

Baptism – Who's Sign Is It Anyway?

A Theological Paper on Covenant Baptism and the Implications of its Practice

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Infant baptism is firmly rooted in a view of the whole of scripture as covenantal. Outside of God's historical working through covenants, our perception of scripture, and the relationship between Old and New Testaments (Covenants) would be such that we also would hold to the belief that baptism is only for professing adults. However, because of the underlying thread of covenant woven throughout all of scripture, there is most certainly more to what we read than meets the eye. George Marston says it well when he states, *"Our God is a covenant God. All his relations with men are covenantal. He has made covenants with men, and in his dealings with us he works out and calls us to work out the implications of these covenants."*¹

We approach and read scripture through the lens of "Covenant." Webster's dictionary defines "covenant" as being "a written agreement or promise usually under seal between two or more parties." Additionally, Donald Bridge and David Phypers state that, *"All God's covenants are made in grace. He comes to us before we come to him. We do not deserve his mercy. Covenants are ratified with sacrifice and accompanied by visible signs. With Abraham, the covenant-sign was circumcision. The signs of Christ's covenant are baptism and the Lord's Supper."*² These are very important points to be made before we dive into and explore the Biblical justification of infant baptism.

It is also important to note that because the Bible is not absolutely clear about baptism, we must hold our beliefs in humility and with open hands. That being said, after many years of diligent study, I have personally come to believe that covenant baptism is the biblical perspective on baptism. Therefore, my thoughts below are intended to provide argument on behalf of covenant baptism.

The important question to help us determine which perspective we hold to is, *"Whose sign is it?"* Is baptism God's sign (of His Covenant) or is baptism man's sign (of an expression of faith)? If we go back to the very beginning, we read in Genesis 17:10-14, *"This is My covenant which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you; Every male child among you shall be circumcised; and you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of every male child in your generations... And the uncircumcised male child, who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant."* John Sartelle says, *"If we had lived in the Old Testament period, as believing parents, we would have circumcised our children. We thus would have applied the sign of salvation to our infants. After becoming adults, they might have been questioned by a new convert as to when they had been circumcised. Our children would have replied that they were circumcised as infants. No doubt the new believer would have responded happily, 'What a great heritage!'"*³

¹ George W. Marston, *Biblical Baptism* (Suwanee, GA: Great Commission Publications, 1986), 10.

² Donald Bridge and David Phypers, *The Water that Divides*, (Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 1998), 164.

³ John P. Sartelle, *What Christian Parents Should Know About Infant Baptism*, (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1985), 5.

In the New Testament, we can confidently link the sign of circumcision (of God's covenant) to baptism (same covenant, different sign), when we read in Colossians 2:11, *"In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead."* The *"circumcision made without hands"* is referring to water baptism.

If we believe that baptism replaces circumcision, and that circumcision was clearly God's sign, then we must conclude that baptism is God's sign. Additionally, since God demanded that His sign be applied to all of His people (adults and children), then we must also conclude the same of baptism.

To be clear in our understanding, covenant baptism does not guarantee salvation, but it points to the hope of salvation (for those children or disabled persons who are unable to discern their own baptism) or the reality of it (for those adolescents or adults who are able to discern their own baptism).

Did God include the children of believers in the Old Testament covenant? Why would He change His mind in the New Testament? There is, in fact, no place in scripture which tells us that they are no longer included. Paul tells us our *"children are holy"* (1 Corinthians 7). We would assume, had children now been excluded from receiving the covenant sign and seal (which is now baptism), that Jewish Believers during the first century would have made a great uproar as to this unthinkable change. History tells us they did not. Therefore, we can assume in great confidence that no such change ever occurred.

A second question to consider is, *"Do you believe that the children (of believers), who die in their infancy, go to heaven?"* If so, then why would we not believe that children may also receive the sign of the promise that gives them access (through the work of Christ) into heaven? How is it possible that heaven could be granted, but the sign of heaven could be denied? In G.I. Williamson's commentary on the Westminster Confession of Faith, he states, *"All are totally depraved and unable to do anything whatsoever to effect union with God. But God is omnipotent, and he can and does effect this union in his own power. And Jesus Christ said that this saving work is to be found in children, and even in tiny infants (Lk. 18:15). 'For of such is the kingdom of heaven,' he said (Matt. 19:14). If children, and even tiny infants, are members of the kingdom of God (Luke 18:16), then it can scarcely be argued that they do not experience that which baptism signifies and seals."*⁴

An illustration I've used over the years to help explain covenant baptism, is one of an insurance policy. As parents, it's a no brainer that our children are included on our health insurance policies, and they will be included on our policies until they are of the age where they decide to

⁴ G.I. Williamson, *The Westminster Confession of Faith for Study Classes* (Philadelphia, PA: P&R Publishing Co., 1964), 211.

have their own insurance policy. Baptism is our spiritual insurance policy, such that our children are covered and protected under the umbrella of the faith of their parents, until they are of the age to decide for themselves, which is certainly the day that believing parents pray diligently for.

My observation is that those churches and denominations who hold to Believer's baptism, have baby dedication services that look almost identical to infant baptism services, and one of the only differences is that they do not apply the water. Why not? Because they believe that baptism is a sign that represents man's expression of faith, rather than God's sign of His covenant promises.

The Christian community, in large degree, has lost sight of the intention and purpose of baptism. God did not necessarily intend that circumcision and baptism to be incredibly "experiential" practices (though circumcision was quite experiential, but not in the way that we would necessarily desire). Instead, these signs were to be given and received as our response of obedience to the command of God to apply the sign of His Covenant promises, *"to you and to your children."* Today, many of us in the Christian community, view baptism as a *"trophy like"* experience that is to be accompanied by the good decision of faith that has been made by the recipient to follow Jesus. I believe that to be an inaccurate perspective that has flawed our understanding of baptism. Baptism was not given so that we could necessarily have a meaningful experience. Instead, baptism is to be applied to God's people as a sign of His faithfulness to keep His covenant promises that *"He would be our God and we would be His people,"* and it's in the God, of that great and unbelievable reality, that our meaningful experience is found. B.B. Warfield emphasizes that baptism is a picture of grace: *"Every time we baptize an infant we bear witness that salvation is from God, that we cannot do any good thing to secure it, that we receive it from his hands as a sheer gift of his grace, and that we all enter the Kingdom of heaven therefore as little children, who do not do, but are done for."*⁵

As relates to the mode (method) of baptism, I do not believe that there is any evidence in scripture that commands one mode over others. There are many who believe today that immersion is the only acceptable mode of baptism. Several years ago, my wife, Laura, shared with me that when she was baptized as a young girl (age 12 or so), her baptism was delayed for a year and a half because she had tubes in her ears and was not able to go under the water. As I consider this example and the likely inability of disabled, invalid, and elderly people to be immersed in water, I have to believe that the application of the sign of baptism would not be so limiting as to only be accessible to those who have the ability to be immersed, while leaving out those who do not have the ability to be immersed. In the same way, I cannot imagine that God's intention of applying the sign of baptism would be so limiting as to requiring a *"body of water"* to be present, such that people would have to be immersed into it. There are many places and situations throughout this world and throughout history, where baptism is desired, but a large pool of water is not accessible. Does that mean that there is no possibility for baptism to take place? About this, Francis Schaeffer has this to say, *"Sprinkling can be*

⁵ Robert R. Booth, *Children of the Promise*, (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing Co., 1995), 106.

performed anywhere, but if baptism is by immersion only, there are many parts of the world in which Christians must be denied this sacrament. Those in the desert, those in the land of unending cold, and those on beds of sickness cannot be baptized by immersion, even if they want to. The fact is that the position that baptism is by immersion only is not tenable.”⁶

Covenant baptism approaches the hope of salvation of our children with an assumption that their starting point is “*inside of*” God’s covenant promises and blessings, and that if they end up not embracing faith in Christ, it is because they moved away and outside of God’s covenant promises and blessings. Believer’s baptism assumes that the starting point of our children is “*outside of*” God’s Covenant promises and blessings, and that if they end up not embracing faith in Christ, it is less of a surprise because they were never “*inside of*” (and included in) God’s covenant promises and blessings.

A few years ago, a friend of mine asked me the following question as relates to re-baptism and immersion. His question was, “*Our ten year old daughter is getting baptized tomorrow morning and we are all so excited. We have explained the "sprinkling" baptism and it serves the purpose as a sign of the covenant. However, she asked if I could do the "full immersion" style sometime too. As a sister of mine in Christ, I don't feel there would be any issue. But I remembered this being discussed at church, and I am not ordained. This second (immersion) baptism would be more of a family thing. I'm not sure what the right answer is, and I want to honor God and be true to our faith. I greatly respect your thoughts and would appreciate your perspective on this situation.*”

I answered my friend as follows, “*That’s a good question! There are several different ways to respond that I don't think would be wrong. The fact that your daughter is so enthusiastic about her baptism is awesome. If it were Grace (my daughter of similar age), I would ask her why she wants to be immersed and baptized a second time? Most likely, her answer would be about an experience and/or a proclamation. So, I would let it be a theology teaching moment, to let her know that the experience and/or proclamation that she's looking for in an immersion baptism is not necessary, and there's really nothing magical (so to speak) about it. Baptism is God's sign, not ours, so the best thing we can do is to let our lives be the experience and proclamation rather than looking to an "event" (like a second baptism). Sprinkling may be a more beautiful mode (method) of baptism because it is the way that God has chosen to illustrate to us His great love, forgiveness, and cleansing of our sins (Ref: Exodus 24:8, Psalm 51:7, Ezekiel 36:25-27, Hebrews 9:19-22, 10:19-22). My observation is that sprinkling often points to God's grace and work in our lives, while immersion sometimes feels like it emphasizes us and our good "decision" to receive Christ. It's not a bad thing but knowing that even my good decision is a result of God's work in my heart, I'd rather my baptism all point to God.*”

In conclusion, Titus 3:4-6 has this to say about salvation, “*But when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the*

⁶ Francis A. Schaeffer, *Baptism* (Wilmington, DE: TriMark Publishing, 1976), 12.

Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, that having been justified by His grace, we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.” If we believe (as scripture seems to clearly teach) that salvation is of God, from start to finish, then it only seems to make sense that baptism is God’s sign and not ours. When we begin to understand that every part of our salvation is of God, then we also begin to lose interest in having a baptism “*experience*” because our greatest desire is such that God, not us, receives all the glory for our salvation. Baptism is His work and His sign, and we are privileged beyond all comprehension to receive both, by the finished work of Christ on our behalf.

*“Regeneration is the act of God alone. The sinner is dead. Regeneration is that which makes him alive. We cannot say that the sinner is active in his regeneration. He is wholly passive. But as soon as he is regenerated, he is alive. And this means that he is in union with Christ. For in Christ is life.”*⁷ When we understand that baptism is God’s sign of His regenerative work in our lives, the experience we might have been looking for in a baptism moment, is transformed to that of a lifetime.

⁷ G.I. Williamson, *The Westminster Confession of Faith for Study Classes* (Philadelphia, PA: P&R Publishing Co., 1964), 208.