

To You & Your Children:
A Case for Infant Baptism

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. INTRODUCTION

II. CLEARING THE GROUND (PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS)

III. THE CASE FOR INFANT BAPTISM

A. The Abrahamic Covenant

1. The covenant God made with Abraham included his descendants.
2. The sign and seal of the Abrahamic covenant was circumcision.
3. Circumcision represented the spiritual benefits of the Abrahamic covenant.
4. The Abrahamic covenant required the circumcision of infant children of covenant members.
5. Summary

B. The New Covenant

1. The New covenant is the expansion and fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant.
2. The new covenant evidences continuity with the Abrahamic covenant in terms of the status of children.
3. Baptism has replaced circumcision as the sign and seal of the new covenant.
4. Infant Baptism is a good and necessary consequence derived from Scripture.

IV. CONCLUSION

Bibliography

I. INTRODUCTION

Discussing the subject of infant baptism (paedobaptism) is like trying to unroll only the right side of a carpet. Once you begin to tug, the whole thing starts to come unraveled. Perhaps no other topic leads more immediately into discussions about other issues, such as the nature of the church (ecclesiology), the meaning of the sacraments (sacramentology), the structure of salvation (soteriology), and one's method of biblical interpretation (hermeneutics). Indeed, one can see why the Baptist theologian Paul K. Jewett would write, "The subject of infant baptism is one about which it is easier to write voluminously than significantly."¹

It is no secret that debates between paedobaptists and credobaptists² can often become heated. It is not our desire to add fuel to this fire. Rather, with the humility and patience required of servants of Christ, we will attempt to outline what we consider to be the most persuasive and exegetically/theologically satisfying arguments for the paedobaptist position.

II. CLEARING THE GROUND (PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS)

Before proceeding further it is necessary to remove some debris from the landscape of this discussion. It needs to be readily conceded that there is neither an *explicit command* nor an *explicit example* of infant baptism in the New Testament. For

¹ Paul K. Jewett, *Infant Baptism & the Covenant of Grace*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978), 1.

² A credobaptist is one who believes that only those who give a credible profession of faith in Jesus Christ may be baptized. The Latin word *credo* means "to believe". Often such a view is described as "believer's baptism" or "believer baptism".

many credobaptists these two facts alone spell “game-set-match” in favor of the credobaptist position. However, it must also be noticed that there is no *explicit command* for women to come and participate in the Lord’s Supper, nor is there an *explicit example*. Yet because in Christ there is no difference in status between male and female (Gal.3:28), everyone agrees that it is not only permissible but also *mandatory* that members of the church who are women partake of this sacrament.³

The issue at stake here is the validity of inferential reasoning.⁴ Inferential reasoning is and must be part of our interpretation and application of Scripture if we are to allow God to rule every area of our lives. There are things of which the Bible does not speak directly, yet certainly are addressed indirectly (i.e. abortion). Moreover, if inferential reasoning were improper, then it would be difficult to defend the historic Christian formulations of the doctrine of the Trinity (one in essence, three in person) or the two natures of Christ (one person, two natures) from the Bible. We must be careful

³ Douglas Wilson wisely remarks on this subject, “Some still may be looking for an express warrant, or unambiguous example of an infant baptism in the New Testament. But this is a false criterion, which no one can consistently apply. For example, should women receive the Lord’s Supper? After all, there is *no command* to give them the supper, and there is *no example* of them receiving the supper. The answer must be to appeal to a passage which has nothing to do with the Lord’s Supper, but which has everything to do with the status of women in Christ’s church. ‘There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus’ (Gal.3:28). This is an argument from theological status of women (on which the New Testament is very clear) to the ordinance of the Lord’s Supper (about which the New Testament says nothing in regard to women). This is a thoroughly biblical way of argumentation, and this is the method employed here as we consider the theological status of the *children of believers* as presented in the New Testament. We are arguing here from their status to the ordinance, from their standing to the sacrament.” Douglas Wilson, *To A Thousand Generations*. (Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 1996), 16-17.

⁴ Valid inferential reasoning is what the Westminster Confession of Faith means by the phrase “good and necessary consequence” (WCF 1.6).

not to set the threshold of evidence⁵ too high for infant baptism, demanding of it what we do not demand of other doctrines we deem essential or vitally important to our faith.⁶

It is also important to remember that the Baptist cannot claim the high ground in the debate by pointing to the unvaried pattern of faith preceding baptism in every instance recorded in the New Testament.⁷ Not only is this not true (there are numerous places where the faith of the one baptized is not mentioned at all, i.e. the “household” baptisms), it is somewhat irrelevant to the point at hand.

The paedobaptist readily acknowledges that the proper practice for baptizing adults is *after* their profession of faith. The issue is whether the infant children of professing believers must make a profession of faith *before* receiving baptism. If credobaptists are bothered by the absence of infant baptisms in the New Testament, it is important to remember the words of Oscar Cullman:

Those who dispute the Biblical character of infant Baptism have therefore to reckon with the fact that *adult Baptism for sons and daughters born of Christian parents, which they recommend, is even worse attested by the New Testament than infant Baptism* (for which certain possible traces are discoverable) *and indeed lacks any kind of proof.*⁸

⁵ Many thanks to David Sherwood for this phrase.

⁶ We do well to remember the words of John Murray who said, “to think organically of the Scripture revelation is much more difficult than to think atomistically.” John Murray, *Christian Baptism*. (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1980), ‘Preface’.

⁷ This type of argument against infant baptism (i.e. (1) Faith is necessary in order to receive baptism; (2) Infants cannot express faith; (3) Therefore, infants should not receive baptism) could also be used to deny infant salvation. One could argue (1) Faith is necessary for salvation (Rom.3:28; Gal.2:16; Eph.2:8,9). (2) Infants cannot express faith. (3) Therefore, infants cannot be saved. But no Baptist I have ever read or encountered accepts this type of reasoning in the latter instance.

⁸ Oscar Cullmann, *Baptism in the New Testament*. Eng. Trans. by J. K. S. Reid (London: SCM Press LTD, rep.1956), 26.

Of course Paul Jewett says of this Cullmann quote, in his usual clever fashion, “In our judgment this argument is hardly worthy of the italicized dignity with which it marches across the page.”⁹ But the rejoinders Jewett offers to explain the “silence” of the New Testament on the baptism of adults raised in Christian homes work equally well to explain the “silence” of the New Testament on the baptism of infants. What is good for the goose is good for the gander!

At the end of the day, neither the paedobaptist nor the credobaptist has the explicit command or explicit example on his side. But it is essential to recognize that the paedobaptist and the credobaptist are really asking two different questions. The credobaptist continues to demand, “Where is the evidence for the baptism of infants in the New Testament?”. But the paedobaptist responds, “Where is the evidence for the exclusion of children from the covenant in the New Testament?”¹⁰ The weight of the debate shifts elsewhere. Both positions cannot be right: either it is legitimate or it is not legitimate for the infant children of professing believers to receive baptism. If progress is going to be made in resolving the dispute, other issues will have to be dealt with along the way.¹¹

⁹ Jewett, *Infant Baptism*, 70.

¹⁰ It is also vital to take into account that in Protestant traditions, the issue at hand is not whether *all* infants should be baptized. As John Owen puts it, infants “whose parents are strangers to the covenant are excluded.” John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, ed. W.H. Goold, vol. XVI vols. Edinburgh, 1850-53, (reprinted, London, 1965-68), XVI.258.

¹¹ “Many Christians have come to baptistic conclusions because they simply took a Bible and a concordance, and then looked up every incident of baptism in the New Testament. This is objectionable, not because they studied the passages concerned with baptism, but because they did *not* look up all the passages that addressed parents, children, generations, descendants, promises, covenants, circumcision, Gentiles, Jews, olive trees, and countless other important areas. In other words, the subject is bigger than it looks.” Wilson, *To a Thousand Generations*, 11.

III. THE CASE FOR INFANT BAPTISM

It has been said that the paedobaptist argument rests upon three types of Biblical texts: (1) Those that have babies, but no water; (2) Those that have water, but no babies; and (3) Those that have neither.¹² Indeed, there is a certain measure of truth (and lots of humor) here. But in light of what we have seen above, the force of the Biblical evidence might still be overwhelming. We will now present the individual pieces to the infant baptism puzzle.

A. The Abrahamic Covenant

Any discussion of infant baptism necessarily involves an exploration of the biblical evidence regarding the covenant.¹³ This is an essential point, for as Douglas Wilson reminds us, “One of the problems in the entire debate over baptism has been the natural mistake of deriving the doctrine of the covenant from our doctrine of baptism, instead of beginning with ...the covenant, and the proceeding to discuss baptism.”¹⁴ Sidestepping the enormous amount of literature on the subject of covenant (and the bewildering intricacies!), the following features will help point the way towards a biblical defense of paedobaptism through reflection on God’s covenantal administrations. There is no better place to start than with the covenant with Abraham.

¹² I believe these are the words of Paul K. Jewett, but the exact location of this reference I have not been able to find.

¹³ If indeed baptism is a “sign and seal of the covenant of grace”, one’s view of the latter will inevitably influence one’s view of the former.

¹⁴ Wilson, *To a Thousand Generations*, 11.

1. The covenant God made with Abraham included his descendants.

From the moment God called Abraham, God's promises to him included blessings for his descendants (Gen.12:1-3). In the most dramatic and powerful way, God pledged Himself to this (Gen.15:1-21).¹⁵ But nowhere is the inclusion of the descendants of Abraham in the covenant more clearly stated than in Gen.17.

The words of Gen.17 underscore that at the very heart of the covenant God was making with Abraham, provision was made to *include* Abraham's descendants within the covenant. In the midst of promises of land and many descendants, God declares:

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...I will be their God. (Gen.17:7)

The import is hard to miss. God set apart Abraham's physical descendants through means of the covenant, pledging Himself to be God to them.

2. The sign and seal of the Abrahamic covenant was circumcision.

The covenant God made with Abraham also included a stipulation. God instituted a sign and seal for the covenant:

⁹And God said to Abraham, 'As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. ¹⁰This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you:

Every male among you shall be circumcised. ¹¹You shall be circumcised in

¹⁵ For a masterful treatment of Gen.15 against the background of Ancient Near Eastern evidence regarding Hittite suzerain-vassal treaty forms, see Jeffrey J. Niehaus, *God at Sinai: Covenant and Theophany in the Bible and Ancient Near East*. Studies in Old Testament Biblical Theology (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1995), 172-178. Niehaus follows the work of Meredith Kline.

the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. (Gen.17:9-11)

Circumcision was to be a sign (and seal¹⁶) of the covenant, which, as we have seen, involved the pledge of God to be God to Abraham and his descendants.

It is worth noting that not only were Abraham's descendants to receive circumcision as a sign and seal of the covenant, but they were to keep the covenant by perpetuating the circumcision sign in their descendants. The Lord commanded, "you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring throughout their generations." (17:9)

3. Circumcision represented the spiritual benefits of the Abrahamic covenant.

It is important to emphasize the fact that circumcision was not simply a rite of incorporation into a national or theocratic kingdom.¹⁷ Nor was it merely a token of racial solidarity.¹⁸ Rather, circumcision was "the sign and seal of the highest and richest spiritual blessing which God bestows upon men."¹⁹ As we saw above, the heart of the covenant was communion with God. The promise given to Abraham and his descendants was that YHWH would be their God, and they His people. This promise pulses throughout the pages of the Old Testament (and New Testament!). If circumcision is a

¹⁶ In Rom.4:11 the apostle Paul refers to circumcision as both sign and seal. We will return to this verse below.

¹⁷ Responding to Paul Jewett who emphasizes the theocratic significance of circumcision under the old covenant, Meredith Kline writes, "Since theocracy in the kingdom form which Jewett evidently has in view came into being long after circumcision was instituted, is it not misleading to identify a Jew's right to circumcision with his citizenship in the theocratic kingdom?" Meredith Kline, *By Oath Consigned*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1968), 90n.12.

¹⁸ "With reference to circumcision it must be fully appreciated that it was not essentially or primarily the sign of family, racial, or national identity." Murray, *Christian Baptism*, 45.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 46.

sign of the covenant, and the heart of the covenant is communion with the Lord, circumcision represents the highest and greatest blessing of salvation.²⁰

Moreover, circumcision represented the removal of defilement. Circumcision was never intended to be a physical emblem alone that pointed only to itself. Rather it pointed to the circumcision of the heart that was required of the people of God (Lev.26:41; Deut.10:16; 30:6). The prophets railed against the notion that mere flesh circumcision amounted to anything without the concomitant circumcision of the heart (Jer.4:4; 9:25; Ezek.44:7,9). Thus, circumcision “signified and sealed that cleansing which fitted for the presence of Jehovah and so was the seal of union and communion.”²¹

4. The Abrahamic covenant required the circumcision of infant children of covenant members.

This point is a crucial premise in the overall case for infant baptism. Even though circumcision represented the highest privilege and blessing of the covenant, which is only received by faith, circumcision was nevertheless applied to the infants of covenant members before those infants could make any sort of profession of faith.

¹²He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised. Every male throughout your generations, whether born in your house or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring¹³ ...shall surely be circumcised. So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. (Gen.17:12-13)

²⁰ Ibid., 46-47.

²¹ Ibid., 47.

This was a requirement, not a suggestion. If the children of Abraham are included in the covenant, then the sign of that covenant *must* be applied to them.

The force of the requirement was such that the greatest penalty was attached for failure to comply: “Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.” (Gen.17:14) If the highest of privileges was signed and sealed by circumcision, then the highest of penalties would result for spurning this covenant sign.

5. Summary

What we have established thus far is that when God made covenant with Abraham, he included Abraham’s descendants within the covenantal administration. They were to have the *status* of covenant members. Moreover, the sign that God instituted to represent this covenant in its deepest and richest significance, namely union and communion with God, was applied to these infant covenant members in accordance with the Divine will.

B. The New Covenant

The significance of our argument to this point is found in the relationship that exists between the Abrahamic covenant and the new covenant that was instituted by our Lord Jesus Christ.²² If central lines of continuity between these two covenants can be

²² It is only for the sake of space that we pass over the Mosaic covenant. It is my opinion that similar arguments could be made from this covenant alone, *even apart from the Abrahamic covenant*, on the basis of the familial solidarity, parental responsibilities, and promises of blessing present in the Mosaic administration. But in order to focus our argument more narrowly, we give attention to the Abrahamic covenant alone.

established, there will be numerous venues for defending the validity of infant baptism by analogy with infant circumcision in the Abrahamic covenant.

1. The New covenant is the expansion and fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant.²³

The Abrahamic covenant was fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul is crystal clear on the subject. Speaking to the Christians in Galatia he exclaims, “And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise.”(Gal.3:29) Indeed the entire third chapter of this epistle is impossible to read without noticing that Christ is the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant: “...it is those of faith [in Christ] who are the sons of Abraham.” (3:7); “...those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.” (3:9); “...in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham [comes] to the Gentiles...” (3:14). Nor is Galatians the only epistle or author that draws out these sorts of connections (cf. Mat.1:1; Rom.4). Christ is brings the Abrahamic covenant to its intended outcome.

Jesus Christ inaugurated the new covenant (Lk.22:20; 2 Cor.3:4-18). Therefore the new covenant is the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant. There are fundamental lines of continuity between the two. To be sure, anticipating a Baptist objection to the direction we are heading, the sons of Abraham that the new covenant embraces are those who embrace Christ by faith (Gal.3:26). But this by no means necessarily entails the exclusion of the infant seed of believers from the covenant. The presence and requirement of faith is not new to the new covenant. Indeed, Abraham is described by

²³ “The basic premise of the argument for infant baptism is that the New Testament economy is the unfolding and fulfillment of the covenant made with Abraham and that the necessary implication is the unity and continuity of the church.” Murray, *Christian Baptism*, 45.

Paul as the “man of faith” (3:9), as one who “believed God” (3:6; Rom.4:3), and as our father in the faith (Rom.4:12, 16; etc.). What is new is the manifestation of Christ. The issue that demands exploration is the effect the revelation of Christ has had on the basic structure of the Abrahamic covenant.

2. The new covenant evidences continuity with the Abrahamic covenant in terms of the status of children.

The question before us is whether the coming of Christ and the inauguration of the new covenant through His person and work have fundamentally altered the covenantal status of infant children in believing homes. Professor Murray put it well when he queried,

If children born of the faithful were given the sign and seal of the covenant [in the Abrahamic covenant] and therefore of the richest blessing which the covenant disclosed, if the New Testament economy is the elaboration and extension of this covenant of which circumcision was the sign, are we to believe that infants in this age are excluded from that which was provided by the Abrahamic covenant?...Is the new covenant in this respect less generous than the Abrahamic?²⁴

Again, “do we find any hint or intimation of such reversal in either the Old or New Testament?”²⁵ Murray has here highlighted the question for which we noted paedobaptists are demanding and answer: where is the evidence for the exclusion of infants in the new covenant?

²⁴ Ibid., 48-49.

²⁵ Ibid., 49.

But fortunately, we are not left with simply a question. There are numerous indications within the pages of the New Testament that underscore the covenantal status of children. Indeed, we find Paul instructing the children in Colossae to obey their parents in everything, for this is pleasing to the Lord (Col.3:20). Moreover, Paul applies the fifth commandment to children in Ephesus (Eph.6:1-3). Children are not second class citizens in the covenantal community, but are full members with promises and responsibilities.²⁶

Of course, the Baptist could respond that the very fact children are addressed by Paul implies a sufficient age to understand and obey and therefore nothing at all is said about infants. Moreover, the Baptist might argue, the grounds of this instruction (“this pleases the Lord” – Col.3:20) implies their own profession of faith. While the first assumption is most likely true, the second begs the question: are they being *treated* as covenantal members because they have given their own profession of faith, or because they are children of professing believers?

1 Cor.7:14 gives insight into this issue. In a context where Paul is arguing for a converted woman to remain with her unbelieving husband, he reasons, “For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be *unclean*, but as it is, they are *holy*.” Though there are some difficulties with interpreting this verse,²⁷ one thing appears undoubtedly clear: the status of the child is affected by the status of the parent.

²⁶ Ibid., 63-64.

²⁷ Particularly, in what sense is the unbelieving spouse made “holy”. It is our penultimate judgment that it is the same status of holiness applied to the child. The implications this has for the baptism of an unbelieving spouse, should our argument be sound, are difficult to work out. Some have argued that an unbelieving spouse should be baptized, unless they refuse. Greg Bahnsen, “Baptism: Its Meaning and Purpose”. Published by Southern California Center for Christian Studies. 7n.3.

The language Paul uses to describe the hypothetical unclean status of the child (a)ka/qarta) is borrowed from the purification ceremonies of the Levitical law.²⁸ It refers to a status in relation to the covenant community. But Paul is emphatic that the status of a child of at least one believing spouse is not unclean, but rather holy. Gordon Fee states, “Here in particular Paul seems to be carrying on an argument with the Corinthians...If you are correct, he argues, then your children lie outside the covenant.” But the point is that, for Paul, it is on the verge of self-evident that children are inside the covenant.²⁹ We find here clear indication that there is covenantal continuity in terms of the status of children.³⁰

Such continuity was already heralded in the gospels in the way that Jesus treated children. Three passages in the synoptic gospels describe an occasion in which children were brought to Jesus in order to be blessed by Him (Matt.19:13ff; Mk.10:13ff; Lk.18:15ff). The passage in Luke 18:15ff is most instructive. Here it is said specifically

²⁸ According to Joachim Jeremias, Paul uses “the terminology of Jewish ritual...[T]his is obvious in the case of the expression a)ka/qarta, which is taken from the language of the Levitical purification ceremonies.” Joachim Jeremias, *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries*. trans. David Cairns (London: SCM Press LTD, 1958), 46.

²⁹ Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*. New International Commentary on the New Testament. ed. F. F. Bruce (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 301. It should be readily admitted that Fee is not sympathetic to the paedobaptist position. 301 n.27. But we believe his exegesis of this passage betrays his own view.

³⁰ It is impossible to resist quoting Calvin at this point, though he advances our argument before we are ready to advance! “*Indeed, it is most evident that the covenant which the Lord once made with Abraham [cf. Gen. 17:14] is no less in force today for Christians than it was of old for the Jewish people, and that this word relates no less to Christians than it then related to the Jews. Unless perhaps we think that Christ by his coming lessened or curtailed the grace of the Father – but this is nothing but execrable blasphemy! Accordingly, the children of the Jews also, because they had been made heirs of his covenant and distinguished from the children of the impious, were called a holy seed [Ezra 9:2; Isa. 6:13]. For this same reason, the children of Christians are considered holy; and even though born with only one believing parent, by the apostle’s testimony they differ from the unclean seed of idolators [1 Cor.7:14]. Now seeing that the Lord, immediately after making the covenant with Abraham, commanded it to be sealed in infants by an outward sacrament [Gen.17:12], what excuse will Christians give for not testifying and sealing it in their children today?*” John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Edited by John T. McNeill. Translated and indexed by Ford Lewis Battles. Vol. 2. Library of Christian Classics. Vol XXI. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 4.16.6 (emphasis mine).

that infants (ta\ bre/fh) were brought to Jesus. But the disciples rebuke the parents of these children for bothering Jesus. Yet Jesus rebuked the disciples who did not think these little babes were “within the compass of his kingdom task.”³¹ What is most striking, however, is that Jesus says “Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God.” (18:16).

Though Jesus draws an application from this instance that “whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it” (18:17), this in no way mitigates the blessed status Jesus was declaring of children (of covenant members) in particular.³² The children of these believing parents who were bringing them to Jesus were received and said to belong to the Kingdom. Dare we say that they belong to the kingdom, but not to the church? Or that they belong to the kingdom, but are not included in the covenant? Such reasoning seems out of accord with our Savior’s full embrace of these children.³³

Finally, it is instructive for the status of children how Peter speaks in his sermon at Pentecost. After interpreting the glorious work of the Lord Jesus Christ and the glorious events of that day as the long-awaited outpouring of God’s Spirit in fulfillment of the prophecy of Joel (Joel 2:28-32), the people cry out “What shall we do?” (Acts 2:37). Peter’s answer reads like an inauguration speech for the new covenant. Included are the realities of baptism, the Holy Spirit, and forgiveness, all in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ (2:38). And also included are the children: “For the promise is for you *and*

³¹ Murray, *Christian Baptism*, 63.

³² *Ibid.*, 59-63.

³³ This, of course, in no way removes the necessity for the child to grow up into faith and repentance.

your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.” (2:39)

It would be difficult to ignore the echoes in this text of Gen.17, which we explored above. We have here a turning point in redemptive-history, the great and glorious day of Pentecost, when the resurrected and exalted Christ poured out the promised Holy Spirit (Acts 2:32-33).³⁴ The words chosen to shape our understanding of the way forward from Pentecost call to remembrance the covenant God made with Abraham. Just as God included Abraham’s descendants in the covenant, so now the children remain heirs of the promise, according to Peter (2:39). God’s method of dealing with families remains unchanged, despite the significant advancement in redemptive history brought about by the death and resurrection of Christ and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit.³⁵

It seems that two fundamental facts have become clear in our study thus far: (1) There is *no evidence for the exclusion* of children of covenant members from the covenant in the new covenant. (2) There are numerous indications that these children are to be regarded as having *the status of covenant members* by virtue of God’s administration of the promise. These two premises are reinforced when we consider that

³⁴ For an exceptional articulation of the redemptive-historical significance of Pentecost, see Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., *Perspectives on Pentecost*. (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979), 13-41.

³⁵ Murray is worth quoting at length here: “It demonstrates that Peter, in the illumination and power of the Spirit of Pentecost, recognized that *there was no suspension or abrogation of that divine administration whereby children are embraced with their parents in God’s covenant promise*. It is simply this and nothing less that Acts 2:39 evinces...Nothing could advertise more conspicuously and conclusively that this principle of God’s gracious government, by which children along with their parents are the possessors of God’s covenant promise, is fully operative in the New Testament as well as the Old than this simple fact that *on the occasion of Pentecost Peter took up the refrain of the old covenant and said, ‘The promise is to you and your children’*. It is the certification of the Holy Spirit to us that this method of the administration of the covenant of grace is not suspended.” Murray, *Christian Baptism*, 68. (emphasis mine)

the responsibility given to parents to raise their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord remains the same in all covenant administrations (cf. Deut.6:4-9; Eph.6:4).

3. Baptism has replaced circumcision as the sign and seal of the new covenant.

In some of our Lord's final instructions to His disciples after His resurrection, but before His ascension, He delivered a charter for new covenant activity: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, *baptizing* them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you..."

(Matt.28:19-20). Thenceforth, the new covenant community would become a baptismal community.

We have already noted the words of Peter at Pentecost, where baptism appears in the complex of new covenant realities (Acts 2:38-39). Were we to survey the entire book of Acts, we would find that baptism continually marked one's entrance into the covenant community (cf. 1 Cor. 12:13). But more specifically, what exactly does baptism signify?

Baptism "binds one to Christ and the order of life represented by him."³⁶ The language one finds, for example, in the Pauline epistles, brings together baptism and union with Christ in very close relationship: those who have been "baptized into Christ have put on Christ" (Gal.3:27). But more particularly, it is union with Christ in His death and resurrection. (Rom.6:3-6). It signs and seals both purification from the defilement of sin, as well as purification from the guilt of sin by virtue of Christ's death and

³⁶ Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*. trans. John Richard De Witt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, eng.trans. 1975), 400.

resurrection, to whom one is united by faith.³⁷ Moreover, we must not forget that because the church is the body of Christ (1 Cor.12:12-31), baptism into Christ is baptism into His body (1 Cor.12:13)³⁸. There is therefore, a pronounced *ecclesiological* dimension to baptism as well. It marks out who is a part of the covenant community.

But what is the relationship between baptism and circumcision in the new covenant? First, circumcision in the flesh has been abolished as a rite of incorporation into the covenant community and as a sign and seal of the covenant. This was clearly settled at the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15:1-29). Moreover, to continue to insist upon circumcision as a religious rite is on the pathway to apostasy! (Gal.5:2-12)

But the spiritual significance of circumcision continues, underscoring that circumcision was never exclusively of national, racial, or external significance. Paul says the true circumcision is fulfilled in those “who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh” (Phil.3:3). Indeed, “For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter.” (Rom.2:28-29). Paul stands in the line of the Old Testament prophets who heralded the need for heart circumcision (Jer.4:4; 9:25; Ezek.44:7, 9). Indeed, this itself was part of the Deuteronomic covenant (Deut.10:16; 30:6).

Baptism has come to signify what circumcision signified under the old covenant.

³⁷ Murray captures well the richness of significance in Christian baptism: “We may say then that baptism signifies union with Christ in the virtue of his death and the power of his resurrection, purification from the defilement of sin by the renewing grace of the Holy Spirit, and purification from the guilt of sin by the sprinkling of the blood of Christ. The emphasis must be placed, however, upon union with Christ. It is this that is central, and it is this notion that appears more explicitly and pervasively than any other.” Murray, *Christian Baptism*, 5.

³⁸ Ridderbos gives particular attention to this theme. Ridderbos, *Paul*, 400-404.

Col.2:11-12 is perhaps the clearest example of the mingling of circumcision language and baptismal language in the New Testament:

*¹¹In him also **you were circumcised** with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, ¹²**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. (Col.2:11-12)*

What is striking here is how closely associated in Paul's mind were the concepts of circumcision and baptism. The purification from defilement that circumcision pointed to is said to be accomplished by Christ in His death, and this is represented to us in our baptism. As Edmund Clowney puts it, "We are circumcised by union with Christ in his death, and baptism is the sign of that union."³⁹

4. Infant Baptism is a good and necessary consequence derived from Scripture.

We have now reached the pinnacle of our argument. We believe that we have laid the groundwork for making a legitimate inference from the biblical evidence to the propriety, indeed necessity, of infant baptism. In summary fashion, the covenant God established with Abraham included his descendants, even the infants, and therefore necessitated the application of the covenant sign to them. The Lord Jesus Christ came in

³⁹ Edmund Clowney, *The Church*. (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 282. Clowney also says, "Paul thinks of circumcision that cut off not a bit of flesh, Christ's whole body in violent death. Christ endured what circumcision symbolized; the cleansing of judgment in death, the 'cutting off' of the sinner. Baptism signifies union with Christ in his death, burial and resurrection. The circumcision done by men no longer avails, for the circumcision of the Christian is now God's doing, bringing us out of the death that our sins deserve into the life that Christ provides." 282.

fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant, bringing the fullness of repentance and forgiveness of sins to the nations, as well as the eschatological Spirit (Luke 24:44-49).

But this epochal leap forward in redemptive history evidences no abrogation of the principle of familial solidarity in God's covenant relations.⁴⁰ On the contrary, the children of professing believers are treated as members of the covenant. The sign and seal of the new covenant is baptism. Since the sign of the covenant was given to all the infant seed in the Abrahamic covenant, the sign of the covenant should be given to the infant seed of professing believers in the new covenant.

Any argument against infant baptism must be tested against the touchstone of infant circumcision. To insist that because the benefits represented by baptism are only received by faith, baptism should not be applied to infants, runs head first into the evidence relating to circumcision. In Rom.4:11 Paul says of Abraham's circumcision, "He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the *righteousness that he had by faith* while he was still uncircumcised..." Circumcision was a sign of righteousness by faith! Yet it was applied to Abraham's infant seed! To deny one who has the status of covenant member (i.e. the children of professing believers) the sign of the covenant because they do not yet evidence faith, is a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of signs and seals.

IV. CONCLUSION

There is undoubtedly much more that could be said on the subject of infant baptism. But we believe that the fundamental argument here for continuity between the

⁴⁰ "Fulfillment in Christ does not destroy that relation, it brings it to accomplishment." Ibid., 281.

Abrahamic covenant and the new covenant is the best and most solid skeleton on which to graft more paedobaptist skin!

One objection, however, that deserves specific mention is the credobaptist appeal to Jer.31:31-34 and its description of the new covenant as one in which “they shall all know me”. Often credobaptists insist that this evidences a fundamental change in administration of the covenant, so that only regenerate, believing people can be included. We do not think that this suggestion overturns the argument we have just made.

Indeed, we do not think that the words of Jeremiah can be interpreted in this fashion either. Following J. Douma, it is important to note a few things about this prophecy of Jeremiah. (1) The way that Hebrews uses Jer.31 in the context of the whole book of Hebrews belies this interpretation. Some of the strongest warning passages against breaking the covenant (i.e. not having faith) are found in Hebrews (4:2; 6:4ff; 10:26ff; 12:14ff). (2) The new covenant has only been inaugurated, not consummated with the first coming of Christ. Until Christ returns and brings in the full and glorious manifestation of His Kingship, there will always be wolves in the sheepfold. It is only when history is consummated that the full import of Jer.31 will be realized.⁴¹

But perhaps nearer to heart of credobaptist concerns is the practical problem of the abysmal state of the church. Nominalism and apostasy are rampant, and the Baptists are rightly bothered. But unfortunately they often blame the practice of infant baptism for perpetuating such nonsense. As David Wright so cleverly said of Baptist sentiments, “[infant baptism’s] injection of a minimal dose of the virus of Christianity has

⁴¹ J. Douma, *Infant Baptism and Regeneration*. Booklet. Originally published as a series of articles in *De Reformatie*, August-October, 1976. It should also be noticed that the credobaptist falls on his own sword here. He or she must readily admit that infallible assurance as to someone else’s regeneration is well-nigh impossible.

successfully inoculated generations of English men and women against catching the real thing in later life.”⁴²

Such sentiments are somewhat widespread. But it is worth mentioning that nominalism and apostasy are widespread in Baptist circles as well. As Douglas Wilson reminds us, “The real origin of nominalism is to be found in all churches that refuse to *discipline* in terms of their baptism, whatever their practice of baptism may be.”⁴³

It is my hope and prayer that the arguments in this paper will help solidify in a summary fashion the basic links in the paedobaptist chain. The children of professing believers are members of the covenant and should be treated as such. They are given the rights and privileges of those who belong. But if they squander their inheritance, they must be disciplined in accordance with the Divine institution, until the Day when Christ returns and the full glory of the new covenant will be manifest! To God be the glory!

⁴² David F. Wright, “Recovering Baptism for a New Age of Mission” in *Doing Theology for the People of God*. Studies in Honor of J.I. Packer; ed. Donald Lewis and Alister McGrath (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 51-66.

⁴³ Wilson, *To a Thousand Generations*, 7.

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