WHY BAPTIZE YOUR BABIES?
by Hunter Brewer

Acknowledgments

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Introduction

This paper came about out of sheer necessity. At the time this was written, I was an intern at a Presbyterian church working with young married couples without children. In the span of a year and a half, our group gave birth to fourteen babies! Suddenly, infant baptism became a topic of interest. Many in the group wanted their newborn baptized, but really didn’t know what it meant. Others were unsure about the validity of the practice. Under these assumptions, I decided to write this paper. Thus, I have consciously avoided arguments concerning the historical practice within the church and any in-depth theological discussions.

There is no doubt that paedobaptism (the practice of baptizing infants) is one of the most debated subjects in the church today. This does not mean, however, that it is a new debate. A careful investigation of church history shows that disagreements concerning infant baptism have been with the church for a long time. For some Christians, this is an issue for which, metaphorically speaking, they would go to the mat. For others, it is something that they’ve really never thought about carefully. I, for example, was baptized in the United Methodist Church, but was raised in a Presbyterian Church. Thus, the idea of baptizing infants was something with which I was quite familiar. On the other hand, my wife was raised and baptized in a Baptist Church and had never seen an infant baptized until she visited my church while we were dating. After the service that day, she asked me why we did this and to my own amazement I realized that I did not know why!

I learned that day that infant baptism was something that I did care about, but only because questioning the practice brought into doubt the legitimacy of my own baptism and the tradition in which I was raised. This was unsettling and unsatisfactory. As a result, I decided to examine the varying doctrines pertaining to paedobaptism in order to discern exactly what I believed. This paper is my unpretentious attempt to put in writing my thoughts and beliefs in regards to this matter.

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1 For example, we see this debate alive and well in the 16th century in the conflict that arose between the Reformers and the Anabaptists.
A Definition of Baptism?

If you ask a head coach what it takes to win in football, he might say a passing offense led by a smart quarterback. However, the coach on the other side of the field may say it takes a strong defense to win at football. They cannot arrive at a common definition of how to win because they interpret the most important aspects of the game differently. We do the same thing when we try to arrive at an absolute definition of baptism. Consequently, how one interprets the Bible determines how they define the components of baptism.  

In the evangelical church\(^3\) there are two primary ways in which the Bible is interpreted. The first is from a Dispensational perspective. This "method of interpretation emphasizes the discontinuity between the Old Testament and the New Testament. According to this view, while the New Testament often draws from principles in the Old Testament, it is nevertheless a complete replacement of the Old Testament, thus rendering the old covenant invalid. The new covenant believer’s starting point is the New Testament, distinct and separate from the Old, and therefore the believer derives all his understanding of the Christian faith from the New Testament alone.\(^4\) The only things carried over from the Old Testament are those things which are explicitly repeated in the New Testament; any other Old Testament teaching is not applicable to the New Testament believer."\(^5\)

The other way to interpret the Bible is that of the Reformed tradition, also known as Covenant theology. This system of interpretation maintains that before time God the Father entered into a single, everlasting covenant with the second person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ, and the third person, the Holy Spirit, (Genesis 17:7\(^6\), 13, 19) in order to bring about the redemption of His elect people. This one covenant of redemption is unfolded throughout the Bible in various subordinate

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\(^2\) We see this problem exemplified in the *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms* by Stanley J. Grenz. Here, baptism is defined as the practice of sprinkling with, pouring on, or immersing in water as an act of Christian initiation and obedience to Christ’s own command. Already we have a problem in such a broad definition. For many (not me personally), their interpretation of the Bible leads them to believe that the practice of sprinkling, or pouring with water is sinful. Thus, this definition, although generally accurate, is erroneous to some people.

\(^3\) The views of the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church, re: infant baptism, will not be discussed in this paper. The main reason is because both churches hold to baptismal regeneration. This means that baptism effects the saving work of the Holy Spirit in washing away original sin. (Dictionary of Theological Terms, Eerdmans.)

\(^4\) "The distinction between the purpose for Israel and the purpose for the Church is about as important as that which exists between the two testaments." This quote is from Lewis Sperry Chafer who is a well-known Dispensational theologian and can be found in Robert Booth’s book *Children of the Promise* (see footnote #5).


\(^6\) "And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.” English Standard Version, emphasis mine.
So what does Baptism mean?

As you have probably already guessed, the Dispensational interpretation of Scripture and the Covenant interpretation produce two decidedly different beliefs with regard to the role that baptism plays in the life of a Christian. Dispensationalists believe in believers’ baptism. This is to say that only “those who profess repentance towards God and personal faith in Christ’s saving work choose to be baptized by immersion in water in the name of the Trinity.” To the Dispensationalist, this fact is clear because

A. The New Testament remember the Old Testament has been discontinued) clearly establishes this as the norm (Acts 2:37-38, 8:12, 18:8) and

B. Infant baptism is not specifically mentioned anywhere in the New Testament.

The idea of believers’ baptism as the norm is seen, for example, in the Gospel of Matthew 28:19. In this verse, Jesus instructs His disciples to “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” Here, baptism is mentioned after repentance and a credible profession of faith (“credible profession of faith” is what Jesus means by make disciples, they often claim). According to this view, infants cannot be baptized because they cannot profess repentance nor make a credible profession of faith.

Those who embrace the Reformed tradition see it quite differently. Because there is continuity between the Old Testament and the New Testament,

7 The various subordinate covenants can be divided into two groups, which are known as the covenant of works and the covenant of grace. Under the covenant of works, we have God’s covenant with Adam, who represents all of humanity. Under the covenant of grace, we have God’s particular covenants with Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and the new covenant that is instituted by Christ and prophesied about in Jeremiah 31:31.

8 Booth, p. 17


10 Supporters of paedobaptism agree with this assertion. They argue that infant baptism, although not mentioned itself, is clearly inferred from the New Testament. An example of this is our doctrine of the Trinity. You will not find this word in the Bible. However, few will argue with the fact that this is clearly and definitely implicit throughout the Bible.

11 New International Version
there exist a relationship between the old covenant sign of circumcision instituted in the Old Testament and the new covenant sign of baptism that we find introduced in the New Testament. This is corroborated in Colossians 2:11-12. Here, the Apostle Paul tells us that baptism has replaced circumcision as the sign of the covenant. Furthermore, the Apostle Peter specifically tells us in Acts 2:39 that this new sign of the covenant, just like it was in the Old Testament, is “for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to Himself.” Notice the similarity with Peter’s words concerning the New Testament sign of the covenant and God’s words to Abraham in Genesis 17:8 concerning the Old Testament sign of the covenant. He says, “And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant.” If the Old Testament is relevant to the New Testament and if we can then use the Old Testament ritual of circumcision to inform the New Testament references to children and the covenant, then the argument for infant baptism becomes more reasonable.

Which way do I go?

As you well see, the interpretations produce dissimilar perspectives. For me, it was like a fork in the road. If I went the Dispensational route then I logically should embrace believers’ baptism. If I followed the path of the Reformed tradition or Covenant theology then I would rightly accept infant baptism as a biblical practice. After careful consideration and prayer, I came to the conclusion that the perspective of Covenant theology was the clearest way to interpret God’s Word.

The main reason for this is that it was hard for me to accept any discontinuity between the Old and the New Testaments. The Dispensational view, among other things, seemed to be cutting the Bible in half – this did not seem coherent. For example, in Matthew 4:4 Jesus says that “Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.” In this verse, Jesus quotes directly from the Old Testament and declares that all of God’s words, not just the words of the New Testament, are applicable to His followers.

We see this idea again in Luke 24:27. Here, Jesus tells His companions on the road to Emmaus, after His resurrection, that all of Scripture testifies concerning Him. According the words of our Savior, we see a unified, unfolding plan from the Old Testament to the New Testament, which speaks of His role in the covenant of redemption. This truth is further echoed in Luke 1:68-73: “Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come . . . to remember his holy
covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham.” Also, consider Romans 15:4 where it says, “For whatever things were written before (Old Testament) were written for our learning . . .”

There are many, many more examples I could give which allude to the continuity between the Old Testament and the New Testament. The point is that the “New Testament does not set aside the Old Testament. It relies on and emphasizes the continued validity of the Old Testament for God’s people under the new covenant.” Once I properly understood this truth, I began to read Scripture in a new light. For the first time, I saw a unity that had not been there before, a God who, through covenantal relationships, was drawing His people unto Himself, and a definite relationship between circumcision and baptism.

**Infant Baptism & Covenant Theology**

“As we have seen, circumcision under the Abrahamic covenant was applied to infants on the basis of parental faith (Gen. 17; Rom 4:11). Since we today are part of the covenant through faith in Christ, the new sign of the covenant, water baptism, should likewise be applied to infants on the basis of parental faith.” But this still begs the question: “What is the significance of baptism, particularly infant baptism, in Covenant theology?”

The significance is that baptism is primarily a sign, as stated before, which is applied to all (infant and adult) who are in covenant with God. “This does not mean that everyone who is in covenant with God is saved. In fact, certainly many who are in covenant with God are not saved (like the Israelite who died in the wilderness after the exile, and Judas Iscariot who betrayed Jesus). Those who are in covenant with God are in a special relationship with Him, whereby He is extra patient and merciful to them.” They have received promises from Him that if they keep covenant, they will receive the blessings of the covenant, and if they break covenant they will fall under the covenant curses (Lev. 26).

Only Jesus can keep covenant, so only those who are ‘in Him,’ who have been united to Him by faith in the gospel, are counted as covenant keepers and thereby receive the

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15 New International Version
16 New King James Version
17 Booth, p. 18.
19 We see throughout the Bible that God exhibits favor toward the covenant community, even towards those within this community who are unbelievers. This is the case in Hebrews 6:4-5. In this verse, the writer of Hebrews says that God has allowed for unbelievers in the covenant to be enlightened, to taste the goodness of His word, to taste of the heavenly gift, and to have shared in the Holy Spirit. Also, we see that God shows favor to the children of believers (Deut. 4:37, Rom. 11:28). Furthermore, 2 Peter 3:9 implies that God, in relation to His covenant community, exhibits patience pertaining to our disobedience. There is a caveat, however, in that God’s punishment for covenant breakers (those who never trust in Christ) is greater.
20 This idea of covenant blessing and curses is found partially in Romans 2:25, I Corinthians 10:1-12, and 11:28-30.
covenant blessings. Those who do not have faith cannot keep covenant and thereby fall under the covenant curses."  

Furthermore, baptism is also to be understood as a *sacramental action*. Sacraments are the signs and seals of a covenant relationship with God. "Through a sacrament, God graciously communicates the reality of God's redeeming message of love through outward and visible means."  
The functions of the sacraments (baptism and the Lord's Supper) are to inspire, strengthen, and confirm faith. As a sign, baptism visually represents the promise that newness of life and the remission of sins are found in the person and work of Christ Jesus. The sacrament of baptism also serves as a seal in that our baptism "is attestation that we are his children and are in fellowship with Him." Thus, sacraments are a means of grace. This means that baptism is a vehicle which God uses to communicate the gospel of Jesus Christ to us, both child and adult.

Not only is baptism a sign of those who are in covenant with God and a sacramental action, "it is a prophetic sign at the beginning of our Christian life that we belong to the people of God. It is our entrance into the church (1 Cor. 12:13)." John Calvin said: "baptism is the sign of the initiation by which we are received into the society of the church, in order that, engrafted in Christ, we may be reckoned among God's children." Furthermore, this sign plainly implies that, not only has this child of God been admitted into the fellowship of the church, but that "God out of His grace has taken the initiative for our salvation."  

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Conclusion

A fitting way to conclude this paper is with question 74 of the Heidelberg Catechism.

Q: Are infants also to be baptized?
A: Yes, for since they, as well as adults, are included in the covenant (1 Cor. 17:7; Acts 2:39) and church of God (1 Cor. 7:14; Joel 2:16); and since redemption from sin (Matt. 9:14) by the blood of Christ, and the Holy Ghost, the author of faith, is promised to them (Luke 1:14-15, Psalm 22:10; Acts 2:39) no less than to the adult; they must therefore by baptism, as a sign of the covenant, be also admitted into the Christian church, and be distinguished from the children of unbelievers (Acts 10:47; 1 Cor. 12:13; 1 Cor. 7:14) as was done in the old covenants or testament by circumcision (Gen. 17:14), instead of which baptism is instituted in the new covenant (Col. 2:11-13).

To that, I say a hearty, “Amen!”
Miscellaneous

The following are other examples, which give credence to infant baptism as a biblical practice:

- The new covenant that is instituted in the New Testament is more inclusive than the covenant of the Old Testament. Why then would the new covenant exclude infants (according to the believers' baptism viewpoint) when the old covenant includes them?
- Many argue that infant baptism has been the primary practice of the church, historically speaking.
- Although the New Testament doesn't specifically speak about infant baptism, several passages seem to suggest this. These are called the 'household' passages (Acts 16:30-34, 1 Cor. 1:14-16, Acts 16:14-15). Many New Testament scholars argue that these 'households' would have included infants. Even if they didn't include infants, however, it is interesting that the verses (see above) seem to indicate that some of the people in the household were baptized without professing faith first.
- Jesus, in Mark 10:13-14, commands His disciples saying, “let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.”
- The idea that you have to have faith before receiving the sign of the covenant is a foreign idea in the Old Testament.
- We see, throughout the Bible, that God shows special concern for the family as a unit. It is hard for us in an individualistic Western civilization to grasp this concept that God can and does work in a redemptive manner through the family/household.
- I don’t think that you can argue from Scripture that infants cannot have faith. See Luke 1:41.
- Dispensationalists argue that there is no command in the Bible to baptize infants. I would counter this argument and say that there is no command that prohibits infant baptism.

27 New International Version
Common Questions

- Does baptizing my child mean that they will definitely place their faith in Christ one day?

No, it doesn’t mean that at all. We must be careful not to equate being in covenant with being saved. Remember, the Bible is full of examples of people who were under the sign of the covenant, but who became covenant breakers because they did not exercise their own faith.

- What does baptism mean for my child?

It means many different things to say the least. For example, baptism brings children into covenant with God. It also means that they have been set apart from the children of the world. Baptism is also a naming ceremony whereby God places His name upon us. Also, it signals entrance into the fellowship of the church. Furthermore, God is extra patient and merciful to those who are in covenant with Him. Lastly, “baptism unites believers and their children with God’s promised Redeemer, Jesus Christ, and secures their position as his people.”

- I am not 100% sure about infant baptism. Why can I not just wait and let my child decide one day for his/her own self?

It is quite true that infant baptism is not 100% clear in the Bible. Perhaps, God has a reason for this! Regardless, I would say that it is important for several reasons. First, there are many wonderful things attached to baptism that, I feel, all parents should want for their children. Second, God is pretty serious about this issue. In Exodus 4:24-26, God almost killed Moses because he had not given the sign of the covenant to his son. Now we know that God does not kill parents for not baptizing their children under the new covenant in Christ, but to think He is less concerned would be a mistake on our part. If you still not sure, I would suggest that you continue to pray over this issue and seek the advice of your pastor and the elders of your church.

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28 Booth, p. 107.
A Letter to a Child

Dear Baby Andrew:

I thought I might be the first to warn you that sooner or later your mommy and daddy are going to give you to some man you’ve never met and he is going to sprinkle water on your head. I know this sounds disturbing, but trust me it is a wonderful thing.

You see Andrew, you are what is called a child of the covenant and what they are doing with the water is called baptism. This whole thing serves as a holy sign. Just like your crying is a sign to your mom and dad that you are hungry, baptism is a sign that in Jesus there is forgiveness of sin. It is also a sign that you have been set apart from the rest of the world, just like your name sets you apart from other kids in the nursery.

As you get older, your mommy and daddy will remind you of what all this means every time there is another baptism in your church. They will also encourage you to ant on your baptism and place your faith in Jesus Christ and to receive the promise of God that in Him your sins have been forgiven and you have eternal life. Wow! Doesn’t that sound great!

At times, you may get frustrated and think this baptism thing is for adults and hard to understand. That is when you need to remember that in the Bible (you can get our mom or dad to read it) Jesus told the little children to come to Him and he blessed them. Oh yeah, you should also remember the words of the Apostle Peter where he says that this promise is, not only for your parents, but for you too.

I will be praying for you and your little buddies in the hope that all of you will learn to run to Jesus at a very early age.
Bibliography


