

FAQ on the Reformed Baptist View of Baptism

by

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1. What books present the Reformed Baptist view of baptism?
 2. What readily available short works present the Reformed Baptist view of baptism?
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1. *Q. What books present the Reformed Baptist view of baptism?*

A. The most important book in print is:

The Baptism of Disciples Alone by Fred Malone, Founders Press, 2003.

This is an excellent, up-to-date treatment of the subject that interacts with the standard arguments as well as recent developments in paedobaptist thought. The author is a former paedobaptist. The book can be obtained from

Founders Press.

Regrettably, some of the best books are out of print, but a few have been reprinted:

Infant Baptism & the Covenant of Grace by Paul K. Jewett, Eerdman's, 1977.

This book is a definitive treatment of the subject, interacting both with older sources such as Calvin and Baxter, as well as with more modern advocates of infant baptism. The book is out of print but may be ordered from

Grace & Truth Books
3406 Summit Boulevard
Sand Springs, Oklahoma 74063
Phone: 918 245 1500

Jewett's writing is at the same time lively and charitable.

Children of Abraham by David Kingdon, 1975.

This is an eminently readable book that makes many of the same arguments as Jewett. According to the Reformed Baptist grapevine, Kingdon wants to update the work in the near future. However, I have been hearing this for a long time, so don't hold your breath.

In the meantime, you can get an authorized spiral-bound copy from *James Drummond Christian Used & New Books*.

Manual of Church Order by John L. Dagg, 1850. Reprinted by Sprinkle Publications.

Dagg deals with the subject in the general framework of ecclesiology. He addresses 1) arguments for infant church membership and 2) direct arguments for infant baptism. Dagg has a special ability to take arguments apart and address the root of the matter. He also has a chapter on the meaning of *baptizo*, which is the best thing I have ever seen on the subject. This chapter addresses the best arguments put forth by writers such as J. W. Dale, whose work on this subject has been reprinted recently. Dagg's *Manual* is available on the web at the *Founders Ministries* site.

Should Babies Be Baptized? by T. E. Watson, Evangelical Press.

This book uses quotes from paedobaptists to allow them to refute themselves.

He shows that there is a great deal of contradiction in the way paedobaptists go about establishing their case.

Dagg and Watson can be ordered from *Cumberland Valley Bible Book Service*.

2. Q. *What readily available short works present the Reformed Baptist view of baptism?*

A. There are quite a few good short works. One of the best available is *A Critical Evaluation of Paedobaptism* by Greg Welty, which is available on the web at the *Founders Ministries* site. The author is a graduate of Westminster Theological Seminary in California. He presents a convincing rebuttal to all the standard paedobaptist arguments and criticisms of the Baptist view. It is available in print form from Reformed Baptist Press.

A String of Pearls Unstrung: A Theological Journal into Believers' Baptism by Fred Malone is also available at the *Founders Ministries* web site. This pamphlet describes Fred Malone's theological pilgrimage from a convinced paedobaptist and Presbyterian pastor to a convinced Baptist. This is a clear, easily read study of the subjects of baptism that interacts with all the major issues. It is available in print form from Founders Press.

Another useful resource on the web is *A Short Catechism about Baptism* by John Tombes. This is a very clear, succinct statement of the Reformed Baptist view from an early proponent (1659).

Babies, Believers, and Baptism by J. K. Davies, Grace Publications, 1983, 23pp, closely follows the arguments of Kingdon's book *Children of Abraham*. This is a good, readable summary of the Reformed Baptist view of covenant theology and of children in the Old and New Testaments, but it will leave you wishing for more detail.

3. Q. *Considering that Old Testament believers were commanded to place the sign of the covenant upon their infant children, why do we not have clear explanations in the New Testament that this pattern of infant inclusion has been abrogated?*

A. The question itself makes an unwarranted leap. Old Testament believers were not commanded to circumcise their infant children as children of believers but as the offspring of Abraham (Gen. 17:9). This is further seen in the fact that the practice was to be continued through succeeding generations

with no reference to the personal faith of the parents but rather to the child's connection to Abraham (vv. 7,9). The blessings of the Abrahamic covenant had special reference to *Abraham's* offspring, with blessings of fruitfulness and many nations from Abraham (v. 6), of possession of the land through Abraham's descendents (v. 8), and of blessing to all families of the earth through Abraham's descendents (12:3). These are the blessings that circumcision signified and sealed to Abraham.

The New Testament confirms this view of the Abrahamic covenant. Even the Pharisees understood that covenant blessings were for the offspring of Abraham. When the Pharisees came to John the Baptist for baptism, they didn't come because their parents were in covenant but because they thought they were children of Abraham. The discussions between Jesus and the Pharisees assume that the real question of heart religion was whether they were children of Abraham. Paul makes this explicit in Galatians 3:29 and other places. The only claim that a believer has for being an heir of the promises of the Abrahamic covenant is that s/he is a child of Abraham. Of course, the New Testament lifts the promises of the Abrahamic covenant out of the shadows of the Old Testament, but the essential terms of the covenant are still the same. The sign of the Abrahamic covenant is for the seed of Abraham.

Some have objected to this reasoning by saying that it has *always* been the case that only those of faith are children of Abraham (Gal. 3:29) and that children were given the sign of the covenant in spite of this reality. This is a major part of Hanks's argument in *We & Our Children*. But this objection ignores the progress of revelation and of redemptive history. The Abrahamic covenant did refer to those who have the faith of Abraham but only under the shadow of the more literal concept of the seed of Abraham. When Abraham was told to circumcise his offspring, he understood it to mean his physical descendents. Clearly, however, this meaning no longer has significance for those under the new covenant.

The proper question, therefore, is whether we find clear New Testament explanations of the abrogation of the shadow (the physical significance of the seed) and emphasis on the reality (the spiritual significance). Interestingly enough, we find *many* passages that explain and emphasize this change of focus (cf. Matt. 3:9, John 8:32-40, Gal. 3:7,9,18,29,4:28). This observation

confirms that this is the proper question.

4. Q. *Doesn't Acts 2:39 indicate a continuation of the principle of including children under the new covenant?*

A. In his Pentecost sermon Peter states, "Repent, and let each one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God shall call to Himself." The passage places two very clear conditions on all recipients of the promise — one from man's perspective and one from God's. From man's perspective, the promise is to those who repent. From God's perspective, the promise is to those whom God calls. Taken in its plain meaning, these conditions apply to all parties: "you, your children, and those who are far off."

The paedobaptist response to this is that it doesn't explain why Peter would've chosen the wording "you and your children". Note first that the term for children here simply means progeny. It does not necessarily refer to infants. Peter's choice of wording is quite natural to expect, as much from a baptist perspective as a paedobaptist one. First, the most immediate concern Peter is addressing is the fact that the Jews were responsible for the crucifixion of the Messiah. Just a few weeks earlier, many of these same Jews had accepted responsibility for Christ's blood to "be upon us and our children". They would naturally have been concerned as to whether they and their children could be forgiven (vv. 36-37). Peter's statement is quite natural considering this context.

Apart from this is the more general recognition that God generally dealt with the Jews in solidarity with their children and did not distinguish outwardly between those whose hearts were circumcised and those whose hearts were not. They were quite accustomed to the outward covenant privileges enjoyed by themselves and their children. Peter, knowing this mindset, assured them that the promises were applicable to their children as well as to them. However, he also knew that the Jews had tended toward presumption in their relation to God because of their familial connection to Abraham. The Pharisees believed that their birth privileges were sufficient to qualify them for the preparatory rite of the new covenant (Matt. 3:7-10). The prophets had to continually emphasize the necessity of circumcision of the heart because

the Jews so easily rested on mere outward circumcision. Peter clearly denounced this mindset in his statement. The promises are offered to your children, but they are offered on the same basis as they are to you and to everyone else — repentance on their part, God's calling on His part.

Finally, the inclusion of the phrase "and to those who are far off" would have been completely unexpected by Peter's Jewish audience. It immediately put them on notice that these promises would not operate in the old shadowy way of the OT promises to Israel. The Jews were no longer the special custodians of the promises (Rom. 3:2, 9:4). Instead, the promise was being sent forth conditionally to all who would repent and believe (Acts 17:30).

We have offered a very natural explanation for Peter's inclusion of the phrase "and your children" without resorting to a paedobaptist viewpoint. Thus, Acts 2:39 furnishes no evidence for the paedobaptist claim that all children of new covenant believers continue to be included automatically in God's covenant dealings the way they were in the Old Testament. In fact, it underscores the fact that the promise is given only to those who demonstrate God's call by repenting of their sin.

Our view is confirmed by v. 41: "Those who received his word were baptized". The most natural reading of this statement is that believers only were baptized.

5. Q. *Does the Reformed Baptist view prevent us from embracing God's promise to be a God to our children?*

A. This is a difficult issue, both emotionally and exegetically. However, there are several things that can be said with confidence:

- a.** Whatever these passages mean, they can't be an absolute guarantee of the salvation of our children. Therefore, we must all understand these promises in a qualified sense.
- b.** The sense given by Doug Wilson, Edward Gross, and others that it is conditional upon the faithfulness of the parents simply doesn't fit the evidence. Isn't Abraham presented to us in Scripture as the father and the *example* of faithfulness? Yet he was explicitly told that one of his children was not the child of promise. Frankly, if Abraham wasn't "faithful" in the Doug Wilson sense, I don't see how that provides a lot of confidence for most of us ordinary believers.

c. God clearly works through families, a fact that can be learned both from the experience of believers throughout the ages and from Scripture as well. Both blessings and curses tend to flow along family lines -- read the 2nd Commandment! The very fact that God chose to work through the physical descendants of Abraham is an indication of God's usual ways in this regard. However, God is still sovereign and is under no obligation to show mercy to any individual in particular, in spite of his ordinary pattern.

d. Benefits ordinarily flow to children of believers as part of the blessings of the covenant to believers, but that's not the same as covenant membership of the children themselves. Granted that God deals in a special way with children of believers, this is not a ground for baptizing infants. It is simply a statement of what God has promised to do ordinarily (God's decretive will), but it doesn't say a thing about what we should do (God's revealed will).

e. There are grounds for being hopeful, more so than for the children of unbelievers. In Proverbs we find many of God's "general operating principles" (rather than absolute promises). In fact, there's one that bears directly on this issue: "Train up a child in the way he should go, and in the end he will not depart from it." This is a proverb, not a promise, so it does not give a 100% guarantee in this. However, it does provide great encouragement that God ordinarily works through the means of faithful parents to bring his grace to bear on their children. We have no guarantees, but we do have tremendous encouragement.

f. The only biblical evidence that your children are in a state of grace is that they repent of their sins, embrace Christ in faith, and demonstrate the fruit of repentance in their lives. The Pharisees were rebuked specifically for thinking that they could presume upon their lineage in their standing with God (Matt. 3:7-10).

6. Q. *Is the sacrament of baptism a means of grace according to Reformed Baptist theology?*

A. Some Reformed Baptists prefer not to use the term "sacrament" due to some negative historical associations. However, Reformed Baptists fully affirm a Reformed view of the sacraments as a means of grace.

The 1689 Confession is admittedly not as clear on this point as it could be.

But Keach's Catechism, which was written to clarify the theology of the Confession, makes it pretty clear:

Q. 95. What are the outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicates to us the benefits of redemption?

A. The outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicates to us the benefits of redemption are His ordinances, especially the Word, Baptism, the Lord's Supper and Prayer; all which are made effectual to the elect for salvation. (Rom. 10:17; James 1:18; 1 Cor. 3:5; Acts 14:1; 2:41,42)

Q. 98. How do Baptism and the Lord's Supper become effectual means of salvation?

A. Baptism and the Lord's Supper become effectual means of salvation, not from any virtue in them or in him that administers them, but only by the blessing of Christ and the working of His Spirit in them that by faith receive them. (1 Peter 3:21; 1 Cor. 3:6,7; 1 Cor. 12:13)

Q. 99. Wherein do Baptism and the Lord's Supper differ from the other ordinances of God?

A. Baptism and the Lord's Supper differ from the other ordinances of God in that they were specially instituted by Christ to represent and apply to believers the benefits of the new covenant by visible and outward signs. (Matt. 28:19; Acts 22:16; Matt. 26:26-28; Rom. 6:4)

Therefore, baptism is a means of grace in Reformed Baptist theology.

7. Q. *How can baptism be a means of grace in Baptist theology when Baptists assert that a person must already be saved to be eligible for baptism?*

A. It is too narrow a reading of the terms "means of grace" and "effectual to salvation" to limit them to the moment of conversion. Christ "communicates to us the benefits of redemption" in an ongoing way not only to regenerate and justify us initially but also to sanctify and preserve us throughout our Christian lives. When the Shorter Catechism (Q. 89) and Keach's Catechism (Q. 96) ask "How is the Word made effectual to salvation?", they do not limit the effect of the Word in salvation to the moment of conversion. In fact, they explicitly affirm in the answer that the Word is effectual to salvation both in conversion and in continuing the Christian life:

A. The Spirit of God makes the reading, but especially the preaching of the Word an effectual means of convincing and converting sinners, and of building them up in holiness and comfort, through faith unto salvation.

The two catechisms have identical answers to this question.

Some Reformed Baptists may be uncomfortable with this second response, but I'll state it anyway. Baptists have historically seen baptism as the culmination of the conversion experience. Among other things, it seals and confirms, both to the party being baptized and to others, that the party has engaged to be the Lord's and is now united with Him. Although no warrant is given to baptize someone with the goal of converting him, in many cases the person may exercise faith in Christ through the means either of contemplating or participating in baptism. Beasley-Murray in *Baptism in the New Testament* makes a very strong case that the conversion experience and the act of baptism need not be separated in our conception of the two, since the NT so often speaks of them in an interchangeable manner. This is true, in spite of the fact that the two can be separated for study or in one's experience. From the believer's perspective, baptism can be viewed as a visible prayer in which the believer "signifies [his] ingrafting into Christ and partaking of the benefits of the covenant of grace, and [his] engagement to be the Lord's."

One could also theoretically benefit from a sacrament as a means of grace before being converted, as paedobaptists argue that infants do in baptism. The objection to infant baptism in this respect is twofold. First, infants are not eligible for baptism and thus have no divine warrant to participate in a means of grace that is not designed for them. Second, baptism is a means of grace at the moment of participation (as well as before and after) that requires the awareness and voluntary participation of the party baptized. If God chose to design a means of grace to be applied to the unconverted and/or to those who can't voluntarily participate, then we should have no problem imagining how they might benefit from it. But if the design includes the awareness and voluntary participation of the party baptized, then it is a perversion and a truncation of the sacrament to admit anyone else.

8. Q. *Doesn't I Cor. 7:14 teach that children of believers are covenantally set apart and thus eligible for baptism?*

A. No. The term "sanctified" that describes an unbelieving spouse of a

believer and the term "holy" that describes the children of believers are based on the same root word in Greek. Therefore, whatever holiness the children have is also shared by an unbelieving spouse. Since an unbelieving spouse is not in the covenant, one cannot use this passage to establish that the children are. Paul's whole argument is grounded in the similarity of the two cases. If unbelieving spouses and children of believers do not share the same type of holiness, the difference between the two cases invalidates Paul's entire argument from the holiness of the children to the holiness of the unbelieving spouse. In fact, Paul's argument actually implies an argument against infant baptism. If the children in Corinth were baptized but unbelieving spouses were not, then the Corinthians would never have accepted Paul's argument that the holiness of the children implied the holiness of unbelieving spouses.

I have elaborated on this argument in [a separate article on I Cor. 7:14](#).

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