

BIG TRUTH LITTLE BOOK(LET)S

Why Not Infant Baptism?

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To Steve Wellum
Who taught me how to understand the New Covenant

Introduction

Christians are united by the truth that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, has borne our punishment on the cross, been raised from the dead, and now offers his saving righteousness to all those who repent and believe in him. In other words, Christians are united by the *gospel*. Regardless of our background, present location, gender, or social status, Christians are bound together by a common Savior and a common salvation (Gal 3:28; Jude 1).

Yet, despite this mutual union with Christ, Christians disagree with each other on a variety of issues. Some of these disagreements relate to how we conduct church and are significant enough to require separate denominations. While some decry the existence of denominations—arguing that their very existence is grievous because they serve as formal disruption of the church’s unity—I would like to offer another perspective.

While it is true that Christians should pursue unity and not allow petty, inconsequential differences to cause division among us, it is also the case that Christians will never be fully united on every doctrinal issue this side of eternity. Yes, denominations indicate that we still live in the “not yet.” But denominations are also proof that Christians take truth seriously—seriously enough to form churches where believers can practice their faith without violating their conscience.

The issue of baptism is one that has caused ecclesiastical division among Christians for the last few centuries. Put simply, the disagreement is over the function of baptism and the question of who should be the recipients of it. *Baptists* hold that only believers should be baptized. *Presbyterians* argue that the infants of believing parents should be baptized.

While this is not an issue of “first importance”—we are still united to our Presbyterian brothers and sisters despite our disagreement about baptism and have much more in common with them than we do differences—it is still worth taking a careful look at the question of infant baptism because this issue reveals deeper theological commitments held by both sides.

In this booklet, we will examine the theological differences between these two church practices and offer several biblical arguments for why baptism should be reserved only for believers.

Getting to the Root of our Disagreement

One common strategy that Baptists use to challenge the Presbyterian argument for infant baptism (also called “paedobaptism”) is to note that the New Testament gives neither command for nor clear example of infant baptism. While this observation is true (and generally recognized by covenant theologians), it actually misses the deeper reason for our disagreement: the divergence occurs at the level of our understanding of the biblical covenants before we ever get to the question of whether

or not infants should be baptized. Derek Thomas (a paedobaptist) affirms this point when he writes,

It is precisely on the grounds of covenant theology that an argument is made for the baptism of the children of those who believe. At its core lies the argument of covenantal continuity in the administration of the covenant of grace. Put simply, if children were included in the administration of the old covenant, then they should be included in the new—and, after, “more excellent” and “better” covenant (Heb 8:6).¹

Now, Thomas’ use of the word “children” here is slightly unhelpful because the credobaptist position (the view that only those who profess faith in Christ should be baptized) doesn’t suggest that children are not included in the New Covenant. Inasmuch as a child has the capacity to genuinely repent and believe, they are included in the New Covenant, by definition. Nevertheless, we will take “children” here as a reference to infants and those children that have yet to profess faith in Jesus Christ.

The Presbyterian argument for infant baptism isn’t based primarily on its explicit affirmation in the New

¹Derek W. H. Thomas, “Covenant, Assurance, and the Sacraments,” in *Covenant Theology: Biblical, Theological, and Historical Perspectives* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 575.

Testament, but on a particular view of the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants and their relation to the New Covenant. It is for this reason that covenant theologians will usually concede that the New Testament doesn't provide explicit commandment or clear precedent for infant baptism: their position doesn't depend on such New Testament evidence. They understand the many "household" baptisms in the book of Acts (Acts 11:14; 16:15, 31, 34; 18:8) to include infants because, as Thomas noted above, there is "a momentum of Old Testament expectation" that the "seed" (i.e., children) is included in each covenantal administration.

According to paedobaptists, when you read in Acts about the households that received Christian baptism, it makes sense, in light of the Old Testament affirmation that "every administration of God's covenant includes children," to conclude that everyone in the household, including infants and young children who had yet to profess faith were included in these baptisms. They would also say that for credobaptists to read "household" as *only* comprising those who repented and put their faith in Christ is to wrest such passages from their redemptive-historical context—a context that is laden with anticipation that children would be included in the New Covenant administration.²

So, the debate over baptism cannot remain only on the level of New Testament evidence of actual infant

²Thomas, "Covenant," 575.

baptisms. We must first ask if covenant theology offers a viable interpretation of the Old Covenant's relationship to the New Covenant.

The Structure of the New Covenant

It is without dispute that infants were included in the Mosaic Covenant. Boys on day eight received circumcision, and girls, though they didn't receive the sign of the covenant, were nevertheless under the covenant stipulations along with their parents. Indeed, *everyone* in Israel was a member of the Mosaic Covenant whether they possessed genuine faith in Yahweh or not. Israel was, in this way, a mixed covenant community: there were some who believed in God, and there were others who didn't, but they were all members of the Mosaic covenant regardless of their spiritual status. While God preserved a remnant in Israel, unbelief prevailed, eventually leading to the nation's exile.

The New Covenant, however, would be different at this very point. Unlike the Mosaic Covenant, which Israel broke (time and again), the New Covenant would remain unbroken (Jer 31:32). Most importantly, the integrity of the covenant would be based on the *nature of its membership*. The primary problem with the Mosaic Covenant was not the laws themselves—they were good and righteous and holy (cf. Rom 7:12). The problem was with the covenant members whose hearts were sinful, uncircumcised, and hard. God's holy law only exasperated the problem because it didn't provide

the means to change the sinner's heart and enable it to obey the commandments published in the Mosaic Covenant.

The New Covenant, however, would change its members inwardly. Rather than remaining outside of the worshipper on stone tablets, the law would be written on the heart of every covenant member (Jer 31:33; cf. Ezek 36:27). The relationship between God and the New Covenant members would be permanent (Jer 31:34) because it would be rooted in complete forgiveness of sin (Jer 31:34). Evangelistic exhortations among the covenant members to "know the Lord" would no longer be necessary because every member of the covenant would be a true believer (Jer 31:34). Whereas the Mosaic Covenant included unbelievers within its membership, only regenerate believers are members of the New Covenant.

These are fundamental differences between the Mosaic Covenant and the New Covenant. In the next section, we will see why these differences should compel us to only baptize those who have processed faith in Christ.

The Differences Between the Mosaic and the New Covenants

While God's aim was to create a permanent relationship with his people (Lev 26:12), such a state could never be achieved under the Mosaic administration due to the covenant member's sin and the deficiency of the Old

Covenant system. Under the Mosaic Covenant, the law remained external to the worshipper, but in the New Covenant, it is now written on the heart (Jer 31:33). Complete forgiveness could never be achieved under the Mosaic system because it had a built-in deficiency that required endless sacrificial repetition (Heb 10:1-4). Moreover, because the Old Covenant didn't deal with the *heart* of the covenant member, the Mosaic community remained a mixed community.

The New Covenant community, however, by its very nature, only consists of regenerate members, as Jeremiah indicates in his prophetic word of the coming new and better covenant (Jer 31:31-33). Therefore, those who have not been regenerated and forgiven of their sin—including infants and unbelieving children—are *not* included within the realm of the New Covenant membership, regardless of their parents' spiritual status.

Now, a response might be that such an interpretation doesn't reckon with a paedobaptist point stated earlier; namely, that every covenant administration includes children. Thomas notes that the Adamic covenant included consequences for Adam's progeny (all die in Adam). Same with the Noahic Covenant: "I will establish my covenant with you and your offspring after you" (Gen 9:9). Abraham was to be the "father of a multitude of nations" (Gen 17:4). The Mosaic covenant included "little ones" (Deut 29:11). Offspring are also

included in the Davidic covenant (2 Sam 22:51; cf. 23:5; Ps 89:3-4).³

I have no argument with these observations. Every administration up to the point of the New Covenant makes an unambiguous reference to the inclusion of offspring. But the credobaptist position doesn't deny that offspring are included in these previous covenants. The argument for believer's baptism is rooted in the *differences* between these covenants and the New Covenant. While covenant theologians argue from the *expectation* that the New Covenant would include children based on prior covenant inclusion, credobaptists argue that the New Covenant is different *precisely at this point*. It should not go unnoticed that neither Jeremiah 31:31-33 nor its parallel in Ezekiel 36:25-26 mention "offspring" but only the spiritual status of the covenant members.

I will address this question of "offspring" in the following section, for it is important to see that even the nature of "offspring" is transformed in Scripture as we move from Old to New Testament.

The Question of Offspring

The question that arises from the last section is "Why?" Why do you not find an explicit reference to "offspring" in the New Covenant texts? Because the "offspring" expectation, beginning in Genesis 3:15 with the

³Thomas, "Covenant," 576.

promised offspring who would crush the Serpent's skull, is fulfilled in Jesus Christ (Gal 3:16). He is *the* offspring the Scripture has anticipated. Now that the Messiah has come, only those who are in Christ—the mediator of the New Covenant (Heb 9:15)—are considered Abraham's offspring (Gal 3:29). Now that the final offspring has arrived, even the centrality of the family in God's plan of redemption has shifted. God is no longer building a nation through physical progeny which means that marriage and physical offspring don't play the same role as they did in the Mosaic Covenant.

Prior to the coming of Christ, redemptive blessings flowed primarily through family and one's offspring. Singleness and childlessness in Israel, therefore, were grievous because they meant the single or childless person had no access to several of God's temporal redemptive blessings. Now that Christ has come and we sit on the precipice of an eternal kingdom, singleness takes on a whole new significance (1 Cor 7:6ff). Marriage is a wonderful gift with profound spiritual implications (Eph 5:25-33), and children are still a blessing from the Lord (Eph 6:1-4), but infinitely more important than getting married and having children is being God's spiritual offspring through Christ (Rom 8:5-17; 23). It is not surprising, then, that the New Testament uses language of begetting and even "offspring" to refer to our relationship with God through Christ's New Covenant (Gal 3:29). Paul is the father of spiritual children through Christ (1 Cor 4:15).

We are “born again” into the kingdom (John 3:6-8). When the Spirit regenerates us, we bear God’s “seed” inside of us (1 John 3:9; cf. 1 Pet 1:23).

The point is this: the *physical* offspring of New Covenant members are not included with their parent(s) in the New Covenant itself because only God’s offspring—namely, regenerate believers in Jesus Christ—are included in that covenant. But how does this relate to baptism?

Circumcision under the Mosaic administration was an external sign and seal that one belonged to the covenant. Baptism is the external sign that one belongs to the New Covenant. Arguing for continuity between the Mosaic covenant and the New Covenant, paedobaptists view baptism as functioning similarly to circumcision by marking out those who are under the covenant administration. Unlike the Old Covenant which only circumcised boys, the New Covenant now expands to both boys and girls. When children are born to believing parents into the covenant community, they should receive the sign of their affiliation with that community.

The problem with this position, however, is that it doesn’t reckon with one of the most important differences between the Mosaic covenant and the new covenant: the question of *who constitutes the covenant membership*. According to Jeremiah 31:31-33, *only* those who are regenerate and forgiven of their sins are members of the New Covenant. That’s why Jeremiah

sees a time when the people within the covenant community would no longer need to evangelistically tell their neighbor, “Know the Lord (see Jer 31:34)!” In a mixed community of believers and unbelievers, evangelism of one’s fellow covenant member would be commonplace. In contrast, every member of the New Covenant would have a genuine relationship with the Lord so that evangelistic exhortations would no longer be necessary.

Infants and unbelieving children, even if they are born to believing parents are not, *by definition*, members of the New Covenant. They should not, therefore, receive the sign of that New Covenant. Such a sign must only be reserved for those who’ve been born again and forgiven of their sins.

Nor should we see baptism as a fulfillment or New Covenant continuation of circumcision. Circumcision is not fulfilled in baptism, but in *regeneration*.

Is Baptism the New Covenant Fulfillment of Circumcision?

Some paedobaptists argue that baptism is the New Covenant fulfillment of the Old Covenant practice of circumcision. Therefore, the argument goes, as circumcision was applied to infants under the Mosaic system, so should baptism be applied to infants under the New Covenant administration. But such an argument misses a point that the New Testament makes explicit: regeneration is the proper fulfillment of Old

Covenant circumcision, not baptism. Indeed, the Old Testament itself anticipates this fulfillment.

In Deuteronomy 10:12-16, for example, the Lord exhorts his people to love him with their whole person and to keep all of his commandments (vv. 12-15). Recognizing their woeful spiritual condition, however, God further instructs them to “Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn” (v. 16). God’s people needed a supernatural change in their innermost being if they were ever going to love God the way he commanded. Later, in Deuteronomy 30:6, God declares that *he* will be the one to circumcise their hearts and enable them to fulfill his commandments.

According to the above passages, one of the reasons God gave Israel the mark of circumcision was to provide a graphic illustration of what needed to occur in the life of the covenant member if they were going to truly love God and obey his Word. Just as the foreskin needed to be cut away from the baby boy eight days after his birth so that he could belong to the covenant community, so every one of God’s people needed to have the stubbornness of their hearts cut away so they could worship God aright and keep his commandments. The New Covenant prophecies in Jeremiah (31:31-33) and Ezekiel (36:26-28) deal directly with the heart problem addressed in Deuteronomy 10:12-16 and 30:6. The circumcision of heart God required would now be remedied with a heart change

wrought by the Holy Spirit. God's law would be written on the heart, and obedience and perseverance in faithfulness would be guaranteed.

This background provides crucial context to Paul's statements about circumcision's relation to regeneration. In Colossians 2:11-14, for example, Paul draws a direct connection between the Old Covenant practice of circumcision and regeneration.

In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.

This text is used by paedobaptists to argue for the continuation of circumcision in New Covenant baptism.⁴ A careful examination of this passage reveals, however, that Paul is making the exact opposite case.

⁴Martin Salter provides both contemporary and historic examples of paedobaptists who appeal to this text. See Bryan Chapell, 'A

In the above text, Paul speaks of putting off the body of flesh and being made alive in Christ as a kind of “circumcision.” Up to this point in redemptive history, circumcision was an external marker of a male Jew’s membership within the Mosaic Covenant. That circumcision was “made with hands.” The circumcision of Christ, however, is spiritual in nature—it deals with the inward problem of the sinful flesh and spiritual death by cutting away the sinful flesh and raising the dead person to life (i.e., regeneration). Given the Old Testament use of physical circumcision as a picture of spiritual circumcision (Deut 10:12-16; 30:6), Paul’s connection between circumcision and regeneration should be seen as nothing less than an indication that circumcision in the Old Covenant is indeed fulfilled in regeneration in the New Covenant.

Importantly, Paul ties circumcision and baptism together *with* regeneration and the complete forgiveness of sin, two vital and defining aspects of the New

Pastoral Overview of Infant Baptism’, in *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism* (ed. Gregg Strawbridge; Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2003), 17; *The Heidelberg Catechism*, question 74; Joachim Jeremias, *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries* (trans. David Cairns; LHD; London: SCM, 1960), 39; John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (ed. John T. McNeill; trans. Ford Lewis Battles; 2 vols.: LCC 20–21; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 4.16.11. See Martin Salter, “Does Baptism Replace Circumcision? An Examination of the Relationship Between Circumcision and Baptism in Colossians 2:11-14,” in *Themelios*, 31.1 (2010): 15.

Covenant. As Paul does elsewhere, he closely links the physical act of baptism with the spiritual baptism we experienced when we were saved (see Rom 6:1-4). Paul does distinguish between our water baptism and our spiritual baptism into Christ's death and resurrection (e.g., 1 Cor 1:13-15), but similar to Peter's preaching in Acts, Paul sees physical baptism as an event that is so intimately tied to our conversion (see Acts 2:38), he can speak of them almost as though they are the same.⁵

This close connection is due to the fact that our physical baptism signifies that we were buried with Christ in his death and rose together with Christ in his resurrection. Thus, in Paul's mind, baptism is a picture of our actual (not potential) union with Christ. According to Colossians 2:11-14, baptism *fulfills* circumcision by indicating that the person receiving the baptism has experienced that to which the baptism signifies: circumcision of the heart, rising from death to

⁵Of course, Paul *does not* see physical salvation the same as spiritual salvation, nor does he believe that the act of water baptism unites us to Christ. But, as Steve Wellum observes, baptism in the New Testament, "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." He says again, "Paul's point [in Romans 6:1-4] 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." Steve Wellum, "Baptism and the Relationship between the Covenants," in *Believer's Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn D. Wright (Nashville, B & H, 2006), 150-51.

life, and the complete forgiveness of sin. Thus, only those who have experienced the circumcision of the heart in their union with Christ should receive the outward sign that such an event has occurred. Or, as we've said above, only those who are members of the New Covenant should receive the sign of the New Covenant. Thus, infants and unbelieving children should not receive baptism.

Conclusion

As we have seen in the above discussion, the question of infant baptism doesn't touch merely upon differing ecclesiastical practices: it exposes opposing views between Presbyterians and Baptists regarding the nature of the covenants. I've argued that the Presbyterian position fails to reckon with the structure of the New Covenant as it pertains to covenant membership. By not fully reckoning with the differences between previous covenants and the New Covenant, paedobaptists fail to see that infants and unbelieving children are not the proper recipients of the New Covenant sign, i.e., baptism. And it explains why they must rely upon *assumptions* about who was included in New Testament household baptisms instead of supplying a single explicit example of infant baptism or a command for the same in Acts or the epistles.

So, why not infant baptism? Because according to the nature of the New Covenant, only those who belong to the covenant should receive the covenant sign. For

that reason, we should only baptize those who offer a credible profession of genuine faith in Christ as a physical symbol of a profound spiritual reality: salvation in Jesus Christ and entrance into New Covenant membership.

While these are not matters that affect our respective faith in the gospel, they do have significant implications for church life and the practice of the church's ordinances. For this reason, we cannot classify this disagreement as a "minor" difference. Underlying the tip of disagreement of who is the proper recipient of baptism is an iceberg of theological differences that affect the way we read Scripture and, importantly, how we obey Christ's commandments in Scripture as they pertain to church life and one's first steps in discipleship (see Matt 28:18-20).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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