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# WHY WOULD I BAPTISE MY CHILD?

*Bruce Pass*

*This thought-provoking and wide-ranging article explores some less familiar arguments in favour of the baptism of the children of believing parents. The author rejects a simplistic replacement of circumcision with baptism, and explores issues of faith for those who are developmentally unable to engage with God's word.*

This question loomed large while my wife and I attended an Evangelical Free Church in Germany where the issue of infant baptism was very contentious. We soon learned that the practise of infant baptism posed a substantial stumbling block to many. Many of our German friends considered baptising babies to be unbiblical or even disobedient. These experiences were very new to us yet upon returning to our native Sydney Anglican turf, I became more aware of a palpable ambivalence toward the practice of infant baptism, which led me to think much more carefully about the reasons why I had thought infant baptism wasn't unbiblical or disobedient. The restoration of my conviction that infant baptism tells more of the Bible's story of the children of believers was slow in coming, yet I am glad for the experiences that prompted a deeper search for an answer to the question, 'why would I baptise my child?' What follows is an exploration of some well-worn theological paths, which I hope will be of benefit to those who may have also found themselves asking similar questions.

## The First Christian Baptism

When the vast crowd of diaspora Jews heard the apostle Peter preach the very first Christian sermon, they responded with the impassioned plea, 'brothers, what shall we do?' (Acts 2:37).<sup>1</sup> Peter's response was characteristically succinct, 'Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call' (Acts 2:38–39). Peter's words present baptism as a token both of the forgiveness of sins and the fulfilment of God's ancient promise to the Patriarch Abraham.

Significantly, Peter's words indicate that this promise belonged not only to those who had come to Jerusalem for the feast of Pentecost and

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise stated, Bible quotations are taken from the NIV 1984. (THE HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®, NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.)

their children, but to all whom the Lord God would be pleased further to call to himself.

At first glance, the book of Acts would seem quite promising a place to start the search for answers concerning the question of baptism and the children of believers, yet one soon finds that it raises more questions than it answers. While the promise is said to belong to the children of those who had received it, nothing is said of how its token should be administered in their case, or that of subsequent generations. Moreover, as one searches the remainder of the New Testament, one is also met by an unexpected silence. Nonetheless, make disciples of their children the first Christians certainly did and as far as we are able to tell, the practice of infant baptism was widespread by the mid-second century.<sup>2</sup> The reasoning underlying this practice however, remains obscured. The statements of the church fathers on the subject of infant baptism are of little help, as baptism itself soon gained a significance that the New Testament never envisaged. Both Tertullian's censure and Cyprian's recommendation of infant baptism are grounded on the idea that the rite itself functions as a guarantee rather than a token of salvation. This lack of clear testimony needn't cause us to despair. Although the authors of the New Testament did not directly address how baptism ought to be administered in subsequent generations, they left sufficient clues to point us in the right direction.

## The New Testament and the Children of Believers

In the quest for answers, we need to look first to what the New Testament says about the children of believers. The most important statement is to be found in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. In the middle of an extended discussion of sexual ethics Paul states that 'if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, *but as it is, they are holy*' (1 Corinthians 7:13–14). Paul states here that the children of even one believing spouse are holy. Paul hereby applies the Old Testament language of cleanliness and holiness to the children of a Christian woman. Significantly, Paul says that on account of the mother's faith, even the children of one believing parent are sanctified, i.e. set apart. Under the Old Covenant, Israel was to be set apart as God's very own people, 'Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation' (Exodus 19:5–6). What Paul predicates of the children of believers is the same objective set-apartness that was true of Israelite children.

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<sup>2</sup> Anthony Lane, 'Dual-Practise View' in *Baptism: Three Views* (ed. David F. Wright; Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 2009), p. 150..

In practical terms what does this mean? The Old Testament language of holiness is very spatial. In the first instance holiness speaks of proximity to God. The descriptions of the tabernacle and the Israelite desert camp convey this spatiality very clearly. The holy areas of the Israelite camp were those closest to the symbol of God's abiding presence, the Ark of the Covenant. Therefore the statement that the children of the believing woman are holy indicates that they are near to God in a way that others beyond this familial tie are not. Of prime importance is the fact that Israel's proximity to God entailed specific privileges. Paul describes the privileges of Israel's objective set-apartness in his letter to the Romans. 'Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises' (Romans 9:4). In short, being near to God entails access to his grace. The parameters of this objective set-apartness charts the sphere of God's gracious action in the world. Therefore the holiness of children of believers in the first instance speaks of their nearness to the means of grace. Theodor Beza (1519–1605) captured it well when he wrote, 'for the infants of believers their first and foremost access of salvation is the fact of their being born of believing parents.'<sup>3</sup>

That the sphere of God's redemptive acts extends beyond the individual to familial bounds is indicative of the fact that God doesn't just save individuals by his gospel, but refashions a people. This can be seen from the very beginnings of the gospel in God's promise to Abraham. The promise God made with Abraham is equally a promise to his children (Genesis 17:7ff.). It is this promise that informs Peter's claim that the gospel promise belonged not only to those who responded to his preaching in repentance and faith, but also to their children (Acts 2:38–39). Also common to both sets of children is the way they are to receive the promise. Both the children of Israel and the children of Christian believers receive the promise as their fathers bring them up in the fear of the Lord (Genesis 18:19; Ephesians 6:4). Remarkably though, the people God is refashioning for himself through the gospel is not limited to ethnic Israel. As the book of Acts progresses, the reader is shown that the phrase, 'all whom the Lord our God will call,' does in fact embrace the Gentile world. Alienated as any Gentile is from God and his covenant people Israel, through the gospel he may become a part of this holy people. Through the gospel, estranged individuals become brothers, children, and fathers, and divided peoples become a household (1 Timothy 3:15), a holy nation (1 Peter 2:9), a new humanity (Ephesians 2:15). God's redemptive acts do not merely reconcile individuals, but transform the disparate shards of humanity into an eschatological unity. Herman Bavinck (1854–1921) put it in a nutshell when he wrote, 'the humanity that fell in the person of

<sup>3</sup> T. Beza, *Resp. Ad coll. Mompelg*, p. 103 cit. J. Gerhard, *Theological Commonplaces*, XX p. 211.

the first is restored in the second; that not just a few separate individuals are saved but that in the elect-under-Christ the organism of humanity and of the world itself is saved.<sup>4</sup>

Thus God's redemptive purpose proceeds organically towards an organic whole. Indeed, it is the organic character of God's redemptive purposes that sheds light on the organic character of the created order, namely the connectedness between all things and every individual thing. This organic principle could be regarded as the Bible's answer to the philosophical problem of the one and the many, and it is grounded in a plurality to be found in God himself. The unity in diversity that can be observed in both creation and redemption obtains because all God's works bear the impress of His triune self. Therefore the connectedness between children and their believing parents of which the New Testament speaks isn't arbitrary, but grounded in a more fundamental principle of the created order which in turn proceeds from the ground of all Being. It is this organic principle that undergirds Paul's affirmation of the corporate holiness of the children of believers and Peter's affirmation that the promise belongs to his hearers' children.

Thus far we have seen that the fundamental datum of the New Testament concerning children of believers is that they share in the corporate holiness of the people of God, but is this holiness anywhere to be associated with baptism? Within the space of a few chapters of his statement concerning the corporate holiness of the children of believers, Paul does exactly this by describing the crossing of the Red Sea under the cloud of God's presence as Israel's baptism (1 Corinthians 10:2).

The crossing of the Red Sea is a part of the matrix of events that comprised the sanctification of Israel as the nation of Yahweh. The Passover, the crossing of the Red Sea, the giving of the Law, and the solemnisation of the covenant at Sinai all marked the birth of the nation of Israel. By his characterisation of the Red Sea crossing as Israel's baptism, Paul clearly connects the corporate holiness previously attributed to the children of believers with baptism. Just as Israel was sanctified as the nation of Yahweh in the events of the Exodus, so too, the eschatological people of God are sanctified in baptism. In this profound piece of theological reasoning type and antitype mutually illuminate one another,<sup>5</sup> striking

<sup>4</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* (4 vols.; ed. John Bolt; trans. John Vriend; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2007), vol 3 p. 231.

<sup>5</sup> Adolf Schlatter's remarks are apposite: 'Die Geschichte Israels, durch die es zum Volk Gottes wurde, seine Begnadigung und seine Versündigung, zeigen der Gemeinde, was Gott in Gnade und Gericht auch an ihr tun wird. Auch Israel ist durch Christus zum heiligen Volke geworden, weshalb die Gemeinde an ihm zu lernen hat, was es bedeutet, da sie "des Christus ist."' (The history of Israel, its pardon and its sin, through which it became the people of God, shows the congregation what God in grace and judgment will do for them. Israel too has become a holy people through

evidence of which is the statement that Israel was baptised *into Moses*. Given the earlier discussion of the connection between ‘following Paul’ and being ‘baptised into the name of Paul’ (1 Corinthians 1:12–13), the idea of being ‘baptised into Moses’ speaks of adherence and obedience, especially in the light of Moses’ giving of the Law, yet the most obvious parallel to be drawn is with Paul’s notion of being baptised into Christ (Romans 6:3; Galatians 3:27). Thus, by presenting the Red Sea crossing as a baptism, Paul recognises the correlation between the event that forged Israel’s corporate identity and the event that forged Christian corporate identity.

That Paul draws a conceptual link between the holiness of the children of believers and baptism prompts one to look for evidence for whether the practice of infant baptism may have originated with the apostles themselves. Noticeably, throughout the narrative of Acts the baptism of entire households is a recurring feature (Acts 11:14, 16:15, 16:31, 18:8). While these verses alone offer no conclusive evidence either way, the characterisation of the Red Sea crossing as a baptism, which almost certainly would have included infants, makes it seem unlikely that Paul would have excluded children or babies when he baptised the household of Stephanas (1 Corinthians 1:16). Although it cannot be proven that children and babies were baptised along with those who professed faith, it would seem more likely than not that the entire household—including slaves—would be baptised in the event of the conversion of the *paterfamilias*, as it was commonly expected in the Graeco-Roman world that families adhere to the religious practise of the household head.<sup>6</sup>

Nonetheless, the lack of clear proof-texts weighs against the conclusion that infant baptism was an Apostolic as well as a post-Apostolic practice, and while these three passages in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians do connect children of believers and the corporate holiness of God’s people with baptism, alone they will not suffice as a clear mandate for the practice of infant baptism. What remains to be shown is that the practice of baptising children coheres with the full scope of everything that baptism signifies, and it is to these more synthetic considerations we now turn.

## Salvation and baptism

We have seen that the holiness Paul attributes to the children of believers speaks of their nearness to the grace of God. Many who would agree that the children of believers are holy in this sense object to the practice of infant baptism for the fact that baptism signifies much more than mere

Christ, on which account the congregation needs to learn what it means that they are “of Christ.” A. Schlatter, *Paulus der Bote Jesus, eine Deutung seiner Briefe an die Korinther*, (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1969) p. 286.

<sup>6</sup> See Plutarch, *Con. Pr.* xix *Moralia*.

access or proximity to the means of grace. Baptism clearly signifies the subjective appropriation of Christ's salvation (Acts 2:40–41; 1 Peter 3:21). A common solution to this problem in the Reformed tradition has been to distinguish between 'external' and 'internal' dimensions of the Covenant. The distinction basically provides a framework for the idea that the Covenant promises are not inherited by natural descent alone, but must be combined with faith (Galatians 3:14). Just as 'not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel' (Romans 9:6), neither do all who are born to Christian households belong to Christ. One of the earliest advocates of this distinction between the 'external' and 'internal' dimensions of the Covenant was Franciscus Gomarus (1563–1641).<sup>7</sup> While Gomarus never used this distinction to limit the significance of baptism to this 'external' dimension of the covenant, others followed who would.

To limit baptism to a merely external dimension of the New Covenant meets with considerable resistance from what the New Testament actually says. In Paul's metaphor of the Red Sea crossing as Israel's baptism, it is plain that the children that passed through the sea did not just enjoy access to salvation, but were in fact saved. Moreover, the New Testament explicitly associates baptism with the reception of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38), which is surely central to the 'internal' dimension of the New Covenant. This is apparent even in Paul's metaphor of the Red Sea crossing as Israel's baptism, as Paul states that the people of Israel weren't just baptised 'in the sea,' but also 'in the cloud,' i.e. the Spirit of God. It is this close connection between baptism and the reception of the Holy Spirit that creates particular difficulties for the view that baptism signifies a purely objective holiness or an exclusively 'external' dimension of the New Covenant. Therefore, if Paul's statement that the crossing of the Red Sea was Israel's baptism is to be taken seriously, the holiness of the children of believers cannot be limited to their proximity to the means of grace. Baptism signifies participation in, as well as access to, salvation.

## Regeneration and baptism

If baptism must be taken as signifying salvation rather than mere access or proximity to salvation, then the practice of infant baptism must reckon with the problem of regeneration. In the narrowest sense, regeneration refers to the Holy Spirit's work of making alive those who are spiritually dead (Ephesians 2:1–6; John 3:1–6). The Spirit's work of regeneration enables those who are unwilling and incapable of faith to believe (Romans 8:6–9). Regeneration is therefore evidenced in the lives of believers by their profession of faith and in the fruits of their faith. If baptism testifies to salvation, and therefore to the Spirit's work of

<sup>7</sup> F. Gomarus, *Disp. de. Sacr in Opera Omnia*, disp. 31.

regeneration and its first fruit of faith, certain problems begin to emerge with respect to the practice of baptising infants. On what grounds can one assume a child's regeneration, given that a child offers no profession of faith? This question acquires an existential urgency and deeply pastoral mantle in the case of *deceased* infants. On what grounds can one assume that one's deceased child is to be numbered among the saved, and therefore, among the regenerate? Article Lxvii of the Canons of Dordt (1619) provides the following answer:

Since we must make judgments about God's will from his Word, which testifies that the children of believers are holy, not by nature but by virtue of the gracious covenant in which they together with their parents are included, godly parents ought not to doubt the election and salvation of their children whom God calls out of this life in infancy.

While the logic is reasonable, one doesn't have to look too hard to see how nagging doubts would emerge. How certain can parents be that their deceased child can be numbered among the elect if a few of their surviving children have turned away from Christ?

An important distinction that goes a long way to answering how children of believers might be said to be regenerate when they have never heard and believed the gospel, is the distinction between the operations of the Word and Spirit in salvation. Reformed theologians have always sought to maintain the unity of calling (the work of the Word) and regeneration (the work of the Spirit), because Scripture clearly testifies that no one can be saved apart from the Word of the gospel (Romans 10:14).<sup>8</sup> Yet a distinction must be made between the operations of Word and Spirit, for the simple reason that hearing the Word of the gospel does not guarantee the Spirit's work of regeneration. It is therefore necessary to state that the Spirit works *with* rather than *in* the Word. Were the Spirit to work solely *in* the Word, then no confidence could be had for the salvation of anyone who could not rationally apprehend the gospel and respond with a profession faith, but by stating that the Spirit works *with* rather than *in* the Word Reformed theologians were able to account for the salvation of deceased infants, as room was left for the possibility of a spiritual work of regeneration well before someone hears and appropriates the Word of the gospel.<sup>9</sup>

While this idea accounts for the salvation of deceased infants, (or children of believers who are incapable of hearing and understanding the gospel, like the mentally disabled), it also suggests that regeneration can

<sup>8</sup> This is the biblical imperative—there is also the theological imperative to maintain the unity of calling and regeneration because God is one in all his works.

<sup>9</sup> For a helpful overview of the history of the doctrine of infant-salvation see B.B. Warfield, *The Development of the Doctrine of Infant Salvation*, (New York: The Christian Literature Co, 1891).



occur *apart* from the Word of God, which is not what the Bible teaches. It may therefore be better to say that the sanctification of the children of believers *anticipates* a subsequent work of regeneration, which in the case of deceased infants may occur at the general resurrection of the dead. Viewed in this way, regeneration would occur *with* the Word. The deceased child of believing parents will hear the summons of Christ's shout (1 Thessalonians 4:16). Locating the regeneration of deceased infants prospectively at the resurrection of the dead is supported by the fact that the language of regeneration (*palingenesia*) is used by the New Testament to describe the resurrection (Matthew 19:28). The resurrection marks the completion of the Spirit's regenerating work in the Church, a work in which the children of the Church share to no less degree than their parents. Viewed in this way, sanctification of the children of believers need not to be equated with regeneration, but rather viewed as *anticipating* regeneration.

## Faith and baptism

If the sanctification of the children of believers anticipates a subsequent work of regeneration, it must also be anticipated that the Holy Spirit will work faith in the children of believers. The most common objection to this is the fact that many baptised children turn away from Christ in later life. How can there be said to be any genuine connection between faith and baptism when a baptised child never professes faith?

Until the Reformation the relationship between faith and baptism was preserved by notion of *fides aliena*. Children of believers were baptised on the basis of the faith of their parents or the Church at large.<sup>10</sup> While the Reformers objected to the idea that saving faith could be had by proxy, they upheld the validity of baptising infants on the grounds of their participation in the salvation of their parents. John Calvin (1509–1564) expresses this succinctly when he states that in the case of an adult, faith must precede the sacrament, yet in the case of infants, they are to be baptised on the basis of the 'hereditary right' by which they are partakers of the covenant.<sup>11</sup> The category of covenant would replace the idea of *fides aliena*, yet Reformed theology always recognised a participation of children in the means of grace. Bavinck describes this when he writes of 'a kind of communion' of parents and children in both sin and misery,

<sup>10</sup> cf. Augustine, *De Baptismo* VII.iv.24; *De Peccatorum Meritis et Remissione*, I.25. Although the idea that baptism infused faith in children gained prominence in the Mediaeval Church, many theologians still retained *fides aliena* as the basic ground for the practice of infant baptism, cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* III.68.8; III.69.6.

<sup>11</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.xxiv. Also cf. Ulrich Zwingli, 'Refutation of Baptist Tricks', in *Selected Works* (ed. S.M. Jackson; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972).

and in grace and blessing.<sup>12</sup> One might ask, if faith is the preeminent blessing of the grace in which they partake, is it not also possible to say that the children of believers also experience a 'kind of communion' in their parents' faith? If the children of believers participate in their parents' salvation, they must in some sense be said to participate in their parents' faith. Such faith may not be able to be described as active or individual, yet neither can it be described as entirely extrinsic or alien, if the children of believers do in fact enjoy 'a kind of communion' with their parents in blessing and grace. But in what sense can it be said that children *participate* in, rather merely benefit from, the faith of their parents?

Firstly, at the crossing of the Red Sea one may observe that the children were literally led in the way of the Lord—between the walls of water—and so saved. They were led by their parents in the obedience of faith and such participation is surely at the heart of what it means for children to commune with their parents in God's grace. By leading them in this way parents make disciples of their children. If the Great Commission specifies that baptism ought to accompany the making of disciples (Matthew 28:19–20), then it is most fitting for the children of believers to be baptised as infants, for the reason that their discipleship begins at birth. Secondly, the way in which children participate in the faith of their parents can in some way be described as analogous to the way in which their parents participate in the faith of Christ (cf. Galatians 2:16; Romans 3:22). We do not actively participate in the Christ's obedience, yet in him we have become the righteousness of God. Similarly, we do not actively participate in the atonement, yet in him we died and have risen. In all these we are beneficiaries on account of our union with Christ. Our participation in Christ is therefore fundamentally *receptive*. Of course a great difference lies between the nature of our union with Christ and the organic union that exists between parents and children in so far as the former is wrought by grace and the latter is wrought through nature, yet the point of comparison is not the way in which the union is established but rather the receptive character of participation common to both. Just as believers receive the benefits of Christ's obedience through their union with him, the children of believers also receive of his benefits by virtue of the organic union between them and their believing parents. Thus, children of believers participate receptively in their parents' faith in their communion with them in grace and blessing, and also participate in the obedience of their parents' faith as they are led in the way of the Lord.

Baptised children of believers who in time may disown the faith of their parents therefore ought not be regarded as never having come to faith, or as never having participated in that faith, but as not having *continued* in faith. Such a view particularly resonates with Paul's metaphor of the Red Sea crossing. Among the multitude that left Egypt, only two of those

<sup>12</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, p. 527.

baptised in the cloud and in the sea persevered in faith to receive that which was promised, namely, entrance into the Promised Land. Similarly, children of believers who ultimately deny Christ should be regarded as those who have not persisted in faith, rather than those who never exercised faith. Faith, rather than indefectible faith, is the New Testament's prerequisite for baptism. It is this fact that has the potential to alleviate much of the angst experienced by those who balk at the propriety of baptising the children of believers in their infancy on the grounds that it cannot be known whether they will profess faith in adulthood. This however, in no way endorses an indiscriminate baptism. Calvin famously declared that we do not baptise 'Turks', by which he meant that it is unfitting to baptise a Muslim and his children.<sup>13</sup> Baptism is rightly restricted to the organic limits of the sanctification wrought by the gospel for the reason that Scripture everywhere connects the administration of baptism with a profession of faith. This relationship is not severed, whether it is construed either prospectively, or in terms of children's participation in the faith of their parents, be it lifelong or short-lived.

### Baptism and circumcision

Thus far I have argued that baptising infants has warrant given Paul's association of baptism with the corporate holiness in which children of believers share. I have also argued that if baptism is a fitting expression of this holiness, then the holiness of the children of believers amounts to much more than just access or proximity to the means of grace. Baptising the children of believers signifies their participation in the salvation of their parents. Most of this coheres with the standard Reformed defence of the practice of infant baptism, but traditionally the emphasis has lain elsewhere. Reformed theologians have long pinned the warrant for baptising children on the notion that baptism replaces circumcision as a sign and seal of the Covenant of Grace.<sup>14</sup> This replacement idea rests on the perceived unity of God's work of salvation referred to as the 'unity of the covenants,' which emphasises the continuity between the Old and New Covenants. The perceived continuity between the Old and New Covenants obtains because they are both expressions of a single redemptive purpose—the Covenant of Grace, which in turn is grounded in a logically prior covenant between the members of the Trinity. Louis Berkhof (1873–1957) summarises the logic for administering baptism

<sup>13</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.xvi.24, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2001) p. 546.

<sup>14</sup> Charles Hodge's (1797–1878) treatment of infant baptism is particularly laudable for the way in which circumcision's replacement of baptism is made subservient to the more fundamental question of whether children ought to be regarded as members of the Church. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (3 vols.; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1946), 3: p. 588–9.

to infants by stating that, 'if children received the sign and seal of the covenant in the old dispensation, the presumption is that they surely have a right to receive it in the new.'<sup>15</sup> Therefore, just as babies were circumcised in Israel, babies ought to be baptised in the new Israel.

While there is nothing objectionable about the idea of the unity of covenants or that circumcision and baptism are both covenantal signs, defending the practise of infant baptism on the basis that baptism replaces circumcision raises a number of questions. Firstly, at an exegetical level there is little to suggest that the apostles regarded baptism as a replacement for circumcision. Secondly, the way in which one conceives baptism to replace circumcision will inform one's understanding both of the significance of baptism and circumcision, as well as the relationship between the Old and New Covenants. The remainder of this paper will explore these issues. It will be argued that if the language of replacement is to be used, it requires careful circumscription. To begin, we turn to the two passages of the New Testament where circumcision and baptism appear in juxtaposition.

## Paul, circumcision and baptism

Colossians 2:11–13 has long been understood as a key proof-text for the conclusion that baptism functions as the New Covenant counterpart of circumcision. Exactly what Paul refers to by the phrase, 'you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands' divides exegetes. Some take this phrase to refer to the Spirit's work in regeneration; others take it to refer to the Son's work on the cross.<sup>16</sup> The material difference is whether circumcision is used as a metaphor for the Son's death, or for the Spirit's life. On the one hand the phrase recalls the Old Testament metaphor of circumcision of the heart (Deuteronomy 30:6; Jeremiah 4:4), which anticipates the work of the Spirit in the last days (Ezekiel 36:26–27). On the other hand, this metaphor depicts Jesus' suffering and death. This second option is less obvious in English translations of the Bible, as they mask some of the subtleties of Paul's usage of the Greek language. When Paul speaks of 'the putting off of the sinful nature,' he employs a graphic image, in which he seems to allude to circumcision by portraying Jesus' flogging and execution as a 'stripping off' or 'removal' of flesh (v.11). A compelling reason in favour of this interpretation is the fact that the only other occurrence of the phrase 'body of flesh' in the New Testament is Colossians 1:22, where it denotes Christ's body. Nonetheless, whether one identifies the 'circumcision done without hands' as redemption

<sup>15</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (London: Banner of Truth, 1971), p. 633–4.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Douglas Moo, *The Letters to Colossians and Philemon* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2008), pp 196–205.

accomplished or applied, it is mistaken to link ‘circumcision done without hands’ directly to the reference to baptism in v.12. Baptism embodies our union with Christ through faith. Paul says that in baptism we are buried with Christ. Baptism is the *means* by which believers benefit from Christ’s circumcision, not Christ’s circumcision itself. Paul can describe baptism as a means by which we receive Christ’s circumcision precisely because in the New Testament baptism always presupposes faith. Here in the immediate context this is also borne out by the fact that being raised through faith is corollary of having been buried with Christ in baptism. This proof-text therefore struggles to demonstrate that baptism *replaces* circumcision. It can however be used to demonstrate that circumcision and baptism share an antithetical function in testifying to ‘the circumcision made without hands.’ In the same way that circumcision anticipates Christ’s circumcision, baptism recalls the same.

### Peter, circumcision and baptism

The apostle Peter also draws a comparison between baptism and circumcision, albeit an indirect one. The passage in which it occurs warrants particularly close attention because, as James Dunn observes, 1 Peter 3:18–22 offers us the closest thing in the New Testament to a definition of baptism.<sup>17</sup> Peter comes to the subject of baptism having noted that Noah was saved through water (v.20). The primary contrast Peter draws here concerns the instrumental role that water plays in both Noah’s salvation and the Christian believer’s salvation. This observation prompts a further comparison of the washing of baptism that saves with antecedent washings that cannot (v.21).<sup>18</sup> The comparison between baptism and the ‘removal of dirt from the body’ implies a comparison between baptism and ineffective Jewish ritual washings, but the word ‘removal’ also implies a contrast with circumcision. As the word rendered ‘removal’ is a synonym of the word used by Paul that is rendered as ‘putting off’ in Colossians 2:11, it is likely that Peter includes the removal of foreskin in this comparison. Demonstrably, circumcision can no more curb or remove sin than a ritual washing, but how does the washing of baptism save?

Having pointed to baptism’s instrumental capacity, Peter now specifies that baptism saves because it is a ‘pledge’ of a cleansed conscience (v.21).<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> J.D.G. Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit* (London: SCM, 1970), p. 219.

<sup>18</sup> ‘This water’ is the NIV’s interpretation of the referent of a relative pronoun. The resumption of  $\sigma\psi\zeta\omega$  in v.21 from  $\delta\iota\alpha\sigma\psi\zeta\omega$  in v.20 warrants such an interpretation, which also makes it seem unlikely that the relative pronoun resumes ‘spirit’ from v.18. Contra D.W.B. Robinson, *Selected Works: Volume 2* (Camperdown: Australian Church Record, 2008), p. 309.

<sup>19</sup> Note the conceptual similarity between this passage and Hebrews 10:22: ‘let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith having our hearts

While there are considerable exegetical difficulties as to what precisely the word translated 'pledge' denotes, what is clear is that Peter regards baptism as a visible word that answers the word of the gospel.<sup>20</sup> Baptism cleanses in a way that the ritual washings and circumcision can't because it invokes the efficacious cleansing of the sprinkling of Jesus' blood (cf. 1 Peter 1:2), and derives its saving power from Jesus' resurrection (cf. 1 Peter 1:3). The comparison between circumcision and baptism is thus salvation-historical. Having firstly drawn out the instrumental character of baptism in the parallel between the water of baptism and the waters of the flood, Peter contrasts the efficacy of the cleansing to which baptism testifies with the ineffective cleansings of the Old Covenant.

What conclusions can be drawn from these comparisons regarding the way in which baptism might be said to 'replace' circumcision? Both Colossians 2:11–13 and 1 Peter 3:18–22 juxtapose circumcision and baptism to emphasise the efficacy of the atonement over and against the ineffectiveness of circumcision and both passages also highlight the instrumental character of baptism with respect to salvation. In Colossians 2:11–13 baptism is the means by which we partake in the circumcision of Christ and in 1 Peter 3:18–22 baptism is the water through which we are saved and by which a cleansed conscience bears testimony. Yet in the passages where one might most expect it, neither explicitly suggests that baptism replaces circumcision. With this in mind, an important historical consideration must also be taken into account. Had the apostles regarded baptism as the functional equivalent of circumcision, both the dilemma that gave rise to the Jerusalem Council and the manner in which it was resolved would become quite difficult to explain (cf. Acts 15). Had baptism been understood in some sense to replace circumcision, the central controversy of the Jerusalem Council could have been resolved simply by pointing to the fact that the Gentile believers had been baptised. If anything, there is much to suggest that the apostles regarded the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, rather than baptism, as the replacement of circumcision. When Peter argued that circumcision ought not to be required of Gentile Christians, he did not appeal to baptism but to the reception of the Holy Spirit (Acts 15:8). While circumcision is described by Paul as the 'seal' of the righteousness of faith (Romans 4:11), the language of 'seal' is never applied to baptism, but is reserved solely for the Holy Spirit (John 6:27; 1 Corinthians 1:22; Ephesians 1:13). Viewing the Holy Spirit in this way, as the covenantal seal that replaces circumcision, adheres closely to the Old Testament anticipation of a heart-circumcision wrought by the Spirit of God (Deuteronomy 30:6; Jeremiah 31:33; Ezekiel

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sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Cf. the concise yet detailed discussion in P.J. Achtemeier, *1 Peter* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), p. 272.

36:27). Moreover, Paul says as much when he writes, ‘it is we who are the circumcision, we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh’ (Philippians 3:3). While Paul may well be speaking only of believing Jews among the Philippians rather than inclusively of Gentile Christians, an Apostolic paradigm of replacement is patent. Rather than baptism, it is the seal of the Spirit that replaces the seal of circumcision. How then, might one speak of baptism replacing circumcision?

### Baptism and circumcision: an asymmetrical relationship

Traditionally, Reformed theology has viewed the Holy Spirit as the seal *par excellence* of the New Covenant, but regarded baptism as an additional ‘external’ seal. Sinclair Ferguson (1948–) writes, ‘baptism, by parity of reasoning, is a seal as well as a sign of the covenant grace of God in Christ.’<sup>21</sup> Apart from the assertion that baptism is a seal as well as a sign, this parity of reasoning also demands that circumcision and baptism share a congruent function as outward seals that testify to internal realities. While there are clear continuities and similarities to be perceived between the function of baptism and circumcision, caution ought to be exercised in the way in which the former can be said to ‘replace’ the latter. The clearest indication that circumcision and baptism do not function in the same way as external seals or signs is that one may belong to Christ without being baptised, yet one could not belong to the people of Israel without having been circumcised (Genesis 17:4). This is why Paul can speak about baptism in the way he does in 1 Corinthians 1:14–17. Paul could never say that he was not sent to baptise if baptism were necessary for membership in the New Covenant. Paul reserves this language of necessity for the Holy Spirit, declaring that ‘if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ’ (Romans 8:9). Thus, there is an important asymmetry to be observed between baptism and circumcision as external signs and seals. Under the Old Covenant circumcision as an ‘external’ seal shares the necessity of the ‘internal’ seal of the New Covenant. More than anything, this key difference highlights the inadequacy of replacement paradigm as a description of what baptism has in common with circumcision and bids us explore alternatives.

### The unity of the covenants

Behind the question of whether baptism can be regarded as the external covenantal seal that replaces circumcision lies the more basic question of the relationship between the Old and New Covenants. The replacement

<sup>21</sup> Sinclair Ferguson, ‘Infant Baptism View’ in *Baptism: Three Views*, p. 93.

paradigm assumes an almost a perfect fit between Old and New Covenant. Continuity is emphasised virtually to the exclusion of discontinuity.

A good example of this ordering of the covenants can be found in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* where Calvin writes, 'the covenant made with all the fathers is so far from differing from ours in reality and substance, that it is altogether one and the same.'<sup>22</sup> The theological strength of this emphasis on unity is its Christocentrism. The covenants are a unity because they share one Mediator in the person of Christ. For Calvin, God's people under the Old Covenant 'both had and knew Christ the mediator, by whom they were united to God, and made capable of receiving his promises.'<sup>23</sup> But note that Calvin specifically states that Israel knew *Christ* as its mediator. That Calvin identifies the *incarnate* Son as the mediator of the Old Covenant is extremely significant as it points to the fact that the unity of the covenants is an eschatological unity. In other words, we can only speak meaningfully of the unity of the covenants from the vantage point of their fulfilment in Christ. Although Calvin identifies this key datum, the minimisation of discontinuity between the Old and New Covenants in the Reformed tradition points to the fact that the essentially eschatological character of their unity was left underdeveloped. This apparent failure to pay closer attention to eschatology lies behind the tendency to smooth over much of the asymmetry that is to be observed between the Old and New Covenants. It is no mere difference of administration; there is a qualitative difference between the covenants. The Old Covenant is but a *shadow* of the things that were to come and not the substance (Colossians 2:17); the New Covenant is *new* wine that cannot be poured into old wineskins (Mark 2:22). The replacement paradigm is bound to err if it relentlessly searches the New Covenant for congruent expressions of the Old without adequately taking into account their qualitative differences. Arguably, viewing baptism as the replacement of circumcision is an example of how the Reformed tradition has turned a blind eye toward the discontinuity between the Old and New Covenants.

How might it be possible to better articulate the covenants' essentially eschatological unity? In an exploration of the relationship between the Old and New Covenant, Henri Blocher (1949– ) cites the observation of Gerhard Ebeling (1912–2001) that Paul's exegesis of the Old Testament separates two lines that culminate in Jesus Christ, the line of promise and faith that starts with Abraham, and the line of law and works that starts with Moses.<sup>24</sup> These threads form a web that binds various

<sup>22</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* II.x. , p. 370.

<sup>23</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* II.x. , p. 370.

<sup>24</sup> 'Der Skopus des Paulinischen Exegese des Alten Testaments ist gerade der, scharf zu unterscheiden und auseinanderzuhalten, was im Alten Testament in verwirrender Weise ineinander verschränkt ist: die Linie von Abraham her und die Linie von Moses her, die *epangelia* und den *nomos*, die *pistis* und die *erga*.'



elements of the covenants in relationships of continuity and discontinuity. Blocher goes on to cite Eberhard Jüngel's (1934– ) nuancing of Ebeling's observation. Jüngel describes the line of promise and faith as *anticipating* the reality unveiled in Christ, whereas the line of law and works is merely *antecedent* to that eschatological reality. The anticipatory trajectory of promise and faith charts a line of continuity, whereas the fulfilment of the law and works line by Christ shows it to be merely antecedent and consequently discontinuous. What Blocher seeks to draw out is that these lines do not stand side by side; Paul needs to separate them one from another because they are intertwined throughout the Old Testament. One cannot simply identify Abraham with faith and Moses with law. Just as Paul will trace the promise-faith thread throughout Moses' ministry (Deuteronomy 9:4), he will also identify elements of the law-works thread in the Abraham narrative. Circumcision provides an instructive example. Circumcision is a reminder to God's people to walk before Him and be blameless (Genesis 17:1, 10–11).<sup>25</sup> Although circumcision was given to Abraham, a figure to be largely associated with the promise-faith line, circumcision is properly located on the law-works line because of its signification of obedience, a point which Jesus himself makes when he describes circumcision as given by Moses (John 7:22).<sup>26</sup> It is precisely this intertwining of anticipatory and antecedent, continuous and discontinuous that resists a simplistic replacement schema.

The description of the unity of the covenants as a web of various elements bound together in relationships of continuity and discontinuity is particularly instructive for the question of the relationship between circumcision and baptism, as baptism itself evidences the intertwining of continuous and discontinuous in the manner that Blocher describes.

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G. Ebeling, 'Erwägungen zur Lehre vom Gesetz' in *Wort und Glaube* (1960), p. 276 cit. Henri Blocher, 'Old Covenant, New Covenant,' in *Always Reforming: Explorations in Systematic Theology* (ed. A.T.B. McGowan; Leicester: Apollos, 2006), p. 53 n.57.

<sup>25</sup> cf. P.R. Williamson, *Abraham, Israel and the Nations: The Patriarchal Promise and its Covenantal Development in Genesis* JSOT Supplement 315 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press), p. 176–81.

<sup>26</sup> Blocher, 'Old Covenant, New Covenant,' p. 254. Paul's description of circumcision as the seal of the righteousness of faith in Romans 4:11 is a key text in this regard. This text is often taken to demonstrate baptism's promissory character, as circumcision is described as the 'seal of righteousness'. Since baptism replaces circumcision, baptism likewise bears an essentially promissory character. Caution must be exercised here lest the intertwining of which Blocher speaks is overlooked. The righteousness that is sealed cannot be viewed in abstraction from its subjective appropriation. The righteousness Paul says is sealed on Abraham and his seed in circumcision is as righteousness subjectively appropriated by faith (Romans 4:10), a point central to Paul's broader argument. Circumcision seals the righteousness that is Abraham's through faith and binds it to the demands of the law.

Both the anticipatory and antecedent can be identified in baptism. The promise-faith line is evident in baptism's presupposition of faith, and the law-works line is similarly evidenced in the connection between baptism, repentance and the obedience wrought by the Holy Spirit, but what really differentiates baptism from circumcision is its soteriological character. Put simply, baptism is a sign of salvation in a way that circumcision is not. This definitive soteriological characteristic is most clearly seen in Jesus' own teaching on the subject of baptism, and it is to this teaching we must briefly turn.

### A new sign of salvation for the last days

John's baptism was a new sign heralding a new age. Ritual washings were commonplace in Inter-Testamental Judaism but when John appeared administering a lustration to third parties, it was entirely unprecedented.<sup>27</sup> Already this difference points to the fact that baptism is in essence something that is *received*.<sup>28</sup> The word of Divine approbation that Jesus received when he presented himself for baptism at the hands of John revealed the sense in which baptism is a word that the baptisand receives from God as much as it is a word spoken by the baptisand (Mark 1:10 - 11), but the full sense in which this is true would not be disclosed until the climax of Jesus' earthly ministry. Just as God identified Jesus as the Son with whom he is well-pleased in his baptism in the river Jordan, God would identify Jesus as his accursed son at the baptism of the cross (Mark 10:38-39). Just as the cross reveals the full sense in which baptism is a word spoken by God, it also discloses the grounds on which baptism is a word spoken by man. Baptism could not become a word capable of being spoken by anyone other than Jesus were it not first uttered by him. In the baptism of the cross Jesus identified himself as God's wayward son, Israel. Pronouncing this word in his baptism, Jesus would drain the cup of God's wrath to its dregs.<sup>29</sup> Such a word could be spoken by Jesus alone, yet Jesus affirmed that his disciples would indeed both drink his cup and be baptised with his baptism (Mark 10:39), because through baptism his disciples would identify with him in his identification with them. Hence, the apostle Paul

<sup>27</sup> Cf. H. Stegemann, *The Library of Qumran, on the Essenes, Qumran, John the Baptist, and Jesus*, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998), cit U. Schnelle, *Theology of the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2009), p 78 n.49.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* (3 vols.; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1997), 3: p. 260 n.51, p. 262.

<sup>29</sup> In this regard it is important to note that the word 'baptize' conveys a sense of being overwhelmed. Cf. Isaiah 21:4: he anomia me baptizei (LXX) 'lawlessness overwhelms (baptises) me'. By drinking Israel's cup Jesus would be 'flooded' and 'overwhelmed' by God's wrath.

would characterise baptism as the subjective experience of identifying with Christ. In his letters Paul frequently employs the word-picture of being baptised into Jesus' death, or baptised into Christ, or being buried with Jesus in baptism (cf. Romans 6:3; 1 Corinthians 1:13; Galatians 3:27; Colossians 2:12). Being united to him, the word of Divine approbation is now spoken over those who have been baptised into Christ.

Thus, the baptism of John has been transformed from being merely a sign of contrition and renewed covenant loyalty into the sign through which one identifies oneself and is identified with the Christ's great work of salvation in the last days. Undoubtedly it is this soteriological character that led both Paul and Peter to identify the saving events of Israel's history as antitypes of baptism rather than circumcision. The apostles recognised in baptism the substance which the waters of the flood and the crossing of the Red Sea had foreshadowed. In this respect the soteriological character of baptism as a sign reflects the essentially soteriological character of the New Covenant as a whole. The newness of the New Covenant consists in this salvation that the covenants with Abraham, Moses or David had only anticipated.<sup>30</sup> Thus, those who had believed and were baptised, adjoining themselves to the New Covenant in Jesus' blood soon acquired the epithet of 'the way' (Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22). The likely origins of this appellation are the 'way of God' described in Qumran literature, and the Jewish behavioural ideals of *halakah* more broadly. These 'ways' typify meticulous obedience to Torah.<sup>31</sup> In contrast, the 'way' of the New Covenant is not described as a way of obedience but a 'way of salvation' (Acts 16:17).

## Baptism and circumcision: differing signs of corporate identity

The lack of strict identity between baptism and circumcision as 'external signs and seals' however, does not necessarily vitiate the specific connections that can be drawn between them. Both ordinances are covenantal signs of corporate identity and both signify the unfolding of the Covenant of Grace in salvation history. Where they differ, they differ according to the disparities that may be observed between the dispensations they signify and their respective functions under the same. Failure to do justice to these differences risks reducing unity to uniformity and could easily precipitate a kind of theological leakage between the covenants. In the case of baptism and circumcision, what is proper to circumcision might be predicated of baptism and vice versa resulting

<sup>30</sup> Johannes Cocceius (1603–1669) and John Owen (1616–1683) are two important Reformed theologians whose federal theology, albeit in very different ways, was more sensitive to this.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. C.K. Barrett, *Acts 1–14* (London: T & T Clark, 2006), p. 448.

in a kind of covenantal *communicatio idiomatum*. This is particularly evident in the way an internal-external or spiritual-material dichotomy often dominates defences of infant baptism. The sense in which baptism is said to replace circumcision needs to preserve the asymmetry that can be observed between the two signs and accurately account for their connectives. Patrick Fairbairn (1805–1874) articulates this most precisely when he writes, ‘the relation between circumcision and baptism is not properly that of type and antitype; the one is a symbolical ordinance as well as the other.’<sup>32</sup> The web of connectives advocated by Blocher also goes a long way to harmonising the covenants’ continuity with their discontinuity, yet the binary structure of promise-faith and law-works sinews arguably gains greater explanatory power where it is augmented by a third line of salvation-historical events. Not only does the apostles’ typology intimate such a structure, but the events of salvation-history sit uncomfortably on the axes of promise-faith and law-works. In contrast with the iterative character of works and the habitual character of faith, salvation-historical events constitute singular momentary manifestations of the timeless Covenant of Grace, climaxing in its fulfilment at the cross. Baptism likewise reflects this. The rite of baptism is performed but once in order to signify the manifestation of the timeless Covenant of Grace in the life of the believer.

## Conclusion

While the New Testament offers no explicit treatment of the subject, it does present sufficient hints that suggest the theological origins of the historical practice of infant baptism. The apostle Paul describes the children of believers as sanctified by the faith of their parents (1 Corinthians 7:14), and associates said holiness with baptism in his description of the Red Sea crossing as Israel’s baptism (1 Corinthians 10:1). The children of believers ought therefore to be regarded as participants in the salvation of their parents, co-heirs in the kingdom, and disciples of Christ. Withholding baptism from the children of believers implicitly calls these realities into question.

In Reformed defences of infant baptism the correspondence between baptism and circumcision as covenant ordinances has always been emphasised. In a qualified sense it may be said that baptism replaces circumcision, yet the significance of this new sign of salvation for the last days exceeds a mere republishing of circumcision. The sign of baptism

<sup>32</sup> Patrick Fairbairn, *The Typology of Scripture: Viewed in Connection with the Entire Scheme of the Divine Dispensations* (2 vols.; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1857), 1: p. 326, cit. D. Gibson, ‘Sacramental Supersessionism Revisited: A Response to Martin Salter on the Relationship between Circumcision and Baptism’, *Themelios* 37/2, (2012) p. 204.

bears a distinctively soteriological character that reflects the newness of the New Covenant as a whole. This soteriological character accounts for the antotypical relationship between baptism and the deliverance of the Ark through the floodwaters and Israel's crossing of the Red Sea, as well as the apparent absence of any explicit Scriptural statement to the effect that baptism replaces circumcision. Hence, it is more felicitous to state that the children of believers receive the sign of baptism for the same reason that children of Israel received the sign of circumcision rather than stating that the children of believers receive the sign of baptism because the children of Israel were circumcised. Both ordinances are properly administered to children on account of an organic principle that undergirds the created order. This principle is the ground, means and goal of creation. O. Palmer Robertson (1937– ) captures this beautifully when he writes, 'redemption has the effect of restoring the order of creation, and the solidarity of the family is one of the greatest of creation's ordinances. The genealogical character of redemption's activity underscores the intention of God to work in accord rather than in discord with this creational ordering.'<sup>33</sup> Thus the work of redemption traces the seams of the work of creation.

The chief virtue of the practice of infant baptism rests therefore in the fact that it speaks more accurately of how the New Testament views the children of believers than its alternatives. Baptising the children of believers avoids an atomistic or individualistic notion of salvation. It testifies both to our corporate identity in Christ and to the future organism of the new humanity. Baptising the children of believers better expresses the discipleship that is native to the Christian household, and it avoids any obfuscation concerning the state of those who cannot articulate a profession of faith. Wolfhart Pannenberg (1928–2014) may well be correct when he states that the Scriptures will accommodate both practises,<sup>34</sup> yet withholding baptism from the children of believers denies children a precious benediction that the Scriptures speak over the Christian household. In the words of Article XVII of the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion agreed upon by the Archbishops, Bishops, and the whole clergy of the Provinces of Canterbury and York in London 1562, 'the baptism of young Children is in any wise to be retained in the Church, as most agreeable with the institution of Christ.'

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<sup>33</sup> O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1987), p. 40.

<sup>34</sup> Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, : p. 26