

# The Sacraments: A Reformed Perspective

## Chapter 2: Baptism—The Covenant of Grace and Covenant Continuity

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The topic of baptism is for many believers a difficult and divisive issue. There is disagreement among professing Christians regarding the meaning, the mode and the proper recipients of this sacrament. In our study we will endeavor to answer the many important questions surrounding baptism. Also we will defend the Reformed position on baptism because we believe it is the position supported by Scripture.

This topic is especially important in our day when the Reformed position is by far the minority view among evangelicals in the United States. Why are baptistic views so popular in modern America? There are a variety of ways why believer's baptism dominates evangelical thought and practice.

First, for many the baptistic position seems to be the logical alternative to the sacramentalism of Romanism, high church Anglicanism and Lutheranism. People who have been raised in or are familiar with such communions have never been presented with solid divine warrant or biblical proof for high church definitions of baptism. Such people often conclude that the only two alternatives are practices that are based on church tradition and believer baptism which is at least proof-texted. Most evangelicals are not aware of the Reformed position or the biblical argumentation that lies behind it.

Second, the whole acceptance of aberrant theologies by "evangelical" Christians in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has contributed to the rejection of covenantal Reformed thinking and has provided a theological foundation for believer's baptism. The two doctrines that have done the most to promote believer's baptism are dispensationalism and Arminianism.

Dispensationalism destroys the unity of the covenant of grace, makes the New Covenant church something completely new (plan B, a parenthesis in God's dealings with Israel) and thus severs the organic unity between the church in the Old Testament and the church in the New Covenant era. It completely separates the covenant made with Abraham from its organic connection to and fulfillment in Christ and the New Covenant. Dispensationalism's errors destroy the continuity of the covenant of grace and thus eliminate key foundational arguments for infant baptism. For example, if the New Covenant church is something completely new and has nothing to do with Abraham or the Old Covenant church, then baptism has little or nothing to do with circumcision as an Old Covenant ordinance.

Arminianism with its exaltation of and emphasis upon an act of the human will (e.g., a self-generated faith and decisional regeneration) in appropriating salvation comports well with the idea that baptism must follow an individual's choice. Reformed theology with its emphasis on God's sovereignty in salvation, the Holy Spirit's role in regenerating hearts and causing faith and the promises made to the children of believers is incompatible with the Arminian idea that God cannot change a heart unless that person allows God to do so. The sovereignty of God and the Reformed doctrine of salvation are crucial to infant baptism.

Third, the rise of modernism or "Christian Liberalism" in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries contributed to the acceptance of baptistic views in a few different ways. The rejection of biblical inerrancy and the idea that the Bible is essentially a fallible human document renders all church ordinances negotiable and non-authoritative. Most denominations that

apostatized practiced infant baptism. Without the authoritative Word, infant baptism has no exegetical foundation. It is a church tradition done for sentimental, sociological or pragmatic ecclesiastical reasons only. Further, many or most of the fundamentalists who were diametrically opposed to modernism were Baptists. In many people's eyes conservative, biblical Christianity and baptistic fundamentalist dispensationalism are essentially one and the same thing.

Fourth, a sociological factor that contributed to the rise of baptistic views was American individualism. Religious Jews who lived in biblical times in accordance with Scripture viewed families covenantally as an organic whole. The children of believers were in the covenant and served the same God as their parents. Modern Americans view individual choice as a *summum bonum* (a supreme good). Therefore, each child is often left to determine his own future as an individual rather than fulfill the covenantal bond of the household as a God-glorifying home. (When we turn our attention to the proper recipients of baptism, these areas will receive further analysis in conjunction with the presentation of divine warrant for the Reformed position.)

## The Institution of Baptism

The official institution of baptism by our Lord is found in the Great Commission, "And Jesus came 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 of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age'" (Mt. 28:18-20). Although Christ did institute baptism during His ministry before His death and resurrection (e.g., Jn. 3:22, 26; 4:1, 2) we do not know the relation between this baptism and the trinitarian baptism of Matthew 28. Further, the uniqueness of the baptism of the Great Commission is supported by the fact that it is rooted in the special authority received by the divine-human mediator (the theanthropic Messiah) at the resurrection. This special authority over everything in heaven and on earth is founded upon a completed redemption. Jesus was a king before His resurrection, but after His death on the cross and His victorious resurrection He is king *with power*. He rules over everything and the token of entrance into the kingdom of grace—His church—is baptism into the name of the triune God. Before the resurrection our Lord told His disciples: "Do not go into the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter a city of the Samaritans. But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Mt. 10:5-6). After the resurrection the apostles are ordered to baptize and disciple all the nations (Mt. 28:19). Obviously the baptism prior to the resurrection was not applied outside the boundaries of Israel.

The Great Commission teaches us a number of things regarding baptism. First, baptism under normal circumstances preceded discipleship. Everyone who believes in Jesus and wants to be under His subjection; who wants to follow the Savior-King as an obedient pupil, learner and servant must submit to Christian baptism. Baptism and the discipleship that follows presupposes membership in a local Bible-believing church with elders that are following and teaching the whole counsel of God or all the things that Jesus commanded. "For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and have all been made to drink into one Spirit" (1 Cor. 12:13).

Second, the command to baptize is given to ordained ministers of the gospel. The command was given specifically to the apostles and continues throughout history through their successors, the teaching elders of the church. David Dickson writes,

[3.] Christ has instituted a ministry of teachers and rulers of his Church to continue from his resurrection to the end of the world; for he says, *Go ye, make disciples, of the world...* [4.] The community of ministers and rulers of the Church respective have all the nations of the earth under their charge to gather disciples to Christ out of them.... [6.] The community of believers, or the body of covenanted and baptized disciples, are not the subject of this authority granted for gathering of Churches, administration of doctrine, sacraments, discipline and other public ordinances: but the community of ministers, teachers, and rulers, contra-distinguished from the body of disciples which is taught and governed; for it is said, *Go ye, my ministers, make ye disciples, baptize ye and teach ye them...* [9.] The ministers of the gospel, teaching and ruling elders respective, are the true successors of the apostles in the dispensation of the doctrine, sacraments and discipline appointed by Christ, for they are appointed in the same patent with the apostles, and spoken to in the person by Christ, saying, *I will be with you to the end of the world.*<sup>1</sup>

Matthew Henry concurs,

The commission he gives to those whom he sent forth; *Go ye therefore*. This commission is given, (1.) To the *apostles* primarily, the chief ministers of state in Christ's kingdom, the architects that laid the foundation of the church. Now those that had followed Christ in the regeneration, were *set on thrones* (Luke xxii.) (2.) It is given to their successors, the ministers of the gospel, whose business is to transmit the gospel from age to age, to the end of the world in time, as it was theirs to transmit it from nation to nation, to the end of the world in place, and no less necessary. The Old-Testament promise of a gospel ministry is made to a succession (Isa. lix. 21); and this must be understood, otherwise how could Christ be with them always to the *consummation of the world*? Christ, at his ascension, gave not only apostles and prophets, but *pastors and teachers*, Eph. iv. 11.<sup>2</sup>

The Bible teaches that the Great Commission was delivered specifically to the eleven apostles (see Mt. 28:16; Mk. 16:14-15; Ac. 1:1-2, 8; 9:15); that those who preach the gospel must be sent (Rom. 10:14-15; Ac. 13:1-4). Further, every example of gospel preaching in the book of Acts involved ordained officers (Ac. 6:8-7:53; 8; 15:22, 32, 40ff; 13:2-4; 14:14). Although some of these men are first identified as deacons (e.g., Stephen, Philip) further study indicates that these deacons were also evangelists who could preach and work miracles (cf. Ac. 6:8; 1 Th. 2:2, 6; Rom. 16:21; 2 Tim. 2:2, 15; 4:2, 5; 1 Tim. 1:14; 4:6; 6:20; Col. 4:10). George Gillespie writes, "We have clear and convincing examples in the New Testament, that the sacraments were administered by public ministries, called and appointed thereunto, as baptism by John (John i. 33, 'He hath sent me to baptize'), and frequently by the apostles in the story of the Acts. The Lord's supper, administered by Christ himself (whose example in things imitable we are bidden [to] follow, who also himself then commanded *touto poiete, this do*); and by the Apostle Paul, Acts xx. 7,11. So 'the breaking of bread' is joined with 'the apostles' doctrine and fellowship,' Acts ii. 42.... So that a lawful minister may in faith administer, and the receivers may receive from him in faith, the sacraments having Scripture warrants for so doing; but there is neither any commission from Christ to such as are not church officers to administer the sacraments, nor can there any clear example be found in the New Testament, of administering either the one sacrament or the other by any person who can be proved not to have been a

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<sup>1</sup> David Dickson, *Matthew* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth [1647] 1981), 414-415.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (McLean, VA: McDonald, n. d.), 5:446.

minister lawfully called and ordained. Therefore such persons cannot in faith administer, nor others in faith receive from them, either baptism or the Lord's supper."<sup>3</sup>

Third, the church is ordered to baptize the nations. Whole nations are to be baptized, brought under the subjection of Christ and disciplined. The idea that the Bible is a book to be used only for private, family and church devotional use; that the earth, culture and civil governments are somehow outside the realm of Christ's comprehensive authority is a reduction of Christianity. It is totally unscriptural.

Fourth, Christian baptism is a baptism into the name of the triune God: "baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit" (Mt. 28:19). This formula teaches us that baptism primarily signifies and seals our union with Christ in His life, death and resurrection, which secures our personal relationship with the triune God of Scripture. God is one God revealed in three persons. Christian baptism signifies union with the Savior. This mystical union secures all the benefits of Jesus accomplished redemption. (The meaning of baptism will be analyzed in more detail below as we compare baptism to circumcision).

In the book of Acts baptisms are administered "upon" (Ac. 2:38), "into" (Ac. 8:36; 19:5) or "in" (Ac. 10:48) the name of Jesus. This fact raises the question of whether or not the baptismal formula of Matthew 28:19 is always required or perhaps can be alternated with the name of Jesus. The orthodox churches have almost universally held the position that the Trinitarian formula must be retained. Theologians and commentators have dealt with the baptism in Acts in a number of different manners. The Presbyterian commentator J. A. Alexander writes, "*In the name of Jesus Christ* is not the formula by which they were to be baptized, and therefore different from the one prescribed by Christ himself (Matt. 28, 19), but a description of the rite as Christian, and not merely Jewish, much less heathen, baptism, or an unmeaning form, connected with no religious creed whatever."<sup>4</sup> Theologian Robert L. Reymond offers this explanation: "I would suggest that Luke is simply giving an abbreviated form of the words in the baptismal ceremony, highlighting by his use of Jesus' name alone both the fact that it is through Jesus' mediation that one enters into union with the triune God and the fact that these persons were being admitted to the Christian Church."<sup>5</sup> F. F. Bruce writes, "Here *en* [in] is to be understood instrumentally: the name of Jesus is an attendant circumstance of the baptism. According to 22:16 the person baptized called at his baptism on the name of Jesus (cf. v. 21 above), probably by way of confessing faith in him; the baptizer also pronounced the name of Jesus over the person baptized (cf. Jas. 2:70, so that the baptism was doubly associated with 'the name of Jesus.'"<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, only anti-trinitarian cults such as the United Pentecostal church insist on baptism in the name of Jesus and forbid trinitarian baptism. Although the explanations given for the use of the name of Jesus in the book of Acts are not completely satisfactory, the only safe and wise thing for the church to do is use the formula given by the explicit command of our Lord.

## The Proper Recipients of Baptism

The Westminster Confession says: "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 baptized"

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<sup>3</sup> George Gillespie, "A Treatise of Miscellany Questions" in *Works* (Edmonton, AB, Canada: Still Water Revival, [1649, 1846] 1991), 2:37.

<sup>4</sup> J. A. Alexander, *Acts* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1857] 1963), 85.

<sup>5</sup> Robert L. Reymond, *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Nelson, 1998), 927.

<sup>6</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 129.

(28:4). The teaching that the children or infants of believers ought to be baptized is called paedobaptism. This is the position that we will be defending as scriptural. It is very important that Reformed believers be able to offer people a solid biblical defense of our creedal position. If we cannot do so then our position will become nothing more than a church tradition.

As we study biblical reasons why the baptism of infants is appropriate, it is important that we have a solid understanding of the biblical concept of divine warrant. Many Baptists demand an explicit authorization from the Bible as the only satisfactory justification for the practice of infant baptism. They would like us to produce either an explicit command or at least an explicit historical example from Scripture of an infant being baptized before they will accept paedobaptism. Although the desire for biblical proof for a church practice is commendable, Baptists who follow such a line of thinking do not understand that some doctrines and ordinances are deduced from Scripture by good and necessary consequence. That is, when various passages of Scripture and biblical teachings are analyzed logically they lead to a certain conclusion. There are many crucial Christian doctrines and practices that are based not on any one direct statement but on a careful application of logical deduction upon Scripture: the trinity, the hypostatic union of the two natures of Christ, the first day Sabbath and women participating in the Lord's supper. Therefore, a doctrine that is "deduced by good and necessary consequence" from Scripture is not less true or important than a direct statement from Scripture. The legitimacy of using logical inference from the Bible to formulate doctrine or practice is taught in God's Word in the following passages: Matthew 19:4-6, 22:31 ff., Mark 12:26; Luke 20:37 ff., 1 Corinthians 11:8-10, etc. As we examine the many biblical teachings relating to infant baptism we will see that even though there are no explicit commands to baptize babies, the scriptural evidence for the practice is strong and abundant.

## The Unity of the Covenant of Grace through Both Covenantal Administrations

One of the main reasons people do not believe in infant baptism is a failure to understand the relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament, the Old Covenant people of God and the New Covenant church. People have been taught that the New Testament and the church are something completely new and different and thus fail to recognize the great continuity between the testaments. Reformed theologians recognize that God's plan of salvation from the fall throughout all human history is the same. There is one covenant of grace that begins with the protoevangelium of Genesis 3:15 that is made very explicit with God's covenant with Abraham in Genesis 17:7 ff. and is fulfilled in Jesus Christ. There is one promise, one way of salvation, one means of entering the covenant, one church, one Savior and one instrument for laying hold of salvation. The major difference between the old and New Covenants is a difference of *administration*. Although baptism is a new ordinance, it has its roots in the Old Testament rite of circumcision. (We will carefully compare the two ordinances below.) Because there is one covenant of grace with one Savior, one church, one salvation and so forth, when we interpret Scripture we must assume continuity regarding salvation, faith, life and even worship unless New Testament teaching specifically annuls or alters a practice or ordinance. For example, the ceremonial law has been fulfilled in Christ and thus is no longer binding.

That there is one covenant of grace with two different administrations is succinctly set forth in the Westminster Standards: "This covenant was differently administered in the time of the law, and in the time of the Gospel: under the law it was administered by promises, prophecies, sacrifices, circumcision, the paschal lamb, and other types and ordinances delivered

to the people of the Jews, all fore-signifying Christ to come; which were, for that time, sufficient and efficacious, through the operation of the Spirit, to instruct and build up the elect in faith in the promised Messiah, by whom they had full remission of sins, and eternal salvation; and is called the Old Testament” (WCF 7:5). “Under the Gospel, when Christ, the substance, was exhibited, the ordinances in which this covenant is dispensed are the preaching of the Word, and the administration of the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper: which, though fewer in number, and administered with more simplicity, and less outward glory, yet, in them, it is held forth in more fullness, evidence, and spiritual efficacy, to all nations, both Jews and Gentiles; and is called the New Testament. There are not therefore two covenants of grace, differing in substance, but one and the same, under various dispensations” (WCF 7:6).

The essential unity of the two dispensations or covenantal administrations is easily established by Scripture. Note the following considerations.

An examination of the various covenantal administrations including the various Old Testament covenants that are concerned with the administration of grace and the New Covenant reveal an underlying unity of all various covenants (Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic and New Covenant). In contradistinction to classical dispensationalism, the various covenants between God and His people after the fall build on each other, develop organically and look to Christ. Each successive covenant builds upon the previous covenant relationship between God and His people and continues the basic redemptive word of promise given to Adam after the fall and made explicit in the promise to Abraham. As redemptive history unfolds and divine revelation progresses the person and work of Christ becomes clearer and more detailed until it reaches its fullest realization in the New Covenant. The covenants and covenant preaching after Abraham look back to the original covenant promises to Abraham (e.g., Ex. 3:16, 17; 6:4-8; Ps. 105:8-12, 42-45; 106:45) and often look forward to the ultimate fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant in Christ. O. Palmer Robertson writes,

The New Covenant, promised by Israel's prophets, does not appear as a distinctive covenantal unit unrelated to God's previous administrations. Instead, the New Covenant as promised to Israel represents the consummate fulfillment of the earlier covenants. This organic relation of the New Covenant to the covenants of Abraham, Moses, and David finds explicit development both in the Old Testament prophecies concerning the covenant and in the New Testament realizations of this consummating covenant. From either perspective, the New Covenant may be understood in no other way than as a realization of the prophetic projections found in the Abrahamic, Mosaic, and Davidic covenants.

Jeremiah's classic prophecy clearly relates the New Covenant to its Mosaic predecessor (cf. Jer. 31:31 ff.). This “New Covenant” with the “house of Israel and with the house of Judah” will not be like the Mosaic covenant in its externalistic features. But the law of God as revealed to Moses shall be written on the heart. While the substance of the law will be the same, the mode of its administration will be different. The form may change, but the essence of the New Covenant of Jeremiah's prophecy relates directly to the law-covenant made at Sinai.

In the following chapter, Jeremiah combines a reference to the New Covenant with allusion to the ancient covenant made with Abraham. God will “faithfully plant” his people “in this land” (Jer. 32:41). But at the same time he will “give them one heart and one way” that they may fear him always (Jer. 32:39, 40). By the intertwining of these references, the prophet combines the Abrahamic with the New Covenant. These two covenants unite to form a single expectation for God's people.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), 41.

A passage which strongly supports covenant theology is found in Romans chapter 14. Paul writes, “Does this blessedness then come upon the circumcised only, or upon the uncircumcised also? For we say that faith was accounted to Abraham for righteousness. How then was it accounted? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised? Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised. And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while still uncircumcised, that he might be the father of all those who believe, though they are uncircumcised, that righteousness might be imputed to them also, and the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also walk in the steps of the faith which our father Abraham had while still uncircumcised. For the promise that he would be the heir of the world was not to Abraham or to his seed through the law, but through the righteousness of faith” (vs. 9-13).

Paul says that the true seed of Abraham are not the natural descendants of Abraham but rather everyone whether circumcised or uncircumcised who has faith in Christ. Further, the apostle interprets the promise to Abraham in terms of Jesus’ worldwide salvation and rule. (Paul, writing under divine inspiration, completely contradicts dispensational teaching.) John Murray writes,

The clause, “that he should be heir of the world” is explanatory of the promise given to Abraham and his seed; it tells us what the promise was. We do not find any promise in the Old Testament in these express terms. What is it? We naturally think of the promise to Abraham that in him all the families of the earth would be blessed (Gen. 12:3) and the correlative promises given later (cf. Gen. 13:14-17; 15:4, 5, 18-21; 17:2-21; 22:15-18). In the light of Pauline teaching as a whole, however, we cannot exclude from the scope of this promise, as defined by the apostle, the most inclusive messianic purport. It is defined as the promise to Abraham the *he* should be heir of the world, but is also a promise to his seed and, therefore, can hardly involve anything less than the worldwide dominion promised to Christ and to the spiritual seed of Abraham in him. It is a promise that receives its ultimate fulfillment in the consummated order of the new heavens and the new earth.<sup>8</sup>

In Romans 4:16 Paul says that Abraham is the father of us all (i.e., both Jewish and Gentile believers). The covenant given to Abraham was not an exclusively Jewish covenant for a former dispensation but extends to all believers in all nations throughout history. The New Covenant is the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant. (Also, keep in mind that the Hebrew word for “new” (*hadash*) used in Jeremiah 31:31 does not mean “brand new” like a “brand new” car that was just manufactured; but “renewed” like an old car that has been refurbished. Therefore, the New Covenant renews and completes the previous covenants but does not replace them.)

Another important section of Scripture that supports covenant theology is found in Galatians 3. In verse 7 everyone who believes in Christ, irrespective of nationality, is identified as the “sons of Abraham.” Verse 8 directly connects the promise to Abraham regarding all nations being blessed to all Gentiles who are justified by faith in Christ. The apostle says that “God...preached the gospel to Abraham.” Then in verse 16 Paul writes, “Now to Abraham and his Seed were the promises made. He does not say, ‘And to seeds,’ as of many, but as of one, ‘And to your Seed,’ who is Christ.” Stott writes,

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<sup>8</sup> John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 1:148.

To what divine promise is he alluding? God promised an inheritance to Abraham and his posterity. Paul knew perfectly well that the immediate, literal reference of this promise was to the land of Canaan, which God was going to give to Abraham's physical descendants. But he also knew that this did not exhaust its meaning; nor was it the ultimate reference in God's mind. Indeed, it could not have been, for God said that in Abraham's seed all the families of the earth would be blessed, and how could the whole world be blessed through Jews living in the land of Canaan? Paul realized that both the "land" which was promised and the "seed" to which it was promised were ultimately spiritual. *God's purpose* was not just to give the land of Canaan to the Jews, but *to give salvation (a spiritual inheritance) to believers who are in Christ*. Further, Paul argues, this truth was implicit in the word God used, which was not the plural "children" or "descendants," but the singular "seed" or "posterity," a collective noun referring to Christ and to all those who are in Christ by faith (verse 16).<sup>9</sup>

As Paul continues his discussion of the fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise in Christ he writes, "And this I say, that the law, which was four hundred and thirty years later, cannot annul the covenant that was confirmed before by God in Christ, that it should make the promise of no effect" (Gal. 3:17). The apostle teaches that the law of God cannot overturn the covenant of grace with Abraham because the law cannot justify; it can only show us our sinfulness. Everyone who believes in Jesus, who does not trust in his own good works or law-keeping receives eternal life and the promise of God to Abraham. Interestingly the verb *kecharistai*, "hath granted" (KJV), in verse 18 is in the perfect tense indicating that the promise to Abraham in the past still holds good in the present. The fact that in Scripture there is an essential unity of the two dispensations is reflected in a number of crucial areas.

First, the mediator of both covenantal administrations is Jesus Christ. Paul applies a passage spoken to Israel directly to the whole Christian church. "The Deliverer will come out of Zion, And He will turn away ungodliness from Jacob; for this is My covenant with them, when I take away their sins" (Rom. 11:26-27; cf. Is. 27:9). Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me" (Jn. 14:6). "But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe... Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness...there is one God who will justify the circumcised by faith" (Rom. 3:21, 22, 24, 25, 26, 30).

Second, the church in the Old Testament and the church of the New Testament is *one church*. When the apostles and elders met in Jerusalem to discuss the conversion of the Gentiles, James applied an Old Testament prophecy regarding the tabernacle of David to the ingathering of the Gentiles into the church. "Simon has declared how God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name. And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written: 'After this I will return And will rebuild the tabernacle of David, which has fallen down; I will rebuild its ruins, And I will set it up; So that the rest of mankind may seek the LORD, Even all the Gentiles who are called by My name, Says the LORD who does all these things'" (Ac. 15:14-17). James not only specifically applied Amos 9:11-12 to the New Covenant church but also said that all the prophets (plural) agree. Christ is building His temple, His church, His people, and all nations are flowing into it.

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<sup>9</sup> John R. W. Stott, *Only One Way: The Message of Galatians* (London: Inter Varsity, 1968), 88.

The middle wall of partition (the ceremonial law) has been removed (Eph. 2:14). God has made two peoples into *one* (Eph. 2:15) Gentiles are fellow citizens and full members with the Jews in God's household. God is building both Jewish and Gentile believers into *one* temple (Eph. 2:11-22). After the resurrection, ascension and Pentecost there is neither Jew nor Greek, for Christians are all *one* in Jesus Christ (Gal. 3:28). Gentiles who believe in Christ are called the true sons of Abraham (Gal. 3:29). The apostle Peter takes Old Testament titles for Israel and applies them directly to the church: You are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people...who once were not a people but are now the people of God (1 Pet. 2:9-10; cf. Ex. 19:5-6). Paul calls the church "the Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16). He says of believers, "We are the circumcision" (Phil. 3:3); that in Christ neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, what is important is the new birth (Gal.6:15).

In Romans 11 Paul uses the metaphor of the one olive tree to describe the one church throughout history. The New Covenant church is one with the Jewish forefathers because it is grafted onto the same Abrahamic root by faith (Rom. 11:17-19). There are not two different trees or roots but only one. Everyone who is regenerated and believes in Christ is organically connected to the one tree. "The doctrine involved in this argument is the one pervading this passage, that the provisions of God's redemptive grace for Jew and Gentile have their base in the covenant of the fathers of Israel. To use Paul's figure here, the patriarchal root is never uprooted to give place to another planting and thus it continues to impart its virtue to and impress its character upon the whole organism of redemptive history."<sup>10</sup>

Because everyone who believes in Jesus is united to Him, and because Christ dwells in His people, they are the temple of God. Paul says, "I will dwell in them and walk among them. I will be their God, and they shall be My people" (2 Cor. 6:16). Here the apostle takes Old Testament passages (Ex. 29:45; Lev. 26:12; Jer. 31:33; 38; Ezek. 37:26-28; Zech. 8:8) that emphasize Israel's special covenant relationship with God and applies them directly to the New Covenant church. Some Old Testament prophecies that use this special covenant language clearly speak of a coming time when the church is not distinctly Jewish but multinational. Paul writes, "As He says also in Hosea: 'I will call them My people, who were not My people, and her beloved, who was not beloved. And it shall come to pass in the place where it was said to them, you are not My people, there they shall be called sons of the living God'" (Rom. 9:25-26). The apostle under divine inspiration introduces this passage by saying that it applies "not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles" (Rom. 9:24). There is to be genuine acceptance of the true religion and spiritual gospel worship among all the nations. "'For from the rising of the sun, even to its going down, My name shall be great among the Gentiles; In every place incense shall be offered to My name, and a pure offering; for My name shall be great among the nations,' says the LORD of hosts" (Mal. 1:11). "All the ends of the world shall remember and turn to the LORD, and all the families of the nations shall worship before You. For the kingdom is the LORD'S, and He rules over the nations" (Ps. 22:27-28). "All nations whom You have made shall come and worship before You, O Lord, and shall glorify Your name" (Ps. 86:9). "He shall have dominion also from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth. Those who dwell in the wilderness will bow before Him, and His enemies will lick the dust. The kings of Tarshish and of the isles will bring presents; the kings of Sheba and Seba will offer gifts. Yes, all kings shall fall down before Him; all nations shall serve Him" (Ps. 72:8-11). Rather than the radical distinction between Israel and the church that we find among dispensational thought the Word of God seamlessly transitions from the Old Covenant to the new.

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<sup>10</sup> John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 2:90.

Third, the children of believers are members of the covenant in both dispensations and receive the same promises. When Mary was at Elizabeth's house she broke forth in praise regarding her unborn son. In doing so she applied many Old Testament promises to the New Covenant era. Mary said: "For He has regarded the lowly state of His maidservant; for behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed. For He who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is His name. And His mercy is on those who fear Him *from generation to generation*" (Lu. 1:48-50). This passage is clearly a reference to Psalm 103:17-18 which reads: "But the mercy of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear Him, and His righteousness to children's children, to such as keep His covenant, and to those who remember His commandments to do them" (Ps. 103:17-18). Jeremiah says that covenant blessings are for those who fear God and their children. "They shall be My people, and I will be their God; then I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear Me forever, for the good of them and their children after them. And I will make an everlasting covenant with them, that I will not turn away from doing them good; but I will put My fear in their hearts so that they will not depart from Me" (Jer. 32:38-40).

Isaiah also spoke of covenant continuity between parents and their children. "'As for Me,' says the LORD, 'this is My covenant with them: My Spirit who is upon you, and My words which I have put in your mouth, shall not depart from your mouth, nor from the mouth of your descendants, nor from the mouth of your descendants' descendants,' says the LORD, 'from this time and forevermore'" (Is. 59:21). Through Ezekiel God says that His blessings are for the children of believers and their children *forever*. "David My servant shall be king over them, and they shall all have one shepherd; they shall also walk in My judgments and observe My statutes, and do them. Then they shall dwell in the land that I have given to Jacob My servant, where your fathers dwelt; and they shall dwell there, they, their children, and their children's children, forever; and My servant David shall be their prince forever. Moreover I will make a covenant of peace with them, and it shall be an everlasting covenant with them; I will establish them and multiply them, and I will set My sanctuary in their midst forevermore" (Ezek. 37:24-26). God's promise to be a God to the seed of believers is also taught in the reasons annexed to the second commandment: "...but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments" (Ex. 20:6; cf. Dt. 5:10; 7:9; 12; etc.). This promise emphasizes a central thrust of God's dealing with His people—that God's covenant love is not simply individualistic but is extended to covenant families and is to be passed down from generation to generation. Calvin writes, "God gives a promise to extend his mercy to a thousand generations; which also frequently occurs in Scripture, and is inserted in the solemn covenant with the church; 'I will be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee' (Gen. 17:7)... He also gives us a cursory intimation of the greatness of his mercy, which extends to a thousand generations, while he has assigned only four generations to his vengeance" (Calvin, *Institutes*, 2, 8, 20-21).<sup>11</sup>

The covenant continuity expressed in the second commandment is taught in Psalm 78 which says: "For He established a testimony in Jacob, And appointed a law in Israel, which He commanded our fathers, that they should make them known to their children; that the generation to come might know them, the children who would be born, that they may arise and declare them to their children, that they may set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep His commandments" (vs. 5-7). Hanko writes, "When God, in so many places, enjoins upon believers to instruct their children in the ways of the Lord, they have the sure Word of God that

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<sup>11</sup> John Calvin as quoted in Johannes G. Vos, *The Westminster Larger Catechism: A Commentary* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2002), 301.

they are instructing children of God, God's own elect people. And the instruction they give is then not some kind of missionary enterprise within their own families, but is instruction which is based upon the sure knowledge that God's promise is to save them and their children. They instruct covenant children. And their instruction will be fruitful."<sup>12</sup>

In Malachi 2:15 God tells us that He instituted marriage and the family for believers because "He seeks godly offspring." The main purpose behind covenant people getting married is the biblical rearing of Christian offspring. Jehovah has never changed His view of the God-fearing family and He clearly has never changed His view of covenant headship. The structure of the family as a covenantal unit with the man as head of the family is a creation ordinance (Gen. 2:21-22; 1 Cor. 11:8; 1 Tim. 2:14). This creation ordinance is explicitly recognized as binding in the New Testament: Wives are to submit to their own husbands in the Lord (Eph. 5:22); children are to be obedient to their parents (Eph. 6:1-2). The New Testament church explicitly follows the covenantal view of the family established at creation: women are not permitted to speak or have authority in the church (1 Cor. 14:34-35; 1 Tim. 2:11-14); wives and children must submit to the head of their household in the Lord (Eph. 5:22; 6:1-2; 1 Pet. 3:1); wives are to follow the example of Sarah's submission to Abraham (1 Pet. 3:5-6); whole households are baptized and brought into the church (Ac. 16:15, 33); the promise to Abraham is continued to the children of believers in the New Covenant (Ac. 2:39). Therefore, we see not only covenant continuity in the visible church but also observe that the church is recognizing and acknowledging an even older covenantal institution—the family. The God-given purpose of the family has never been abolished. But, because of the fall and God's creation of a New Covenantal institution—the church—covenant families live and function under the authority of the church.

The role of the family in God's kingdom must never be ignored or underestimated. R. L. Dabney writes, "The affection, authority, and influence of parents are so unique, that when we properly consider them, it seems incredible God would have omitted them as parts of His Church instrumentalities, subject to the sanctifying rules of His house. Parental love is the strongest of the instinctive affections, and the most godlike in its permanence, forbearance, and disinterestedness. Parental authority is the most remarkable and absolute one delegated by God to man over his fellow man. Consider: it authorizes the parent to govern the child for a fourth of his life as a slave; to decide virtually his intelligence, culture, and social destiny, and even to elect for him a character and religious creed; thus seeming almost to infringe the inalienable responsibilities and liberties of the immortal soul! And last: the parental influence is so efficacious, especially in things moral and religious, that it does more than all others to decide the child's everlasting fate. Can it be that God would omit such a lever as this, in constructing His Church, as the organism for man's moral and religious welfare?"<sup>13</sup>

All of these passages are related to Genesis 17 where God explicitly identifies children to be members of the visible church along with their parents. "And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you" (Gen. 17:7). Erskine writes, "The same principle was again and again announced when the children of Israel, under the Mosaic law, were still more definitely separated from the rest of the world. The law of circumcision was more than a mere civil regulation. The act was a religious transaction belonging to the Church, of which the terms of membership (*viz.*, faith) were the same as under the later dispensation. 'He

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<sup>12</sup> Herman Hanko, *We and Our Children: The Reformed Doctrine of Infant Baptism* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free, 1981), 55-56.

<sup>13</sup> R. L. Dabney, *Systematic Theology* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1878] 1985), 783-784

received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had yet being uncircumcised.’ Rom. iv. 11. ‘For the promise...was not to Abraham, or to his seed, through the law, but through the righteousness of faith.’ Rom. iv. 13.”<sup>14</sup>

God’s command to Abraham is the crux of the whole issue. John Murray writes,

The infant seed of those who are believers by confession and profession should be baptized and thus bear the sign and seal of the covenant of grace. This is the divine institution: it is one of the ways by which it has pleased God to administer the covenant of grace in the world; it is one of the ordinances by means of which it pleases God to fulfill His covenant purposes from age to age and from generation to generation. It is this fact of divine institution that constitutes the sufficient ground for administering and receiving the ordinance. When we ask the question: why do we baptise infants or upon what *ground* do we dispense baptism to them? It is sufficient for us to know and to answer that it is the divine institution. God has ordained it as one of the provisions whereby He administers His grace in the world. When the church practices this institution and complies with the divine command, no further judgment respecting the secret purpose nor respecting God’s secret operations in the heart of those baptised is required as the proper *ground* upon which the ordinance is administered. To require any further information than the divine institution would go beyond the warrant of Scripture. It is true that in administering this ordinance we plead the promises which God has attached to faith and obedience, and we rest our faith and hope upon God’s faithfulness. But our faith in God’s promises would not appear to be placed in its proper relationship to infant baptism if it were conceived of as the *ground* for baptising infants. The ground is rather the institution which God has established and revealed, namely, that to the infant seed of believers the sign and seal of the covenant of grace is to be administered. Hence to aver that baptism is dispensed to infants on the ground of presumptive election or presumptive regeneration appears to be without warrant and also introduces perplexity into the question at issue.<sup>15</sup>

Murray’s approach to the issue of infant baptism is the correct one. Instead of debating difficult issues such as presumptive regeneration or how the meaning of baptism is compatible with its application to infants we must acknowledge that God has explicitly told the church that infants are to receive the covenant sign and seal.

The only way to avoid this conclusion is to: (a) prove that the covenant of grace has nothing to do with the New Testament (We have already demonstrated the essential unity of the covenant and thus dispensed with this argument); (b) argue that the meaning of circumcision and baptism are radically different or at least different enough to warrant a major difference of practice between the two covenantal administrations (This argument will be dealt with below.) (c) argue that even though there is one underlying covenant of grace the difference of administrations is the reason why infants are no longer given the covenant sign. (This kind of argument is essentially the one adopted by “Reformed” Baptists who accept covenant theology. This argument is intimately related to the previous one and will be addressed below as we examine the difference between baptism and circumcision.)

In our next chapter we will consider some of the arguments for infant baptism and will interact with some of the common objections against these arguments.

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<sup>14</sup> Erskine N. White, *Why Infants Are Baptized* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1900), 39.

<sup>15</sup> John Murray, *Christian Baptism* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1977), 56-57.