking carefully through the issues of continuity and discontinuity now that Christ has come.⁶⁹ In doing theology, it is imperative that we approach the Bible in its own categories and structure. When we do so, we observe that God's self-revelation, in word and act, involves historical progression, along a redemptive-historical storyline, ultimately centered in Jesus Christ (see Heb 1:1–2). What this entails for our reading of Scripture and doing theology is that we must do justice to the unity of God's plan without flattening the epochal changes that have occurred now that the Lord of Glory has ushered in the end of the ages.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ See for example, Jewett, *Infant Baptism and the Covenant of Grace*, 69–137 and Malone, *The Baptism of Disciples Alone*, 23–135.

⁷⁰ On issues of theological method see the introductory articles in *NDBT*, 3–112; R. Lints,

Specifically, my critique will follow my description of the paedobaptist viewpoint. In four steps I will evaluate their covenantal argument: first, their particular understanding of the covenant of grace; second, the relationship of the Abrahamic covenant to the other biblical covenants; third, the new covenant and the nature of the church; and finally a discussion of the relationship between the covenantal signs of circumcision and baptism.

The Use of the Theological Category, “The Covenant of Grace”

It is beyond question that the theme of the “covenant” is an important unifying theme in Scripture. As we have seen, paedobaptists have made the “covenant” a crucial organizing principle of God’s relation to us. They have rightly used it to unpack the truth that God has one plan of salvation across the ages and that history is the working out of that plan centered in the coming and cross work of our Lord Jesus Christ (see Eph 1:9–10). I do not dispute this point at all. In fact, in one sense, all evangelicals regardless of whether they are more covenantal, dispensational, or somewhere in between, agree with this point. We believe that the storyline of Scripture moves clearly from Creation to Fall, from Abraham to David, and finally to Christ.

If we are not careful, however, the notion of *the* “covenant of grace” may be misleading, because Scripture does not speak of only one covenant with different administrations. Rather, Scripture speaks in terms of a *plurality* of covenants (e.g. Gal 4:24; Eph 2:12; Heb 8:7–13), which are all part of the progressive revelation of the one plan of God that ultimately is fulfilled in the new covenant. In reality, the “covenant of grace” is a comprehensive *theological* category, not a biblical one. This does not mean that it is illegitimate. In theology we often use theological terms that are not found specifically in Scripture (e.g., the Trinity). If the theological category, “the covenant of grace,” is used to underscore the unity of God’s

The Fabric of Theology: Toward an Evangelical Prolegomenon (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993); M. S. Horton, *Covenant and Eschatology: The Divine Drama* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002).

plan of salvation and the essential spiritual unity of the people of God in all ages, it is certainly helpful and biblical. But if it is used to flatten the relationships and downplay the significant amount of progression between the biblical covenants, which then leads us to ignore specific covenantal discontinuities across redemptive-history, then it is unhelpful, misleading, and illegitimate.

In order to make headway in the baptismal divide and think biblically regarding the relationships between the covenants, we should place a moratorium on “covenant of grace” as a category when speaking of the biblical covenants and the relationships between them. In its place, let us speak of the one plan of God or the eternal purposes of God centered in Jesus Christ, for that is what the language of the “covenant of grace” is seeking to underscore. But when it comes to thinking of the “covenant,” let us speak in the plural and then unpack the relationships between the biblical covenants vis-à-vis the overall eternal plan of God centered in Jesus Christ. We may then think more accurately about how the one plan of God, tied to the promises of God first given in Gen 3:15, is progressively revealed in history *through* the biblical 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.

In fact, this flattening of Scripture is clearly taking place when the paedobaptist identifies and equates the Abrahamic covenant with the “covenant of grace” as though it actually were *that* covenant. Instead of first understanding the Abrahamic covenant in its own context, in all its diverse features (e.g., national/physical, typological, and spiritual), and then relating it to God’s overall plan vis-à-vis the biblical covenants, the paedobaptist tends to reduce it merely to its spiritual realities while neglecting its other aspects. The paedobaptist thus reads new covenant realities into it and overlooks important differences between the Abrahamic and new covenant.

The Nature of the Abrahamic Covenant and its Relation to the Biblical Covenants

As noted above, the paedobaptist views the Abrahamic covenant as essentially identical with the new covenant, beyond a few explicit changes. In so doing, the paedobaptist tends to flatten the Abrahamic covenant by reducing it primarily to *spiritual* realities while neglecting its national and typological aspects, and then in turn he takes the genealogical principle operative in the Abrahamic covenant—"you and your seed" (Gen 17:7)—as applicable *in exactly the same way* across the canon without suspension, abrogation, and especially reinterpretation in the new covenant era. So the paedobaptist contends that baptism *replaces* circumcision and that the covenant sign, regardless of our location in redemptive-history, is for "you and your seed" (i.e., physical children). Even though the new covenant era is described as the *fulfillment* of the old, given the continuity of the covenant of grace interpreted in light of the genealogical principle of the Abrahamic covenant, the paedobaptist assumes that "believers and their children" are included in the church much as they were in Israel of old. This identification and equation of the Abrahamic covenant with the new covenant is particularly seen in the parties of the covenant. In arguing for the "dual aspect" of the covenant, namely, that in the "visible church" the parties of the covenant are "believers and their children," paedobaptists demonstrate that they view new covenant membership through the lens of the Abrahamic covenant, thus identifying the two covenants without acknowledging the redemptive-historical differences between them.

What, then, is the precise nature of the Abrahamic covenant? Should it be viewed primarily in spiritual terms or is this a reductionistic reading of it? How should we view the Abrahamic covenant in relation to the other biblical covenants? And is it correct to view the Abrahamic covenant as basically identical with the new covenant, especially in regard to the genealogical principle? Are there no differences as one moves from promise to fulfillment? I will attempt briefly to delineate the nature of the Abrahamic covenant and its relationship to the other biblical covenants in addition to noting a couple of implications for the baptismal debate.

Abrahamic covenant as paradigm of God's dealings with humankind. First, in agreement with much of covenant theology, I concur that Scripture presents the Abrahamic covenant as the basis for all God's dealings with the human race and the backbone for understanding the biblical covenants. Truly, it is through Abraham and his seed—ultimately viewed in terms of our Lord Jesus Christ (Gal 3:16)—that our Triune God fulfills his eternal purpose and promise to save a people for himself and to usher in a new creation. This is borne out, not only in terms of OT theology, but also in how the NT authors interpret the fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise in light of the person and work of Christ (e.g., Romans 4 and Galatians 3).

We must note the location of the Abrahamic covenant in the storyline of Scripture.⁷¹ God's promises to Abraham of a great name, seed, and land (Gen 12:1–3; cp. Gen 15:4–5; 17:1–8; 18:18–19; 22:16–18) must be understood in view of the unfolding drama of Genesis 3–11, especially the promise given in Gen 3:15. As a result of the disobedience of Adam—the covenantal head of the human race—sin and death have entered God's good world. Unless God acts in grace and power, the original creation will stand completely under divine judgment. But, thankfully, God chooses to act on our behalf. He promises that his purposes for creation and the human race will continue through his provision of a Redeemer, the seed of the woman, to reverse the disastrous effects of the Fall. This promise continues in the Noahic covenant (Genesis 8–9) through the covenant mediator, Noah, and his family. But with Noah, like Adam, there is failure. By the time we reach Genesis 11, we have Genesis 3 all over again. The rebellious human attempt to make a name apart from God is set over against God's gracious calling and election of Abraham. But unlike the situation with Noah, where God destroyed everyone except Noah and his family, God does not destroy the human race as in the flood. Instead, God allows the nations to exist and then calls Abraham out of the nations. Ultimately, God's

⁷¹ For helpful resources on the nature of the Abrahamic covenant and its relation to other biblical covenants see Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty*, 45–92; Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation*, 47–79; and Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 128–211.

intent is to work through the covenant mediator, Abraham, and his seed to bring blessing to the nations. In this context, one must view the Abrahamic covenant as the means by which God will fulfill his promises for humanity. In this important sense, Abraham and his family constitute another Adam, a calling into existence of something new parallel to the original creation, but in this case a “new creation” (Rom 4:17). In Abraham and his seed, all God’s promises for the human race will be realized—promises that God takes upon himself to accomplish in the inauguration of the covenant in Genesis 15. N. T. Wright summarizes well the importance of Abraham in this OT context when he writes, “Abraham emerges within the structure of Genesis as the answer to the plight of all humankind. The line of disaster and of the ‘curse’, from Adam, through Cain, through the Flood to Babel, begins to be reversed when God calls Abraham and says, ‘in you shall all the families of the earth be blessed.’”⁷²

Due to God’s covenant promises to Abraham, the promise is confirmed and passed on to Isaac and Jacob (Gen 26:3–5; 28:13–15; 35:9–12). In addition, the promises made to Abraham are also the basis on which God delivers Israel from slavery in Egypt. God’s calling and establishing his covenant with Israel through Moses is in fulfillment of the promises made to Abraham and his seed (Exod 3:6; cp. 2:24–25; Deut 4:36–38; 1 Chr 16:15–19; 2 Kgs 13:22–23). God did not set his love on Israel because they were better or more numerous than the nations (Deut 7:7). Neither was it for their righteousness that they were given the land of Canaan (Deut 9:4–6). The basis for God’s calling of Israel was not to be found in them, but instead in God’s sovereign choice and his covenant loyalty to Abraham (Exod 19:4; Deut 7:8). Once again, it is through Abraham and his family, now narrowed to the nation of Israel, that God purposes and plans to bring blessing to all nations. In this way, through Israel, which also serves as a kind of new Adam, God will bring about a resolution of the sin and death caused by the first Adam. Israel, as a nation, is the agent and means God uses to achieve the wider purposes of the

⁷² N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 262.

Abrahamic covenant which ultimately leads us to Christ and the ushering in of a “new creation.”

But it is not only the Mosaic covenant that is built on the backbone of the Abrahamic covenant, it is also the Davidic. The Davidic king of Israel is a son in relation to the Lord (2 Sam 7:14). He is the administrator and mediator of the covenant. As such, the Davidic sons function as the Lord’s representative to Israel. The sonship applied to Israel as a nation (Exod 4; cp. Hos 11:1) is now applied to David and his sons. But there is more: the Davidic king also inherits the role of Adam and Israel as son of God to humanity as a whole. As Walter Kaiser has rightly argued, the expression in 2 Sam 7:19b should read, “This is the charter by which humanity will be directed,” indicating David’s own understanding of the implications of the Davidic covenant for the entire human race, namely, that his role as covenant mediator would effect the divine rule in the entire world as God intended it for humanity in the original situation.⁷³ In this, the Davidic covenant is linked to the Abrahamic, which in turn is linked to God’s earlier promises. Thus, under the Davidic king, the Abrahamic promise of the great nation and great name come together. In this sense, the ultimate fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant coincides with the ultimate fulfillment of the Davidic covenant. The Abrahamic blessings, linked back to Noah and creation, will only be ultimately realized through the Davidic son. Indeed, the final fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise of blessing in a promised land will take place under the rulership of the Davidic king. In this important sense, the Davidic king becomes the mediator of covenant blessing, tied back to Abraham, ultimately tied back to Adam, as the covenant head of the human race.

In the OT none of the covenant mediators—whether Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, or David—fulfilled their role and brought about the promise; they only typified and anticipated the one to come (Rom 5:14). Only our Lord Jesus Christ, the God-man, fulfills the roles of the previous covenantal mediators and brings about the promises

⁷³ See W. C. Kaiser, Jr., “The Blessing of David, The Charter for Humanity,” in *The Law and the Prophets*, ed. J. H. Skilton (Nutley, NJ: P&R, 1974), 311–14. Also see the unpublished paper by P. J. Gentry, “The *hasdê dāwīd* of Isa 55:3: A Response to Hugh Williamson,” and Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation*, 151–52.

stretching back to Gen 3:15. That is why the NT presents Christ as nothing less than the Lord as well as the last Adam, the true seed of Abraham, David's greater Son, who ushers in a new covenant—a covenant which all the previous covenants anticipated and typified. In Christ, all the promises of God are yes and amen (2 Cor 1:20). That is why in Jesus and his cross work, the desperate plight begun in Eden now finds its solution as the last Adam, the obedient Son, has accomplished his saving work. The promise that God himself must be the Savior of his people is fulfilled for he himself is the Lord. Indeed, the death of Jesus, the crime of all crimes, is nevertheless determined by the divine plan (Acts 2:23). Why? To bring to fulfillment what God had promised through the prophets, that Messiah would suffer (Acts 3:18) in order to save his people from their sins (Matt 1:21). In Jesus Christ, the prophetic anticipation of God's coming to save in and through David's greater Son is fulfilled. Indeed, as D. A. Carson reminds us, "the promise that through Abraham's seed all the nations of the earth will be blessed, gradually expanded into a major theme in the Old Testament, now bursts into the Great Commission, the mushrooming growth of the Jewish church into the Gentile world, the spreading flame reaching across the Roman Empire and beyond, in anticipation of the climactic consummation of God's promises in the new heaven and new earth."⁷⁴

Here in summary is something of the relationship of the Abrahamic covenant vis-à-vis the other biblical covenants. It is beyond question that the Abrahamic covenant is the basis for all God's dealings with the human race as it unfolds the promise and leads us to Christ. But in this overall summary of the covenants and their relationships there is something crucial that we must not miss: as we move from Abraham to Christ, there is a significant progression and advance that takes place. The Abrahamic covenant sets the context and anticipates the coming of the new covenant, but promise and type are not the same as fulfillment and antitype. No doubt continuity exists between the covenants, but there is also significant discontinuity. This has implications for how we view the nature of the covenant community and the significance of the covenant signs. It is this last

⁷⁴ D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 263.

observation that leads me to my second point regarding the nature of the Abrahamic covenant first in its own canonical context and then in its relation to the new covenant.

The Various Aspects of the Abrahamic Covenant. Second, as we think about the nature of the Abrahamic covenant in its own historical context it is important that we do not reduce it merely to its *spiritual* aspects alone. To do so, is to read new covenant realities into the old era *too fast*. We must first understand the Abrahamic covenant in its own canonical context before we relate it to what has now come in Christ. Surely the Abrahamic covenant ultimately leads us to the new covenant, but what is the nature of that covenant first in its own historical context? It is my contention that the Abrahamic covenant is very diverse; it encompasses not only spiritual elements that link us to the new covenant, but it also consists of national and typological elements that result in significant discontinuity as the era of fulfillment is inaugurated. This can best be illustrated if we think of the different senses Scripture gives to the genealogical principle—to “you and your seed” (Gen 17:7). As we have noted above, paedobaptists understand to “you and your seed” as “you and your physical seed” (i.e., believers and their children)—a principle that continues without suspension or change from Abraham to Christ. But does this understanding do justice to the Abrahamic covenant in its own context, let alone in light of the fulfillment in Christ? My answer is no. We see this by answering the important question, Who is the seed of Abraham? Who is the true heir of God’s promise? Scripture teaches that there are four senses that must be distinguished and not confused. Let us look at each of these in turn.⁷⁵

1. 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

⁷⁵ On this point see T. D. Alexander, “Seed,” in *NDBT*, 769–73; J. G. Reisinger, *Abraham’s Four Seeds* (Frederick, MD: New Covenant Media, 1998); and R. F. White, “The Last Adam and His Seed: An Exercise in Theological Preemption,” *TJ* 6 ns:1 (1985): 60–73.

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.⁷⁶

2. The “seed of Abraham” also refers to a *natural, yet special* seed tied to God’s elective and saving purposes, namely Isaac, and by extension Jacob and the entire nation of Israel. As God enters into covenant relationship with Israel, they are a special, chosen people (Deut 7:7–10). As in the case of the natural seed, they too are marked as Abraham’s seed by circumcision. But as a nation, they are a “mixed” entity comprising believers and unbelievers—Elijahs and Ahabs simultaneously—even though all males within the covenant nation, regardless of whether they were spiritually regenerate, were marked by the covenant sign of circumcision. In fact, being God’s chosen people did not guarantee that they would receive God’s ultimate redemptive blessings (see Matt 3:9; Luke 3:8; 16:19–31; John 8:31–39; Rom 9:1–15).⁷⁷ Instead, their being marked with

⁷⁶ 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.

⁷⁷ We must be careful that we do not equivocate on the term “redemption.” In the OT context, it can simply refer to God’s deliverance of the nation from Egypt without the full NT sense of redemption from sin and ultimate salvific blessings. To speak of the nation of Israel as a “redeemed” people does not necessarily mean that they were all redeemed in the same sense that the church is the “redeemed” people of God. No doubt there are typological relations but the type is not the same as the antitype.

the covenant sign not only showed their relationship to Abraham, but also, unlike the mere natural seed (Ishmael), allowed them the supreme privilege of bringing God's blessing to all nations through the coming of the Messiah.

3. The Messiah is the third sense of the "seed of Abraham." In Gal 3:16, Paul argues that the singular use of "seed" in Gen 12:3 and other places is a reference to the *true/unique* "seed of Abraham," namely Christ.⁷⁸ Here Paul is picking up the promise theme from Gen 3:15, traced through a distinctive line of seed, beginning with Adam, running through Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Israel, David, and eventually culminating in Christ. In Christ, we have the promised seed, the mediator of God's people, the one who fulfills all God's promises, not least the Abrahamic promises. Hence, he is the true seed of Abraham, the true Israel, and David's greater Son. In this important sense, then, Jesus is the unique seed of Abraham both as a physical seed through a specific genealogical line and as the antitype of all the covenant mediators of the OT. What is crucial to note at this juncture is how in Christ, viewed as the true seed of Abraham and the mediatorial head of the new covenant, there is a significant typological advance as we move across the covenants which has implications for understanding the expression "to you and your seed." This is clear in the fourth sense of the "seed of Abraham."

4. In this last sense of the "seed of Abraham," the NT emphasizes its *spiritual* nature now that Christ has come. It includes within it both believing Jews and Gentiles in the church. Given the new era that Christ has inaugurated, the way into Abraham's family is not dependent on circumcision or the Torah, but it comes through faith and spiritual rebirth. Only those who have experienced conversion are those who are Abraham's "seed" in this *spiritual* sense. To be a member of Abraham's family now is not tied to a specific physical lineage, nor circumcision, nor any kind of physical links to other believers. Rather, one becomes a part of Abraham's family only through faith union in Christ brought about by the Spirit (Gal 3:26–29). Thus, in the coming of Christ, a new era of redemptive history

⁷⁸ See Alexander, "Seed," in *NDBT*, 769–73 and T. R. Schreiner, *Paul: Apostle of God's Glory in Christ* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001), 73–85.

has dawned where the structures, types, and shadows of the old have given way to the reality and fulfillment of what the OT was all along pointing to.

Implications of the Abrahamic Covenant for Baptism. At least two important implications follow this discussion of the baptismal issue. First, it is illegitimate to identify and equate the Abrahamic covenant with the new covenant without noting the diverse aspects within it (national/physical, typological, spiritual) and the discontinuity that results as we move from Abraham to Christ. For example, to identify and equate the *natural/special* seed (Israel) with the *spiritual* seed (church) as well as to equate the covenant signs of circumcision and baptism is a mistake often made by paedobaptists. It not only fails to do justice to the diverse aspects of the Abrahamic covenant, but also to the way that covenant is ultimately fulfilled in Christ. So Israel, as a nation, is a type of the church. But this is the case, not because the church is merely the replacement of Israel, but because 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). There is continuity, but also important discontinuity. Now that Christ has come, only those who have faith and have experienced spiritual rebirth are his people and part of his family. In the OT era, the people of God were both a nation and the spiritual people of God; circumcision signaled one’s affiliation with the nation. But even though circumcision marked one as a *natural* seed of Abraham and brought one into the nation of Israel, not all who were part of Israel were the *spiritual* seed (see Rom 9:6). This, as I will argue below, is *not* the same in regard to the new covenant people of God. The new covenant people of God are all those, regardless of ethnicity or circumcision, who have confessed Christ as Lord, the *true/spiritual* seed of Abraham. It includes all those who believe in Christ and who have been born of his Spirit. That is why, in the end, Scripture teaches that we should only baptize those who are Christ’s covenant children—those who are actually in the covenant by God’s grace through regeneration and saving faith.⁷⁹

⁷⁹ For more on this point see Jewett, *Infant Baptism and the Covenant of Grace*, 93–104; Malone, *The Baptism of Disciples Alone*, 71–79.

A second implication is that the genealogical principle of the Abrahamic covenant is reinterpreted as we move from promise to fulfillment.⁸⁰ Under the previous covenants, the genealogical principle, that is, the relationship between the covenant mediator and his seed was *physical* (e.g., Adam, Noah, Abraham, David). 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? That the Lord will unite himself with a *spiritually* renewed covenant people, *all* of whom will know him, in contrast to the “mixed” nation of Israel who broke the covenant? And that *all* of these new covenant people will be marked by the knowledge of God, the forgiveness of sins, and the reality of a circumcised heart which will allow them to be covenant-keepers, not covenant-breakers. In other words, in failing to grasp the significant progression in the covenants across redemptive-history, particularly in terms of the relationship between the covenant mediator and his seed, paedobaptists fail to understand correctly how the genealogical principle has changed from Abraham to Christ. Ultimately they do not acknowledge the “newness” of the new covenant. Their emphasis on the continuity of the covenant of grace has led them to flatten the covenantal differences and thus to misconstrue the nature of the new covenant community. It is to this point that I now turn.

The Newness of the New Covenant and the Nature of the Church

As already noted, how one understands the nature and structure of the new covenant vis-à-vis the previous biblical covenants takes us to the heart of the baptismal divide. In arguing for the continuity of the covenant community across the ages, paedobaptists argue that the new covenant community (church) is essentially the same as the old (Israel) in that both communities are “mixed” entities. As in

⁸⁰ For more on this point see White, “The Last Adam and His Seed,” 60–73; Reisinger, *Abraham’s Four Seeds*.

Israel, so in the church, there is a distinction between the locus of the covenant community and the elect (remnant), with circumcision, and now baptism, being the sign of entrance into the former. That is why the covenantal signs may be applied in exactly the same way, even to those who have not yet exercised saving faith.

Baptists, on the other hand, disagree with this understanding of the nature of the new covenant community. Credobaptist theology, at least the view I will defend, argues for more redemptive-historical discontinuity between Israel and the church, especially in regard to the nature of the church. No doubt there is only one people of God throughout the ages; that is not in dispute. However, in the OT promise of the new covenant (Jer 31:29–34) and its fulfillment in Christ (see Luke 22:20; Heb 8–10), the nature of the covenant communities are not the same, which entails a difference in the meaning and application of the covenant sign. Specifically, the change is found in the shift from a *mixed* community to that of a *regenerate* community with the crucial implication that under the new covenant, the covenant sign must only be applied to those who are in that covenant, namely, believers. 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. Because the church, by its very nature, is a regenerate community, the covenant sign of baptism must only be applied to those who have come to faith in Christ. It is at this point that we see the crucial discontinuity between the old and new covenant communities, a point the paedobaptist fails to grasp.

This is why paedobaptists consistently interpret the new covenant in “renewal,” rather than “replacement,” or better, “fulfillment” categories. The new covenant, they maintain, is “new” because it expands the previous era, broadens its extent, yields greater blessings, but the basic continuity is still in place, particularly in regard to the nature of the covenant community. Additionally, this is why paedobaptists argue that the new covenant, like the old, is a *breakable* covenant which includes within it “covenant-keepers and covenant-breakers.” Recently, there have been attempts to defend

the paedobaptist understanding of the new covenant by Jeffrey Niell and Richard Pratt, Jr. Interestingly, these two attempts, even though they have much in common, are quite different in approach. Both, though, acknowledge the centrality of this discussion for the baptismal debate. Pratt, for example, grasps the point correctly when he admits,

Evangelical paedobaptists consistently stress that baptized children are in the new covenant, but that they are not automatically or necessarily saved. In effect, infant baptism introduces unregenerate, unbelieving people into the new covenant community. But this practice appears to contradict Jeremiah's prophecy that salvation will be fully distributed in the new covenant. How can it be right for infants to receive the covenant sign of baptism when they often do not and may never "know the Lord"?⁸¹

This is precisely the issue at stake—the *nature* and *newness* of the new covenant.

Niell contends, in his discussion of the new covenant (Jer 31:31–34; Heb 8–10), that the *new* covenant is *not* really new in comparison with the old. For example, he notes that there is no radical separation between the people of God across the canon: many OT saints were regenerate, knew the Lord, and experienced forgiveness of sins in the same way as those under the new covenant. And regardless of the covenant in question, God must take the initiative in grace to redeem, and when he does, he establishes the same relationship with his people. Given these similarities, then, what is "new"? According to Niell, the "newness" is found in the fact that Christ has brought to an end the ceremonial law and the Levitical priesthood—a priesthood that was "especially engaged in teaching and representing the knowledge of the Lord to the people."⁸² In fact, he interprets the "knowledge" of Jer 31:34 (see Heb 8:11) as only referring to the special knowledge of the Levitical priest, not, as most would contend, a salvific knowledge. He argues that v. 34 is only addressing "the removal of the ceremonial aspects of the law and refers to the knowledge that is possessed and published by the priests. This is true whether or not they were elect before the foundation of the

⁸¹ Pratt, "Infant Baptism and the New Covenant," 161.

⁸² Niell, "The Newness of the New Covenant," 153.

world.”⁸³ But, in the end, other than Christ's fulfilling all that is associated with the ceremonial law, the “new” covenant is the same as the old, especially in that both were breakable and “mixed” in regard to membership.⁸⁴

In contrast to Niell, Pratt (with most covenantal paedobaptists) rightly argues that Jeremiah's new covenant promise does relate to the soteriological nature of the community since Jeremiah anticipates that

God himself will bring about deep internal transformation of his covenant people. ... Jeremiah did not see entrance into the new covenant community as entrance into an external environment, but as undergoing a spiritual, inward change. ... It is apparent that the law of God often regulated the lives of the people of Israel as little more than an external code. Obedience often came reluctantly and resulted from external pressures. But Jeremiah promised that the new covenant would bring this situation to an end. In this regard, Paul echoed Jeremiah's words when he contrasted the old covenant “ministry ... which was engraved in letters of stone” (2 Cor 3:7) with the “new covenant ... ministry of the Spirit ... that brings righteousness” (2 Cor 3:6,8–9).⁸⁵

Also, in contrast to Niell, Pratt rightly contends that v. 34 refers to a *saving* knowledge.

In this sense, “knowing the Lord” means “properly acknowledging and recognizing him.” This is why Jeremiah 31:34 concludes, “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.” In a word, to know God as Jeremiah spoke of it would be to receive eternal salvation. In the covenant of which Jeremiah spoke, salvation would come to each participant. There would be no exceptions.⁸⁶

In other words, what the promise anticipates is a *regenerate* community, not merely a mixed one. Pratt's understanding of Jeremiah 31, which is in direct opposition to Niell's, raises serious issues for paedobaptists. How can they speak of baptized infants as participating in the external aspects of the covenant (i.e., the visible church) without an inward heart transformation? Pratt attempts creatively to skirt this issue. He appeals to the important “already-

⁸³ Ibid., 153, n 37.

⁸⁴ See Ibid., 153.

⁸⁵ Pratt, “Infant Baptism and the New Covenant,” 159–60.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 161.

not yet” tension associated with inaugurated eschatology to argue that the ultimate fulfillment of the new covenant is not until the consummation.⁸⁷ No doubt, the new covenant is “already” here in the church, but the perfect fulfillment of it envisioned in terms of a regenerate community is still “not yet.” Thus, it is not until the consummation of this age that the church will be a regenerate community; at present it is only a “mixed” community constituted by covenant-keepers and covenant-breakers. Pratt writes,

We can have confidence that after Christ returns in glory, everyone in the new creation will have the law of God written on his or her heart. ... In this sense, we expect Jeremiah’s prophecy to find complete fulfillment when Christ returns. At the present time, however, this expectation is only partially fulfilled. ... Until the consummation, the new covenant will continue to be a mixture of true believers and sanctified unbelievers.⁸⁸

Space permits only a brief response. First, paedobaptists fail to do justice to the biblical data, specifically the promise of Jeremiah 31 and its fulfillment in the NT. Second, due to that failure, they wrongly view the nature of the church as a “mixed” entity. Let us briefly address both of these issues in seven steps by first turning to Jeremiah 31 and then to the nature of the church.

1. In response to paedobaptists like Niell, most Baptists, at least those writing in this volume, do *not* deny what Niell thinks we deny namely, “that the internal operations of divine grace were not present for the old covenant saint,”⁸⁹ as if all Baptists understand the relations between the covenants within a framework of complete discontinuity.⁹⁰ I agree that OT saints were saved by grace through faith, were regenerate, knew the Lord, and experienced forgiveness of sins under the old covenant structures in anticipation of the fulfillment of those types and shadows in Christ. This is simply not the issue at debate. As James White rightly notes, “The point is that for Niell, the ‘counter-point’ to which he is responding is an either/or situation: either the elements of the New Covenant described in

⁸⁷ See *Ibid.*, 169.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 171, 173.

⁸⁹ Niell, “The Newness of the New Covenant,” 134.

⁹⁰ Here is another example of how paedobaptists often caricature Baptists as being classical Dispensationalists without acknowledging the diversity of viewpoint within Baptist theology.

Heb. 8:10 were *completely* absent in the Old Covenant ... or they were present *and hence cannot be definitional of what is 'new' in the New Covenant.*"⁹¹ What, then, is the real point of contention? This leads me to my second point.

2. The real issue centers on whether there is a fundamental change in the *structure* and *nature* of the new covenant community in contrast to the old.⁹² Let us think first in terms of *structural* changes in the new covenant which, I would contend, become the basis for understanding the church as the "priesthood of all believers." Under the old covenant, as D. A. Carson has noted, God dealt with his people in a mediated or "tribal" fashion.⁹³ Despite remnant themes and an emphasis on individual believers, the OT pictures God working with his people as a "tribal" grouping whose knowledge of God and whose relations with God were uniquely dependent on specially endowed leaders. Thus, the strong emphasis on the Spirit of God being poured out, not on each believer, but distinctively on prophets, priests, kings, and a few designated special leaders (e.g., Bezalel). Given this hierarchical structure of the covenant community, when these leaders did what was right, the entire nation benefited. However, when they did not, the entire nation suffered for their actions. But what Jeremiah anticipates is that this tribal structure is going to change, "In those days people will no longer say, 'The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge.' Instead everyone will die for his own sin; whoever eats

⁹¹ J. R. White, "The Newness of the New Covenant: Part 2" *Reformed Baptist Theological Review* 2:1 (2005): 88.

⁹² There is debate over the meaning of the word, "new" (Heb., *hadash*; LXX, *kainos*). Some argue that the word only means "renewed" (e.g. Lam 3:22–23) and others argue that it means "new" in a qualitatively different sense (Exod 1:8; Deut 32:17; 1 Sam 6:7; Eccl 1:10). Ultimately the "newness" of the new covenant must be contextually determined. On this debate see Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation*, 175 and J. R. White, "The Newness of the New Covenant: Part 1" *Reformed Baptist Theological Review* 1:2 (2004): 144–52; C. B. Hoch, Jr., *All Things New* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 105–107.

⁹³ See D. A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit: A Theological Exposition of 1 Corinthians 12–14* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 150–58; see id., "Evangelicals, Ecumenism, and the Church," in *Evangelical Affirmations*, ed., K. S. Kantzer and C. F. H. Henry (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 347–85.

sour grapes—his own teeth will be set on edge” (Jer 31:29–30).⁹⁴ As Carson observes,

In short, Jeremiah understood that the new covenant would bring some dramatic changes. The tribal nature of the people of God would end, and the new covenant would bring with it a new emphasis on the distribution of the knowledge of God down to the level of each member of the covenant community. Knowledge of God would no longer be mediated through specially endowed leaders, for *all* of God’s covenant people, would know him, from the least to the greatest. Jeremiah is not concerned to say there would be no teachers under the new covenant, but to remove from leaders that distinctive mediatorial role that made the knowledge of God among the people at large a secondary knowledge, a mediated knowledge.⁹⁵

Related to this anticipation is the OT promise of the gift of the Holy Spirit and his empowering work in the new covenant era (Ezek 11:19–20; 36:25–27; Joel 2:28–32; cp. Num 11:27–29).⁹⁶ Under the old covenant, the “tribal” structure of the covenant community meant that the Spirit was uniquely poured out on leaders. But what the prophets anticipate is a crucial change: the coming of the new covenant era would witness a *universal* distribution of the Spirit (see Joel 2:28–32; Acts 2). God would pour out his Spirit on *all* flesh, namely, *all* those within the covenant community. Thus, *all* those “under the new covenant” enjoy the promised gift of the eschatological Holy Spirit (see Eph 1:13–14). In the NT, the Spirit is presented as the agent who not only gives us life but also enables us to follow God’s decrees and to keep God’s laws, thus making us covenant-keepers and *not* covenant-breakers. The role which Israel was supposed to play is now fulfilled in us, the church, by the Spirit.⁹⁷ It is precisely the dawning of this new age that John the Baptist announces (Matt 3:11), which is signaled at Pentecost, and which is

⁹⁴ All quotations from Scripture come from the NIV.

⁹⁵ Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, 152. It is clear from the context that the knowledge spoken of here is a salvific knowledge. See Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation*, 177–78; Pratt, “Infant Baptism in the New Covenant,” 159–61; P. R. House, *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1998), 317–21.

⁹⁶ On this point see Max Turner, “Holy Spirit,” in *NDBT*, 551–58; D. F. Wells, *God the Evangelist* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 1–4; G. Vos, “The Eschatological Aspect of the Pauline Conception of the Spirit,” in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation*, 91–125; A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 55–67.

⁹⁷ On this point see T. R. Schreiner, *Romans*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 395–468.

grounded in the triumphant cross work of our Lord (John 7:39; 16:7; Acts 2:33). All these events are associated with the inauguration of the new covenant era. That is why it came to be understood that the new covenant era, the Messianic age, would also be the age of the Spirit. In this age, the Spirit is sent to *all* believers and thus becomes the precious seal, down-payment, and guarantee of the promised inheritance of the last day. To be “in Christ” is to have the Spirit for, as Paul reminds us, “if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ” (Rom 8:9). What is the point of all this? It is simply this: one cannot understand the *new* covenant without acknowledging the massive *structural* changes that have taken place. It is simply *not* correct to think of the new covenant as merely a “renewed” version of the old; it brings with it significant change.

3. The new covenant results not only in *structural* change, but also change in the *nature of the covenant people*. Jeremiah signals this in two ways. First, he contrasts the new covenant with the old, “It will not be like the covenant I made with your forefathers ... because they broke my covenant” (Jer 31:32). But, secondly, he tells us why this covenant will *not* be like the old due to a change in the very *nature* of the covenant community. Under the new covenant *all* will know the Lord, not in a mediate but immediate fashion, and *all* will have the law written on their hearts and experience the full forgiveness of sin. In fact, it is these last two aspects of the new covenant which highlight the incredible change that is anticipated and which is now a reality in the church.

Certainly the expression “law written on the heart” is very close to the language of “circumcision of heart” (see Deut 10:16; 30:6; Jer 4:4; 9:25), which can refer to nothing less than regeneration. This does not mean that no one in the OT ever experienced a “circumcision of the heart.” Rather it is signaling the change that is taking place in the nature of the *entire* covenant community. Instead of the people being a “mixed” entity, now the entire community will experience a “circumcision of the heart.” The change that is emphasized is nothing less than the change from a “mixed” to a *regenerate* people.⁹⁸ Jer 31:32 is clear: this is in direct contrast to the

⁹⁸ See House, *Old Testament Theology*, 317–21.

OT people of God. No doubt within national Israel there were many believers. But as an entire community not “all Israel was Israel” (Rom 9:6). Within the national community, there was a distinction between the physical and spiritual seed of Abraham. Under the old covenant both “seeds” received the covenant sign of circumcision and both were viewed as full covenant members in the national sense. However, it was only the believers—the remnant—who were the spiritual seed of Abraham, the “true Israel” in a salvific sense. As White reminds us, built within the very nature of the old covenant community “for every David there were a dozen Ahabs; for every Josiah a legion of Manassehs. Unfaithfulness, the flaunting of God’s law, the rejection of the role of truly being God’s people, the rejection of His knowledge, and the experience of His wrath, were the *normative* experiences seen in the Old Covenant.”⁹⁹ But this is *not* what is anticipated of those under the new covenant. Thus White correctly observes that “Quite simply, there is no ‘remnant’ in the New Covenant, and all those with whom God makes this covenant experience its fulfillment. This is why it is better, and hence proves the author’s [Hebrews] apologetic presentation of the supremacy of Christ over the old ways.”¹⁰⁰

Furthermore, this change is also evident in the promise that the Lord will no longer “remember” our sin (v. 34). White rightly notes that the entire presentation of Jeremiah 31 in Hebrews is “inextricably linked with this demonstration of the supremacy of Christ’s priesthood *and salvific work* (7:22–25; 9:15,23–25; 10:10–18).”¹⁰¹ The “better” nature of the new covenant is seen in light of the perfection of Christ’s work which is *qualitatively* better than all that has preceded. It has better promises and better sacrifices and therefore is a *better* covenant. What is the *better* nature of the covenant? It is this: because of who the Redeemer is and what he offers as a sacrifice we now have a *more effective* sacrifice and thus a *more effective* covenant; indeed, we have a covenant that “is not

⁹⁹ White, “The Newness of the New Covenant: Part 2,” 88.

¹⁰⁰ White, “The Newness of the New Covenant: Part 1,” 160. See W. L. Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*. WBC (Dallas: Word, 1991), 200–11 and G. H. Guthrie, *Hebrews*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 286–87.

¹⁰¹ White, “The Newness of the New Covenant: Part 1,” 147.

susceptible to the breach perpetrated in the past.”¹⁰² Is this not the glory of what Christ has accomplished for us? Due to his work, he has brought about a full, effective, and complete salvation unlike the types and shadows of the old (see Heb 7–10). In the OT, forgiveness of sin is normally granted through the sacrificial system; however, the OT believer, if spiritually perceptive, was fully aware that it was not the blood of bulls and goats that forgave sins. Salvation ultimately had to be found in God's provision of his own Son. But in the new covenant the types and shadows of the old have reached their *telos*. Due to our covenant mediator, sin will be forgiven and “remembered no more.” Clearly, the concept of “remembering” in the OT is not simple recollection (see Gen 8:1; 1 Sam 1:19). In the context of Jer 31:34 for God “not to remember” means that no action will need to be taken in the new age against sin. In the end, to be under the terms of *this* covenant entails that one experiences a full and complete salvation.¹⁰³

4. When does this “new covenant” begin? The NT is clear: it was inaugurated and ratified by the sacrificial death of Christ (Luke 22:20; cp. 1 Cor 11:25; 2 Cor 3:7–18). Hebrews unambiguously applies Jeremiah to the church (Heb 8–10). As D. A. Carson notes, this means that whatever complex relationships obtain between Israel and the church, at least, in this context, it is a typological connection since the promise of the new covenant in Jeremiah is made to “the house of Israel and with the house of Judah” (v. 31).¹⁰⁴ Contrary to Pratt's view, Hebrews establishes the reality of the new covenant in the church without any hint that the full establishment of a regenerate community is yet future.¹⁰⁵ No doubt, we still await the “not yet” aspects of our redemption, but this does not entail that the community is not “already” a regenerate people. The perfect passive use of the verb in Hebrews 8:6—he “has enacted”—emphasizes the

¹⁰² A. I. Wilson, “Luke and the New Covenant: Zechariah's Prophecy as a Test Case” in *The God of Covenant*, ed. J. A. Grant and A. I. Wilson (Leicester: InterVarsity, 2005), 163.

¹⁰³ On this point see Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation*, 181–85.

¹⁰⁴ See D. A. Carson, “Evangelicals, Ecumenism, and the Church,” 361.

¹⁰⁵ On a more detailed and helpful critique of Pratt, see White, “The Newness of the New Covenant: Part 2,” 97–103.

completed action even though the full ramifications may be future. As White rightly comments,

There is nothing in the text that would lead us to believe that the full establishment of this covenant is yet future, for such would destroy the present apologetic concern of the author; likewise, he will complete his citation of Jer. 31 by asserting the obsolete nature of the first covenant, which leaves one to have to theorize, without textual basis, about some kind of intermediate covenantal state if one does not accept the full establishment of the New Covenant as seen in the term *νενομοθέτηται*.¹⁰⁶

In fact, one cannot understand the argument of Hebrews without seeing that what Jeremiah anticipated has now come to pass in the church. In Christ's coming, the new age is here, the Spirit has been poured out on the entire community, and we now experience our adoption as sons including the full forgiveness of sin (see Rom 8), even though we long for the end.

5. Everything that has been stated regarding the new covenant is also supported in the NT's instruction regarding the nature of the church. Once again, I do not dispute that Scripture teaches that there is only *one* people of God throughout the ages. However, what is at debate is whether the *nature* of the covenant community changes in Christ, specifically whether the church is a "mixed" community like Israel of old. As with the previous discussion, whole books have been written on this subject, so the discussion here is necessarily abbreviated. But the crucial point to note in regard to baptism is that the NT church everywhere is viewed as a regenerate, believing community. As Jeremiah anticipated and the NT proclaims, the people of the new covenant are *all* those who have the law written on their hearts, *all* of whom know the Lord salvifically, for *all* of them have experienced the forgiveness of sin. Unlike Israel of old, the locus of the covenant community and the locus of the redeemed is one in the new covenant.

What has brought about this change? Ultimately the answer is rooted in Christology. 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,

¹⁰⁶ White, "The Newness of the New Covenant: Part 1," 157.

Noah, Abraham, and David to Christ; and with Christ, we have change.¹⁰⁷ This is *the* reason why it is *not* correct to view the church, as paedobaptists do, as simply the replacement of Israel, a kind of “renewed” instantiation of it. Rather the church is *new*. Because of her identification with Christ, the head of the new creation, she is a “new man” (Eph 2:11–22). This is why the church is identified with the “age to come” and not the structures of the old era, or what have been called “this present age.” This is why the church is viewed as the community empowered by the Spirit in which *all* have been born of the Spirit.¹⁰⁸

In fact, this is why the church is described as an eschatological and “gathered” (*ekklēsia*) community.¹⁰⁹ In this regard, the church as identified with the “age to come” is an illustration of the running tension between the “already” and the “not yet.” It is the “gathered” people of God in a singular sense—“*the* church” (Col 1:18; cp. Heb 12:22–24)—because even *now* Christians participate in the heavenly, eschatological church of Christ as the beginnings of the new creation. As Carson reminds us, what this entails for our understanding of the church is that,

each local church is not seen primarily as one member parallel to a lot of other member churches, together constituting one body, one church; nor is each local church seen as the body of Christ parallel to other earthly churches that are also the body of Christ—as if Christ had many bodies. Rather, each church is the full manifestation in space and time of the one, true, heavenly, eschatological, new covenant church. Local churches should see themselves as outcroppings of heaven, analogies of “the Jerusalem that is above,” indeed colonies of the new Jerusalem, providing on earth a corporate and visible expression of “the glorious freedom of the children of God.”¹¹⁰

But if this is so, then what is crucial to note is that *this* understanding of the church presupposes that it is a *regenerate* community—a community in faith union with Christ, born of his Spirit, those

¹⁰⁷ For a development of this point see White, “The Last Adam and His Seed,” 60–73.

¹⁰⁸ On this point see Carson, “Evangelicals, Ecumenism, and the Church,” 362–63.

¹⁰⁹ See Carson, “Evangelicals, Ecumenism, and the Church,” 363–67, as well as the helpful discussion in E. Clowney, *The Church*, 27–33.

¹¹⁰ Carson, “Evangelicals, Ecumenism, and the Church,” 366. Also see P. T. O’Brien, “Church,” in *DPL*, 123–31.

who have been raised and seated with Christ in the heavenly realms (Eph 2:5–6; Col 2:12–13; 3:3). It is unpersuasive to think of the church as a mixed entity. As Carson rightly notes, if this biblical and theological understanding of the church is basically right, “then the ancient contrast between the church visible and the church invisible, a contrast that has nurtured not a little ecclesiology, is either fundamentally mistaken, or at best of marginal importance.”¹¹¹ Why? Because the NT views the church as a *heavenly* (i.e., tied to the “age to come” and the new creation, not “in Adam” but “in Christ”) and *spiritual* community (i.e., born of and empowered by the Spirit in faith union with Christ), living her life out now while she awaits the consummation, literally “the outcropping of the heavenly assembly gathered in the Jerusalem that is above.”¹¹²

All this understanding of the church is basic NT ecclesiology.¹¹³ And all of it is true because Christ Jesus has come and through his cross work has inaugurated the new covenant age. He, as the fulfillment of Adam, Abraham, Israel, and David, has brought covenantal and epochal change. And we, as the new covenant people of God, receive the benefits of his work in only one way—through individual repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. By God’s grace and power we are then transferred from being “in Adam” to “in Christ” with all the benefits of that union. And the NT is clear: being “in Christ” and thus in the new covenant, a member of his gathered people (church), means that one is a regenerate believer. The NT knows nothing of one who is “in Christ” who is not regenerate, effectually called of the Father, born of the Spirit, justified, holy, and awaiting glorification.¹¹⁴

6. Given what has been stated, Baptists insist that the covenant sign of the new covenant age, namely baptism, must only be applied to those who have repented of their sins and believed in Christ. This is precisely the pattern we find in the NT. In fact, as other

¹¹¹ Carson, “Evangelicals, Ecumenism, and the Church,” 367.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 371.

¹¹³ See Clowney, *The Church*, 27–70; D. J. Tidball, “Church,” *NDBT*, 407–11; Schreiner, *Paul*, 331–44. Cp. S. Motyer, “Israel (nation),” *NDBT*, 581–87.

¹¹⁴ On the biblical teaching regarding union with Christ see S. B. Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996), 93–138, and Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 840–50.

chapters in this book have argued, the most fundamental meaning of baptism is that it signifies a believer's union with Christ, by grace through faith, and all the benefits that are entailed by that union. It is for this reason that, throughout the NT, baptism is regarded as an outward sign that a believer has entered into the realities of the new covenant that Jesus sealed with his own blood on the cross. J. I. Packer captures this point well when he writes,

Christian baptism ... is a sign from God that signifies inward cleansing and remission of sins (Acts 22:16; 1 Cor 6:11; Eph 5:25–27), Spirit-wrought regeneration and new life (Titus 3:5), and the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit as God's seal testifying and guaranteeing that one will be kept safe in Christ forever (1 Cor 12:13; Eph 1:13–14). Baptism carries these meanings because first and fundamentally it signifies union with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection (Rom 6:3–7; Col 2:11–12); and this union with Christ is the source of every element in our salvation (1 John 5:11–12). Receiving the sign in faith assures the persons baptized that God's gift of new life in Christ is freely given to them.¹¹⁵

In fact, so close is the association between baptism and new covenant blessings in Christ that in the NT baptism “functions as shorthand for the conversion experience as a whole.”¹¹⁶ Evidence for this is quite apparent. For example, in Gal 3:26–27, Paul can say, “You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ.” The language of being “clothed” with Christ refers to our union with him.¹¹⁷ But what is interesting about Paul's statement is how Paul can ascribe union with Christ both to faith (v. 26) and to baptism (v. 27). How can Paul do this? Does he have in mind an *ex opere operato* view of baptism? No, he is not referring to those who have been baptized but have not believed; that would go against the clear statement of v. 26. Rather, he is referring to those who have been

¹¹⁵ J. I. Packer, *Concise Theology* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1993), 212.

¹¹⁶ D. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 355. Moo, agreeing with James Dunn, notes that it is not as if baptism effects regeneration, but it is assumed that faith leads to baptism, and baptism always assumes faith for its validity. This observation underscores the importance the New Testament places on baptism, without denying the priority of salvation by grace through faith. See J. Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1970), 139–46; Moo, *Romans*, 366; Beasley-Murray, “Baptism,” *NIDNTT*, 1:146–48.

¹¹⁷ See R. Y. K. Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 170–75; Beasley-Murray, *Baptism*, 146–51; Clowney, *The Church*, 280.

converted: all such have clothed themselves with Christ and have been united with him through faith. Thus, baptism, by metonymy, can stand for conversion and signify, as an outward sign, that a believer has entered into the realities of the new covenant as a result of his union with Christ through faith.¹¹⁸

We find something similar in Rom 6:1–4, where Paul sees the initiation rite of baptism as uniting the believer to Jesus Christ in the redemptive acts of his death, burial, and resurrection. In this text Paul is not primarily giving a theological explanation of the nature of baptism, but rather unpacking the significance of baptism for the Christian life. Paul is deeply concerned to rebut the charge that the believer may “remain in sin” in order to underscore grace. Accordingly he uses the language of “realm transfer”¹¹⁹ to show how inconceivable this suggestion really is. Christians, Paul affirms, have “died to sin” (v. 2b). We have been transferred from the realm of Adam (sin) to the realm of Christ (life, resurrection, grace), and as such, it is quite impossible for us to still live in sin; its power in us has been decisively broken due to our union with Christ in his death. When did this realm transfer, this “death to sin,” take place? Significantly in vv. 3–4 Paul connects “death to sin” with our baptism, meaning that when we were “baptized into Christ Jesus” we were “baptized into his death” (v. 3). We have died to sin because we have become one with the Lord who died and rose for the conquest of sin and death. Furthermore, “We were buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead ... we too may live a new life” (v. 4). In this sense, then, baptism serves as the instrument by which we are united with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection.¹²⁰ Once again, Paul’s point is *not* to say that the practice of baptism itself unites us to Christ. Rather, as in Galatians 3:26–27, baptism functions as shorthand for the whole conversion experience. Thus, Douglas Moo is right in concluding that “just as faith is always assumed to lead to baptism,

¹¹⁸ See Fung, *Galatians*, 173–74; Beasley-Murray, “Baptism,” *DPL*, 62; and R. N. Longenecker, *Galatians*, WBC (Dallas: Word, 1990), 154–56.

¹¹⁹ Moo, *Romans*, 354 (also pp. 351–52). See H. Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, trans. J. R. de Witt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 44–181.

¹²⁰ Moo, *Romans*, 353–67.

so baptism always assumes faith for its validity. In vv. 3–4, then, we can assume that baptism stands for the whole conversion-initiation experience, presupposing faith and the gift of the Spirit.”¹²¹ In truth, if we understand Paul’s argument, it is *not* baptism which is the primary focus at all; rather, the redemptive events themselves are what Paul is stressing. Baptism is *only* introduced to demonstrate that we were united with Christ in his redemptive work, and now all the new covenant blessings that our Lord has secured for us are ours by virtue of our relationship with him. As Beasley-Murray states, “Through the faith expressed in baptism, what was done outside of us (*extra nos*) becomes effective faith within us. In Christ we are the reconciled children of God.”¹²²

Other texts could be multiplied to make this same point,¹²³ but suffice it to say that in the NT baptism is so closely linked with the gospel itself that it is not enough to say that baptism is merely a symbol. Instead, in the words of Beasley-Murray, it is also a “divine-human event.”¹²⁴ One must not think of this either as *ex opere operato* or as implying the absolute necessity of baptism for salvation. The NT is clear: the benefits that come to us in baptism are tied to faith and faith alone. That is why faith and baptism do not enjoy the same logical status of necessity. But with that said, it is significant that Scripture links all the gracious benefits of the believer’s being united to Christ with water baptism. But if this is so, we cannot conceive how the new covenant sign of baptism may be applied to anyone who does not have faith.

7. What do paedobaptists say in response? The most significant response is an appeal to the warning and apostasy passages of Scripture in order to demonstrate that the church is still a “mixed” community (e.g., Heb 6:4–6). Once again, we can only simply note a number of problems with this approach. First, the paedobaptist

¹²¹ Ibid., 366.

¹²² Beasley-Murray, “Baptism,” in *DPL*, 62. Col 2:11–12 is another text which is parallel to Rom 6:1–4. On this text see below as well as P. T. O’Brien, *Colossians and Philemon*, WBC (Waco: Word, 1982), 114–21.

¹²³ For example see 1 Pet 3:21. On this text see T. R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003), 193–97 and W. Grudem, *1 Peter*, TNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 164–65.

¹²⁴ Beasley-Murray, “Baptism,” *NIDNTT*, 1:148.

interpretation of these texts assumes the “covenant theology” it must first demonstrate. In order for their argument to carry any weight, they must first prove that the nature of the covenant communities is essentially the same throughout the canon. But I have already given reasons why I think this is not correct. Second, the paedobaptist interpretation of these texts is inconsistent with biblical teaching regarding the nature of the new covenant church.¹²⁵ Third, even though their understanding of these texts is a “possible” reading, other legitimate ways of reading these texts (in light of a better way to understand the relations between the biblical covenants, the nature of the new covenant community, and what it means for someone to be in union with Christ) can do justice to *all* the Scriptural data.¹²⁶ The true test for anyone’s theology is this: Does it do justice to *all* the biblical data? I have argued that paedobaptism fails in this regard.

¹²⁵ Paedobaptist literature commonly asserts that our own experience sadly confirms what the NT says about the possibility of apostasy. This *fact* demonstrates to paedobaptists that the church must be viewed as a mixed community like Israel of old. Proof is offered from such texts as Matt 13:24–30 (the parable of the wheat and the tares—even though the parable portrays the kingdom of God in the world and *not* the constitution of the church), the vine imagery of John 15 and Romans 11, and the warning texts of Hebrews (e.g. 6:4–6). But the *nature* of the new covenant community makes this interpretation highly unlikely. We cannot deny Scripture’s description of how the new covenant people of God has incredibly changed. Furthermore, the *fact* of apostasy and the *status* of the one who commits it are not the same. No one disputes the *fact* of apostasy in the new covenant age, but the *status* of those apostates is disputed. Are they “covenant breakers” (assuming they were once full covenant members), or those who professed faith and identified with the church, but who demonstrate by rejecting the gospel that *they were never one with us* (see 1 John 2:19)? The NT teaches the latter. Apostasy leads us, sadly, to re-evaluate a person’s former profession of faith and his covenant status. But this situation is unlike unbelievers in the old covenant who were still viewed as covenant members, even though they were unbelievers. As R. Fowler White, “The Last Adam and His Seed,” 72, n. 19, asserts, “Unlike apostates from the Mosaic covenant (Heb 3:7–11, 16–19) who had heard God say of them that he had (fore)known them in their mediatorial forebears (see Deut 4:37; 7:6–8; 10:15), apostates from the Messianic covenant will hear the Lord of the covenant say to them, ‘I never knew you’ (see Matt 7:23; cp. 2 Tim 2:17–19).” Trying to discern true saving faith is merely a human epistemological problem, and we do our best to discern whether one’s profession of faith is genuine. But this is a far cry from baptizing where there is no faith.

¹²⁶ The best treatment of the warnings passages in Scripture showing how they function in the Christian life, which does *not* conclude that they entail that the church is a “mixed community” is T. R. Schreiner and A. B. Caneday, *The Race Set Before Us* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001).

The Relationship between Circumcision and Baptism

The final area to investigate is the relationship between circumcision and baptism. Assuming the continuity of the covenant of grace and the covenant community, paedobaptism contends that circumcision and baptism carry essentially the same *spiritual* meaning and that in the new covenant era baptism is the *replacement* of circumcision as a covenant sign. Neither covenant sign is effective apart from faith; they are merely entry markers signifying that one is part of the covenant community, at least in the external sense. They promise and anticipate the gospel, pointing forward to the need for a “circumcision of the heart,” testifying to God’s promise of righteousness by faith. Somehow they signify union with Christ and all the blessings related to that union without necessarily implying that one is regenerate in the full salvation sense of the word.¹²⁷

Of course, the crucial question in the baptismal debate is this: Does circumcision signify the exact same spiritual realities as baptism? My answer is no. No doubt they are parallel in a number of ways, but they ought to be viewed as covenantal signs tied to *different* covenants. Circumcision is an OT ordinance established in a specific redemptive-historical context, and the same is true of baptism in the NT. To equate the two in a one-to-one fashion is a significant error, as I will seek to demonstrate.

1. In its OT context, circumcision is first instituted in Genesis 17 where it is clearly tied to the Abrahamic covenant. Up to that point in time, no covenant sign existed to mark God’s people, even though God’s promise was in the world (Gen 3:15). In fact, this point is stressed in Rom 4:9–12 where Paul correctly argues that God’s declaration of Abraham’s righteousness took place before the

¹²⁷ There is an equivocation of terms in the paedobaptist position. What does it mean for one to be united to Christ apart from faith, or to affirm that one has entered into new covenant realities apart from faith, regeneration, and forgiveness of sin? In fact, what does infant baptism effect apart from faith? Reformed paedobaptists are not clear at this point, even though they attempt to provide some kind of explanation. See the helpful discussion of this problem in D. F. Wright, “Recovering Baptism for a New Age of Mission,” in *Doing Theology for the People of God*, ed. D. Lewis and A. McGrath (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996), 51–66. For an example of a confusing use of the word “regeneration” as it relates to what infant baptism effects, see R. Lusk, “Do I Believe in Baptismal Regeneration?” <http://www.auburnavenue.org/Articles/DO%20I%20BELIEVE%20IN%20BAPTISMAL%20REGENERATION.htm>.

institution of circumcision, thus demonstrating the priority of faith over circumcision in our justification. Interestingly, paedobaptists often appeal to Romans 4 to argue that circumcision, as a sign and seal of Abraham's faith, is applied to infants as a sign and seal to them as well, which is then carried over in baptism.¹²⁸ But this is not Paul's point in this text. Instead, Paul is presenting Abraham as the paradigm for all believers, both Jew and Gentile. To Abraham and to him alone, circumcision was a covenantal sign attesting that he had already been justified by faith apart from circumcision. The text is not giving a general statement about the nature of circumcision for everyone who receives it. After all, Ishmael was also circumcised the very same day, but there is no evidence that Rom 4:11 applied to him in the same way as it did to Abraham. The text seems to indicate that one must first believe *before* one receives the covenantal sign. Thus, for Abraham (and those who have a faith like Abraham) circumcision served as a sign and seal of righteousness, but for others, it signified other realities.¹²⁹

2. What else did circumcision signify? In the context of the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants, the primary purpose of circumcision was to mark out a physical seed in preparation for the coming of Messiah.¹³⁰ The marking purpose of circumcision may be viewed in two complementary ways. First, circumcision marked out a national entity. With the inauguration of the Abrahamic covenant, God chose one man and his seed to grow into a nation to prepare the way for the coming of Christ. Now that Christ has come, God deals with all nations directly through his Son. We must, then, view the period from Abraham to Christ as a unique time in redemptive-history, a time of preparation in which Israel, as a nation, was used in the plan of God to bring forth the Messiah. Circumcision was integral to that purpose. It served as a physical sign to mark out a

¹²⁸ For example, see B. Chapell, "A Pastoral Overview of Infant Baptism," 14–15, and C. Venema, "Covenant Theology and Baptism," 221–22.

¹²⁹ For more on this issue see the helpful treatment in Schreiner, *Romans*, 222–33.

¹³⁰ On a general discussion of circumcision see the following: P. D. Woodbridge, "Circumcision," *NDBT*, 411–14; Robertson, *Christ of the Covenants*, 147–66; P. R. Williamson, "Circumcision" in *Dictionary of OT: Pentateuch*, ed. T. D. Alexander and D. W. Baker (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003), 122–25; Jewett, *Infant Baptism and the Covenant of Grace*, 82–104.

nation and to distinguish them as his people. In this regard, it did its job well, but now that Christ has come, its job is complete and the NT has abrogated it as a covenantal sign. What promises were signified by circumcision? *All* the promises tied to the Abrahamic covenant, which included not only salvific promises but also national ones, particularly the land promise (e.g., Gen 12:7; 15:12–21; 17:8). *All* these promises in different ways lead us to Christ, but we must not reduce all of them merely to their spiritual sense. Second, circumcision marked out a male line of descent from Abraham to David to Christ. That is why, in a typological way, every Jewish male child, specifically those in Judah's line, was a type of Christ who anticipated the day when the true/unique seed of Abraham would come.¹³¹

3. As circumcision was incorporated into the Mosaic covenant (see Lev 12:1–5; Josh 5:1–9), it served a number of purposes. It continued to mark and delineate the nation, which, by its very nature, was constituted as a spiritually mixed entity. Even in the darkest moments of Israel's history, the prophets never questioned Israel's right to circumcise their sons even though they reminded them that physical circumcision was not enough. What was ultimately needed was faith in the promises of God tied to a circumcised heart, but physical circumcision was never called into question.¹³² In fact, one cannot find in Israel the idea that circumcision was only for “*believers and their children*” since many unbelieving Jews circumcised their infant boys and were still considered part of the covenant nation. The paedobaptist understanding already reads into circumcision a meaning that is not there.

But under the Mosaic covenant, there was also another purpose of circumcision which begins to point to spiritual and typological realities. In this regard, physical circumcision pointed to the need of a spiritually circumcised heart which would result in a wholehearted

¹³¹ Circumcision also traces out the source of our moral corruption. Adam, as the head of the human race, is held responsible for sin. We were not corrupted through Eve but through Adam, and circumcision reminds us of this as well as the need for a radical spiritual surgery—hence it speaks of the need for a “circumcision of the heart.” See Robertson, *Christ of the Covenants*, 148–52, and G. Vos, *Biblical Theology* (1948; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 88–90.

¹³² On this point see Jewett, *Infant Baptism and the Covenant of Grace*, 93–104.

devotion to the Lord (Deut 30:6; cp. Jer 4:4). Indeed, the new covenant promise in Jer 31:33 of the “law written on their hearts” combined with Ezek 36:25–27 pointed forward to the day when the entire covenant community would be circumcised in heart. This emphasis picks up the teaching of the prophets that physical circumcision only availed the one who had been spiritually circumcised (see Rom 2:25–29). In this sense, circumcision serves as a type that finds its fulfillment and replacement in regeneration.

4. In the NT, it is beyond question that circumcision is abrogated as a sign of membership in the church. Circumcision, in light of Christ’s coming, is no longer a covenantally significant sign and thus is not required for believers, whether they are Jewish or Gentile (see Acts 15:1–35; Gal 1:6–9; 2:11–16; 6:15; 1 Cor 7:18–19). In Christ, the previous covenants have come to fulfillment, and, as such, the covenant sign of circumcision is no longer necessary; it has served its purpose. Now, in Christ, and the creation of the “new man” (Eph 2:11–22), the law-covenant has been fulfilled and the God-given divisions tied to that law-covenant have been removed so much so that Paul can proclaim, “Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation” (Gal 6:15). In this new era, a new covenantal sign, baptism, has been established to testify of the gospel and to identify one as having become the spiritual seed of Abraham, through faith in Messiah Jesus. But unlike circumcision, baptism is *not* a sign of physical descent, nor is it a sign that anticipates gospel realities. Rather it is a sign that signifies a believer’s union with Christ and all the benefits that are entailed by that union. No doubt, baptism is analogous to circumcision in that it is an initiatory rite, but it is not a mere replacement of it. Nowhere does the NT say that circumcision is now unnecessary because baptism has replaced it. That would have been the most logical answer to the Judaizers, if the paedobaptist position was correct.¹³³ This answer is never given because baptism is a new rite, applied to each person who has repented and believed, who has been born of the Spirit, united to Christ, and thus demonstrated that he has entered into the new covenant realities inaugurated by our Lord.

¹³³ See Jewett, *Infant Baptism and the Covenant of Grace*, 228–32.

5. Circumcision, then, in light of the entire canon, ought to be viewed as signifying at least two truths. Most important, it marks out a physical people and nation. Second, it serves as a type anticipating NT realities that have now come to fulfillment in Christ. We may view circumcision as a type in two ways. First, circumcision is a type in that it anticipates Christ. As noted above, the “seed of Abraham” has a number of nuances including its reference to Christ (Gal 3:16). In a typological way, then, every male offspring of Abraham—specifically through the line of Isaac, Judah, David—was a type of Christ and thus anticipated his ultimate coming. In this regard, Luke 2:21 is important. Jesus’ circumcision is not a minor event; it marks the fulfillment of circumcision in its purpose of preserving a line of descent from Abraham to Christ and marking out the one in whom all the promises of God have reached their fulfillment. In Christ, Abraham’s true seed is now here, and as such, circumcision is no longer necessary and was soon to be abrogated. In this sense, Jesus’ circumcision is the last significant covenantal circumcision recorded in Scripture. Other circumcisions, such as Timothy’s (Acts 16:3), were only done for principled pragmatic concerns in order to win Jews for the sake of the gospel.¹³⁴

Second, circumcision is a type in that it anticipates the need for a “circumcision of the heart,” a reality which all new covenant people have experienced. In us, the spiritual meaning of circumcision is fulfilled (Rom 2:25–29; Phil 3:3). That is why true believers, regardless of whether they have been physically circumcised are called “the true circumcision.” Due to Christ’s cross work and the Spirit’s work within us, we have now received a circumcision without hands that gives us our new covenant status as God’s people and thus makes us heirs and co-heirs with Christ.

¹³⁴ Against Wilson, *To a Thousand Generations*, 59–80, in the NT there is no covenantal significance in circumcision after the cross work of Christ. Just because Paul circumcises Timothy or other Jewish believers circumcised their children (Acts 21:21–26) does not mean that circumcision continued to have covenantal efficacy. Paul only circumcised Timothy for mission purposes, what I have called “principled pragmatic concerns.” For a helpful treatment of this issue see D. A. Carson, “Pauline Inconsistency: Reflections on 1 Corinthians 9.19–23 and Galatians 2.11–14,” *Churchman* 100:1 (1986): 6–45.

In fact, this is the point of Col 2:11–13, the only text in the NT that brings together circumcision and baptism. But as it has repeatedly been shown, the connection in these verses is *not* between physical circumcision and baptism, as if the latter replaces the former, but *spiritual circumcision* tied to union with Christ and *baptism*.¹³⁵ As Paul reminds these believers, they are complete in Christ not because they were physically circumcised but because they were circumcised in “the circumcision of Christ.” The “circumcision of Christ” refers either to “a Christian circumcision of the heart”¹³⁶ or to Christ’s death on the cross. This means that the only circumcision believers need is that which has been done by our being united into Christ’s death on the cross.¹³⁷ Either way, circumcision finds its fulfillment in being joined to Christ and experiencing the promises associated with the inauguration of the new covenant age. But note how the text says even more: v. 12 makes it clear that we participate by baptism in the burial of Christ, and through it “a real death has occurred and the old life is now a thing of the past. Those who have been buried with Christ ‘through baptism into death’ (Rom 6:4) can no longer go on living as slaves to sin.”¹³⁸ It is clear that Paul does not view baptism in an *ex opere operato* fashion for he clearly stresses the instrumentality of faith. But he does argue that in baptism the objective realities of having died to sin and being made alive in Christ have actually taken place—something which cannot be applied to infants unless one affirms some kind of baptismal regeneration. All of this is to say that circumcision, as a type, *pointed to* a spiritual regeneration. Baptism, on the other hand, testifies that by faith *these realities have occurred*. Baptism marks and defines the children of God, those who believe in Messiah Jesus. That is why we baptize only those who have confessed Jesus as Lord, who have experienced his power, who are, by faith and spiritual rebirth, Abraham’s true spiritual seed.

¹³⁵ For example, see Ridderbos, *Paul*, 404–405, n 38.

¹³⁶ See M. J. Harris, *Colossians and Philemon*, EGGNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 101–105.

¹³⁷ See O’Brien, *Colossians and Philemon*, 114–21.

¹³⁸ O’Brien, *Colossians and Philemon*, 118; cp. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, 152–60.

6. What does baptism signify? As already stated, it signifies a believer's union with Christ, by grace through faith, and all the benefits that result from that union. It testifies that one has entered into the realities of the new covenant and as such, has experienced regeneration, the gift and down-payment of the Spirit, and the forgiveness of sin. It graphically signifies that a believer is now a member of the body of Christ (Eph 4:22–25). It is our defining mark of belonging as well as a demarcation from the world (see Acts 2:40–41). It is an entry into the eschatological order of the new creation which our Lord has ushered in. Through baptism, we are united with Jesus Christ, by faith, and sealed with the Holy Spirit for the day of redemption (Eph 4:30).¹³⁹

What is crucial to note in this description of Christian baptism is that what it signifies cannot be said of circumcision; they carry two different meanings. Circumcision, in a typological way, may anticipate and point to these new covenant realities, but it does not testify that all these realities are true of us. Baptism, in contrast to circumcision, is a NT ordinance, commanded by our Lord (Matt 28:18–20). It is a covenantal sign for the new covenant age. And as a covenantal sign, it communicates the grace of God *to those who have faith*, something which could not be said of circumcision of old. Baptism, in the end, is a new rite for the new covenant people of God; it is not the replacement of circumcision. To argue in a contrary fashion, is fundamentally to misunderstand not only the relations between the biblical covenants and the nature of the new covenant community, but also to confuse promise with fulfillment and type with antitype.¹⁴⁰

Concluding Reflections

More can be said regarding the covenantal argument for infant baptism. In truth, the baptismal question is a major test-case for one's entire theological system since it tells much about how one puts

¹³⁹ For a theological summary of Christian baptism see Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, 263–305.

¹⁴⁰ For an in-depth treatment of this point see Jewett, *Infant Baptism and the Covenant of Grace*, 93–104, 219–43.

the entire canon together. The Reformed paedobaptist argument is grounded in an explicit view of the covenants; if this understanding of the “covenant of grace” can be sustained, it provides a strong warrant for the position. However, if this understanding is inaccurate, then the entire biblical and theological warrant for the practice of infant baptism evaporates. In this chapter, albeit in a preliminary way, I have argued that the latter is the case. At the heart of the paedobaptist problem, I contend, is a failure to understand correctly the proper relationship between the biblical covenants. In fact, a truly *covenantal* approach to Scripture, preserving the proper biblical emphasis on continuity and discontinuity between the covenant communities of the old and new testaments, as well as between the covenant signs, demands an affirmation of believer’s baptism.

But the baptism issue must not remain merely at the level of theological debate. Much unites credo- and paedobaptists, but there are also profound differences, and it is not helpful to blur the differences merely for the sake of unity. Ultimately baptism is linked to the proclamation of the gospel itself as it proclaims the glories of our Lord Jesus Christ and the full realities of the gospel of sovereign grace. To get baptism wrong is not a minor issue. It not only misconstrues our Lord’s command and instruction to the church, it also leads to a misunderstanding of elements of the gospel, particularly in regard to the beneficiaries of the new covenant and the nature of the church. It may even lead, if we are not careful, to a downplaying of the need to call our children to repentance and faith. Often Baptists are charged with not appreciating the place of their children in the covenant community.¹⁴¹ Not only does this charge miss the mark in fundamentally misunderstanding the nature of the new covenant community, but it also runs the danger of what is truly imperative—to call all people, including our children, to faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. It is only then that the promise of the new covenant age becomes ours, for the promise is not only for us, but for our children and “for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our

¹⁴¹ This is a constant charge against credobaptists. Obviously it only carries weight if the paedobaptists can sustain their entire argument, which I have attempted to disprove. For a helpful response see Malone, *The Baptism of Disciples Alone*, 173–85.

God will call” (Acts 2:39). Baptism, as a new covenant sign, even though it does not bring us into a state of grace, has been ordained by our Triune God as a proper means of grace that we ignore, distort, or downplay to the detriment of our spiritual life and mission.