

The Sacraments: A Reformed Perspective

Chapter 4: An Excursus on the Baptist use of Jeremiah

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One of the most common arguments by Reformed Baptists against the baptism of covenant infants is based on Jeremiah 31:31-36. It is argued that in this prophecy regarding the New Covenant we have a radical change of administration where there is a regenerate church membership; where no member of the New Covenant can fall away. Note the following examples. Jewett writes,

According to the prophet Jeremiah (31:31-36), the New Covenant, in contrast to the old, is one that *cannot be broken*. The fathers who came out of Egypt broke the first covenant the Lord made with them; but the New Covenant will stand as sure as the ordinances of day and night, for it shall be engraved on the hearts of the covenantees by the omnipotent finger of him who saves by his grace. How can the heirs of this new, unbreakable covenant break that covenant? Yet paedobaptists often speak of baptized children who grow up in unbelief as ‘covenant breakers’ who are ‘unfaithful to their baptismal vows.’ So constant are these terms in the discussion that they have become, as it were, technical terms in the literature. Paedobaptists evidently cannot get along without them, though it is not clear how they get along with them either, if they are to remain truly Reformed.¹

David Kingdon writes,

What indications are there in Scripture that the principle of “thee and they seed” is abrogated in the era of the New Covenant? First there is the promise of the New Covenant (Jer. 31-34). *According to v. 33 God will write his law on the hearts of his people. The emphasis is shifted from the external ceremonies and institutions of the Old Covenant to the possession of inward spiritual life. (See Rom. 2:29; Phil. 3:3.)* It is those who know the life of God within their souls to whom the promise, “*they shall be my people*”, applies.

The next verse indicates another point of distinction between the Old and New Covenants. Many who received the sign of circumcision were without the knowledge of God (Rom. 2:17-29), whereas under the New Covenant God declares ‘*they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them*’. In the New Testament this universal knowledge of God through vital communion with him in the Holy Spirit is predicated of the *visible* church of believers (cf. 2 Cor. 6:16).²

John MacArthur also placed a great deal of weight on the Jeremiah passage when he debated R. C. Sproul on this topic:

You don’t have a whole group of covenant people in which there is a little believing remnant in the New Testament, and if you ever do question that, then you need to deal with the text of Jeremiah 31:31-34, which is the watershed issue, I believe, on this whole discussion. In Jeremiah 31:31-34, he promises the New Covenant, and here’s what Jeremiah says, “There’s a

¹ Paul K. Jewett, *Infant Baptism and the Covenant of Grace*, 152.

² David Kingdon, *The Children of Abraham* (Sussex, England: Carey Publications, 1973), 34.

covenant coming. It's not like the covenant you know; it is a New Covenant," and he says this, "Here's how it's different." And all of the options Jeremiah could have picked, of all the things that Jeremiah could have said, of all the choices that he could have made to distinguish the New Covenant from the Old, this is what he said (verse 34): "They shall all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them." The essence of the New Covenant is everybody in it knows God savingly. That is, I think, the significant distinction between belonging to the Abrahamic Covenant ethnically and belonging to the New Covenant savingly. And so a sign that suited an ethnic covenant is not parallel to a sign that suits a saving covenant, and therein baptism is to be made distinct from circumcision, and again remind you that Scripture does make no such connection.³

What are these Baptist apologists saying about the New Covenant that precluded infant baptism? They note the following differences. (a) There will be a shift from external rites to the possession of an inward spiritual life. (b) In the New Covenant administration everyone will know God savingly. In other words there will be a regenerate church membership in the visible church in the new dispensation. (c) The New Covenant unlike the Old cannot be broken. Obviously, in an era with a regenerate church membership, church members will not abandon the New Covenant.

The Baptist argumentation from these promises goes something like this. The Old Testament was primarily a time of external ceremonies without internal realities. Since infants cannot exercise faith, circumcision, at least for infants, was an external rite without any interior significance. The Old Covenant era was a time when most Israelites were unfaithful to the covenant. This sad reality was due to the fact that: unregenerate infants were circumcised and brought into the pale of the church corrupting it; and, the law of God was written on stones but not written upon hearts by the Holy Spirit. In the New Covenant era only people who first profess faith and are regenerated are admitted to the church. Everyone will be saved; will have the law written on the heart; and, will be faithful to the covenant.

Although many Baptists believe that Jeremiah 31:31-34 (and its New Testament counterpart Hebrews 8:8-13) contains a devastating refutation of infant covenant membership and thus the baptism of the babies of believers, their argument is based on a faulty understanding of the Old Covenant and an accompanying failure to understand what is distinctly new about the New Covenant. They, also, are guilty of a sloppy exegesis of the Jeremiah passage itself. Let us examine some of the major problems with their interpretation.

(1) A careful examination of the Jeremiah passage indicates that the prophecy does not radically redefine who is eligible for covenant membership in the church in the coming new dispensation. Note what the prophet says in Jeremiah 31:33, "This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people." The phrase "house of Israel" which is a common phrase used throughout the Old Testament (e.g., "house of Jacob" Gen. 46:27 [i.e., Jacob's family]; "house of Israel," Ex. 16:31; 40:38; Lev. 10:6; 17:3, 8, 10; 22:18; Num. 20:29; Josh. 21:45; Ruth 4:11; 1 Sam. 7:2-3; 2 Sam. 1:12; Ps. 98:3; Is. 5:7; Jer. 2:4, etc.) refers to the whole covenant people of God including children and infants. It is virtually synonymous with the "congregation of the LORD" (e.g., 2 Chr. 20:13; 21:16; Joel 2:16; Josh. 8:35; Dt. 29:11, 12). Unless one is willing to *arbitrarily* redefine the designation "house of

³ John MacArthur, Baptism Audio Debate Series (Orlando, FL: Ligonier Cassette 1998); as quoted in Jeffrey D. Niell, "The Newness of the New Covenant," Gregg Strawbridge, *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2003), 129-130.

Israel” to exclude infants, one must admit that the infants of believers are included in the New Covenant administration.

(2) The Jeremiah passage also includes the statement “I will be their God and they shall be My people” (Jer. 31:33). This promise always included covenant children (cf. Ex. 3:10; 7:4, 14, 16; Lev. 26:12; Jer. 7:23; 11:4; 24:7; 30:22; 31:1; 32:38; Ezek. 11:20; 36:28; etc.). The Israelites, the congregation of the LORD or the visible church, included children and infants. These children have been set apart from heathen children by God, identified as “My people” and have been given special rights and privileges that other children do not have. If Baptists are going to use Jeremiah 31 to kick the children of believers out of the New Covenant, then they need to explain why words and phrases that have a well-established biblical meaning can be ignored or arbitrarily given a whole new meaning. This point is especially important given the fact that most Baptists are premillennialists who claim to hold a literal interpretation of Scripture. We ask our Baptist brothers one simple question: Would the Jews of Jeremiah’s day who heard this prophecy have regarded the phrase “My people” as one which *excluded* the small children and infants of believers?

(3) Baptists place a lot of weight on the interpretation that the New Covenant is internal and spiritual while the old is primarily external. While it is indeed true that the Old Testament worship and approach to God *ritualistically* was much more elaborate and complicated because of the ceremonial laws that pointed to Christ, it is a great error to teach that a true heart, internal, spiritual love and service to God was not an important aspect of the Old Testament religion. The first and foremost commandment of the law was and still is: “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart” (Dt. 6:5-6). The author of Hebrews says that God killed the Israelites in the wilderness because they did not believe (Heb. 3). Paul says that Jewish circumcision that is not accompanied by regeneration is uncircumcision (Rom. 2:25). It is worthless. David said that he memorized Scripture and placed it in his heart so he wouldn’t sin against God (Ps. 119:11). God says that the righteous man has “the law of God in his heart” (Ps. 37:31). Old Testament saints would sing: “I delight to do Your will, O my God, and your law is within my heart” (Ps. 40:8). If the Old Covenant religion was not concerned with regeneration and saving faith then why did God repeatedly condemn and judge the Israelites who followed the outward rituals but who didn’t believe, love God and obey Him from the heart (e.g., Am. 5:21; Isa. 1:14)? In the Old Covenant era, regeneration, an interior work of the Spirit, saving faith and repentance were just as important and were required of *all* of God’s covenant people in the same manner as in the New Covenant era. To argue otherwise is to ignore dozens of explicit Bible passages.

(4) We now come to the crux of the whole debate which is Jeremiah’s statement that in the New Covenant “they all shall know Me, from the least to the greatest of them.” It is this statement that is used to argue for a regenerate church membership in the New Covenant era. Once again note that according to Baptists this passages teaches: *no one* can break the New Covenant (e.g., Jewett); *everyone* in the New Testament church has the internal spiritual reality including regeneration and the law of God on the heart; “everybody in it knows God savingly” (MacArthur). This Baptist interpretation of Jeremiah is fallacious and easy to disprove. Note the following arguments.

First, the Baptist view violates two very foundational principles of biblical interpretation: Scripture can never contradict Scripture; and, the clearer portions of the Bible must be used to interpret the less clear. Does the New Testament teach that the visible church is only made up of

regenerate, truly saved church members? No. It teaches that in the New Covenant church there are true believers and there are hypocrites.

Jesus told the disciples that there would be tares among the wheat (Mt. 13:25). He warned the disciples about false prophets and hypocrites in the church by telling them His words to such false professors of religion on the day of judgment: “*I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness*” (Mt. 7:23). Simon Magus, who made a profession of faith and was baptized by Philip the evangelist, was soon identified by Peter the apostle as an unsaved hypocrite who remained “poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity” (Ac. 8:23). If everyone in the New Covenant visible church is regenerated and truly saved then why did our Lord set up church courts that could excommunicate apostates (cf. Mt. 18:17; Rom. 16:17-18; 1 Cor. 5:4-5; 1 Tim. 6:3-5; Tit. 1:11; etc.)? Paul warned the elders of Ephesus about “savage wolves [who] will come in among you, not sparing the flock” (Ac. 20:29). Peter told the churches “there will be false teachers among you” (2 Pet. 2:1). The Bible talks about: those who endure for only a while (Mt. 12:21); some who depart from the faith (1 Tim. 4:1) and have strayed from the truth (1 Tim. 2:17). Paul talks about those: who have a form of godliness but deny its power (2 Tim. 3:5); who have itching ears who will attach themselves to false teachers (2 Tim. 4:3); who profess to know God but deny Him (Tit. 1:16). Peter speaks of apostates who had escaped the pollution of the world for a season (1 Pet. 2:20-22). The author of Hebrews speaks of apostates who had once been enlightened and tasted the heavenly gift (Heb. 6:4ff.). There are even examples of notable church leaders who apostatized such as Demas who left Paul because he loved the present world (2 Tim. 4:10); and, Hymenaeus and Alexander whom Paul delivered to Satan (1 Tim. 1:20). Examples could be multiplied. However, the point has been established that even during the days of the apostles not every church member was regenerated, had the law on his heart, or knew God savingly. Therefore, whatever the phrase “they all shall know Me” means, it definitely does *not* mean what the Baptists say it means. If it did, Scripture would contradict itself which is impossible.

While both orthodox Presbyterians and Reformed Baptists would like to have a regenerate church membership and both ought to do everything they can within the bounds of Scripture to have a born-again church membership, this side of heaven there is no such thing as a regenerate church membership. Church elders do not have the ability to look into the human heart. Therefore, they can only function in terms of a credible profession of faith. In the visible church there will always be wheat and tares, true professors and hypocrites. If one carefully studies church records, disciplinary cases and the numbers who apostatize in both Reformed Baptist churches and strict, truly Reformed or Presbyterian churches one will see that generally speaking Reformed Baptists churches have very similar rates of apostasy and excommunications as do the Bible-believing Reformed churches. If the Baptist interpretation of Jeremiah 31 were true, Reformed Baptist churches would not have cases of apostasy or excommunication. Further, if one of one of the problems of the old-covenant Jews regarding apostasy was the circumcision of infants then: a) Why do truly Reformed churches have such low rates of apostasy? (They are as low, or lower, than Reformed Baptists churches); and, b) Why did God tell his people to do something that was spiritually bad for them? If Baptists could figure out that the circumcision of infants was a spiritual disaster then could not Jehovah who is infinitely wise do the same?

Second, if one follows the Baptist interpretation that this passage is literal and means a one hundred percent regenerate church membership, then one has a serious problem, for Jeremiah does not say “no more shall every man teach his fellow church member” but rather “No more shall every man teach his neighbor” (Jer. 31:34). If one follows the Baptist thinking on this

passage consistently then one doesn't simply have a regenerate church membership but a one hundred percent regenerate society. Since most Reformed Baptists are amillennialists, they would naturally reject such an interpretation.

What then does Jeremiah mean? After all, the New Covenant is superior to the Old. There are basically two different interpretations among Reformed scholars regarding the meaning of verse 34, "They shall all know me..." The majority interpretation is that Jeremiah is speaking hyperbolically. That is, he is speaking in a dramatic, poetic manner of the superiority of the New Covenant. What is different about the gospel era is that there will be a more widespread, comprehensive knowledge of God than under the old administration. Matthew Henry writes, "Many more shall know God than did in the Old-Testament times, which among the Gentiles were times of ignorance, the true God being to them an unknown God. The things of God shall in gospel times be more plain and intelligible...the knowledge of God in gospel times should vastly exceed that knowledge of him which they had under the law."⁴ Matthew Poole writes,

This must not be so interpreted as if under the gospel there should be no more need of ministerial teaching, for Christ himself sent out his apostles to preach; nor yet as if there should be no more need of brotherly teachings, by instruction or correction; the contrary is commanded, Col. iii. 16. It is only an expression signifying the increase of knowledge, and of the fear of the Lord, that should be after the pouring out of the Spirit: we have such expressions 1 John ii. 27. The learned author of our English Annotations thinks this phrase signifies, that under the gospel there should be a greater measure of means and of knowledge, and of knowledge got by that means, and of clearness of understanding in persons, or ability to conceive things revealed, and a greater number of persons that should be enlightened with the saving knowledge of God.⁵

The Old Covenant was given to a nation while the new is intended for the whole world, for every nation, tribe and tongue. "All that is national, temporary, preparatory, as far as preserving one nation as God's people is concerned has disappeared."⁶ The Holy Spirit has been poured out on all flesh, both: young and old, slave and free, Jew and Gentile. All kinds of men are being brought to a saving understanding of Christ and are being disciplined in the knowledge of God.

Another interpretation which is the minority view is that the phrase "all shall know Me" refers primarily to the removal of the ceremonial Old-Testament priesthood in the New Covenant era. The ceremonial priesthood occupied a unique place in the old administration. The priests were specially consecrated to God. They had a special access and knowledge related to the sacrificial cultus that did not extend to the "ordinary" Israelite. They were a special class that mediated between God and the people; that had knowledge, an expertise in sacred things. In the new administration this special class, with special knowledge and unique access has been abolished. Now everyone from the least to the greatest knows God in the same way. There is no longer a separation between the priesthood and the laity (cf. Dt. 33:8-10; Num. 1:51; 3:10; 12:32; 16:40; Mal. 2:8). An excellent representative of this position is Arthur Pink. He writes, "The apostle's object is obvious. It was to the Old Covenant that the whole administration of the Levitical priesthood was confined...But the introduction of the new Priesthood necessarily

⁴⁴ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (McLean, VA: MacDonald, n. d.), 4:607.

⁵ Matthew Poole, *A Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1706] 1962), 2: 382.

⁶ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Epistle to the Hebrews and the Epistle of James* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1966), 271.

abolished that covenant, and put an end to all the sacred ministrations which belong to it. This is which the apostle here undertakes to prove.”⁷ A little later Pink adds,

But at this point a difficulty, already noticed, may recur to our minds: Were not the things mentioned in Heb. 8:10-13, the grace and mercy therein expressed, actually communicated to God’s elect both before and afterwards? Did not all who truly believed and feared God enjoy these same identical blessings? Unquestionably. What then is the solution? This: the apostle is not here contrasting the internal operations of Divine grace in the Old and N.T. saints, but as Calvin rightly taught, the ‘reference is to the economical condition of the Church.’ The contrast is between that which *characterized* the Judaic and the Christian dispensations in the *outward* confirmation of the covenant.⁸

In the Old Covenant era the ceremonial intermediaries who brought to the people an intimate personal knowledge of Jehovah by their priestly acts and ceremonial teaching will no longer be needed because of Christ’s completed redemption. This point is supported by the very next sentence. “For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more” (Jer. 31:34). While the new dispensation has teachers, it does not have priestly intermediaries. Both these interpretations of Jeremiah 31 are far better than one which contradicts Scripture.

But (a Baptist may ask) what does the Jeremiah passage mean when it implies that the New Covenant cannot be broken? Doesn’t this promise teach that church members in the new dispensation cannot fall away? Doesn’t this passage refute infant baptism because some infants grow up and reject Christ and go into the world? No. The Baptist interpretation is once again mistaken for the following reasons.

First, (as noted earlier) individual church members whether baptized as infants or as adults (with a credible profession of faith) fell away from the Savior in the New Testament and still apostatize today. The idea that no professing Christian in the visible church can be unregenerate or fall away is patently absurd.

Second, the context and the history of Israel after this prophecy indicate that Jeremiah is speaking of the New Testament church as a whole. The church would not end in total failure as did Israel. When the prophet penned this prophecy, God had already begun to punish His people with Babylonian oppression and exile. It would not be long before a great slaughter occurred and Jerusalem itself would fall. Further, Israel as a covenanted nation rejected their Messiah, killed the Prince of life, was destroyed by God in A. D. 70 and her covenantal kingdom privileges were given to the New Testament church (Mt. 21:43). While the church in the new dispensation would certainly have its ups and downs, it would be preserved by the power of the Holy Spirit and thus would not end in failure. The Baptist use of Jeremiah 31 is exegetically sloppy, contradicts clear portions of Scripture and fails to recognize the real differences between the covenants.

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⁷ Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1954), 436.

⁸ *Ibid*, 454.