

Discourse

Theology

**The Biblical Doctrine of Covenantal Infant
Baptism**

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The Biblical Doctrine of Covenantal Infant Baptism

The Lord Jesus Christ as the sole king and head of his Church has appointed two sacraments in the New Testament to continue to the end of the world. These are Baptism and the Lord's Supper and both have been the subject of much contention. With respect to Baptism, controversy has raged concerning its meaning, subjects and mode. In this discourse we are concerned with the subjects of Baptism and in relation to the doctrine of covenant Children.

Churches that hold to Baptist Theology argue that only adults who make a profession of faith have a right to Christian Baptism. They lay much emphasis on texts such as *Mk 16:16, Acts 2:38*. In opposition to this Paedobaptists believe that not only should adults professing faith be baptised but also the children of such. This was the position adopted by the Westminster Assembly and set down in the Confession of Faith chapter 28, paragraph 4 '*Not only those that do actually profess faith in and obedience unto Christ, but also the infants of one or both believing parents are to be baptised;*' and also in the Shorter Catechism answer 95 '*Baptism is not to be administered to any that are out of the visible Church, till they profess their faith in Christ and obedience to him, but the infants of such as are members of the visible church are to be baptised.*'

This position is widely rejected in evangelical Churches today and one the main reasons for this is that there is a fundamental misunderstanding of the true relationship between the Old and New Testaments. Biblical scholars have either moved completely away from Covenant Theology¹ or hold a form of it that still drives a wedge between that which is essentially one. We therefore turn to consider the true relationship between the Testaments.

1. The Unity Between the Testaments

When we approach Scripture we must begin, not with Matthew's account of the Gospel but with the book of Genesis. Only when we make this our starting point will we understand redemptive history and see that there is a fundamental unity between the Old and New Testaments.

(i) There is one Covenant of Grace

It has pleased God to order all his dealings with men upon a covenantal basis. Witsius defines the scriptural concept of a covenant as '*an agreement between God and man about the way of obtaining consummate happiness; including a commination of eternal destruction, with which the contemner*

¹ Covenant Theology is '...The rediscovery of New Testament theology by the Reformed churches, which represents the whole of the Scriptures being covered by two Covenants.' (Alan Cairns, Dictionary of Theological Terms, p103. Ambassador 1998). These two Covenants are not the Old and New Covenants but 'The Covenant of Works' and 'The Covenant of Grace.'

*of the happiness, offered in that way, is to be punished.'*² Robertson condenses and simplifies this idea stating that it is '*a bond of life and death (or blood) sovereignly administered.*'³

In the Old Testament there are six Covenants referred to - the Adamic *Gen 2-3*; Noahic *Gen 6-9*; Abrahamic *Gen 12-17*; Mosaic *Ex 19*; Davidic *2Sam 7* and the New Covenant *Jer 31*. In reality these covenants represent just two, the Covenant of Works and the Covenant of Grace. The *Covenant of Works* was established with Adam and all his posterity wherein God promised eternal life to him upon the condition of perfect obedience. The punishment for disobedience was death *Gen 2:17*, and when he sinned this death entered into the world and passed upon all men.⁴ The *Covenant of Grace* is the basis upon which God saves sinners. In it he promises eternal life upon condition of faith in Christ. This covenant is one from Genesis to Revelation, from the Fall of man to the consummation of all things. The Noahic, Abrahamic and Mosaic Covenants etc. are different administrations of the one covenant of grace. Likewise the New Covenant of *Jeremiah 31*, fulfilled in the New Testament, is not new in essence but only in its form of administration.⁵ The Covenant of Grace is therefore revealed progressively in Scripture with each covenantal epoch bringing further and clearer presentations of God's purpose of Redemption.

The unity of the Covenant in both the Old and New Testaments is demonstrated in that its promise was the same (*Ex 19:4-6 cf 1Pet 2:5,9; Jer 31:33cf 2Cor 6:16*);⁶ its appropriating organ was the same – faith (*Gen 15:6 cf Rom 4:3*); and its object of faith was the same – Christ (*John 8:56; Acts 2:25-32; Heb 4:2*). It is for this reason that Paul in writing to the Galatians can say that Christians are made partakers of the blessing of Abraham *Gal 3:8, 9, 14*.

(ii) *There is One Church*

Since there is but one covenant of grace it follows that the Church of God is one in all ages. We state this in opposition to the view that the Church began on the day of Pentecost and is exclusively a New Testament entity. In the New Testament the Greek *ekklhsia* is the word translated Church. It is formed from the preposition *ek* meaning 'out of' and the verb *kalew* meaning 'to call.' Therefore, etymologically *ekklhsia* means 'called out,' but when it is used in the New Testament in a religious sense Thomas Witherow states 'it has always one meaning and one only – an

² Witsius, H. *The Economy of the Covenants Between God and Man*, Vol 1, p42-5. den Dulk Christian Foundation 1990

³ Robertson, O. P. *The Christ of the Covenants*, p4. P & R 1980.

⁴ Romans 5:12

⁵ See The Westminster Confession of Faith 7:5-6 which concludes '...There are not therefore two covenants of grace differing in substance, but one and the same under various dispensations.'

⁶ This covenant promise is summarised in the repeated declaration '*I will be your God and ye shall be my people.*' *Gen 17:7; Jer 31:33; Ezekiel 34:23; 2Cor 6:16, 18; Heb 8:10; Rev 21:3.*

*assembly of the people of God – a society of Christians.*⁷ It is used of a gathering of saints in a house *Col 4:15*; in a city *Acts 11:22*; in the whole earth *1Cor 12:28*; and of the Church in earth and heaven *Eph 5:25*.

The last two texts above highlight a vital distinction in our understanding of the Church. This is what we refer to as the Visible and Invisible Church. Bannerman cautions that we are not to understand these as two separate churches, but rather ‘the same Church under two different characters.’⁸ The Invisible Church ‘consists of the whole number of the elect who are vitally united to Christ the head and to one another.’⁹ The Visible Church on the other hand ‘consists of all those who profess the faith of Christ, and their children.’ It is by public profession and obedience to Christ that the Church is made manifest in the world and so the Invisible Church gains expression in the Visible Church.

This Church began in the Garden of Eden. If the Church is an assembly of the people of God and if the whole number of the elect are found in it, then Adam must have been a member of the Church for he embraced salvation through the promised seed of the woman *Gen 3:15, 21*. Furthermore Israel was the Church. Abraham was ‘called out’ of Ur of the Chaldees (*Gen 12:1*) into covenant with God, and he with his family became the Visible Church. This family went down into Egypt and grew into a great nation whom God Redeemed and gave them his law, the priesthood and later a monarchy. One of the titles given to Israel was ‘*the congregation of the LORD*’ *Deut 23:1-3*. The Hebrew phrase *בְּקִהְלֵי יְהוָה* is translated in the Greek Old Testament (Septuagint) as ‘*ekklesian Kuriou*,’¹⁰ meaning the Church of the Lord. So Israel is identified as the Church.

This is confirmed in the New Testament. In *Matthew 18:15-17*, the Lord Jesus Christ instructs his disciples concerning the correct process of discipline among believers. When private conference has failed and with it, a private meeting in the presence of witnesses, the matter is to be taken to ‘*the Church*’ *v17*. Christ was speaking prior to the day of Pentecost and the Church he referred to was the ecclesiastical government established in Israel. So Christ called Israel the Church. Then in *Acts 7:38* Stephen, in giving his defence before the Sanhedrin, refers to Israel as ‘*the church in the wilderness*.’ Another key passage is found in *Romans 11:15-24* where Paul, having shown that the casting off of Israel is not total (*v1-5*), proves that it is not final either. He uses the figure of an olive tree from which Israel, who were the natural branches, were cut off for unbelief (*v17, 20*).

⁷ Witherow, T. *The Apostolic Church*, p13. FPP 1997.

⁸ Bannerman, J. *The Church of Christ Vol 1*, p29. BOT 1974.

⁹ *ibid*.

¹⁰ *The Septuagint with Apocrypha in Greek and English*, p261-262. Hendrickson 1999.

The Gentiles, depicted by wild olive branches, have been grafted into this olive tree but Israel shall be grafted in again to *'their own Olive tree'* v24. The Olive tree must represent the Visible Church because the Invisible Church allows no cutting off and grafting in again of its members. This one tree with both Jewish and Gentile branches teaches the unity of the Church in all ages.

2. Children of the Covenant and Baptism

Having established that there is an essential unity between the Old and New Testaments; that there is one Covenant of Grace and that the Church is one in all ages, we turn our attention to the membership of the Church – God's Covenant Community. Douglas Wilson has rightly noted that *'the debate about infant Baptism is fundamentally a debate about children.'* In particular our concern is with the children of believers and so he asks *'What does the Bible teach about the children of believers as a class?'*¹¹ One thing that is apparent from scripture is that the children of believers are recognised as members of the Church in both the Old and New Testaments.

(i) Children in the Old Testament.

a) Children were included in the promise of the Covenant in the Old Testament.

The first thing that we highlight concerning children in the Old Testament is that they were included in the covenant promise. This is clear from how God dealt with Noah. We read that *'Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord'* Gen 6:8 yet not only was he found in the Ark, but his family with him 6:18. Then, after the flood abated God established his covenant with Noah and included his children.

'And God spake unto Noah, and to his sons with him saying, And I, behold I establish my covenant with you, and with your seed after you' Gen 9:8-9.

The same is true of the Abrahamic covenant in which the gospel was revealed more clearly than in all that went before. *'It is a fact beyond dispute'* says Prof John Murray *'that the covenant made with Abraham included the infant offspring of Abraham.'*¹² God said to him.

'And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee and to thy seed after thee' Gen 17:7

¹¹ Wilson, D. *'Baptism and Children: Their Place in the Old and New Testaments'* in *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*, p287. P&R 2003 ed. Gregg Strawbridge.

¹² Murray, J. *Christian Baptism*, p48. P&R 1974.

When the Mosaic covenant was solemnly inaugurated at the end of Israel's wilderness wanderings, the congregation gathered before the Lord included children. God recognised the whole congregation as party to that covenant which was the same as that sworn with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (*Deut 29:10-13*).

'Ye stand this day all of you before the LORD your God; your captains of your tribes, your elders, and your officers, with all the men of Israel, your little ones, your wives, and thy stranger that is in thy camp, from the hewer of thy wood unto the drawer of thy water: That thou shouldest enter into covenant with the LORD thy God, and into his oath, which the LORD thy God maketh with thee this day: That he may establish thee to day for a people unto himself, and that he may be unto thee a God, as he hath said unto thee, and as he hath sworn unto thy fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.'

The Davidic Covenant is also not without reference to succeeding generations. In *1 Chronicles chapter 17* Nathan the Prophet reveals to David God's purpose for his son Solomon. God says '*I will establish his throne forever*' v12. The Psalmist Ethan elaborates on this covenant promise in *Psalms 89*.

'I have made a covenant with my chosen, I have sworn unto David my servant, thy seed will I establish forever, and build up thy throne to all generations Selah' v3-4

'Once have I sworn by my holiness that I will not lie unto David. His seed shall endure for ever, and his throne as the sun before me. It shall be established for ever as the moon, and as a faithful witness in heaven. Selah' v35-37.

From this it is clear that children were included in the promise of the covenant in the Old Testament. Indeed we could summarise that promise as '*[I will] be a God unto thee and to thy seed after thee*' *Gen 17:7*.

b) Children received the Sign of the Covenant in the Old Testament.

Not only were the children in Old Testament times included in the covenant promise, God commanded that the male children should receive the sign of this covenant.

'And God said unto Abraham, Thou shalt keep my covenant therefore, thou, and thy seed after thee in their generations. This is my covenant, which ye shall keep, between me and you and thy seed after thee; Every man child among you shall be circumcised. And ye shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin; and it shall be a token of the covenant betwixt me and you. And he that is eight days old shall be circumcised among you, every man child in your generations, he that is born in the house, or bought with money of any stranger, which is not of thy seed. He that is born in thy house, and he that is bought with thy money, must needs be circumcised: and my covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant' Gen 17:9-13.

God commanded Abraham to circumcise himself together with all the males in his household. This was appointed to be a perpetual ordinance in Israel to be performed on each male child when he was eight days old. We must be careful not to reduce our view of circumcision to a mere badge of national identity specific to the nation of Israel. What was it then?

First of all it was a sign and seal of the covenant of grace as is clear from what Paul writes in *Rom 4:11*. There we are told that Abraham's circumcision was a *'seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had yet being uncircumcised.'* Mark Ross comments on this 'Paul is saying that circumcision is a sign and seal of the righteousness Abraham had by faith.'¹³ We might say it was the guarantee to Abraham of the truth of God's promise that righteousness was his on the basis of faith, which faith is the instrumental cause.

Secondly, circumcision signified cleansing from sin. In *Isaiah 52:1* God associates uncircumcision with uncleanness *'...there shall no more come into thee the uncircumcised and the unclean.'* In circumcision, writes Brian Chapell 'the removal of the foreskin from the male reproductive organ signified the removal of spiritual uncleanness from God's people...'¹⁴ According to Paul it signified a *'...putting off the body of the sins of the flesh...'* *Col 2:11*. The physical act itself necessarily involved the shedding of blood and therefore prefigured the work of Christ in the removal of our sins.

The third thing symbolised by circumcision was the spiritual renewal of the soul in the new birth. God warned Israel repeatedly that circumcision was more than a mere physical rite and that it rather

¹³ Ross, M. E. 'Baptism and Circumcision as Signs and Seals' in *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*, p93. P&R 2003. Ed. Greg Strawbridge.

¹⁴ Chapell, B. 'A Pastoral Overview of Infant Baptism' in *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*, p12 P&R. 2003. Ed. Greg Strawbridge.

pointed to the requirement of a circumcised heart. He commands his people '*Circumcise the foreskins of your heart and be ye no more stiffnecked*' Deut 10:16. Later in the same book he makes them understand that this was in fact the work of God '*And the LORD thy God will circumcise thine heart, and the heart of thy seed, to love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, that thou mayest live.*' Deut 30:6. C. G. Kirkby remarks 'a promise of power from God was added to the command... just in the same way as promises of grace in the New Testament are added to commands of duty.'¹⁵

Fourthly circumcision was a sign of consecration and union. In Genesis chapter 17 the idea of consecration is prominent. God commands Abraham to '*walk before me and be thou perfect*' Gen 17:1. Abraham and his seed had to keep covenant with God not only in observing the rite of circumcision but in living a life in conformity to his will. Mark Ross writes 'To use the language of the New Testament, Genesis 17 is a call to discipleship. Abraham's circumcision thus signified his consecration to God.'¹⁶ However, we should remember that what we are dealing with here is primarily God's covenant with man and not man's covenant with God. Circumcision is therefore the sign not only of Abraham's consecration to God, but God's consecration to him. It signified to Abraham and to his seed that God had set them apart to himself and promised to them life and salvation.¹⁷ When this covenant was kept by the believing Israelite (*Gen 15:6, Rom 4:3*) the soul was brought into a relationship of union with Christ summarised in the promise '*I will be your God and you shall be my people.*'¹⁸ This promise expresses of the consecration of God to his people and of them to him.

Circumcision was evidently more than an emblem to identify the nation of Israel; it was full of symbolical meaning and spiritual significance. Yet God commanded that infants in Israel were to receive this sign of circumcision. There is no warrant in Scripture for saying that circumcision meant one thing for adults and another for children, it had the same meaning for both and therefore children in the Old Testament received the sign of the covenant of Grace.

c) Children were members of the Church in the Old Testament.

We have previously shown that there is one Church in all ages and that consequently Israel in the Old Testament was a special nation in the sense that it was the Church in that period of history. The Church is built upon the covenant of grace, in particular upon the person and work of the mediator

¹⁵ Kirkby, C. G. Signs and Seals of the Covenant of Grace, p59. Billing and Sons, Worcester 1988.

¹⁶ Ross, M. E. 'Baptism and Circumcision as Signs and Seals' in The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism, p104. P&R 2003. Ed. Greg Strawbridge.

¹⁷ Westminster Confession of Faith chapter 7:3.

¹⁸ Gen 17:7; Jer 31:33; Ezekiel 34:23; 2Cor 6:16, 18; Heb 8:10; Rev 21:3.

of that covenant – the Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore from the Old Testament inclusion of children in the covenant promise and in the application of the covenant sign to them, we can conclude that children were regarded as members of the Church. This is further proved by a consideration of the practical significance of circumcision.

Our examination of circumcision to this point has focused on its spiritual significance as a sign and seal of the covenant of grace. It did however serve a practical purpose within the Old Testament Church which can be considered in two ways. First of all it was the initiatory rite of the Church and was administered upon reception into Church membership. For this reason when a man from a heathen nation was converted to faith in Jehovah he had to be circumcised before he could keep the Passover. He was circumcised as a believer in the way that Abraham was, and like Abraham all his male children were circumcised also.

‘And when a stranger shall sojourn with thee, and will keep the passover to the LORD, let all his males be circumcised, and then let him come near and keep it; and he shall be as one that is born in the land: for no uncircumcised person shall eat thereof’ Ex 12:48.

The Second practical function that circumcision served was to mark the boundary of the Church in the Old Testament. Kirkby writes ‘It was ordained to be a discriminating mark between God’s covenant people and all others in the world who were strangers to the covenant (*Eph 2:12*).’¹⁹ In *Genesis 17:14* this is seen in the example of the man in Israel who refused circumcision for his children ‘*that soul shall be cut off from his people, he hath broken my covenant.*’ He was to be excommunicated from the Church by his removal from the fellowship of the people of God and from all the promises, privileges and blessings belonging to them.²⁰ Calvin comments on this text ‘...God, indeed, will not acknowledge those as among his people who will not bear the mark and token of adoption.’²¹ So circumcision was used by God to distinguish between the Church and the world who were the circumcision and uncircumcision respectively (*1Sam 14:6, 17:26, Col 3:11, Eph 2:11*).

Circumcision was the initiatory mark of the Church of God in the Old Testament and it marked the boundary of the Church. Again we note that God required children to receive the sign of

¹⁹ Kirkby, G. C. Signs and Seals of the Covenant, p60.

²⁰ For a discussion of this point see chapter 4 ‘There was an ecclesiastical excommunication of the Jews and what it was’ together with chapter 5 ‘Of the Cutting off from among the people of God, frequently mentioned in the law’ in Aarons Rod Blossoming, George Gillespie, p19-30. Sprinkle publications 1985.

²¹ Calvin. J. Calvin’s Commentaries Vol 1, p458-59. Baker 1998.

circumcision and by this they were ‘sealed and marked as a member of the Church of God as it was at that time.’²² Children were members of the Old Testament Church.

(ii) Children in the New Testament Church.

We move now from the Old Testament into the New to see what the New Testament teaches about the children of believers. If the New Testament remained silent on this subject then we would have to conclude that children today are to be treated as they were in the Old Testament. This is because a vital hermeneutic principle guiding us to a correct understanding of the Bible is that the teaching of the Old Testament still stands unless it has been changed or altered in the New. If we are to view the children of believers differently in the New Testament then we must produce New Testament warrant to prove this. What we find on studying the New Testament is that it is neither silent on the subject of children, neither does it essentially alter the teaching of the Old Testament, but on the contrary, it everywhere confirms what we have learned already concerning the place of children in the Church.

a) Children were included in the promise of the Covenant in the New Testament.

As children were included in the promise of the covenant in the Old Testament (*Gen 17:7*), so they are established in this position in the New.

In the opening chapter of Luke’s Gospel, as he deals with the events surrounding the birth of Christ, we have an interesting passage that relates to the inclusion of Children in the covenant promise. After hearing from the Angel Gabriel of the imminent conception in her womb of Jesus, the Son of the Highest, who would sit on the throne of David (*Luke 1:31-32*), Mary breaks forth into her Magnificat in which she praises God that his mercy ‘*is on them that fear him from generation to generation.*’ (*Luke 1:50*). Luke thus introduces the birth of Christ within the context of the covenant of grace and includes a clear reference to the continuation of God’s dealings with men in a generational manner according to his covenant.

Luke also authored ‘The Acts of the Apostles’ in which we find an account of the day of Pentecost. Jews and proselytes from the nations²³ have gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate the feast of Pentecost. The Apostle Peter, filled with the Holy Ghost, preaches Jesus and the Resurrection to this congregation. His text is *Psalm 16* and *110* which he expounds in the context of the Davidic covenant (*v30*) declaring to them ‘*that God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified,*

²² Marcel, P. CH. The Biblical Doctrine of Infant Baptism, p121. James Clarke & Co. Ltd, 1959.

²³ *Acts 2:9-11* records Jews gathered from at least sixteen nations.

both Lord and Christ v36. His audience were *'pricked in their heart'* and inquired of him the way of salvation. Peter replied in words recorded in v38-39 which include a command to repent accompanied with a promise.

'...Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost. For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call.'

We are concerned with the promise which is *'unto you and to your children.'* 'These words of the apostle Peter' says Joel Beeke 'were spoken at a critical time in Redemptive history.'²⁴ The Old dispensation with its shadows was passing away, the New dispensation of fulfilment had come, and with it great changes were in store for the Church. Beeke continues 'significantly, these words of the Apostle Peter declare that certain things had not changed and would not change in the new era. The pattern of God's dealings with believers and their children, as old as creation itself, would continue as a constitutional principle of the visible Church.'²⁵ We must not forget that Peter was addressing a congregation of Jews. How would they have understood his words? They would have interpreted them in the light of the Old Testament, understanding *'the promise'* as rhetorical shorthand for the covenant of grace²⁶ in which their children were still included. The difference was that the Gospel was now going to all nations in fulfilment of God's promise to Abraham *'In thee shall all families of the earth be blessed'* Gen 12:3.

This is how we must understand Paul's words spoken to the Philippian jailor when he came under similar conviction of sin (Acts 16:30). He was directed to *'believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved and thy house'* v31. On this occasion the promise is addressed to a Gentile, one who was *'afar off'* (Acts 2:39), but it is still *'to you and to your children'* in keeping with the established pattern of the Church in the Old Testament. The jailor is promised salvation by faith alone in Christ and his household is included with him. Therefore the Children of believers as a class have still the peculiar favour of God shown to them in the New Testament by their inclusion in the promise of the covenant. The continuation of this representative principle explains why Paul in writing in *1 Cor 7:14* describes the children of at least one believing parent as *'holy,'* not that they

²⁴ Beeke, J. R. & Lanning, R. B. 'Unto You and to Your Children' in *The Case For Covenantal Infant Baptism*, p49. P&R 2003.

²⁵ *ibid.* p49-50.

²⁶ *ibid.* p55

are automatically Christians but that ‘they are set apart from the world and consecrated to God by virtue of their membership in a covenant household.’²⁷

b) Children are members of the Church in the New Testament.

All three of the Synoptic Gospels record an occasion when mothers who desired to bring their children to the Lord Jesus were prevented from doing so by his disciples. Jesus rebuked the disciples saying ‘*Suffer the little children and forbid them not to come unto me for of such is the kingdom of heaven*’ (Matt 19:14 cf. Mark 10:14, Luke 18:16). These children were of an age young enough to be brought by their mothers, and small enough to be taken up in the arms of Jesus while he blessed them Mark 10:16. Luke’s account tells us that they were ‘*infants,*’ where the word is *breph* which means new born children, infants or a babes.²⁸ Jesus says of these infants ‘*of such is the kingdom of God.*’²⁹ The ‘*kingdom of God*’ is a complex scriptural theme. Hendrickson defines it as ‘God’s kingship, rule or sovereignty, recognised in the hearts and operative in the lives of his people, and effecting their complete salvation, *their constitution as a church* and finally a redeemed universe.’ It is therefore both present and future, in essence it is in the hearts of God’s people (Luke 17:21) but it finds expression on earth in the visible church. Now Christ says ‘*of such is the kingdom of God*’ not merely in a metaphorical sense of those who have a childlike spirit as John Gill argues.³⁰ What Jesus is asserting is ‘that the kingdom of God belongs to little children and that they are members of it.’³¹ They therefore belong to the Church and are to be received into the fellowship of the saints.

In the epistles of Paul to the churches in Ephesus and Colosse what we have said above is confirmed. He addresses his letter to the Ephesians ‘*...to the saints which are at Ephesus and to the faithful in Christ Jesus*’ Eph 1:1 and similarly to the Colossians (cf. Col 1:2). Then in Eph 6:1 and Col 3:20 he addresses children as among those saints, commanding them in each place to be obedient to their parents whose care they are evidently still under (Eph 6:4, Col 3:21). They are addressed as a class within the church in the same way as husbands, wives, servants, masters and parents; and are among those who share ‘*one Lord, one faith, one baptism*’ (Eph 4:5). In addition to children being addressed as ‘*saints,*’ the motive presented with the command for their obedience to parents is ‘*in the Lord for this is right.*’ Paul thus exhorts children to this duty not only out of love to their parents but especially from reverence to the Lord Jesus Christ. Charles Hodge writes

²⁷ Booth, R. Children of the Promise, p134. P&R 1995.

²⁸ Thayer, J. H. The New Thayer’s Greek English Lexicon, p105. Hendrickson 1981.

²⁹ Matthew’s account says ‘*Of such of is the kingdom of heaven*’ which is essentially the same concept as the kingdom of God. For as discussion of this point see W. Hendrickson ‘Commentary on Matthew’ p87, Banner of Truth 1974.

³⁰ Gill, J. Commentary on the Whole Bible, on the Online Bible.

³¹ Murray, J. Christian Baptism, p63. P&R 1974.

of the character of this obedience ‘It should be religious; arising out of the conviction that such obedience is the will of the Lord. This makes it a higher service than if rendered from fear or from mere natural affection.’³² It is an obedience that only a Christian can begin to render as part of his calling to live godly in Christ Jesus. Yet the children of the Church in Ephesus and Colosse, together with the adult church members are expected to meet such a condition (*Eph 6:1 cf. 4:1; 5:1-2, 21-22, 25; 6:5, 9*).

According to the teaching of the New Testament we can safely conclude with the Westminster Confession of faith that the visible Church still consists of ‘...all those throughout the world that profess the true religion, together with their children...’³³ Furthermore, we can take the next step with B. B Warfield and assert ‘According as is our doctrine of the Church, so will be our doctrine of the subjects of Baptism.’³⁴ If the children of believers are members of the visible Church they have a right to Christian Baptism.

c) Children must receive the sign of the Covenant in the New Testament.

In the Old Testament children received the sign of the covenant which was circumcision. In the New Testament this sign has been replaced by baptism which is to be applied to the children of the Church. Baptist theologians commonly object at this point 1. The New Testament does not teach that baptism replaced circumcision. 2. There is no express command in the New Testament to baptise children. We must deal with these objections if we are to establish our case.

In the New Testament Baptism replaced Circumcision.

In the Old Testament, among other rites and ceremonies appointed by God two stand out – Circumcision and the Passover, which were both signs and seals of the Covenant of grace. The Passover signified Redemption accomplished by Christ while circumcision pictured the application of that Redemption by Christ through the Holy Spirit. In the New Testament there are also two signs and seals of the covenant of grace – the Lord’s supper and Baptism³⁵ – which also represent the accomplishment and application of redemption respectively. It is beyond dispute that the Passover was replaced in the New Testament by the Lord’s supper. Both are symbolic meals and Christ appointed the latter on the very night that he had gathered with his disciples to celebrate the Passover (*Matt 26:17-30*). This was the same night in which he was betrayed (*Matt 26:47-50; 1Cor*

³² Hodge, C. The Epistle to the Ephesians, p357. Banner of Truth 1964.

³³ Westminster Confession of Faith Chapter 25, Paragraph 2.

³⁴ Warfield, B.B. ‘The Polemics of Infant Baptism’ Works Vol 9, p389. Baker 2003.

³⁵ Shorter Catechism Q&A 93. Proof texts Matt 28:19; Matt 26:26.

11:23), the eve of his death by which he accomplished the Redemption symbolised in these rites. It is clear then that in the New Testament, the Passover is replaced by the Lord's Supper.

We have already established the spiritual significance of the Old Testament rite of circumcision.³⁶ When we pass into the New Testament we find that Baptism has the same meaning. The sign in every sacrament is sacramentally united to the grace it signifies and the meaning of circumcision and baptism can be summarised by two fundamental concepts: cleansing from sin and union with Christ, or cleansing and consecration.³⁷ Robert Booth has helpfully tabulated the similarities between baptism and circumcision as follows.³⁸

Circumcision and Baptism	References
Are initiatory rites	Gen 17:10-11; Matt 28:19; Acts 2:38-39; 8:12-13
Signify an inward reality	Rom 2:28-29; Col 2:11-12; Phil 3:3
Picture the death of the old man and sin	Rom 6:3-7; Col 2:11-12
Represent repentance	Jer 4:4; 9:25; Lev 26:40-41; Acts 2:38
Represent regeneration	Rom 2:28-29; Titus 3:5
Represent justification by faith	Rom 4:11-12; Col 2:11-14
Represent a cleansed heart	Deut 10:16; 30:6; Is 52:1; Acts 22:16; Titus 3:5-7
Represent union and communion with God	Gen 17:7; Ex 19:5-6; Deut 7:6; Heb 8:10
Indicate citizenship in Israel	Gen 17:4; Gal 3:26-29; Eph 2:12-13; 4:5
Indicate separation from the world	Ex 12:48; 2Cor 6:14-18; Eph 2:12
Can lead to either blessings or curses	Rom 2:25; 1Cor 10:1-12; 11:28-30.

From these profound similarities it should be apparent that baptism has replaced circumcision in the New Testament Church. However, some are not convinced by this and demand more. They require a direct scriptural statement proving that baptism is indeed the replacement of the Old Covenant sign. John Piper argues that the council at Jerusalem (*Acts 15*) provided a perfect opportunity to provide such a statement and concludes that the silence of that passage, and the rest of the New Testament, casts grave doubt over the paedobaptist position.³⁹ It would however be unsafe to draw such a conclusion from the silence of *Acts 15*, especially when the New Testament does in fact address the question in *Col 2:10-12*.

³⁶ See above

³⁷ Ross, M. E. 'Baptism and Circumcision as Signs and Seals' in *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*, p100. P&R 2003.

³⁸ Booth, R. R. *Children of the Promise*, p181. P&R 1995.

³⁹ Piper, J. 'How do circumcision and Baptism correspond?' www.desiringgod.org/library/sermons/99/082999.html

‘And ye are complete in him, which is the head of all principality and power: In whom also ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ: Buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with him through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him from the dead.’

When we introduce this text it is immediately objected that the baptism and circumcision spoken of are not the physical sacraments, but spiritual baptism and circumcision. We heartily agree, but since the external rites symbolise those spiritual realities this passage is extremely relevant to our question. Paul informs the Colossians that they are complete in Christ (v10) assuring them that they don’t require in addition to observe Judaistic rituals in order to be saved. He goes on to demonstrate that they had in reality received a spiritual circumcision, *‘made without hands...the circumcision of Christ.’* What was this? It can only be the new birth which was spoken of in the Old Testament as the circumcision of the heart (*Deut 10:16*). But Paul continues to describe the same experience under the figure of baptism, thus identifying the two signs as symbolising the same grace. Not only is it possible, but we must conclude that if the spiritual realities are the same then the physical rites symbolise the same thing and therefore the New Testament does expressly prove that baptism replaced circumcision. The paedobaptist therefore argues that if baptism and circumcision signify and seal the same truths of God, and if the children of believers are members of the covenant people in the New Testament, then those children are entitled to the sign of the covenant.⁴⁰

A New Testament Command to Baptise Children

Key to the argument against infant baptism is the fact that it lacks an express New Testament command, neither do we find one example of an infant being baptised. We readily admit that there is no express New Testament command, but from what we have considered to this point it should be evident that to demand such a statement as the only warrant acceptable would be an over simplification of the issue and hermeneutically unsound. Then with respect to the absence of an example of infant baptism in the New Testament we note that there is no example of a child growing up in a Christian home and being baptised upon profession of faith as an adult, and that this is on the back of two millennia of Church history when children received the equivalent Old Testament sign while in their infancy. The Baptist has no example of his view, neither will he find a possible instance of this. He assumes that the New Testament cases of the baptism of adult,

⁴⁰ Ross, M. E. ‘Baptism and Circumcision as Signs and Seals’ in *The Covenantal Case for Infant Baptism*, p100. P&R 2003. Ed Gregg Strawbridge.

gentile converts are sufficient to deal with the question of what we are to do with the children of believers.⁴¹ On the contrary, the paedobaptist points to the New Testament practice of household baptisms to support his case.

Although baptism must have been a very frequent occurrence in the early New Testament Church, surprisingly, there are only twelve instances actually recorded (*Acts 2:41; 8:12, 13, 38; 9:18; 10:48; 16:15, 33; 18:8; 19:5; 1Cor 1:14, 16*). Four of these occasions involved the baptism of households including that of Lydia (*Acts 16:15*), the Philippian jailor (*Acts 16:33*), Crispus (*Acts 18:8*), and the house of Stephanus (*1Cor 1:16*). Two words are translated house in these verses, the masculine *oikos* and the feminine *oikia* which mean either a residence, or the people who dwelt in it.⁴² In Graeco-Roman culture the household referred to the family and therefore included children. Baptist apologists must argue that there were no infants present in any of the households that were baptised, and if children were present they were only baptised upon profession of faith (something that Baptists do not practice today until a child is at least a young adult). In actual fact it cannot be proved that infants were present or not in any of the examples of household baptism found in the New Testament, however their presence remains at least a possibility. Nevertheless, the weight of the argument from household baptisms lies not in wrangling over the presence or absence of infants but in the continuation of the Old Testament practice of applying the sign of the Covenant to households.

In the Old Testament as we have seen Abraham was circumcised at the age of ninety-nine as a believer and his household with him. God called Abraham out of heathenism in Ur of the Chaldees and established his covenant with him (*Gen 12:1-3*), he was in New Testament terms a Gentile convert. Likewise the proselyte who was converted to faith in Jehovah was upon his profession of faith to be circumcised and his household with him (*Ex 12:48*). He was one who was ‘*an alien from the commonwealth of Israel*’ and a ‘*stranger from the covenants of promise,*’ who was ‘*afar off*’ but was now ‘*made nigh*’ (*Eph 2:12-13*). Clearly, the established practice in the Church for centuries was the circumcision of adult converts and their households. In the New Testament baptism has replaced circumcision and significantly it is applied by the apostles to adult converts and their households, and where there were infants present, they too would have been baptised. To the apostles who themselves were Jews, this would have been a perfectly natural application⁴³ and it explains why there is no express warrant given in the New Testament. The sign changed but the

⁴¹ Strawbridge, G. *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*, p5. P&R 2003.

⁴² Watt J. M. ‘The oikos formula’ in *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*, p77. P&R 2003.

⁴³ Murray, J. *Christian Baptism*, p69. P&R 1974.

Old Testament practice simply carried on. We have seen then that the frequent record of household baptisms in the New Testament strongly supports the case for covenantal infant baptism.

Summary and Conclusion.

We have demonstrated from scripture the essential unity that exists between the Old and New Testament age as it is expressed in the unity of the covenant of grace and the Church of God. On that foundation we examined what both the Old and New Testament teaches about children in relation to the covenant of grace, the church and the signs and seals of the covenant. In both dispensations they were included in the promise of the covenant, recognised as members of the visible church and in both they have the right to the application of the sign and seal of the covenant. Our conclusion is simple – The children of believers must be baptised. Warfield succinctly sums up the paedobaptist position. ‘The Argument in a nutshell is simply this: God established his Church in the days of Abraham and put children into it. They must remain there until he puts them out. He has nowhere put them out. They are still then members of his Church and as such entitled to its ordinances. Among these ordinances is Baptism, which standing in similar place in the New Dispensation to circumcision in the Old, is like it to be given to children’⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Warfield, B. B. ‘Polemics of Infant Baptism’ in *Studies in Theology* Vol 9 of the Works of B. B. Warfield, p408.