

## Infant Baptism Defended

**Introduction:** This morning I tried to focus on a positive presentation of why God's people have, from the beginning of the New Testament period, included their children in the visible administration of God's one Covenant of Grace. This evening I would like to try to answer a few objections and interpretations of Scripture that are offered by a variety of baptistic positions. I say a variety of baptistic positions because I have heard a very wide array of interpretations of numerous passages of Scripture from various Baptist writers – dispensationalist and Reformed and some that would probably identify as neither dispensationalist or Reformed. Greg Welty, Fred Malone, Brian Borgman, Paul Jewett, John MacArthur, James White, and John Piper are men I've listened to or read on these issues. Obviously, I've not listened to or read everything each of these men have said or written on this topic, but I have tried to listen carefully and read carefully their specific comments about the key Scripture passages I raised this morning.

**Before I begin this message** I want to make a very important point. I've said for a long time that I believe Reformed Baptists and Presbyterians have more in common than perhaps any two denominations I know of. We have the same God, the same gospel, the same understanding of God's sovereignty, God's decrees, the doctrines of grace, the doctrine of justification, the doctrine of sanctification, the person and work of Jesus Christ, biblical inerrancy, inspiration, and infallibility, the 5 great Reformation Solas, and many other things. Neither of our camps believe that children or adults are justified by baptism. And when both of our denominations are faithful to their heritage as expressed in our great Confessions of Faith – the Westminster Standards and the 1689 London Baptist confession of faith – the church of the Lord Jesus Christ will always be focused upon pure biblical worship and upon the reading and exposition of the Word of God as the central aspect of God's worship in his church. There is much that our traditions have in common and in this we ought always to rejoice. We are united in the Lord by the biblical gospel. Any discussion of our differences regarding church government or baptism which devolves into party-spirit or rancor is completely inappropriate and unbecoming those who wish to adorn their profession of faith in the Lord Jesus by a godly life. Baptists are my dear friends and Christian family. And I am quite certain that we are going to live together in heaven for all eternity and be able to laugh about the mistakes that they made. [pause] And that we made.

### 1. Acts 2:38-39

**Acts 2:38-39** Then Peter said to them, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. [39] For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call."

**In his book *The Baptism of Disciples Alone* by Fred Malone, on p140, we read:** "... the mention of children here is better explained by considering that the apostle wanted to ensure that there was not misunderstanding; that they were not to receive baptism unless they also repented and believed as did their parents, as verse 38 clearly requires. Only those who received Peter's word were baptized (Acts 2:41). This is why the children were mentioned in the invitation to repent, to *prevent misunderstanding by Jewish parents who might assume from the Abrahamic Covenant that it was permitted to baptized their infants without their personal repentance.*"

**Application:** Malone is arguing here that the *only* reason Peter uttered the phrase "and to your children" was to make sure everyone listening would understand that they were being excluded from the covenant sign. It is difficult to know exactly how to respond to an argument like this. Listen to the text again [reread it]. Do you get the impression that Peter's purpose in saying "and to your children" is to clear up a misunderstanding that might have arisen among the Jewish hearers that their children would be permitted to be baptized?

**Point:** Remember how we saw this morning repeatedly and emphatically throughout the entire New Testament that the Abrahamic promise is itself the very foundation of our justification and salvation. The Abrahamic promise is called “the gospel” in Galatians 3:8. The Abrahamic covenant is the very foundation upon which the New Covenant stands. Paul cites Abraham and the promises made to him as being the very heart of his magisterial defense of the gospel of justification by faith alone through all of his letters – especially Romans and Galatians. The Abrahamic promise has not changed – indeed it cannot change. It is, as Hebrews 6:13-18 says, *immutable*. As Paul said in Galatians 3 – the giving of the law did not add to or annul *anything whatsoever* about the promise made to Abraham.

**Genesis 17:7-9** 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.

**Application:** Since all of Christ’s apostles understood what Paul articulates so clearly in his letters – that the Abrahamic covenant is still in effect and is the foundation of our justification – does it not make much more sense to recognize that when Peter adds the phrase “and to your children” that he is taking this language directly from the everlasting and unchangeable Abrahamic covenant? “Your and your descendants” and “you and your children.”? And Peter then adds that wonderful 3rd category – “and to as many as are afar off, as many as the Lord our God shall call” – referring likely to the gentiles all around the world.

**Application 2:** If our Baptist brethren are correct, I would expect Peter to have said: “For the promise is to you and to as many as are afar off, as many as the Lord our God shall call.” And yet, the second clause is added: “and to your children.” The covenantal concept of the solidarity of the family unit *has not changed*. We see line after line of clear evidence in the New Testament that it remains in effect.

**A Reformed Baptist** minister named Brian Borgman argued in a sermon that we ought to read this passage as follows: “For the promise is to as many of you as the Lord our God shall call, to as many of your children as the Lord our God shall call, and to as many as are afar off, as many as the Lord our God shall call.”

**Response:** It is not sound exegesis to take a modifier to a third item in a list in a sentence and then back-read it to be modifying the first and second items in that same list. For example, if I said to you: “I need you to go to the plant nursery and get me a sapling oak tree, a rose bush, and some flowers that are blue.” And then you come back to me with a sapling oak tree you painted blue, a rose bush you painted blue, and some flowers that are blue. I would then say, “Why did you pain the oak tree and the rose bush blue?” And the response would be: “Because when a modifier is put on the last item in the list, we know clearly that we’re supposed to apply that modifier to everything else in the list.” You all can see that you would never interpret my request in that way. And yet, why would Brian Borgman do that with Acts 2:39? Because he does not like the idea that children are included in the *visible* administration of the New Covenant. And he is willing to go to extremes to avoid it.

**Matthew Henry** said: “When God took Abraham into covenant, he said, I will be a God to thee, and to thy seed; and, accordingly, every Israelite had his son circumcised at eight days old. Now it is proper for an Israelite, when he is by baptism to come into a new dispensation of this covenant, to ask, “What must be done with my children? Must they be thrown out, or taken in with me?” “Taken in” (says Peter) “by all means; for the promise, that great promise of God’s being to you a God, is as much to you and to your children now as ever it was.” “Though the promise is still extended to your children as it has been, yet it is not, as it has been, confined to you and them, but the benefit of it is designed for all that are afar off;” we may add, and their children, for the blessing of Abraham comes upon the Gentiles, through Jesus Christ, Gal. iii. 14. The promise had long pertained to the Israelites (Rom. ix. 4); but now it is sent to those that are afar off, the remotest nations of the Gentiles, and every one of them too, all that are afar off.”

**Here again, it must be emphasized** – If you do not recognize the clear biblical distinction between the *actual, elect members of the Abrahamic and New Covenants* and the *visible administration of them in*

*actual time and space*, you will still make the mistake of thinking that what we mean by saying that we “take our children” with us to Christ that we think they are automatically saved. Nothing could be further from the truth. Every promise – of forgiveness and salvation and of the land of Canaan is conditioned on faith and repentance. But the *visible* administration of the covenant of grace and its signs has always included children. Peter’s statement in Acts 2:38-39 makes this clear.

## 2. 1 Corinthians 7:12-16

**1 Cor. 7:12-16** But to the rest I, not the Lord, say: If any brother has a wife who does not believe, and she is willing to live with him, let him not divorce her. [13] And a woman who has a husband who does not believe, if he is willing to live with her, let her not divorce him. [14] For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband; otherwise your children would be unclean, but now they are holy. [15] But if the unbeliever departs, let him depart; a brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases. But God has called us to peace. [16] For how do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife?

**Fred Malone and John Gill** argue that what this passage is addressing specifically in verse 14 is the *legitimacy* of children born to mixed marriages – i.e. marriages between believers and unbelievers. He wrote: “To summarize, it is my conclusion that 1 Corinthians 7:14 refers either to the children’s legitimacy in a legitimate marriage in the eyes of God or to their set-apart position for the sake of their parent’s gospel heritage. The verse does not support a covenant position for children.” So, Malone offers two possibilities regarding what “holy” versus “unclean” means here: 1) whether the child is legitimate in the eyes of God. By the way, this would have to mean that Malone believes every child born to unbelievers is, in point of fact, illegitimate – a completely untenable position. Marriage is a creation ordinance and not something unique to Christians. Or 2) having a Christian influence. Brian Borgman is another minister who argues for option 2 – that “holy” means “having a Christian influence” versus “unclean” meaning “not having a Christian influence.”

**When you analyze this passage** and the terms Paul is using – *akathartos* – “unclean”, and *hagios* – “holy,” and look at how they are used at least 200 times together in Greek Septuagint version of Leviticus and Numbers (which is the Bible the apostles quote from), they are *manifestly* “covenantal” language. Remember all the passages about certain things – discharges, foods, sores, skin discolorings, and etc. which would render one “unclean until evening,” etc. What did these things mean? Unclean meant you were outside the church – outside the covenant community. Holy meant you were inside. And here again, why do Malone, Borgman, and Gill offer interpretations which ignore this simple fact and also render every child ever born on earth to unbelievers illegitimate? Because they do not like the idea that children are included as part of the church under the New Covenant. And yet, on nearly any other biblical passage or theological topic, these men would be spot on and crystal clear.

## 3. Romans 4:11-12

**Point:** This passage’s teaches on what circumcision signified has generated a very wide and interesting array of interpretations from Baptist commentators.

**Fred Malone on p119 of his book wrote:** “It is certainly true that circumcision was called a sign of the Abrahamic Covenant (Genesis 17:11), but it was never called a seal of that covenant. [pause] Rather, in only one place in Scripture is it called a seal and that was of the righteousness of the faith which Abraham had while uncircumcised (Romans 4:11). In other words, circumcision was a seal, not of every member of the Abrahamic covenant, but of the salvation experience, or personal faith, of ***Abraham alone.***”

**Remarkably,** Malone does not address the key point at issue – namely – that this “sign and seal of righteousness by faith” was administered to infants incapable of professing faith because of God’s

wisdom in commanding that it be done. Malone's assertion that circumcision signified something to Abraham which it *never signified* to any other person for the 2000 years in which it was administered is simply false. When God institutes a covenant sign and tells us what it signifies, *that is what it always signifies to every person to whom it is administered – no matter how old they are*. And I have to wonder what Malone thinks of God's wisdom in ordering this covenant sign to be given to entire households. It almost sounds like Malone would think it most unwise on God's part to command such a thing.

**John Piper** apparently preached a sermon awhile back in which he critiques our doctrine of infant baptism. After this sermon, Dr. Piper received a letter from a concerned congregant wondering why he did not address Romans 4:11 in this sermon. Piper's understanding of how we understand this passage is refreshingly accurate. Says Dr. Piper:

"Then comes the crucial verse 11 which functions as a kind of definition of circumcision: "He received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised." So Abraham's circumcision is described here as "a sign . . . a seal of the righteousness of faith."

Now why is this important? It's important because it gives a spiritual meaning to circumcision that is like the meaning of baptism in the New Testament—"a sign and seal of the righteousness of faith." We say that baptism is an expression of genuine faith and the right standing with God that we have by faith before we get baptized. This seems to be what circumcision means too, according to Paul in Romans 4:11. Circumcision is a sign and seal of a faith that Abraham had before he was circumcised.

So you see what that means? If circumcision and baptism signify the same thing—namely, genuine faith—then you can't use this meaning of baptism by itself as an argument against baptizing infants, because circumcision was given to infants. In other words, you can't simply say, "Baptism is an expression and sign of faith; infants can't have faith; therefore don't baptize infants." You can't simply say this, because Romans 4:11 says that circumcision means the same thing—a sign of faith—and it was given to infants. This is why Romans 4:11 is considered by some as the linchpin of the defense of infant baptism. It defines circumcision in a way that gives it the same basic meaning as baptism, and yet we know from Genesis 17 that circumcision was appointed by God for the infants of all Jewish people.

**Point:** When I read this, I thought, "Wow, he's got it!" His response is most disappointing. He writes:

"The main problem with this argument is a wrong assumption about the similarity between the people of God in the Old Testament and the people of God today. ... There are differences between the new covenant people called the Church and the old covenant people called Israel. And these differences explain why it was fitting to give the old covenant sign of circumcision to the infants of Israel, and why it is not fitting to give the new covenant sign of baptism to the infants of the Church. In other words, even though there is an overlap in meaning between baptism and circumcision (seen in Romans 4:11), circumcision and baptism don't have the same role to play in the covenant people of God because the way God constituted his people in the Old Testament and the way he is constituting the Church today are fundamentally different. ... The covenant people in the Old Testament were mixed. They were all physical Israelites who were circumcised, but within that national-ethnic group there was a remnant of the true Israel, the true children of God (verse 8).

**Response:** Reformed Baptists tend to get irritated with us when we drop the D-word – dispensationalist. But how can we use any other word when Dr. Piper says: "There are differences between the new covenant people call the church and the old covenant people called Israel."? The "old covenant" people called Israel are called "the church" 75 times in the Old Testament – the Hebrew word, *qahal* – translated by the Greek word, *ekklesia*. The martyr Stephen in Acts 7:38 calls what Piper calls "the old covenant people called Israel" "the church in the wilderness."! So, no, it is not Israel and "the church." It is "the church" and "the church." This is basic not only to Reformational / biblical theology, but to classical Christianity from the very beginning. The oldest Christian creed in existence confesses: "we believe in one, holy, universal, and apostolic church." And the most basic assertion of biblical covenant

theology is summarized in WCF 7:6: “There are not therefore two covenants of grace differing in substance, but one and the same under various dispensations.”

**Dr. Piper is also in error when he asserts:** “They were all physical Israelites who were circumcised, but within that national-ethnic group there was a remnant of the true Israel, the true children of God (verse 8).” From the very beginning, they were not all physical Israelites. Every foreign male in Abraham’s household, in Isaac’s household, in Jacob’s household, and in Joseph’s household were circumcised from the beginning. Abraham’s servant, Eliezer of Damascus, was circumcised the day circumcision was commanded by God – and he *was not a physical descendant of Abraham*. Dr. Piper has also not addressed the fact that church discipline was practiced prior to the coming of Christ. If people were not faithful to the Lord, if they committed idolatry, if they committed grievous sins – they were to be cut off from the people.

**The subordinate document to the 1689 London Baptist Confession** has a lengthy section in which they address Romans 4:11. Here are some of their comments: “circumcision was given to Abraham for a Seal of that Righteousness which he had being yet uncircumcised, which we will not deny to be in some sense true, but we believe that circumcision had chiefly a far different respect. ...”

**Application:** As a pastor and as a Christian, I want to warn you about a certain phrase they are using here. Anytime you hear a theologian or commentator read a text of Scripture and they begin by quoting it and then saying that they wouldn’t deny what it says to be “in some sense true, but we believe that circumcision had chiefly a far different respect...” this should cause red flags to go up. Romans 4:11’s description of the significance of circumcision is not *in some sense* true. It is infallibly true exactly as it is written. These divines may believe it had a “far different respect,” and I’m certainly willing to listen to what they have to say – but I can assure you that I’m going to stick with Romans 4:11 when all is said and done. Here is what they think circumcision was all about. Please listen carefully:

“Abraham had a twofold seed, natural, of the Jews; and faithful, of the believing Gentiles: his natural seed was signed with the sign of circumcision, first indeed for the distinguishing of them from all other Nations whilst they as yet were not the seed of Abraham, but especially for the memorial of the justification of the Gentiles by faith, when at length they should become his seed. Therefore circumcision was of right to cease, when the Gentiles were brought in to the faith, forasmuch as then it had obtained its last and chief end, & thenceforth circumcision is nothing.”

**Application:** This is really the only direction they can go: downplay (as Malone and Piper do) that circumcision was a sign of personal justification by faith (which was commanded by God to be given to infants), try to argue that circumcision was strictly a Jewish sign not for gentiles, or try to argue (as Paul Jewett and David Kingdon do) that circumcision had only to do with land promises. The problem with what the divines of the 1689 baptist confession say here is that circumcision, from the day it was instituted, was given to non-Jews. Please hear me: Circumcision was at no point a strictly Israelite / Jewish identity marker.

**Important Illustration:** When the Passover was instituted by God to the people of Israel just prior to the 10<sup>th</sup> plague of the death of the firstborn, a provision was made for *non-Jews* – contrary to the theologians of the Baptist confession – to become part of the people of Israel by being circumcised:

**Exodus 12:48** And when a stranger dwells with you and wants to 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 a native of the land. For no uncircumcised person shall eat it.

**Had the authors of the Baptist Confession been correct**, Exodus 12 would say instead: “When a stranger dwells with you and wants to keep the Passover to the Lord, he can’t because only the circumcised can eat it and only ethnic Israelites are allowed to be circumcised.” Obviously, this is not what it says.

#### 4. Hebrews 8 and Greg Welty’s paper against infant baptism.

**Point:** When this issue of infant baptism first came on my radar, I was directed by a friend of mine who was in seminary at the time working through the same issue to read a paper titled: “A Critical Evaluation of Paedobaptism” by a man named Greg Welty. At the time, I was not fully settled on the issue. I read the entire paper and thought it was fairly compelling, but I also felt like something was wrong with it. So, I read it again, this time stopping and looking at every citation of Scripture in the paper – and I caught his error. In fact, others had already caught it and pointed it out to him and he responds with one sentence. The paper lays a very heavy emphasis upon the New Covenant – Jeremiah 31:31-34 – and its citation in Hebrews 8. The contrasts between the New Covenant and what Jeremiah calls the Old Covenant are hammered home very hard. The problem is: Welty treats the Old Covenant (which is the legal, obedience-based covenant made at Mount Sinai where the law was given to the people of Israel) and the Abrahamic promise as if they are one. If you do not grant to Welty, his entire paper falls apart. If you let him get away with this, the argument makes perfect sense. Welty writes:

Paedobaptists may claim that baptists are failing to recognize that the contrast which Jeremiah is drawing here is between the New Covenant and the *Mosaic* (Old) Covenant, *not* between the New Covenant and the covenant as originally administered to Abraham. Since paedobaptists justify infant baptism with reference to the *Abrahamic* (not *Mosaic*) Covenant, the fact that Jeremiah speaks of the New Covenant as different from the *Mosaic* is of no relevance for the question of infant baptism. This point is well taken—the *Mosaic* Covenant was indeed added to the Abrahamic promises, not repealing or replacing them but furthering their ultimate purpose (Galatians 3:17-19). But reflection upon the realities of the Abrahamic Covenant will reveal that each of the contrasts Jeremiah asserts here between the New and the Mosaic Covenants, is also a contrast between the New and the Abrahamic! Under the Abrahamic Covenant, all did not have the law written on their hearts, or know the Lord, or have their sins forgiven. Covenant children such as Ishmael and Esau, who lived under the Abrahamic but not the Mosaic Covenant, bear eloquent testimony to this fact.

**And that’s it.** That’s his entire response. He assumes that the law-covenant of Sinai which was conditioned on the obedience of the people of Israel who twice swear and oath to be obedient (Exodus 24:3, 7) is identical to the gracious Abrahamic promise. Would Paul have agreed with this assessment? Let’s see if Paul would have agreed that all of Jeremiah 31:31-34’s contrasts with the Old Covenant at Sinai would apply equally as contrasts to the Abrahamic promise:

**Galatians 4:22-31** For it is written that Abraham had two sons: the one by a bondwoman, the other by a freewoman. [23] But he who was of the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, and he of the freewoman through promise, [24] which things are symbolic. For these are the two covenants: the one from Mount Sinai which gives birth to bondage, which is Hagar-- [25] for this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and corresponds to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children-- [26] but the Jerusalem above is free, which is the mother of us all. ... [28] Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are children of promise. ... [30] Nevertheless what does the Scripture say? "Cast out the bondwoman and her son, for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with the son of the freewoman." [31] So then, brethren, we are not children of the bondwoman but of the free.

**What do you think?** Do you think Paul would agree with Welty – that every contrast between the New Covenant and the Legal Old Covenant (which Paul says gives rise to children of bondage) would also apply as valid contrasts to the covenant of promise by which sinners are made free? Most certainly not.

## 5. Difficult pastoral questions

**Point:** In nearly every debate I have listened to on this topic, the paedobaptists are asked questions like these: “Would you baptize a 10 year old who had declared himself to be an atheist?” “Would you baptize a 16 year old in a household?” “What if slave holders in 1841 came to Christ in Biloxi, MS. Would their slaves and all their slaves’ children have been baptized?” There are simple answers to these questions. No, yes, and no.

**Application:** Posing difficult pastoral questions is irrelevant to the practice of infant and household baptism. Think with me. Are these kinds of pastoral situations addressed in the Old Testament institution of circumcision? What if Abraham, Isaac, or some Israelite later had a 24 year old male servant who didn't want to be circumcised? What should they have done? Whether or not there was a hard and fast answer to such questions had no bearing at all upon the fact that *God commanded households to be circumcised*. Posing difficult pastoral questions to paedobaptists like these and then acting like this is somehow an argument against the propriety of the practice would be the same as Abraham responding to God like this: "God, you didn't address what I should do with 16 year old male servants to don't want to serve you. Therefore, I will not practice household circumcision as you commanded." Such was not valid then. Such is not valid now either.

**Conclusion:** For many in our day, they will listen to all that I've said here and respond with a simple argument: "Look, I don't have time to read 100 books on this issue. The fact is, I do not see infant baptism commanded in Scripture, and I do not see it explicitly practiced in Scripture. Therefore, I'm not going to do it." If that is your standard, then you would be forced to conclude that women cannot take the Lord's Supper. There is no command for them to do so. And there is no explicit example of them doing so either. The reality is, what God requires of us when it comes to the administration of his church in this world is supposed to be relatively easy to understand. One need not have a PhD in theology or biblical exegesis to see this. The argument is really quite simple. I am very thankful that Reformed Baptists see the continuity between the administration of the gospel before and after the coming of Christ much clearer than the dispensationalists do. But they still need to see it more clearly. There is one church and one people of God across both testaments. It is not, as Pipe says, "Israel and the church." It is THE ONE CHURCH. Failure to understand this point means a failure to understand the heart of covenant theology over against dispensationalism. The administration of the covenant of grace has not changed in the visible church. Households were circumcised just as households are now baptized. Children are not cut off from membership in the visible church. Divine wisdom orders us to include our children in our covenant communities – not as a guarantee that they will be saved, but rather as a guarantee that we will not fail to recognize that these children are not ours. They belong to God and we are obligated to raise them in the bosom of Christian discipleship while we pray for and seek their conversion through personal faith and repentance just as the people of God on earth have done for these past 4000 years.