

Children of the Covenant: One Presbyterian's View on Infant Baptism

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Preface *Two Brief Notes of Explanation*

This paper focuses exclusively on the issue of whether or not the infant children of believers should receive baptism even before they are able to intelligently express faith in Christ.

I want to first make it clear that those who favor infant baptism (called “Presbyterians” in this paper) and those who are opposed to the practice (called “Baptists” in this paper)¹ both agree on one major issue: An adult without a Christian background must first believe in Jesus before he or she can be properly baptized. No one who takes the teaching of the New Testament seriously would advocate randomly baptizing everyone we encounter whether or not they have any faith in Christ or were raised in Christian home. Also, I think we are both agreed that baptism itself does not save anyone, nor is it a guarantee that the person being baptized is or will be saved.

I will not be discussing the issue of the mode or method of baptism—whether baptism should involve immersion, pouring (effusion), or sprinkling. I don’t have the time or space to go into all of my reasons for my conviction in this area, so I’ll limit my discussion to the question of whether the infant children of believers should or should not be baptized.

What the New Testament Does and Does Not Say About Baptism *(With a Little Bit of Personal History)*

I remember a tract I read when I was a junior in high school. I was attending a Baptist church at the time and, having been baptized as an infant at Knox Presbyterian Church in Oklahoma, was told that I needed to be baptized again if I wanted to join my church. I was intrigued when I saw this tract, as I thought it might help me with my problem. It was titled, “What the Bible says About Infant Baptism.” I opened it, hoping to find a compelling argument, and I saw that it was totally blank inside. The back said something like, “That’s right. The Bible doesn’t teach infant baptism at all. Why then should anyone practice it?” It was short and to the point, and enough to convince me at the time. I was re-baptized shortly thereafter and joined the Baptist church.

Today I realize that Presbyterians could just as easily produce their own tract on baptism entitled, “What the Bible Says Against Infant Baptism.” It, like its Baptist counterpart, would be completely blank inside, and the back would read, “That’s right. The Bible does not condemn infant baptism at all. Why then do some Christians speak so strongly against it?”

Well, exchanging tracts probably won’t get us very far in this long-standing debate. This issue needs more careful discussion and patient explanation than any tract can provide in a few brief paragraphs. Few

¹ I realize that these are not technically precise terms. Most people who believe in infant baptism are not Presbyterians, and most people who are opposed to infant baptism are not Baptists. Yet I am using these terms for two reasons: First, I think these terms are just easier to use than always referring to “paedobaptists” and “credobaptists” or “those who favor infant baptism” and “those who are opposed to infant baptism,” etc. Secondly, I will be defending a specifically Presbyterian view of infant baptism, as opposed to a Roman Catholic or Lutheran view, which involves baptismal regeneration.

issues divide great Christian leaders, who otherwise agree on so much, like the issue of baptism. Every year, R.C. Sproul's Ligonier Ministries holds a teaching conference in Florida. The speakers are all good friends who see eye-to-eye on almost everything. They all believe strongly in the inerrant authority of the Word of God, and they would all consider themselves "reformed" in their theology. Yet every year, half of the speakers believe in infant baptism and half of them strongly disagree with it.

The Bible teachers and preachers whom I respect most deeply are all strongly divided on this issue: Charles Spurgeon, Jonathan Edwards, John Piper, J.I. Packer, R.C. Sproul, John MacArthur, Alistair Begg, John Stott, and John Bunyan. These are all men of God and faithful students and teachers of the Word. I have learned much from all of them, yet I find that they are divided on this key and basic issue. For a long time after I was re-baptized at the age of 16, I read Baptist explanations of baptism with all of their apparent support from the New Testament, and I was very convinced. I became so convinced, in fact, that I began to ridicule Presbyterians-- "This is so stupid. Haven't these people read their Bibles? The Bible is so clear." I was dumbfounded that I could figure out that baptism was only for believers, but that men like Sproul and James Boice were so blind to the obvious teachings of Scripture. I was taught that infant baptism was just a remnant of Roman Catholicism that Luther and Calvin didn't want to eliminate, and I felt sorry for these poor Presbyterians with their Catholic leftovers.

Well over time I began to listen to what Presbyterians had to say about infant baptism. My life circumstances and some of my other convictions had led me back to a Presbyterian church, and I found myself very uncomfortable whenever an infant was baptized on Sunday morning. I started listening to some teachings by Presbyterians. I hoped to understand how they justified their position, not to be converted in my own opinion but simply that I might understand theirs. I heard for the first time the connection between baptism and circumcision (which we will explore later), and I thought it was interesting, although misapplied. I heard for the first time the use of the word covenant in connection to baptism (which we will also explore later), and I again thought it was interesting, but off base. Wanting to give the Baptists a fair shake in the debate, I scoured the Internet for articles on baptism from both sides. I found both sides making good points, but typically talking past each other.

Finally, I resolved to go back to the Scriptures and re-examine thoroughly and systematically what the New Testament had to say about baptism. I had learned some Greek by this time (taught to me by a Baptist), so I thought I could examine the teaching more clearly. I spent hours pouring over the texts. I read the contexts. I read the cross-references. I read sermons by Spurgeon on some of the more interesting texts, and I searched my *New Geneva Study Bible* for notes on others. I came to one conclusion: The New Testament says a lot about baptism and gives a lot of examples of baptisms, but it does not say clearly whether or not the infant children of believers should be baptized.

The New Testament contains no "magic bullet" verse to abolish one side or the other in this debate, although both sides sometimes act as if it does. The New Testament does not say, "You shall baptize the infant children of believers when they are 8 days old, just as Abraham had them baptized when they were 8 days old." Nor does it say, "The infant children of believers must not receive the sign of baptism until they make a credible profession of faith." Those verses simply do not exist. Biblically, this issue of baptizing the infant children of believers remains difficult, even upon close examination, and that is why good Bible teachers remain divided by it.

Now, to say that this issue is difficult is not to say that there are no definite answers to the questions it raises. I believe that as Christians we are called to live our lives in accordance with Scripture in everything, including in how we practice baptism. I hope that my personal struggles in this area will help me to present my case on a fair and balanced manner. A Presbyterian named Steve Brown once said, "Never go to someone about a difficult matter unless they first agree that it is a difficult matter." I know from experience that those who believe this issue is so "cut and dried" (as I once thought it was) are not of great use to those who are honestly grappling with it. I hope you will find this consideration thought-provoking at least and perhaps even convincing.

Well, now that we agree that this is a difficult matter, what does the New Testament say about baptism?

Two Key New Testament Passages

The Great Commission

And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

--Matthew 28:18-20, NAS

This is Jesus' clearest and strongest commandment about baptism, so it makes sense for us to start our discussion here. Grammatically, this passage is relatively easy to understand, with one tricky exception, and that is the question of who is to be baptized. The basic command Jesus gives is to make disciples of all the nations. Baptizing and teaching are two activities that are done in order to carry out the main command to make disciples. In other words, Jesus isn't commanding three things here: make disciples, baptize and teach. He's giving one command, make disciples, and two things that need to be done to carry out that command, baptizing and teaching. This is clear because "make disciples" is the main verb of the sentence.

The question debated by Baptists and Presbyterians is, "Who should be baptized?" Baptists argue that the grammar indicates that only disciples should be baptized. They say the antecedent reference for "them" is "disciples." The problem is that, in the Greek, the word "disciples" does not appear as a separate noun. Rather, the verb is "make disciples" or "disciple." A more literal translation could read "Go therefore and disciple all nations, baptizing them . . ." Written this way, the clear reference for "them" is "all the nations." So, is Jesus teaching universal baptism? No. The reason why Jesus makes "all nations" the object of His command is that the apostles are being told to expand their ministry beyond Israel to the gentile world.

Jesus is giving His disciples a command to make disciples of all kinds of people, not just Jewish people. Earlier, He had restricted their ministry to the House of Israel only (see 10:6 and 15:24). Now, He is sending them beyond the House of Israel and into all the nations. They are to make disciples of all kinds of people by first baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and then by teaching them to obey all of Jesus commands.

So, who is to be baptized? All kinds of people who are being made into disciples of Jesus are to be baptized. Does this include the children of believers, even from birth? Well, the question is really whether or not Christian parents are making disciples of their children from birth, teaching them to obey the commands of Jesus.

I think most Christian parents would say that they are called to disciple their children, that is, to teach them to obey Jesus' commands from birth. If it is appropriate to disciple children by teaching them to obey Jesus' commands, why would it be inappropriate to baptize them? Jesus gives two elements of making disciples—baptizing and teaching. Should Christian parents exclude the one and continue in the other? Nothing in this passage would justify that position.

The Day of Pentecost

Peter said to them, "Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself." –Acts 2:38-39, NAS

Here we see Peter at Pentecost carrying out the Great Commission that Jesus gave him ten days earlier at His ascension. After explaining who Jesus really is and what God is accomplishing through the work of Jesus, Peter urges the crowd to repent and be baptized. This is the clearest command about baptism given to a mass group of unconverted people in the Bible, and it is also the first command to receive Christian baptism given in the history of the church.

Peter gives two commands, a promise, and a statement about the nature of the promise. The two commands are "Repent" and "be baptized in the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of sins." The fact that he adds "each of you" personalizes the responsibility for each person within hearing of his voice. The basic meaning of these commands is that the people are to turn from their sins and identify themselves with Jesus in baptism in order to be forgiven of their sins.

If the people obey these commands, they will receive the Holy Spirit, just as the 120 disciples had already received Him. Then, Peter adds a statement about the promise of forgiveness and the gift of the Holy Spirit. He says, "For the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself."

I think Peter's main point is that this is not an isolated promise just for those 3,000 who received it that day. Pentecost was not an unconnected event. Rather, the promise given at Pentecost was part of God's unfolding plan of redemption for the whole world and for all generations (the "far off" and the "children"). God was beginning the process of calling people into His new covenant, marked by baptism and the gift of the Holy Spirit, and it was a process that would expand geographically beyond Jerusalem and the Jews and generationally beyond the people gathered on that day.

In this passage, Baptists typically tend to emphasize the order or "repent" and then "be baptized" and they insist that a person must be old enough to repent of his or her sins before he or she can receive baptism. On the other hand, Presbyterians tend to emphasize Peter's statement "the promise is for you and your children" as they teach that Christian parents should claim God's promise for their children in baptism.

The demand that one must repent and believe before being baptized cannot necessarily be taken from this passage and applied to the children of believers. Peter is addressing a group of unconverted adults, and his immediate and primary audience cannot be forgotten. For unconverted adults, repentance and faith must precede baptism, but children of believers are different than unconverted adults. At what age do Christian parents start teaching their children to repent of their sins and believe in Jesus? If not from birth, then certainly they start at a very young age. Christian parents teach their children to show the fruit of repentance (humility, confession of wrong, making amends) and of faith in Jesus (prayer, worship songs, etc.) as soon as they are able to do so.

The point is that Peter is not talking about the infant children of believers here. If baptism is assumed to be proper for these infant children, this passage does not provide sufficient grounds for refuting it. The children of believers are not unconverted adults, and it is probably unreasonable to apply the same standards to them.

The Presbyterians don't quite get off the hook, either. They tend to emphasize Peter's statement, "the promise is for you and your children," and they virtually ignore the rest of the verse. The promise is not only for you and your children, but also "for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself." While the children are singled out as specific recipients of the promise, they are not the only ones mentioned here. It is just as important that the promise is going out to the nations as it is that it is

being passed on to the children. The recipients of the promise are “as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself,” some of whom are the children of those present and some of whom are still far off (gentiles). Ultimately, it is those whom God will call to Himself who are the heirs of the promise.

Still, Peter does mention “your children” as being among those for whom the promise is given, and this is important for our consideration of infant baptism. God does seem to single out the children of the new believers as specific heirs of the promise. The nature of this promise and how it is for the children of believers is a little unclear, so we’ll need to investigate it further by examining other passages of Scripture that have similar expressions.

If we do, we’ll soon find that Peter is using covenant language here. The idea of a promise being given, especially one “for you and for your children” is at the heart of a biblical covenant. So, if we’re going to understand what Peter says here about the promise given through baptism, we’re going to have to do a little background study into covenants.

Covenants in the Bible

Do we really need to study covenants in order to talk about baptism? Only if we want to understand the Presbyterian position on infant baptism. The Presbyterian position is directly tied to their view of the covenant and how it is administered. They see baptism as a sign and seal of the covenant that should be given to all those who are included in the covenant and its blessings.

So, what’s a covenant? Well, a covenant is a divine promise of relationship. The heart of a covenant is the repeated promise of Scripture, “You will be my people and I will be your God.” It is a promise of relationship in which God gives Himself to His people in order to save them and establish an eternal, spiritual relationship with them.

The covenant relationship we are all most familiar with is marriage. In marriage, a husband and wife promise to continue in faithful relationship with one another. The covenant involves love, sacrifice, self-giving, faithfulness, and obligation. The husband gives himself to his wife and in return she is obligated to give herself to him, and vice versa. So the covenant is a promise and a self-giving that comes with obligations for both sides.

The Covenant with Adam: The very first covenant between God and man was made at the very beginning of history. When God made Adam and Eve, He entered into covenant relationship with them. He loved them and blessed them with Himself. God’s initial covenant relationship with Adam and Eve can be found in Genesis 1:28: “And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”

This was a promise of blessing that involved obligation for Adam and Eve. But where was the relationship? Genesis 3:8-9 says, “Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, ‘Where are you? (NIV)’” Here we see a picture of the intimate fellowship that Adam and Eve enjoyed with God before the Fall. In fact, all of the subsequent covenant relationship promises are designed to get humanity and God back to this level of intimate fellowship.

What does any of this have to do with infant baptism? Well, notice that God includes their children in the covenant when He says, “Be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth and subdue it.” More clearly, when Adam and Eve break the covenant, God includes their children in the consequences of the Fall.

God says to the serpent, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel (Gen 3:15, NIV)." The consequences of Adam and Eve's sin were passed to all their offspring in subsequent generations. All men and women are born sinful, all women suffer pain in childbirth, and all men continue to work hard for their food and die.

If we understand that Genesis 3:15 is also a reference to Jesus Christ as the Seed of the woman who crushes the head of the serpent, we can begin to see some basic elements of a covenant emerge:

1. A covenant involves a relationship with God (walking with God in the garden).
2. A covenant brings great blessing to those who keep the obligations of the covenant ("Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion . . .").
3. A covenant has requirements/ obligations that, if broken, bring a curse ("You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die."- Gen 2:16-17, NIV).
4. All covenants really point to Christ (the real Tree of Life and the Seed of the woman who crushes the head of the serpent).
5. A covenant involves believers (those in covenant with God) and their children. Both the blessing and the consequences of the covenant are passed to the children of the covenant.

Let's take a brief look at the other major covenants of Scripture and see if we can find these same elements in them, too.

The Covenant with Noah: (Genesis 6-9)

1. A relationship with God: "But Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord . . . Noah was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked with God." –Gen. 6:8-9, NIV
2. Great blessing to those who keep the covenant: "Go into the ark, you and your whole family, because I have found you righteous in this generation." –Genesis 7:1, NIV and "Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth." –Genesis 9:1, NIV
3. Covenant requirements/ obligations to avoid a curse: "I am surely going to destroy both them and the earth. So make yourself an ark of cypress wood; make rooms in it and coat it with pitch inside and out. This is how you are to build it . . ."- Genesis 6:13-15, NIV
4. Points to Christ: Christ is the real ark of safety from the judgment of God.
5. Involves Noah's children: "I will establish my covenant with you, and you will enter the ark-you and your sons and your wife and your sons' wives with you." –Genesis 6:18, NIV and "Go into the ark, you and your whole family . . ."-Genesis 7:1, NIV and "I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you."-Genesis 9:9, NIV

The Covenant with Abraham: (Genesis 12, 15, 17)

1. A relationship with God: "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. 'I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you.'" –Gen 12:1-2, NIV

2. Great blessing to those who keep the covenant: “I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you. I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.” –Genesis 12:2-3, NIV

“I will confirm my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers.’

Abram fell facedown, and God said to him, ‘As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations.’” –Genesis 17:2-3, NIV

3. Covenant requirements/ obligations to avoid a curse: “This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised . . . Whether born in your household or bought with your money, they must be circumcised. My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.”- Genesis 17:10, 13-14, NIV

4. Points to Christ: Christ was circumcised (cut off) for us on the cross. The blood of circumcision points to the blood of Calvary.

5. Involves Abraham’s children: “I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you.”-Genesis 17:7, NIV

The Covenant with Moses and the Israelites (Commonly Called “The Old Covenant”): (Exodus – Deuteronomy)

1. A relationship with God: “God called to him from within the bush, ‘Moses! Moses!’ And Moses said, ‘Here I am.’ ‘Do not come any closer,’ God said. ‘Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.’ Then he said, ‘I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.’ At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God. The Lord said, ‘I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering.’” –Exodus 3:4-7, NIV

2. Great blessing to those who keep the covenant: “Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession.” –Exodus 19:5, NIV

“I will look on you with favor and make you fruitful and increase your numbers, and I will keep my covenant with you.” –Leviticus 26:9

“Know therefore that the Lord your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commands.” –Deuteronomy 7:9, NIV

3. Covenant requirements/ obligations to avoid a curse: “I will bring the sword upon you to avenge the breaking of the covenant.”- Leviticus 26:25, NIV

“The Israelites are to observe the Sabbath, celebrating it for the generations to come as a lasting covenant.” –Exodus 31:16, NIV

The Ten Commandments (Exodus 20)

4. Points to Christ: “Therefore the Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, so that we may be justified by faith.” –Galatians 3:24, NAS

“These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.” – Colossians 2:17, NIV

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.” –Matthew 5:17, NIV

5. Involves the children/ descendants: “He passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, ‘The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation.’” – Exodus 34:7, NIV

“Only be careful, and watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them slip from your heart as long as you live. Teach them to your children and to their children after them.” –Deuteronomy 4:9, NIV

“The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law.” –Deuteronomy 29:29, NIV

The Covenant with David: (2 Samuel 7)

1. A relationship with God: “This is what the Lord Almighty says: I took you from the pasture and from following the flock to be ruler over my people Israel. I have been with you wherever you have gone” –2 Samuel 7:8-9, NIV

2. Great blessing to those who keep the covenant: “I have cut off all your enemies from before you. Now I will make your name great, like the names of the greatest men of the earth. And I will provide a place for my people Israel and will plant them so that they can have a home of their own and no longer be disturbed.” –2 Samuel 7:9-10, NIV

3. Covenant requirements/ obligations to avoid a curse: “I will be his father, and he will be my son. When he does wrong, I will punish him with the rod of men, with floggings inflicted by men.”- 2 Samuel 7:14, NIV

4. Points to Christ: “Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever.” –2 Samuel 7:16, NIV

Jesus fulfills this promise by being the Son of David whose throne endures forever.

“As Jesus went on from there, two blind men followed him, calling out, “Have mercy on us, Son of David!” –Matthew 9:27, NIV

5. Involves David’s children: “When your days are over and you rest with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, who will come from your own body, and I will establish his kingdom.”-2 Samuel 7:12, NIV

Through these covenants, we can see a pattern in God’s dealings with His people. In fact, if you take all of these covenants together, you can see that they are all part of a larger covenant between God and His people. This is the overarching relationship that God enters into with His people in order to save them, bless them and draw them into obedience and eternal fellowship with Him. The heart of this covenant promise is repeated throughout Scripture, from Genesis to Revelation, in God’s most precious promise:

✓ “I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and ***I will be their God.***” –Genesis 17:8, NIV

✓ “I will take you as my own people, and ***I will be your God.***” –Exodus 6:7, NIV

✓ “Obey me, and ***I will be your God*** and you will be my people. Walk in all the ways I command you, that it may go well with you.” –Jeremiah 7:23, NIV

✓ “So you will be my people, and ***I will be your God.***” –Jeremiah 30:22

✓ “You will live in the land I gave your forefathers; you will be my people, and ***I will be your God.***” -- Ezekiel 36:28, NIV

✓ “As God has said: “I will live with them and walk among them, and ***I will be their God***, and they will be my people.” –2 Corinthians 6:6, NIV

✓ “I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. ***I will be their God***, and they will be my people.” –Hebrews 8:10, NIV (quoting Jeremiah 31)

✓ “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, ***and God himself will be with them and be their God.***” –Revelation 21:3, NIV

We see here that, from the time God speaks to Abraham, until the time when Christ returns again, God has given His people one covenant promise, Himself, and has promised to redeem one people, His people, and thus there is ultimately only one covenant. This is why the New Testament can refer to Christians as the “children of Abraham” (Romans 9:8 and Galatians 3:7). We see clearly throughout biblical history that there is one people of God and one promise for the people of God. If we have faith in God and trust Him, He will be our God and we will be His people.

Ultimately, God accomplished His covenant promise on the cross, where Jesus died to make peace between (or “reconcile”) a sinful people to a holy God. Jesus’ death, life, and resurrection are the fulfillment or accomplishment of the covenant promises, as our sins are taken away and we are made God’s people forever. The Bible refers to this final accomplishment as the “new covenant.” This covenant, accomplished by Jesus at Calvary, will be finally consummated when He comes again.

Each of the older covenants had a fatal flaw: the sins of the people always kept them from seeing God’s promises come true for them. Whatever requirements God set for His people, they always broke them and God had to bring the punishment for breaking the covenant. Time after time, God started again with His people, and time after time they broke His covenant and received the punishment instead of the blessing.

The New Covenant in Jesus

Then the prophet Jeremiah made a great promise of a coming new covenant that would not depend on human effort as the older covenants had:

The time is coming," declares the Lord ,
"when ***I will make a new covenant***
with the house of Israel
and with the house of Judah.

***It will not be like the covenant
I made with their forefathers***
when I took them by the hand
to lead them out of Egypt,
because they broke my covenant,
though I was a husband to them,"
declares the Lord .

"This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel
after that time," declares the Lord.

***"I will put my law in their minds
and write it on their hearts.
I will be their God,
and they will be my people.***

No longer will a man teach his neighbor,
or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,'
because they will all know me,
from the least of them to the greatest,"
declares the Lord .

***"For I will forgive their wickedness
and will remember their sins no more."*** —Jeremiah 31:31-34, NIV

This promise of a new covenant is a promise of a covenant that would accomplish what the others could not. Instead of tablets of stone, God will write His law on His people's hearts, and instead of the covenant being broken by the people's sin, God will forgive and forget His people's sins forever.

When Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper on the night of His betrayal, He said, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you." (Luke 22:20, see also 1 Cor. 11:25). It was Jesus' blood that accomplished what all of the old covenant sacrifices could never accomplish—it took away our sins and made peace with God. And yet this new covenant is still a covenant. We are still called to keep the covenant, to be ministers of the covenant (2 Cor. 3:6), and there are still signs of the covenant that we are called to take upon ourselves to mark us out as the people of God.

In keeping with the pattern of God's covenants, the children are also included in the covenant promises of the new covenant. Jeremiah 32 says that God will establish this new covenant with His people, "for their own good and the good of their children after them (Jer. 32:39, NIV)." Taken together with Peter's statement at Pentecost ("the promise is for you and your children"), this covenant pattern begins to strongly lead us to the conclusion that, if the sign of the old covenant (circumcision) was given to the children, then the sign of the new covenant (baptism) ought to also be given to the children. But to better understand this idea of the covenant sign, we need to explore the concepts of the covenant community and the sign of the covenant community.

The Signs and the Community of the Covenant

When Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper with the words, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood," He was giving His people a covenant sign. When we drink the cup at communion we are reminded of the blood that Jesus shed for us on the cross. The cup is a sign that points us to the heart of the covenant, Jesus' death for us on the cross. The same is also true, of course, for the bread, which reminds us and points us to Jesus' broken body.

The Lord's Supper is not the only sign of the covenant. Jesus also commanded us to baptize in His name—as we have already seen. Jesus gave the church these two covenant signs—or sacraments—to be "visible signs of invisible grace," as Augustine called them, visible demonstrations of the essence of the new covenant that He has made with us. Later, we'll explore in a little more detail what baptism demonstrates to us, but first we need to answer the question of whether or not the infant children of believers should receive the signs of the covenant.

The answer to this question is found in two places: the community-forming nature of the covenant and the pattern of covenant community sign-giving that God has established in His word. The covenant, by its very nature, creates a covenant community: those who are called to be "the people of God." So we can speak of the "covenant people" and the "covenant community" as other terms for the people of God—those who have received the promise from God that He will be their God and they will be His people. In the Old Testament, the community of the people of God was called Israel. In the new covenant, the community of God's people is the church.

Does this community of the promise include the infant children of believers? Clearly, the Bible teaches that it does. God told Abraham to mark the infant sons at the age of 8 days, so they would be physically set apart as members of God's covenant community. As soon as they were old enough to ask questions and understand answers, these children were called to participate in the covenant community's most sacred meal—the Passover. These children were members of God's people from birth, and they received the signs of being members of God's people as soon as was feasible.

We see the same thing in the new covenant, which is more expansive and inclusive than the old. In the Gospels, we see Jesus welcoming the children and saying “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these (Matthew 19:14, NIV).” Then, at Pentecost, we see Peter proclaiming, “For the promise is for you and your children.” Later in the Book of Acts, we see the apostles baptizing entire households of people, not just the adult parents (Cornelius' household in Acts 11, Lydia's household and the household of the Philippian jailer in Acts 16). And even later, in the epistles, we see the Apostle Paul addressing the children as members of the covenant community, as he reminds them of their obligations under the covenant (see esp. Ephesians, where children are included in the letter as part of the group of “saints” at Ephesus).

From all of the evidence of the New Testament, we can conclude that the children of believers were included in the covenant community. There is no evidence that they were excluded or that God had changed His mind about their place in the covenant community. What is clearly stated to Abraham in Genesis, and is clearly preserved throughout the Old Testament, is maintained in the new covenant, too. Therefore, if the children of believers received the signs of the old covenant because they were members of the covenant community, we ought to conclude that children under the new covenant should have the same privileges.

Now, if we say that the children are members of the covenant community, then we should also be prepared to give them the sign of covenant membership. The only appropriate sign given in the Bible is that of baptism. Sometimes Baptists, wanting to acknowledge their children's place among the people of God, will dedicate their children to God, appealing to a ceremony performed for the firstborn children under the old covenant. But the New Testament does not give this ceremony any place in the church. The appropriate sign of covenant community membership is baptism, just as it was circumcision under the old covenant. If we want to acknowledge that our children belong to God and to His people, the way to do that is in baptism.

This conclusion does involve making a connection between the signs of the old covenant and the signs of the new covenant. Specifically, we need to see the connection between the sign of circumcision, which was given to infants in the old covenant, and the sign of baptism, which Presbyterians want to give to infants under the new covenant. Is there a strong connection between these two signs? Is the connection strong enough to justify applying baptism to infants based primarily (although not exclusively) on the fact that circumcision was given to infants?

The Connection Between Circumcision and Baptism

In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.

—Colossians 2:11-12, NIV

Paul makes the connection between circumcision and baptism for us when he speaks of baptism as being a sign of the circumcision done by Christ. Paul is reassuring the Colossian believers that they have indeed been circumcised even if many of them are Gentiles who have not received physical circumcision.

They have a better circumcision, the cutting away of their sinful natures by Christ, a cutting away that is demonstrated in baptism. Essentially, Paul is teaching that baptism signifies for the new covenant believer the same thing circumcision signified for the old covenant believer. What do both circumcision and baptism signify?

1. Both circumcision and baptism signify covenant union with God and His people.

God gave the covenant sign of circumcision to identify His people as His people—those who are joined to Him by the covenant bond. Circumcision primarily served to mark out the people of God from the world. While it later took a national focus under the nation of Israel, its original and primary purpose was spiritual, the mark of God on the people of God.

Baptism in the New Testament signifies the same thing, only with a more specific emphasis on union with Christ. Jesus commanded that we be baptized “in the name of the father, or the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” To be baptized into the name of the Triune God is to be united to Him, to have His name or His identity placed on you. As the apostles baptized people in the New Testament, they emphasized the focus of being baptized “in the name of Jesus.” Later, Paul emphasizes this aspect of the covenant union as he teaches that baptism is a sign of union with Christ.

“Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.”—Romans 6:3-4, NIV

“All of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.”—Galatians 3:27, NIV

So baptism unites us to Christ in covenant union the same way that circumcision united the old covenant saints to God and His covenant promises.

2. Both circumcision and baptism signify a cleansing from sin or a putting off of sin.

Circumcision was always intended to outwardly represent an inward spiritual reality. Just as the foreskin of the male was cut away shortly after birth, so the one who received circumcision was expected to cut sin away from his heart as he grew in knowledge of God.

“Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer.”—Deuteronomy 10:16, NIV

“The Lord your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live.”—Deuteronomy 30:6, NIV

“Circumcise yourselves to the Lord, circumcise your hearts, you men of Judah and people of Jerusalem, or my wrath will break out and burn like fire because of the evil you have done— burn with no one to quench it.”—Jeremiah 4:4

In the same way, but without the shedding of blood, baptism signifies a cleansing from sin and a putting off of the sinful nature. The cleansing that baptism symbolizes is more effective cleansing than that symbolized by circumcision. Circumcision was a sign pointing ahead to what Christ would do, while baptism is a sign that points back to what Christ has done already on the cross in providing final cleansing for us. We are now called by God to walk in the new life and cleansing that Christ accomplished and that baptism signifies. Paul uses baptism in Romans 6 to emphasize the new life and cleansing from sin that Christians should live:

What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through

baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. –Romans 6:1-4, NIV

Paul's plea to the Romans (and to us) is really the same as the plea of the Lord regarding heart circumcision in the Old Testament. Those of us who have been baptized need to be living out what our baptism represents. We need to put off the old nature and walk in the newness of life that we have in Christ.

Theologians look at these passages and conclude that both circumcision and baptism are signs of **regeneration**, of putting off the old nature and receiving a new life. Yet how can Presbyterians give infants the sign of regeneration when there is no evidence that they have been regenerated yet? Well, the same question can also be asked of circumcision: How could the Israelites circumcise their infant sons when they showed no evidence of putting off sin by circumcising their hearts? The answer to both questions is that a covenant sign, like circumcision, does not necessarily point back to something that has already happened. It can also look ahead to something that God is yet to do.

The other covenant sign, the Lord's Supper, helps us both to look back and to look forward. Jesus said, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you," but He also said, "I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God (Mk. 14:25)." So, as we drink the cup at the Lord's Supper, we look back at what Jesus has already done for us, but we also look forward to what Jesus will do in the future. We remember His sacrifice and we anticipate the wedding supper of the Lamb, when we will drink wine with Jesus in the kingdom. Like the Lord's Supper, baptism also looks back and looks forward.

In baptism, we remember the sufferings and death and resurrection of Christ, as well as the gift of the Holy Spirit whom He sent at Pentecost. All of these are past, accomplished realities to which baptism looks. But baptism also looks ahead to the work of salvation that God will do in regeneration, in the continued cleansing of sanctification, and finally in our glorification, when the last stains of sin will be removed forever.

Male infants under the old covenant were circumcised at the age of 8 days in eager expectation that God would circumcise their hearts and that they would walk in the reality that circumcision signified. Did this reality always come to pass? No. Just consider the fact that God commanded Abraham to circumcise Ishmael, even though he was not the child of promise. The same is true of Esau, who was also circumcised on the eighth day, even though Jacob inherited the promises. Circumcision was not a 100% guarantee that a child would be saved. Circumcision was given to Ishmael and Esau because they were members of the covenant community and God commanded that they be circumcised as covenant children.

In the same way, the infant children of believers today are members of the covenant community, even from birth. While many of them may grow up to reject God and His promises, it is still proper to baptize them and welcome them into the covenant community. Their baptism as infants looks forward to that day when God will spiritually and eternally unite them to Christ and make them born again. This is not a 100% guarantee that God will do this, any more than circumcision was in the old covenant. Yet just as all male babies were circumcised, so all infant children of believers should receive baptism today.

Baptism serves the same function under the new covenant that circumcision served under the old. Both of them are signs of union with God and His covenant people and of regeneration, a putting off of sin and a newness of heart and life. Just as male babies received the physical sign of circumcision in anticipation of the spiritual reality that God would work in them, so babies born into the covenant today receive the sign of baptism in anticipation of the spiritual work that God will do in them some day. Neither circumcision nor baptism were given as a 100% guarantee that God will do that work, but both look forward in faith to what God will do in keeping His promises.

OBJECTION: The New Testament does not clearly and explicitly teach that baptism is the replacement sign for circumcision. Since so much of the Presbyterian argument rests on this conviction, it is a great weakness of their argument that the Bible does not make this connection more clear.

RESPONSE TO OBJECTION: While the New Testament may not explicitly teach that circumcision has been replaced by baptism, the New Testament does not make much sense without that understanding in view. When God established the covenant of circumcision with Abraham, He made it an everlasting covenant for all generations (see Gen. 17). For 2,000 years, the pattern of God's covenant administration was clear. When an adult converted from paganism to faith in the God of Israel, he was circumcised and so were the male members of his household. All of a sudden, after Jesus gives His Great Commission, the Apostles operate under a different set of circumstances. As long as they are ministering to Jews, there was no problem with the fact that they did not require new converts to be circumcised. They were already circumcised. But once the Apostles started preaching the gospel to gentiles and did not require them to be circumcised upon conversion, we have a real problem. How can gentiles be included in the people of God without being circumcised?

Let's take the incident of Phillip and the Ethiopian eunuch as an example (see Acts 8:26-40). The Ethiopian eunuch was a God-fearer and was familiar with the God of Israel, but He had not completely converted and had not received the sign of the covenant in circumcision. After Phillip shared the gospel with him and he believed in Jesus Christ and was converted, Phillip did not reach for the knife to circumcise him. Instead, he baptized him in water. By whose authority did Phillip abandon the 2,000 year-old sign of the covenant, a sign that God had said was everlasting? He could only do so if Jesus, the Lord of the Covenant, had given Him a replacement sign for circumcision.

It did take awhile for the Jewish believers in Jesus to recognize that circumcision had been replaced by baptism, but they did come to that realization. That's why, when Cornelius and his household were converted, they were baptized and not circumcised, and it's also why Paul could insist so strongly that converts to Christ who had been baptized did not need to be circumcised. It is also, finally, why Paul could speak of baptism as the "circumcision of Christ." If baptism did not replace circumcision as the initiation sign of entrance into the covenant community, then the Apostles would be violating God's everlasting covenant with Abraham by failing to circumcise all of God's people. In other words, if baptism is not the replacement for circumcision, then what is?

OBJECTION: It's true that infants received circumcision under the old covenant, but it's also true that children partook of the Passover in the old covenant. If you use circumcision as a basis for baptizing children, shouldn't you also use the Passover to justify giving the Lord's Supper (the new covenant equivalent of Passover) to children? It's inconsistent to extend baptism to infants based on circumcision and then withhold the Lord's Supper.

RESPONSE TO OBJECTION: While children were given the Passover under the old covenant, they were not given it as infants. A child had to be old enough to be able to digest the food in the Passover meal (bitter herbs, lamb, wine?) and also had to be old enough to ask the question, "What does this mean?" and understand the answer. So while children took the Passover meal, it wasn't until a number of years after they were baptized. This would correspond very nicely with the fact that infants are baptized today, but that do not take communion until they are old enough to understand what they are doing. Also, the New Testament explicitly requires a level of discernment before taking the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11:29), while it does not make this requirement in connection with baptism.

OBJECTION: The new covenant is not the same as the old covenant. Therefore, it is improper to practice baptism the same way the old covenant people of God practices circumcision. Children were considered members of the old covenant community from birth because the old covenant community was also a racial nation, so membership was automatic from birth. The new covenant community is not the same, because people must have faith in order to be included in the promises of salvation in Christ.

The promises of the old covenant were automatically passed to the children. Israel was a nation with a common blood ancestry. The church is a community of believers without a common blood ancestry. This is part of the change that God brought to believers in the “new covenant” prophesied by Jeremiah. This is why the Lord said that the new covenant would not be like the old covenant. The new covenant does not automatically include the children of believers in the same way that the old covenant did.

RESPONSE TO OBJECTION: First of all, children were not automatically “saved” by birth under the old covenant. This can be seen in Ishmael and Esau, who were both born into the covenant community, but who did not inherit the promises of God. Also, circumcision was never given as an outward sign of national identity only. God always commanded and expected that a heart circumcision follow a flesh circumcision. It was never enough just to be circumcised in the flesh, just as it is not enough now just to be physically baptized. There must also be an inward spiritual reality of regeneration.

As far as the children’s place in the new covenant is concerned, Jeremiah makes this quite clear in Jeremiah 32, where he continues his prophesy about the coming new covenant. He says, “They will be my people, and I will be their God. I will give them singleness of heart and action, so that they will, always fear me for their own good **and for the good of their children after them**. I will make an everlasting covenant with them: I will never stop doing good to them, and I will inspire them to fear me (Jer. 32:38-40, NIV).” Jeremiah makes it clear that the Lord intends for the new covenant to be for the good of the children, as well as for the adults.

The bottom line response to this objection is that the Bible’s teaching about families and children makes it virtually impossible for God to make a covenant with parents and not include the children in that covenant, too. God is a God of families, and He consistently deals with families as whole units and blesses the children because of their place in their parents’ households.

What the Bible Teaches About Families

I don’t think it’s merely a coincidence that infant baptism began to be seriously questioned in the church only after the rise of individualism in Western culture following the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. Baptist theology is inherently individualistic as each believer makes his or her own stand before God. The Bible takes a decidedly different view of humanity, without denying our individuality or lessening our personal accountability before God. The Bible consistently treats people as members of families and communities and nations.

God is a God of families. When he created Adam in the garden, He said, “It is not good for man to be alone,” and “be fruitful and multiply.” When God made his covenant with Noah, he did not bring just Noah into the ark. He also included the members of Noah’s family, even though one of Noah’s sons, Ham, was wicked. When God called Abram to leave his father’s house, he did not call him to leave alone, but he left with his wife, Sarai. Later, God’s covenant promises to Abraham are fulfilled in the child of promise, Isaac. Again and again throughout the scriptures, we see God interacting with families, not with isolated individuals.

When God causes Joseph to be sold into slavery and then to rise to be Prime Minister over Egypt, He does so not only for Joseph’s benefit but also for the benefit of Joseph’s family. Later, when God establishes His covenant with David, He does so by making a promise concerning David’s sons. This family perspective that we see throughout Scripture can even be seen in the graphic and shocking fact that Achan’s entire family is stoned to death because of Achan’s sin. In the Ten Commandments themselves, God says “I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate me, but showing mercy to thousands [of generations] to those who love me and keep my commandments (Exodus 20:5-6).”

None of this in any way cancels out the fact that we are held accountable for our own sins, nor does it lessen the fact that God enters into a personal relationship with each one of us. However, especially when giving His covenant promises, God consistently treats us as members of families and not as isolated individuals. Thus, when Paul and Silas are asked by the Philippian jailer, “What must I do to be saved?,” they answer him by saying, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved, **you and your household.**” God’s covenant blessings will not be isolated to just the Philippian jailer, but his whole household will share in the blessings of being included among God’s people.

In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul addresses the issue of marriage between an unbeliever and a believer. In verse 14, he states, “the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband; otherwise your children would be unclean, but now they are holy.” I don’t think Paul is teaching that an unbelieving spouse is automatically saved based on his or her spouse’s faith or that a child is automatically saved because of his or her parent’s faith, but Paul is clearly teaching that a believing husband or wife imparts spiritual blessing to his or her entire household. The unbelieving spouse is “sanctified” and the children are “holy” because they are brought into the influence of God’s covenant promises. Again, this blessing is not automatic salvation, but it is a real blessing nonetheless.

The family-focus of God’s dealings with humanity is easier to see in the Old Testament, especially as the people of God consisted of a patriarchal family. Today, as the church is not limited to any one genealogy or nation, many argue that God does not deal with people in the same way, as members of families. Yet one way to see how God’s family concerns continue in the New Testament is to see how often the New Testament makes reference to the “households” of believers. Not only do we have the 4 household baptisms recorded in Acts and 1 Corinthians (Cornelius, Philippian Jailer, Lydia, and Stephanus), but we also have reference to at least 4 other “households” in Acts and the letters of Paul. Then there is the fact that Paul makes reference to the church as “the household of faith (Gal. 6:10)” and “the household of God (Eph 2:19).”

If we take all of the household references in the New Testament and combine them with the Bible’s other teachings about the family we can see a clear pattern emerge. The church is the family of God that is made up of smaller family units—it is a family of families. When God looks down on my church as we are gathered in worship on Sunday morning, He does not see a sanctuary full of individuals. Rather, He sees a family of families. He views us and deals with us as families. He sees me as a husband to my wife, not just as some guy sitting there by himself. We lose this perspective in many of our modern churches as we divide families from each other as soon as they walk in the door, but God still looks at us as members of families.

This perspective of the church as a family of families is why Paul can say that the unbelieving spouse is sanctified because of the believing spouse. God sees that unbelieving spouse, not as an isolated individual, but as someone who is intimately connected in a family relationship to a child of God. Does this mean that the unbelieving spouse is seen as a Christian? No. Yet the spouse is still “set apart for God’s purposes” by connection to his or her believing mate.

Perhaps the strongest and most beautiful statement of household solidarity comes in the last chapter of the book of Joshua. Here, Joshua challenges the Israelites, “If serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve . . . But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.” Joshua knew that each family in Israel was going to have to choose which god they would really serve, but he left no doubt about what his family was going to do. He didn’t say, “I’m going to serve the LORD, and I hope my family will decide to do so, too.” He didn’t say, “I’m going to teach my children about the LORD and hope that some day they may decide to serve Him.” No, Joshua’s commitment was clear. He and his household would serve the LORD. Once his children grew up and left his household to form households of their own, they may decide to abandon the LORD and serve other gods. But as long as they lived in his household, they would serve the LORD.

When Presbyterians present their children before the LORD to receive baptism, they are really just declaring the same thing that Joshua was declaring before the Israelites. They put God's mark of ownership on their children, just as Joshua had his sons circumcised. Their children belong to God and will worship and serve God, at least as long as they live in their parents' house. If they decide to turn their backs on God when they grow up, that will be their choice, but they will be turning their backs on God and His promises. They will be leaving the covenant community of which they have been a part since birth. They will be abandoning their faith. They will be rejecting the mark of God put on them in baptism.

But can we really say that children belong to God or that they know God and serve Him as God when they are so young? How can a child of two or three years of age really believe in God and follow Him? Don't we have to wait until these children grow up and learn to stand on their own two feet before we can say that they are serving the LORD or that they belong to Him?

The Bible's View of Children

The answer to these questions lies in what the Bible teaches us about children and their relationship to God. Again, it is in keeping with the spirit of our age that many Christians (Presbyterians as much as Baptists) seem to devalue children. Children, especially young children who are very much dependent on their parents for almost everything, aren't of much value to our individualist-minded culture. It isn't until a child can stand on his own or reject the values of her parents that he or she becomes a "real person with a mind of his own" in our society. Ironically, even those who argue most for children's rights do so with this individualism in mind. They want children's rights **as opposed to** parents' rights. That is, they want children to stand on their own apart from and even against their parents' wishes and values and teachings. Somehow, until they've done that, they've not taken their rightful place in the world. Where does that leave a two or three-year old?

Jesus' view of children was very different. He was not waiting for them to "grow up and start thinking for themselves" before they could be taken seriously. He welcomed them and blessed them, even as their parents brought them to Him, and He declared that the kingdom of heaven belonged to them.

People were also bringing babies to Jesus to have him touch them. When the disciples saw this, they rebuked them. But Jesus called the children to him and said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it."

—Luke 18:15-17, NIV

This story of the children being brought to Jesus is told in all three synoptic gospels-- Matthew, Mark, and Luke. These were small children who were being brought to Jesus, most likely by their parents. The disciples did not have time or patience for these small children, these mere babies. Certainly the adults who were waiting to see Jesus must have been more important. These little ones were not capable of understanding Jesus and they could not go and testify to what Jesus had done for them. The disciples didn't want to bother Jesus with trivial matters like blessing babies when He had so much more important work to do.

Jesus did not join the disciples in rebuking the parents for bringing their small children to Him. Instead, He turned and rebuked the disciples for failing to understand the values of the kingdom. "The kingdom of God," Jesus said, "belongs to such as these." The kingdom belongs to such little, helpless, voiceless, and yet trusting children. The fact that most modern commentators want to spiritualize Jesus' statement and make it merely a metaphor for a "childlike faith" shows how much our value system mirrors the disciples' and not Jesus'.

Surely Jesus could not have meant that the kingdom really belonged to these infants. He couldn't have actually welcomed them for their sakes, right? While I'm sure Jesus had a message for the adults

standing around Him, I'm also sure He really did welcome and bless the little children and say that the kingdom was theirs, even as they trusted Him with their baby faith. Being of young age and immature intellectual understanding does not disqualify someone from receiving the blessings of the kingdom. Just as God welcomed the children of Abraham even at 8 days old into His people, so Jesus welcomed these little ones whose parents brought them to Him. As their parents were faithful to bring them to Jesus, Jesus was faithful to welcome them, despite their young age. He is still the same today.

Part of the reason we don't see any clear examples of infant baptism in the New Testament is that we see so few people who are raised in the Christian faith. Because the New Testament covers the very early days of the church, almost everyone who believes in Christ comes to faith in Him as an adult. We do have one notable exception whose life can teach us much about children who are raised in the faith. His name is Timothy, Paul's young apprentice. Unfortunately, we don't have a record of Timothy's baptism, so we cannot say for sure that he was baptized as an infant or a young child. We do know that Paul told Timothy to "continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus (2 Timothy 3:14-15, NIV)." We also know that Paul spoke of Timothy's "sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother, Lois, and in your mother, Eunice, and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also (2 Timothy 1:5, NIV)."

Timothy knew the Holy Scriptures from infancy and he received almost by inheritance the strong faith that lived in his grandmother and his mother. We see in Timothy's life a picture of one who was truly raised in the faith. His life reminds us of the words of Charles Spurgeon (ironically a Baptist) who said:

It would not be easy for some of us to recall the hour when we first heard the name of Jesus. In very infancy that sweet sound was as familiar to our ear as the hush of lullaby. Our earliest recollections are associated with the house of God, the family altar, the Holy Bible, the sacred song, and the fervent prayer. Like young Samuels, we were lighted to our rest by the lamps of the sanctuary, and were awakened by the sound of the morning hymn. Many a time has the man of God, whom a parent's hospitality has entertained, implored a blessing on our head, desiring in all sincerity that we might early call the Redeemer blessed; and to his petition a mother's earnest "Amen" has solemnly responded. Perhaps the first song we learned to sing was concerning the children's best Friend. The first book that we began to read contained His sweet name, and many were the times when we were pressed by godly ones to think of Jesus, and to give our young hearts to Him.

Timothy and Spurgeon should be the norm for the experience of the Christian child. Children raised by godly parents often cannot trace the exact date of their conversion and this is good and proper. We should not pressure such people to identify a "sacred moment" when they were converted to the Lord. Rather, we should be willing to accept and celebrate the fact that they were truly raised in the faith. They were children of the covenant from birth and their parents brought them to Jesus time and time again from the earliest moments of their lives.

Infant baptism merely puts into practice what should be a living reality for Christian families. As soon as is reasonably possible, Christian parents should present their children before the church as children who belong to God, who are being joined to the family of God and who will be raised in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. Again, I think that Baptists recognize this truth just as much as Presbyterians do. This is why they present their children before the church in a "baby dedication" service. Their hearts are in the right place, but they fail to use the proper method that God has provided for placing His mark of ownership on their children. "Baby dedications" are a nice idea, but baptism is the sign and seal that God has given for believers and their children.

OBJECTION: This view of children that is used to justify infant baptism makes the fatal mistake of making the children of flesh into the children of God, which is spoken against in Romans 9:8. After all, don't we know that God doesn't have any grandchildren but only children? No one becomes a Christian simply by

being born into a Christian home and no one can claim to be saved just because their parents are believers.

RESPONSE TO OBJECTION: This view does not automatically make the children of flesh into children of God. Here is where a very key difference in the Baptist view of baptism and the Presbyterian view of baptism needs to be clearly stated. Presbyterians believe in covenant baptism. According to this view, baptism is a sign and seal of entrance into covenant relationship with God. The appropriate time to bestow this sign and seal on someone is when they join the covenant community. Based on the 4,000-year-old pattern that God gave to Abraham in the covenant of circumcision, Presbyterians believe that children of believers are members of the covenant community from birth. This does not mean that they are automatically saved or that they are regenerate from birth. Presbyterians do not believe that baptism is an infallible sign that someone is saved, but it is the sign and seal that someone belongs under the covenant. As long as a child lives in a Christian home, he belongs under the covenant. He is holy based on his parents' faith until such time as he either embraces that faith for himself or decides finally to reject God's covenant promises. (Most Christian children who reject the faith don't do so permanently, but they only wander from God for a season, eventually returning to the faith of their youth.)

The Baptist view of baptism is not centered on God's covenant promises, but rather on the repentance and faith of the individual. The Baptists believe that baptism should only be given to someone after they are saved and that baptism is one of the ways that the newly redeemed person makes their public profession of faith in Christ. There are two problems with this view. First of all, baptism in the New Testament is nowhere called a profession of faith. While many baptisms took place publicly, some also took place privately (Cornelius' household and the Ethiopian eunuch). These baptisms were not professions of faith, but rather were signs of God's grace enjoining the individual to Christ and cleansing him of sin. The other problem is that baptism does not need to be tied chronologically to the grace that it signifies. Baptism can either be a sign that points ahead to God's future grace or it can be a sign that points back to a past work of God. In fact, we have already seen that it always does both no matter when it is given.

The church has not been given the right or privilege of deciding who is and is not saved. The Baptist insistence that someone can only be baptized after he has been saved attempts to give the church the responsibility of deciding whether or not a person is really saved. This simply cannot be done. The church has been given the privilege of administering God's covenant and of regulating his covenant community. The church must do so by faithfully following the standards for covenant administration that God has set. It is clear that, for adults, a credible profession of faith in Christ is a prerequisite for admission into the covenant community. Once such a credible profession has been made, the adult convert may then be baptized and admitted into the church.

Under the covenant of circumcision, the same prerequisite applied for adult converts. They needed to first believe in the God of Israel and then be circumcised before they would be admitted into the company of God's people. Yet no such prerequisite for covenant admission ever existed for the children of believers. These children received the sign of the covenant very shortly after birth for over 2000 years. When Jesus changed the form of the sign from circumcision to baptism, He did not change the basic requirements for receiving that sign. On the contrary, He explicitly welcomed children into His kingdom.

A Summary of the Points Presented So Far

1. The question of infant baptism is complex and troubling and has divided the best Bible teachers and theologians.
2. In the Great Commission, Jesus commands us to make disciples by baptizing and teaching. This command favors Christian parents baptizing their children since they are discipling them and teaching them from the earliest age.

3. Peter's sermon at Pentecost includes a promise "for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself." This statement places the command to be baptized in covenant language and so baptism can only be understood by understanding the covenant of God.
4. Throughout history, God has made several covenants with Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses and David. Each of these covenants included promises and provisions for the children of believers.
5. The new covenant in Jesus Christ likewise contains a promise for the children of believers.
6. All of God's covenants should be viewed together as parts or stages in the unfolding of one covenant promise that God will redeem a people for Himself and He will be their God.
7. Since the covenant involves God redeeming a people for Himself, it creates a covenant community. The Bible clearly teaches that the children of believers have always been included in the covenant community.
8. Under the covenant of circumcision, male infants receive the sign of the covenant when they were eight days old. In the new covenant, we see Jesus welcoming the children and the apostles baptizing whole households.
9. If children are members of the covenant community, they ought to receive the sign of the covenant, which is baptism.
10. That children should receive the sign of baptism is made clearer when we understand the connection between baptism and circumcision.
11. Both baptism and circumcision are initiating signs of entrance into the covenant. They both signify covenant union with God and His people and a cleansing from sin or a putting off of sin. Since baptism and circumcision both signify the same things, if it was appropriate to give the sign of circumcision to infants, then it is also appropriate to give the sign of baptism to infants.
12. Just as some who received the sign of circumcision later turned their backs on God's covenant, including Ishmael and Esau, so some who receive the sign of baptism may unfortunately later decide to turn their backs on God.
13. The objection that the New Testament does not clearly teach that baptism is the replacement for circumcision may be answered with the fact that the New Testament does not make sense apart from the understanding that baptism now serves the function of being a sign of covenant admission that circumcision once served.
14. The objection that children in the old covenant also partook of Passover while children in the new covenant do not partake in the Lord's Supper may be answered with the fact that children would have had to wait until they reached a certain age and understanding before they would have been able to take the Passover meal. The same time lapse between baptism and the Lord's Supper remains in place today.
15. The objection that the new covenant is not the same as the old covenant and does not automatically include children the same way the old covenant did may be answered first by emphasizing that children were not automatically saved under the old covenant (Ishmael and Esau) and second by Jeremiah 32:38-40, which explicitly states that the new covenant is "for the good of their children after them."
16. God is a God of families and God consistently deals with families as units throughout redemptive history. This can be seen in Adam, Noah, Abraham, Joseph, David, the Philippian jailer, and in many other places in Scripture.
17. The church is a family of families. The household of God is made up of individual households and not isolated individuals. This can be seen in the household baptisms, in Paul's reference to the unbelieving spouse and children being sanctified by connection to the believing spouse, and in Joshua's declaration that he and his house would serve the Lord.
18. The Bible's view of children is consistent with baptizing them and including them in the church. Unlike society, which tends to devalue children until they reach a certain age of maturity and responsibility, Jesus welcomed the little children whose parents brought them to Him. He declared that the kingdom of God belonged to them and those who had childlike faith like they did.
19. While we do not have any clear examples of infant baptism in the New Testament, we do have an example of one who was raised in the faith in Timothy. Timothy knew the scriptures from infancy and received the faith that first lived in his grandmother and his mother. This picture of a child growing

naturally in the faith is consistent with infant baptism, which recognizes that the children of believers should grow in their faith from the earliest days of life.

20. The objection that infant baptism makes the children of flesh into the children of God must be answered carefully. Presbyterians do not give baptism to their children because they believe their children are automatically saved but they give their children the sign of baptism because they believe that their children belong under God's covenant. This is not a guarantee of salvation, but it is the proper way of administering God's covenant. Baptists on the other hand, think that baptism should only be given to those who are already saved. This puts the church in the position of judging someone's salvation, something the church cannot do. The requirements for administering baptism are the same as that of circumcision and so the children of believers do not need to repent and express faith before they are included among God's covenant people.

Conclusion: What Really Made the Difference for Me?

A number of years passed between the time when I first heard clear Presbyterian teachings on infant baptism (R.C. Sproul, 1996) and the time when I was fully and finally convinced that infant baptism was the only practice fully consistent with the Bible's teachings about the covenant, the church and the Christian family (Fall of 2001). Over those five years, I gradually became convinced, piece-by-piece, of the major building blocks in the Presbyterian argument for baptizing the infant children of believers.

The first piece to fall in place was the connection between circumcision and baptism. This is the summand substance of R.C. Sproul's teaching on infant baptism, and it took me about 6 months to a year after first listening to his tapes before I could accept that baptism serves the same function under the new covenant that circumcision served under the old. Just as circumcision was the mark of entry into the old covenant, so baptism was the mark of entry into the new.

I accepted this, but I still held onto the idea that the entrance requirements for the two covenants must be different. Surely, faith was always required for entry into the new covenant, whereas mere birth was the only requirement for the old covenant. I believed that, since the old covenant was tied to an ethnic group and a political nation, then circumcision was the identification of belonging to that ethnic group. After all, you can be born into an ethnic group, right? But I rejected the idea that you could be born into the church, because I saw that the church was not tied to an ethnic group of political nation, as Israel was.

What I was missing at this stage were two things: First of all, I did not understand that circumcision's primary significance was spiritual, and not merely political or ethnic. The weight of the significance of circumcision lies in the idea of a separation from sin and unto God. Secondly, I did not understand that the children of believers had the same privileges under the new covenant that they had under the old. I failed to see that not all children of the old covenant who received circumcision were automatically saved (like Ishmael, Esau, and many others). I also failed to see the importance of the fact that Jesus welcomed little children into the kingdom and that Paul called the children of believers "holy."

The children of the new covenant have the same covenant privileges as the children of the old covenant had. I missed that fact, and so I remained unconvinced that new covenant infants could be baptized just as old covenant children were circumcised.

The second piece to fall into place for me was the concept of "one covenant, one people of God," which I've already explored in detail. Before this time, I thought that Israel was a political nation that had been given promises concerning land and that the church was a spiritual nation that had been given promises concerning forgiveness and eternal life. Gradually, especially as I began to read and study Hebrews, I saw that the promises made to Abraham and the Jews were not primarily about land. Here are some of the Hebrews passages that cleared things up for me:

By faith he [Abraham] made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

–Hebrews 11:9-10

All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country--a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.

–Hebrews 11:14-16

For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.

–Hebrews 13:14

These and other passages helped me see that the covenant promises of God have always been about the same inheritance: God Himself and the city He is building, the New Jerusalem. This helped me overcome my thought process that saw Israel as being worldly and the church as being spiritual. The people of God have always been spiritual and have always had their eyes on God as their ultimate prize. This really helped me see circumcision in a more spiritual light, and it was at this time that I began to respect infant baptism as a valid biblical position, even though I could not accept it for myself.

What still kept me from accepting infant baptism for myself? Well, I basically thought that the church should only be made up of Christians, and I thought you couldn't really call children Christians until they made that decision for themselves. This was a fundamental, deeply held belief that no amount of biblical reasoning was able to fully overcome. I just couldn't accept that these little children were Christians, and if they weren't Christians then they didn't belong in the church as church members.

What helped me overcome this last hurdle? Well, the Bible's teachings about children certainly helped, and I think Paul's addresses to children in Ephesians and Galatians were the final clinchers for me, but the greatest influence probably came from watching faithful Christian parents raise their children. What does it mean to be a Christian? More than anything else, a Christian is one who is a disciple of Jesus. While regeneration is the inward key to being a Christian, the outward signs are devotion to God, prayer, obedience to Christ's commands, etc. These are the marks of a disciple of Christ, and faithful Christian parents model these marks for their children and teach their children to display these marks from the earliest moments of their lives.

This lifelong discipling of children is true for Baptists, just as it is for Presbyterians. I think that's why Baptists dedicate their children to God in infancy, just as Presbyterians do. The biggest key difference is that Presbyterians recognize that baptism is the appropriate way to dedicate your children to God in baptism, which recognizes that your children belong to God and are members of His covenant people. The quote from Charles Spurgeon, a Baptist, resonates with Baptists just as much as it does with Presbyterians. Yet, if that's true, then why won't Baptists recognize their children for what they are, children of the covenant and young Christian people?

Another tract I saw in a Baptist church very recently made things crystal clear for me. The tract was entitled, "What to do now that You're Saved." The tract was obviously written for new converts to Christianity, and it listed 7 things for new believers to do:

1. Get baptized.
2. Go to church regularly.
3. Read and study your Bible.
4. Pray regularly.

5. Obey God's commandments.
6. Give 10% of your income to God.
7. Share your faith with others.

Something very obvious struck me as I read this tract. Faithful Christian parents teach their children to do all of the things listed in #2 - #7 as soon as they are capable. They take their children to church, read the Bible to them and then teach them to read their Bibles, teach them to pray, teach them to obey God, teach them to give money to God in the offering, and even teach them to share Jesus with their friends. They don't wait for them to make a mature and personal profession of faith before they teach them to do these things. If they did, we would probably question how faithful they were at being Christian parents. So, if Christian parents do #2 - #7 with their children from the earliest days of life, then why should they skip #1 and leave it until some later date?

Infant baptism is the practice most consistent with faithful Christian parenting. I don't have children yet, but when I do, I will have them baptized as infants and I will teach them to love and follow Jesus from birth. I will treat them as God's children from the time God gives them to me, and I will pray that they will continue to walk with God all of their lives. I hope that when they grow older, no one will try to convince them that the baptism they received as infants was fake or less than a faithful and biblical baptism. I hope no one will try to convince them that I was wrong to place God's name on them as soon as they were born, even before their lips could speak that precious name for themselves. Paul says there is "one baptism," and no one should ever ask a Christian to be re-baptized once God has placed His sign and seal on them with water and triune name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Appendix 1: Scriptural Support for the Major Points of the Infant Baptism Arguments

One Covenant, One People of God

One Father of the People of Faith: Consider Abraham: "He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." Understand, then, ***that those who believe are children of Abraham***. The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: "All nations will be blessed through you." --Galatians 3:6-8

He [Abraham] received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. So then, ***he is the father of all who believe*** but have not been circumcised, in order that righteousness might be credited to them. And he is also the father of the circumcised who not only are circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised. --Romans 4:11-12

One Root for the Many Branches: If some of the branches have been broken off, and ***you***, though a wild olive shoot, ***have been grafted in among the others*** and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root, do not boast over those branches. If you do, consider this: You do not support the root, but the root supports you. --Romans 11:17-18

One City for the One People of God: Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw ***the Holy City, the new Jerusalem***, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. ***They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God*** . . . It had a great, high wall with twelve gates, and with twelve angels at the gates. ***On the gates were written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel***. There were three gates on the east, three on the north, three

on the south and three on the west. The wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were **the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb**. –Revelation 21: 1-3, 12-14

Israel Described as the Church: This is that Moses who said to the children of Israel, "The LORD your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your brethren. Him you shall hear." "This is he who was in **the congregation (ekklesia= 'church') in the wilderness** with the Angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our fathers, the one who received the living oracles to give to us, whom our fathers would not obey, but rejected." –Acts 7:37-39

The Church Described as Israel: But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; who once were not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy. (See Is 43:20f; Deut 10:15; Is 61:6; 66:21; Ex 19:6; Deut 7:6; Ex 19:5; Deut 4:20; 14:2; Is 9:2; 42:16; Hos 1:10; 2:23) –1 Peter 2:9-10

The New Covenant Made with Israel and Judah, and yet with the Church: "The time is coming," declares the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant **with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah**." –Jeremiah 31:31, quoted to the church in Hebrews 8:8

The Children of Believers Included in the One Covenant

I now establish my covenant with **you and with your descendants after you**. --Genesis 9:9

I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, **to be your God and the God of your descendants after you**. -- Genesis 17:7

The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but **the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever**, that we may follow all the words of this law. –Deuteronomy 29:29

I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers . . . They will be my people, and I will be their God. I will give them singleness of heart and action, so that they will always fear me **for their own good and the good of their children after them**. I will make an everlasting covenant with them: I will never stop doing good to them, and I will inspire them to fear me, so that they will never turn away from me. –Jeremiah 31:31-32 and 32:38-40

Jesus said, "**Let the little children come to me**, and do not hinder them, for **the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these**." –Matthew 19:14

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 2:39

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 7:14

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, **To the saints in Ephesus**, the faithful in Christ Jesus: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ . . . **Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right**. "Honor your father and mother"--which is the first commandment with a promise-- "that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth." –Ephesians 1:1-3 and 6:1-3

Circumcision Given to the Children of the Covenant

Then God said to Abraham, "As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come. This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised, including those born in your household or bought with money from a foreigner—those who are not your offspring. Whether born in your household or bought with your money, they must be circumcised. My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant. – Genesis 17:9-13

Circumcision Connected to Baptism

In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, *having been buried with him in baptism* and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. –Colossians 2:11-12

Households Are Baptized (Just as Households Were Circumcised)

Household Circumcision: And every male in Abraham's household, including those born in his household or bought from a foreigner, was circumcised with him. –Genesis 17:27

An alien living among you who wants to celebrate the Lord 's Passover must have all the males in his household circumcised; then he may take part like one born in the land. No uncircumcised male may eat of it. –Exodus 12:48

Household Baptism: One of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. When *she and the members of her household were baptized*, she invited us to her home. – Acts 16:14-15

"The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. But Paul shouted, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!"

The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. He then brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

They replied, "*Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved--you and your household.*" Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; *then immediately he and all his family were baptized.* – Acts 16:27-33

(Yes, I also *baptized the household of Stephanas*; beyond that, I don't remember if I baptized anyone else.) --1 Corinthians 1:16

Appendix 2: A Concise Presentation of Different Arguments for Infant Baptism

We now have enough information that we can briefly look at a few other Presbyterian arguments for infant baptism that are based on the concepts of covenant and circumcision and household.

A Basic 4-Step Covenant-Based Argument (As presented by Rev. Howard Griffith):

1. The church (the covenant community or the people of God) is the same throughout the history of redemptive revelation. The body of believers is organically one throughout all of history because there is only one covenant promise and thus one people of God.
2. The church in the Old Testament was constituted of believers and their “seed” or offspring. The nature of covenant administration is always spelled out as being a covenant made with believers and their children, thus children have always received the sign of the covenant.
3. In the new covenant in Jesus Christ, it is the old covenant that is fulfilled, rather than the old covenant being totally set aside for a completely new and unrelated covenant. Because of this, there is continuity in the significance of circumcision under the old covenant and baptism under the new. Baptism is a non-bloody sign which points back to that to which circumcision pointed ahead (the death and resurrection of Christ). If it was appropriate to give the covenant sign to believers’ children under the old covenant by circumcision, then it is appropriate to give the corresponding covenant sign to children today in baptism.
4. The covenant blessings are extended in Christ and not contracted. Peter’s words at Pentecost indicate an expansion of the covenant to the gentiles, not a contraction of the covenant that would exclude the children of believers.

A key to understanding and accepting this argument: The sacraments are not public professions of faith in Jesus. No one should feel comfortable saying, “Baptism means that I’ve made my decision for Jesus.” The function of baptism is that of a covenant sign, so it points to the grace of the covenant and the saving work of God in the covenant. It does not point to an individual’s faith.

Dr. Edmund Clowney’s Argument from *The Church*²:

1. Jesus commanded His disciples to baptize into the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, thus marking by baptism those who belong to Him. Christian baptism is a naming ceremony. The baptized person is given the name of the triune God. Baptism is the initiating sacrament that marks belonging to the family of God.
2. God gave Abraham circumcision as a sign of His covenant. Circumcision was a ritual of cleansing and dedication because it marked the acknowledgement of God’s Lordship. Abraham was responsible for his household and so all male children in his household were circumcised on the eighth day.
3. Baptism is also a ceremony of cleansing and a sign of the covenant. Baptism represents covenant commitment and the gift of the Spirit. Baptism is an outward sign of an inward seal. The inward seal is that of the Holy Spirit and of union with Christ.
4. The old covenant form of the people of God had the same core covenant as the new covenant people of God: that God will be our God and we His people. Fulfillment in Christ does not destroy that relation, but it brings it to accomplishment.
5. Circumcision marked the claim of God on His children, who were His by creation and by redemption. Paul refers to this claim of God on the children of His covenant when he says that our children are holy (1 Corinthians 7:12-14). Because of God’s claim of ownership, children were given the sign of God’s covenant promise in the old covenant. In the new covenant, the sign of its fulfillment is not denied to them (Acts 2:39).

² Clowney, Edmund P. *The Church*. Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1995, pp. 276-284.

6. In the book of Acts, the place of children in the families of God's people was well understood. Our individualistic culture has a difficult time understanding what was self-evident at the time of the apostolic church. Family baptisms and the welcoming of children by Jesus are two indications that children were included in God's people.

7. If we can present our children to the Father and dedicate them to Him, then we can pronounce the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit on them. If we can do this, then we must do so with the sign of water. This is the only sign that God has given for naming His children as His own.

8. Through God's blessing and His promise, we look forward to the day when our children will confess the Lord for themselves, but they will confess Him who knew them from the beginning and whose name has been on their lips from their first babbled words.

A key to understanding and accepting this argument: The church is the company of all those whom God has claimed for Himself. Those who bear the name of God and who are claimed as God's children are included in His church unless they decide to reject His ownership and leave His church.

John Murray's Argument from *Christian Baptism*³:

1. Baptism is the sign and seal of union with Christ and His body, the church. Not only is it union with Christ, but it is also union with the Father and the Holy Spirit, as the recipient is baptized into the full triune name of God. Also involved in the significance of baptism is the idea of purification from the defilement and guilt of sin (John 3:5 and Titus 3:5 and 1 Cor. 6:11).

2. The church is the body of Christ, comprised of all of those who have been regenerated and joined to Christ by faith. However, no man is able to accurately judge regeneration in another, and the Lord alone knows those who are His. For this reason, we must recognize an aspect of invisibility to the church. Yet the church is also a visible entity governed by human beings. These humans who govern the church are given the responsibility of including and excluding people from membership in the church, but they must do so according to the standards Christ has given.

3. The most obvious and clear criteria for admission into the church is a credible profession of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord. Since baptism is the sign and seal of membership in the church, it must be given to those who make the required profession of faith, even if those people are not really regenerate. Regeneration is something no man can judge, for it is known to God alone.

4. Another key characteristic of the church is that it is generically one in both the Old and New Testament ages. While the form of the church and the administration of membership in the church have been radically transformed by the coming of Christ and the gift of the Spirit, the church in the Old Testament is still the church, and there is only one church. In fact, we can see that the church of the New Testament is really founded on the Abrahamic covenant (Galatians 3) and is the extension and unfolding of that covenant. The church is not two bodies, one old and one new, but one plant with many branches.

5. The church under the Old Testament included not only all believers, but also their infant children. Circumcision was the sign of "church membership" in the old covenant and was given to the infant children of believers. Circumcision symbolized union with God, the removal of defilement, and was the sign given to Abraham to seal the righteousness by faith he had earlier demonstrated. These three things which circumcision symbolized are today signed and sealed in baptism.

6. If the children of believers on the Old Testament received the full sign of covenant blessing in circumcision, why should we expect any different in the new covenant, especially since the new covenant

³ Murray, John. *Christian Baptism*. Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1980.

represents an expansion of the covenant blessings given to Abraham, not a contraction of them? If infants are excluded from receiving baptism, it would represent such a huge change in covenant administration that we should expect some explicit teaching in the New Testament explaining this reversal. Yet there is no evidence that the inclusion of children in the covenant was revoked under the new covenant. In the absence of any such evidence, we must believe that baptism continues to be appropriate for the infant children of believers, just as circumcision was in the old covenant.

7. Even though baptism is a sign of covenant union and communion, it does not follow that everyone who receives the sign is an actual heir of eternal life. Those who bear the sign and seal of grace may not necessarily bear the grace that is thus signified and sealed. This is not unique to infant baptism, for the same is true of adult or “believers” baptism, too. We should see in this—just as we do in church membership in general—that there is a difference between the secret operation of God’s grace and the God-appointed method of human administration of the covenant. The requirements given to men for administering the covenant cannot be perfect knowledge of the secret operation of God’s spirit.

8. The infant children of those who make a credible profession of faith should be baptized, not because we know they are “saved,” but because God has told us to administer the sign and seal of the covenant in that way. The fact that God has instituted it is sufficient grounds for administering it. The institution of God says that we should baptize adults based on a credible profession of faith, and that we should also baptize the infant children of such adults. Once such children have been baptized, they should be received as the children of God because that is what God tells us to do. (Those who see a problem in this must also see a problem in God’s commandment that Ishmael and Esau be circumcised, even though they were neither elect nor regenerate.)

9. There is also significant circumstantial corroborating evidence for baptizing infants:

- ✓ The welcoming of the little children by Jesus as evidence that the kingdom of heaven is not just for intelligent adults.
- ✓ The fact that Paul addresses the children of believers in Ephesians and Colossians as saints, and he gives them covenantal duties appropriate to their station in life, namely, obeying their parents.
- ✓ Paul’s teaching about the sanctified status of the children of even one believing parent in 1 Cor. 7:14.
- ✓ The household baptisms in the New Testament.
- ✓ The address of Peter at Pentecost and the declaration that “the promise is to you and to your children.”

A key to understanding and accepting this argument: The church, although it is defined as the body of believers, is made up of a mixture of those who are truly united to Christ and those who only externally appear to be united to Christ. This mixture will always characterize the church because God has placed the responsibility for governing the church in the hands of human beings.

Pierre Marcel’s Argument from *The Biblical Doctrine of Infant Baptism*⁴:

1. God’s eternal covenant of grace is His sovereign plan to redeem a people for Himself, for His own glory and for the good of man.

⁴ Marcel, Pierre Ch. *The Biblical Doctrine of Infant Baptism*. Cambridge, England: James Clarke and Co., 1953, 1981.

2. By sovereign decree, God decides that the children of believers shall be included in His covenant. For the time of Abraham onwards, for a period of 2,000 years, children were expressly received into the church from the time of their birth, if they were born of Jewish parents, or as minors, if they belonged to families of which the father had been converted to Judaism.

3. The children of believers are heirs of all the promises of the covenant. They are separate from the world and are members of God's kingdom, just as baptized converts are. This is supported by four things:

- ✓ Christ regards children as members of the covenant, members of His kingdom, and of the Church when He welcomes them in Matthew 19:13 and in other places.
- ✓ Both Peter and Paul in the book of Acts uphold the continuation of family solidarity under the covenant and thus the extension of covenant benefits to children. Peter does this at Pentecost (Acts 2:39) and Paul does it with the Philippian jailer (Acts 16:31).
- ✓ The household baptisms, when viewed in light of the covenant of grace, say more about infant baptism than Baptists would like to admit. The willingness of the Holy Spirit to grant salvation to all the members of the household, without exception, is the clearest demonstration that the Spirit is acting in line with the covenant of grace, which includes family or household solidarity before God.
- ✓ In 1 Corinthians 7:14, Paul affirms that the children of believers are holy.

4. The children of believers are baptized based solely on the fact that they are the children of the covenant and heirs of the promises of the covenant. The covenant is the legal and objective basis for infant baptism. Baptism is the sign, seal and pledge of all the covenant promises and so it is given to infants of believers because they are the rightful heirs of these promises.

5. The ground or basis of baptism is the same for both adults and children. Children are not baptized on the basis of a presumed regeneration and neither are adults. The covenant is the grounds of the baptism of both adults and children. Both professing believers and their children are included in the covenant and thus receive the sign of the covenant.

6. God is sovereign in His choice. He makes decisions and it is not for us to question His methods. The sequence of God's action and then man's response holds true for both adult baptism and infant baptism because, in both cases, faith is the response of man to the initiative of God. The taking hold of a child by God does not depend on the child anymore than does the taking hold by God of an adult. God must first claim a child as His own and then the child will be able to believe. Human faith is always a consequence of the divine decision.

7. God has chosen that the children of believers should be born into the covenant. The children of the covenant have no more choice than the children of Adam. God brings these children under the blessings and obligations of the covenant by His sovereign will.

8. In order for a child's later choice about God to be based on the truth, he must know that God has chosen to count him among the members of the covenant. His choice then involves either the rejection of the grace that God has already given or the acceptance of this grace and the confirmation of the covenant. If a child does not know his proper standing before God, he cannot understand the nature of his choice. When a child rejects the covenant, the choice is to revolt against what God has already done.

9. The New Testament accounts of the baptisms of adults, which show that faith and repentance precede baptism, do not prove anything regarding the baptism of children. Baptists want to use the accounts of adult baptisms in the book of Acts to form a binding rule without exception that would apply to all

baptisms. They refuse to see any difference between an unconverted adult and a child born to Christian parents. God himself made a distinction between these two groups when He gave the guidelines for the administration of circumcision. A few baptism narratives in the book of Acts do not cancel a fundamental distinction that God has established. Abraham needed to believe God before he received the sign of circumcision, but Isaac received the sign at birth before he was able to express faith.

A key to understanding and accepting this argument: God is sovereign in salvation and in covenant administration.