

## *Argument 2*

### *Infant Baptisers Claim that the Abrahamic Covenant Applies to Believers and Their Children*

In addition to their mistaken view of 1 Corinthians 7:14, infant baptisers support their practice of infant baptism by arguments based on the Old Testament Abrahamic covenant, those promises which God made to Abraham concerning his physical seed. They apply these promises to the church, by which they mean believers and their children. In this way, the circumcision of Israelite boys comes to be replaced by the baptism of infants who are born in families where the father or the mother, or both, are Christians (or nominally so). The promises of the Abrahamic covenant are applied to such children.

This is totally unwarranted. Unwarranted, it may be – it is! – even so, it does not lack, what seems to many, an impressive theology to buttress it. But... let us see how well this ‘impressive’ theology stands up.

Its fullest formulation comes from covenant theology, that logical system invented by the Reformers,<sup>1</sup> which is built upon the mistaken

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<sup>1</sup> Although Johann Heinrich Bullinger (1504-1575) was probably the first to publish a work containing the concept of federal salvation, Kaspar Olevianus (1536-1587) ‘was the real founder of a well-developed federal theology’ (Berkhof pp211-212). This took place in Germany when Olevianus and Zacharias Ursinus (1534-1583) drafted the final version of the Heidelberg Catechism (1562). William Ames (1576-1633) was the leading British exponent of covenant theology, which dominated the Westminster Confession of the Presbyterians (1643-1646) and the Savoy Declaration of the Independents (1661). See Douglas pp36,165,267,729,1005; Kendall pp38-39. Although covenant theology plays an important part in infant baptism today, the dates just cited tell all; it is a relatively recent development. What is more, its introduction did not go uncontested. These facts need wider recognition. The Fathers, when they drifted towards infant baptism, did not argue for it on the basis of the covenant; indeed, by them, ‘the Abrahamic covenant is hardly

## *Argument 2: The Abrahamic Covenant*

premise that the two Testaments are continuous,<sup>2</sup> and leads to the application, to the church, of principles which concerned Israel.<sup>3</sup> As

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ever mentioned'. True, the 4th century laid the foundations for it (Stander and Louw pp37,69,80,185), but it was the Reformers who systematised covenant theology, and the Puritans who took it to its pinnacle. See Davies Vol.2 pp311-313.

So why did the Reformers invent covenant theology? Wright: 'The 16th century Reformers... were confronted with the urgency of justifying [infant baptism] in the face of Anabaptist protests which took *sola Scriptura* more strictly than did the likes of Luther, Calvin and company. [Supposed] covenantal parallelism [between the covenant with Abraham and the new covenant] proved the most sophisticated and durable of their [attempted] defences, which in turn made the assumption of universal infant baptism (made legally binding in some Reformation strongholds, such as Geneva) a factor in the rise of covenantal theology to prominence in the later 16th and the 17th centuries' (Wright: 'Children' p28). Wright quoted Riggs: 'From a historical perspective, the Reformed use of covenant to interpret Christian baptism first arose, almost always, when arguing for infant baptism. In other words, its origin was not in theological or exegetical reflection on baptism as such, but as a specific response to the [Anabaptist] challenge to a long-held practice of infant baptism' (Riggs p122). In other words, the Reformers began with the practice they had inherited from Rome, and went looking for a theology to support it. But if they had taken Scripture as seriously as did the Anabaptists, they would have started with Scripture, tested their practice against it, and come to the right way to baptise.

<sup>2</sup> I have already noted the significance of this mistake. We have not heard the last of it.

<sup>3</sup> 'For the Reformers, the total Bible was to be taken as one flat book, with every text having the same kind of authority, regardless of its place in the Bible, when it served their purposes' – when it served their purposes! So, for instance, 'the religious government of the Old Testament could be an example for the State Church in the 16th century without reference to what happened to that government under divine providence in the Old Testament or what Jesus did about being a king... The Anabaptists were the only mission group of the Reformation to make clear the fundamental distinction between the Old Testament and the New... Over against the "mainstream magisterial" Reformation for which in all history there has been but one age since the covenant with Abraham... the Anabaptists spoke... of the old covenant and the new... The significance of the relationship between [the] Testaments is enormous in practical consequences' (Yoder pp19-20). 'It would seem that the Reformers, in their haste to find the [Anabaptists] guilty of heresy at this point, were themselves led into error, the error of not appropriating the

## *Argument 2: The Abrahamic Covenant*

Warfield put it, infant baptisers believe that the church ‘carried over into itself all that was essentially Israelitish’.<sup>4</sup> But this is wrong; it flies in the face of the New Testament itself.

It is not only wrong, it is complicated. To try to unravel the arguments infant baptisers use, I will look at them under four headings. *First*, I will examine their claims based on the Abrahamic covenant. *Secondly*, I will consider the double aspect of that covenant from Romans 9. *Thirdly*, I will look at the way infant baptisers confuse the Abrahamic covenant with the Mosaic and new covenants. *Finally*, I will consider the new covenant itself.

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teaching, found so unmistakably present in the letter to the Hebrews for example [as well as Romans and Galatians], that the Old Testament is superseded by the New. One can go very far indeed in saying that there is a discontinuity between the Old Testament and the New before one lands in error as great as that of the man who refuses to accept the discontinuity that the New Testament plainly teaches’ (Verduin pp210-211). Given Verduin’s background, these comments cannot be ignored.

Ronald E. Diprose noted how the Presbyterians at the Westminster Assembly argued for their view of the church by what they called ‘Jewish subordinations’ which, they alleged, ‘do, in the moral equity of them, concern us as well as them... We may... urge an argument’, they claimed, ‘from subordinations in the Jewish Church to prove a subordination still... There should be subordinations now in the Christian Church, that was then in the Jewish’. ‘In other words’, Diprose observed, ‘Israel’s Levitical order is seen [by such men] to constitute a model for the church’ (Diprose pp137-138). See Newton pp43,48-49,51-52; Stuart Murray: *Biblical* pp97-124; Lusk: ‘Paedobaptism’ pp106-107; Wellum; Wright: ‘Christian’ p168. In addition to the ridiculous notion (see below) of a *Jewish* as opposed to a *Christian* church, among the many dreadful consequences which have come from over-emphasising the continuity between the Testaments, Cyprian used it to establish the priesthood; the slaughter of heretics has been justified on its basis; and, principally for my purposes, infant baptism has been built on circumcision. As I have said, I will go into this in more detail in my forthcoming book on the law. Even in this present book, however, I do not ignore the ‘sharp questions’ about the covenant, which those who, like me, baptise believers need to face (Wright ‘Christian’ p168). But Reformed infant-baptisers, likewise, cannot duck some ‘sharp questions’ about the logical system they have foisted upon Scripture.

<sup>4</sup> Warfield p404.

### **1. The Abrahamic covenant**

The terms of the Abrahamic covenant are found in Genesis 17:7-8:

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. Also I give to you and your descendants after you the land in which you are a stranger, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.

Before we examine these promises in more detail, some preliminary and obvious remarks are called for. The promises God gave to Abraham applied to the man himself *and to his descendants*. As Warfield's words make clear, infant baptisers take this principle – this Abrahamic, Israelitish principle of physical descent – into the New Testament, into the church. But this is utterly out of order; it is completely misguided; it runs counter to Scripture. We have no need to guess or speculate as to what the New Testament understands by 'the seed of Abraham'; it tells us – and plainly: The children or seed of Abraham in New Testament terms *are believers, all believers, only believers and nothing other than believers*. Most definitely *they are not the children of believers*.<sup>5</sup> The covenant does not apply to the children of Christians on the basis that they are the physical descendants of believers. In the New Testament it is not a matter of physical descent; it is entirely a question of faith. The issue is not: 'Is my father a believer?' But: 'Am I a believer?' The New Testament is clear. Abraham is:

The father of all those who believe... who also walk in the steps of the faith which our father Abraham had... Abraham... is the father of us [believers] all... Therefore know that only those who are of faith are sons of Abraham... So then those who are of faith are blessed with believing Abraham... For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus... And if you are Christ's, then are you Abraham's seed, and heirs according to

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<sup>5</sup> I am not saying, of course, that the children of believers cannot themselves be the spiritual children of Abraham. Rather, that in the New Testament, the *definition* of the seed of Abraham does not include the children of believers. Those who do include such children in the definition of Abraham's seed, fly in the face of Scripture, and confuse the physical and the spiritual. Nowhere is it ever stated that Abraham is the father of believers *and their children*.

## *Argument 2: The Abrahamic Covenant*

the promise... Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are children of promise (Rom. 4:11-12,16; Gal. 3:7,9,26-29; 4:28).

These verses clearly teach that it is believers – and only believers – who are the seed of Abraham in the language of the New Testament; *not the children of believers*. It is only ‘those who are of faith’ who are the ‘sons of Abraham’. Only believers are in the covenant in the gospel age; not believers and their children. Thus, when infant baptisers contend for infant baptism on the basis of the promises of God to Abraham concerning his physical seed, their argument is utterly false; utterly false, I repeat. But this is just what infant baptisers do. They wrongly apply the terms of the Abrahamic covenant to Christians *and their children*. Where, in the New Testament, are the children of believers told they are the seed of Abraham? and told it simply because they are the children of believers?<sup>6</sup>

What is more, when they apply the promises of the covenant which God made with Abraham and his physical seed, to Christians and their children, infant baptisers are not only wrong; they prove too much. Let us look at Genesis 17:7-8. By God’s promise, since all the descendants of Abraham were in the covenant, then it followed that they all inherited all the promises of the covenant. Once a boy born to an Israelite was circumcised, he himself was an Israelite, one who inherited all the rights and privileges of an Israelite. God established his covenant with that circumcised boy and his descendants for ever through Abraham. That is what God promised in the Abrahamic covenant. He said as much in Genesis 17. The point is, infant baptisers wrongly apply this covenant principle to Christian parents. This must mean – it can only mean – that they think a Christian’s children are in the covenant in the same way as – or, at least, parallel to – the terms of Genesis 17. A Hebrew’s children were Hebrews; a Christian’s children must be Christians! If this passage could be applied to Christians as

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<sup>6</sup> I invite anybody who suggests Acts 2:39 to read it again. There is no mention of any covenant. If the claim is still maintained, then it follows that not only are the children of believers in the covenant, but everybody is – ‘all who are afar off’. If it is then said that the qualifying clause – ‘as many as the Lord our God will call’ – governs all, I agree entirely. The promise here is to everybody without exception. All who repent (and believe) and are baptised will be saved. If the verse is still applied to the Abrahamic covenant, however, then indiscriminate baptism must be the result. I will return to the verse.

## *Argument 2: The Abrahamic Covenant*

infant baptisers do apply it – a big ‘if’ – it would mean that all the children of all believers are included in the covenant; and in it for ever. What is more, they all inherit all the promises of the covenant.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Calvin, replying to the Anabaptists, declared that they were criticising God, not the Reformers, when they argued against infant baptism: ‘The Lord did not anciently bestow circumcision upon [the Israelites] without making them partakers of all the things signified by circumcision... The covenant... is no less applicable to the children of Christians in the present day... If [‘since’ Calvin meant] [the children] are partakers of the thing signified, how can they be denied the sign? If they obtain the reality, how can they be refused the figure?... Let God, then, be demanded why he ordered circumcision to be performed on the bodies of infants. For baptism and circumcision being here in the same case [Oh? What a begging-of-the-question!], [the Anabaptists] cannot give anything to the latter without conceding it to the former’.

Calvin’s argument was both dangerous and puerile. God ‘ordered circumcision to be performed’ on baby boys under the Abrahamic covenant, yes; he guaranteed – guaranteed – all the promised inheritance to those boys, yes; they were Israelites, with all the benefits attached to being an Israelite. But where did God order believers to baptise their babies, and guarantee them all the inheritance of true believers? Calvin’s premise was wrong; ‘baptism and circumcision’ are not ‘in the same case’; in covenant theology, they may be, but not in Scripture. Do the babies of believers ‘partake of the thing signified’ in baptism? Do they have ‘the reality’ of the figure? According to Calvin, apparently so: ‘The divine symbol communicated to the child, as with the impress of a seal, confirms the promise given to the godly parent, and declares that the Lord will be a God not to him only, but to his seed; not merely visiting him with his grace and goodness, but his posterity also to the thousandth generation’. ‘If [since] the children of believers, without the help of understanding, are partakers of the covenant, there is no reason why they should be denied the sign, [just] because they are unable to swear to its stipulations’. Such ‘children, deriving their origin from Christians, as [since] they are immediately on their birth received by God as heirs of the covenant, are also to be admitted to baptism... Baptism... is a kind of entrance, and as it were initiation into the church, by which we are ranked among the people of God, a sign of our spiritual regeneration, by which we are again born to be children of God... Wherefore, if we would not maliciously obscure the kindness of God, let us present to him our infants, to whom he has assigned a place among his friends and family; that is, the members of the church’ (Calvin: *Institutes* Vol.2 pp531-532,534,542,546,549,554). Phew! If Calvin was only half right, why would Paul have said that Christ had not sent him to baptise (1 Cor. 1:17)? It brings to mind the claims of faith-healers. Why don’t they visit the hospitals and empty the wards? Likewise, if baptism carries such

## *Argument 2: The Abrahamic Covenant*

But do infant baptisers really believe that all the children of Christians are Christians? Do they believe that all the baptised children of believers inherit all the covenant promises? Well, do they? Surely it does not need to be pointed out, but the sad fact is, unfortunately, not all the children of believers will be converted, whether or not they are baptised as infants. On the infant baptiser's logic, why is this? They claim that they and their children are in the covenant of Genesis 17. Well then, since God was the covenant God of the seed (or children) of Abraham (Gen. 17:7), is he the God, the covenant God, of the seed (or children) of believers or not? Do infant baptisers really believe that their children are in covenant with God for ever? Furthermore, are the children of *their* children in an everlasting covenant with God likewise? Abraham's descendants were. All of them were. If infant baptisers are right, then a Christian's baptised children are in the covenant, his grandchildren are in the covenant, his great-grandchildren are in the covenant, *ad infinitum*. Really? Infant baptisers claim that the Abrahamic covenant applies to believers and their children. If they are right then all their seed are in the covenant for ever. They are all – all of them – regenerate.

But this is ridiculous. The mistake, of course, is to leap from the physical covenant made with Abraham – and it was physical, 'in your flesh' (Gen. 17:13) – to the spiritual life of the church. This is totally unwarranted, and, as a result, highly dangerous. The truth is, the physical covenant blessings promised to the seed of Abraham have no connection with the church at all. None whatsoever. Physical covenant blessings certainly came through physical descent in the Old Testament, but does grace come through physical descent? It most

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benefits, why preach? Have as many children as you can, and baptise them all! And why stop at baptism – why not the Lord's supper? Read on!

I have already asked if anybody knows why Calvin baptised infants. May I broaden the question a little? I ask all covenant theologians: Are these particular infants in the covenant by birth, or does baptism bring them into it? A personal note: I was standing with fellow-speakers at a Reformed conference for a group photograph. The birth of my grandson had been announced at the meeting that morning. I felt a nudge in my side. A Reformed minister hissed in my ear: 'Get him under the covenant, brother; get him under the covenant'. As I recall it now, I wish I had asked: 'On your principles, isn't he already under the covenant?' Or is there a difference between being '*in* the covenant' and *under* it?

## *Argument 2: The Abrahamic Covenant*

decidedly does not. It never did. And in New Testament terms it is expressly ruled out. It is not a question of physical descent. This vital point has been made already. Regeneration has nothing to do with human birth ties. Nothing whatever. Let me quote John 1:11-13:

He came to his own, and his own did not receive him. But as many as received him, to them he gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in his name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.

Is it not perfectly clear? Grace does not run in the line of physical descent in the New Testament. As we shall see, it never did, not even in the Old Testament. There never was a time when it did. It never will. Infant baptisers are going further than the Abrahamic covenant itself.

Another of the promises in Genesis 17 concerned the land (Gen. 17:8). Infant baptisers say that to this day the physical seed of believers are included in the covenant. Well then, is the physical land also included? Will the baptised children of believers inherit the promised land? Of course not! What a silly suggestion! But what *will* they inherit? Since the children of Abraham did inherit the land, on the infant baptiser's argument the children of believers must inherit something. They must inherit the promise of God. What promise? What, if not the land? Is it 1 Peter 1:4? Do the children of Christians come into 'an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven'? All believers have this covenant inheritance. God has promised it to them. Do the children of believers come into this, on the basis that their parents are Christians, and consequently they themselves are in the covenant and were baptised? Believers possess an incorruptible inheritance – do their baptised children possess it, too? If not, why not? On the arguments of infant baptisers, children must inherit something from the covenant by virtue of their physical descent from Christians. What, exactly, do the children of believers inherit through the covenant?

Further, must it be an eight-day baptism (Gen. 17:12)? If not, why not? And what about servants in a home where the husband or wife or both are Christians or nominally so? Are they included in the covenant? What about the children of these servants? Are they included in the covenant, likewise? They were in the Abrahamic covenant, with no suggestion that they had adopted Israelite



## *Argument 2: The Abrahamic Covenant*

convictions (Gen. 17:12-13). So, to come to a practical case, if a Christian has adult servants, must they be baptised? What if they are not converted, or do not even make a profession, must they be baptised even so? Are they in the covenant? Are they Christians? These are no idle questions. Meredith Kline tried to face up to them, but the consequences proved too much:

Perhaps the complications that can easily be foreseen developing in this area are in themselves sufficient to turn us from further consideration of this approach as a proper interpretation of New Testament directives.<sup>8</sup>

Is this the best that can be said for the practical consequences of the attempt to apply the covenant in the way infant baptisers do? It is more than ‘sufficient to turn us from further consideration of this approach’. It is an utter farce. It is nothing less than a frank admission of the failure of their case based upon a most improper interpretation of Scripture. Infant baptism, on the basis of this kind of partial, pick-and-choose application of the Abrahamic covenant, ought to be stopped now!

Again, if an Israelite parent did not circumcise his infant, that boy was to be ‘cut off from his people’; he had broken God’s covenant (Gen. 17:14). How does this apply to infant baptism? What will infant baptisers do to those persons whose parents were Christians but who did not baptise them as infants? What will they do to the unbaptised infant? How will the child be ‘cut off from his people’? What will it mean? My wife and I were such parents; we were believers but we did not baptise our infants. Thus the question is of personal interest to me and millions like me. What happens to those whose parents did not baptise them as infants? Will infant baptisers cut them off from Christ and salvation? What will this mean in down-to-earth terms? Would some infant baptiser spell it out for us?<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Kingdon pp48-49.

<sup>9</sup> My parents were not believers when I was born. I was not baptised as an infant. In my teens, I was converted and baptised. My parents later professed faith, and were baptised. In time, I married a believer who had been baptised upon profession of faith – her believing parents had not baptised her as an infant. When our children were born, we did not baptise them as infants. On credible profession of faith, in their teens, at their request and after due examination, they were baptised. When, in their turn, in their marriages to believers, they had children, they did not baptise them as babies. But these

## *Argument 2: The Abrahamic Covenant*

Ishmael was circumcised but he was expressly excluded from the covenant (Gen. 17:15-27; Rom. 9:7-8; Gal. 4:22-31). What, exactly, is the spiritual equivalent of this in the baptism of the New Testament? Who are the Christian Ishmaelites?

What is more, why do Reformed infant-baptisers not baptise *all* children? Since the covenant applies for a thousand generations (Deut. 7:9; 1 Chron. 16:15-17; Ps. 105:5-10), once a man is in the covenant, all his descendants are in the covenant, even to a thousand generations. On the principles of infant baptism, once any man is in the covenant, all his descendants must be baptised, even to a thousand generations. Let us pause for a moment and consider this. It is bound to mean virtual indiscriminate baptism in the end.<sup>10</sup> The point is, what happens

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children are now coming to profess Christ, and those who have so professed him have been baptised. As I say, would some infant baptiser please write to me, and set this in the context of Gen. 17? Who should be 'cut off'? And what will that mean?

<sup>10</sup> The arithmetic is unassailable. In round figures, 2000 years have passed since the New Testament; 70 generations, say. Allowing, for the moment, 2 offspring *per* generation, and no intermarriage, a believer of the New Testament age would now have  $2^{70}$  descendants, approximately  $10^{22}$ , alive today. So the 120 believers at Pentecost would have approximately  $10^{24}$  descendants alive today; a million, million, million, million. Obviously, this figure will be drastically reduced by intermarriage and all the rest, (but it will be increased if more than two offspring are produced and have children in each generation). The point I am making is that when the arithmetic is applied to all the generations since Pentecost, leaving aside isolated tribes, the likelihood of anybody alive today not having at least one believer in his ancestry, is so remote as to be unthinkable. (As I write, the world population is just under a 'mere' 7000 million!) In other words, everybody alive today must be in the covenant. Furthermore, why begin at Pentecost? What about Abraham? He lived 42 generations before the birth of Christ (Matt. 1:17). So we are talking about 110 generations! All this makes the possibility – of anybody alive today *not* being in the covenant – even more remote. Nor must it be forgotten, Ps. 105 speaks of 1000 generations – which Calvin applied to the babies of believers. In short, everybody alive today almost certainly has at least one ancestor who was in the covenant. And this has large consequences for infant baptisers and covenant theologians. Let John Cotton spell it out: 'If you can say, you have known some of your ancestors in this covenant, and you have not refused it, but laid claim to it, when you understand it yourselves, it is certain this covenant reaches to you' (Perry Miller p92). Cotton was stricter than the Bible. A man is in the covenant if but *one* of his

## *Argument 2: The Abrahamic Covenant*

if an infant's father is a rank infidel, but his grandfather is a true believer? Since the grandfather is in the covenant, his son, though an unbeliever, is also in the covenant! But even if he is not, the promise still descends to the infant through his grandfather. Are infants to be baptised because the father is in the covenant, or because the grandfather is, or because the great-grandfather is? Louis Berkhof said that some infant baptisers actually do reason on this basis to the end that 'children whose parents have left the church have not thereby forfeited their privileges as children of the covenant'. In other words, some infant baptisers do argue for the virtual indiscriminate baptism of infants, irrespective of the standing of the parents. 'Covenant theology' has come to a sorry state when this happens.<sup>11</sup>

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ancestors was. And he is in it, whether or not he knows his ancestor was. And where does this idea of 'refusing the covenant' come from? Can a man, in the covenant by God's decree through birth, refuse it?

By the way, how does Ex. 20:5 effect the infant-baptiser's argument based on the generations in the covenant? 'I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate me'. Suppose a man is a believer, but his son, though in the covenant and baptised as an infant, turns out to be a hater of God. Are *his* children in the covenant, or does God visit the iniquity of their father upon them? And so on.

<sup>11</sup> Calvin to John Knox: 'God's promise comprehends not only the offspring of every believer in the first line of descent, but extends to thousands [*sic*] of generations. Whence it has happened that the interruption of piety which has prevailed in Popery has not taken away from baptism its force and efficacy... To us then it is by no means doubtful [a *litotes*; that is, it is certain] that offspring descended from holy and pious ancestors, belong to the body of the church, though their fathers and grandfathers may have been apostates... [Let me suppose a case:] It is unjust, when God, three hundred years ago or more [say], has thought them worthy of adoption [that is, one of their ancestors at that time was a believer], that the subsequent impiety of some of their progenitors should interrupt the course of heavenly grace. In short, as each person is not admitted to baptism from respect or regard to one of his parents alone, but on account of the perpetual covenant of God, so in like manner, no just reason suffers children to be debarred from their initiation into the church in consequence of the bad conduct of only one parent' (Calvin: *Letters* pp215-216). See below for note on Calvin: *Institutes* Vol.2 p521. So much for the children of apostates, according to covenant theology. But a question suggests itself: Were those apostates, themselves, in the covenant or not? After all, they had an ancestor who was.

## *Argument 2: The Abrahamic Covenant*

On the basis of Genesis 17:12, why do infant baptisers not adopt infants, and baptise them? This is no trivial question. Berkhof said it is the principle and practice of some infant baptisers where ‘the parents were unfit or unwilling to vouch for the Christian education of their children’. As he put it: ‘Others could step in to guarantee this’.<sup>12</sup>

What is more, if a foreigner became an Israelite, his children and slaves had to become – and did become – Israelites, too, by circumcision (Exod. 12:48). Charles Hodge, at least with the merit of consistency, said that the equivalent applies to Christians! Really? He was actually prepared to maintain that ‘if the father becomes a citizen of a country he makes his children citizens. In like manner, when a man becomes a Christian, his children are to be regarded as doing the same thing’.<sup>13</sup> This is staggering. It is unbelievable. I agree that if a man takes on English or American nationality, say, his dependent children do,<sup>14</sup> but do infant baptisers really believe that if a man is converted, his children are to be regarded as converted? Apparently they do. Warfield, for instance, said that the parent acts as a representative of his child, and ‘that the status of the parent determines the status of the child’. And to remove all misunderstanding, he explained that he meant ‘in the church of God... as well as... in the State’.<sup>15</sup> What an incredible claim!

John Murray said that ‘baptised infants are to be received as the children of God and treated accordingly’.<sup>16</sup> Surely this must be a gross mistake. But A.A.Hodge was even more frank. He said that the baptised infant should be ‘taught from the first to recognise himself as a child of God, with all its privileges and duties; trained to think, feel, and act as a child of God’.<sup>17</sup> What an amazing statement! How terribly misguided. What untold damage this must have done to unregenerate

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<sup>12</sup> Berkhof p642. What is this talk of ‘Christian education’? I am not, of course, implying that parents should not train up their children in the ways of God (Prov. 22:6), but, according to covenant theology, the infant is in the covenant, full stop, by virtue of the faith of its parent, grand-parent or whoever – whether or not the parent gives it a ‘Christian education’.

<sup>13</sup> Kingdon p47.

<sup>14</sup> As Paul said: ‘I was born a [Roman] citizen’ (Acts 22:28). Where in the Bible is anyone said to be ‘born a Christian’?

<sup>15</sup> Warfield p403.

<sup>16</sup> Kingdon p47.

<sup>17</sup> A. A. Hodge p337.

## *Argument 2: The Abrahamic Covenant*

children who have been trained, constantly brought up, to look upon themselves as children of God. It is horrific.

I ask again: Since all the children of the Israelites were Israelites by the covenant, are infant baptisers really prepared to say that all the children of Christians are themselves Christians? In their discussion of infant baptism, it is obvious that they get very close to saying it, if not actually committing themselves to the position. And it is totally wrong and a diabolical suggestion. Reader, I can do no better than to refer you to John 1:11-13 once more. In New Testament terms, birth has nothing to do with spiritual life. That there are advantages in being born to Christian parents, no one denies. But this is not the issue.

In the Presbyterian *Directory for the Public Worship of God*, the section on the *Administration of the Sacraments* gives this counsel to a minister when he baptises a child. He is to say:

The promise is made to believers and their seed; and that the seed and posterity of the faithful, born within the church, have, by their birth, interest in the covenant, and right to the seal of it, and to the outward privileges of the church, under the gospel, no less than the children of Abraham in the time of the Old Testament... that children by baptism, are solemnly received into the bosom of the visible church, distinguished from the world, and them that are without, and united with believers... That they are Christians, and federally holy before baptism, and therefore are they baptised.<sup>18</sup>

This is a shocking statement to be found in a Reformed document. As I have indicated, I shall have something more to say about the use of the words ‘sacrament’ and ‘visible church’, but for now I call your attention to what is said about children who ‘have by their birth’ come into all these benefits, including ‘that they are Christians’. Christians by their birth? Does the principle of John 1:11-13 not run totally contrary to the *Directory*? How can any non-Papist speak as the *Directory* advises? A child of a Christian is a Christian by means of his birth? Is this what infant baptism comes to?

The arguments for infant baptism based upon the Abrahamic covenant are mistaken, and worse. And the consequences are alarming. But certain questions remain. What of the Abrahamic covenant and the Christian? Is there no connection whatsoever between the two? And

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<sup>18</sup> Westminster pp382-383.

## *Argument 2: The Abrahamic Covenant*

where does the new covenant (Heb. 8:13) fit into this discussion? We now look into these matters.

### ***2. The double aspect of the Abrahamic covenant***

Romans 9:6-8 must be considered at this point. It reads:

But it is not as though the word of God has taken no effect. For they are not all Israel who are of Israel, nor are they all children because they are the seed of Abraham; but: 'In Isaac your seed shall be called'. That is, those who are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God; but the children of the promise are counted as the seed.

Infant baptisers fail to act on the practical implications of this passage. It is worse; they act against them. The passage teaches that there was a two-fold aspect to the covenant which God made with Abraham; there was a two-fold line of descent. One, physical; the other, spiritual. Abraham's physical descendants were physical Israelites. Isaac was, Esau was, Jacob was, and so on. But within and among the physical descendants there was another line of descent – those who were Abraham's spiritual children. Abraham's physical descendants, or 'the children of the flesh' (Rom. 9:8), were physical Israelites; Abraham's spiritual descendants, or 'the children of the promise' (Rom. 9:8), were spiritual Israelites. All Abraham's descendants were the seed of Abraham, but not all of them were his children, in the terms of the covenant (Rom. 9:7). Jacob was. Esau was not (Rom. 9:10-13).

This is the very point Paul develops in Romans 9:6-8. God declared his mind to Abraham. He gave him his word, he instituted his covenant with him. When Paul wrote to the Romans, this covenant, this word from God, had not failed or collapsed (Rom. 9:6), though it might appear that it had, since not every Israelite was saved. The truth is, God's covenant had not failed, and for this reason – Abraham's descendants were of two sorts, physical and spiritual. 'For they are not all Israel who are of Israel' (Rom. 9:6); that is, just because they were physically descended from Abraham, it did not mean that they were so spiritually. God's word had not failed. All the spiritual Israelites had received the fulfilment of the spiritual promise of the covenant. That is what Paul taught in Romans 9:6. The principle applies today. In particular, all believers – Jew and Gentile – are the spiritual Israelites, and all of them inherit the spiritual promise to Abraham. In addition,

## *Argument 2: The Abrahamic Covenant*

the spiritual descendants of Abraham are not only the children of Abraham, they are much more; they are even ‘the children of God’ (Rom. 9:8). In other words, the spiritual descendants of Abraham are, in New Testament terms, believers. See Galatians 3:7,9,26-29. The physical descendants of Abraham are most decidedly not the children of God simply because they are the physical descendants of Abraham (Rom. 9:8). This double aspect to the Abrahamic covenant is brought out very clearly in various other passages – Luke 3:8; John 1:47; 8:30-32,37-39; Romans 2:28-29; Galatians 4:22-29; 6:16, for instance. If only infant baptisers would act upon this double aspect of the covenant, the discussion would be at an end.

What is more, it is the new covenant which is in force in the New Testament (Heb. 8:13), and it is precisely this covenant which is the continuation of the spiritual aspect of the covenant with Abraham. Moreover, it is through the new covenant that believers during the gospel age are linked to Abraham and all the Old Testament saints in the line of faith and grace. Reformed infant-baptisers go astray at this point. They link believers to the physical aspects of the covenant with Abraham. This is a mistake of immense proportions. For one thing, they do not give sufficient weight to the *newness* of the new covenant. I shall have more to say on this.

The contrast between the two aspects of the Abrahamic covenant is highlighted by the following: How does a man become a physical Israelite? By being born into an Israelite family and then being circumcised. How does a man become a spiritual Israelite? Certainly not in that way. ‘For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is that circumcision which is outward in the flesh; but he is a Jew who is one inwardly, and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter’ (Rom. 2:28-29). In other words, a man becomes a true spiritual Jew (that is, a believer) by being spiritually circumcised; that is by being regenerated. Regeneration is the way a man becomes a spiritual Israelite (that is, a child of the promise), a child of God and a child of Abraham. This regeneration shows itself in faith (and repentance), so that Abraham is ‘the father of all those who believe, though they are uncircumcised... who also walk in the steps of the faith which our father Abraham had while still uncircumcised’ (Rom. 4:11-12). This regeneration, which leads to faith, itself comes about as God works out his purpose and promise according to his electing grace.

## *Argument 2: The Abrahamic Covenant*

Paul developed this argument more fully in the verses which follow on from Romans 9:6-8. He spoke of ‘the word of promise... the purpose of God according to election’ (Rom. 9:9-11), and he continued in the same vein to the end of chapter 11, saying: ‘Israel has not obtained what it seeks; but the elect have obtained it, and the rest were hardened. Just as it is written’ (Rom. 11:7-8). Simply because a man is a physical Israelite – that is, because he is in the Abrahamic covenant in its physical aspect – it does not mean he is elect and hence will be regenerated and come to faith. By no means. True spiritual Israelites are those who are believers, and only they; they are believers through their regeneration; and they are regenerated because of the election of God. Timothy’s mother is a classic case – she was a ‘Jewish woman who believed’ (Acts 16:1). She was a daughter of Abraham in a physical sense by her natural birth; she was his spiritual daughter by election and regeneration.<sup>19</sup> The same goes for all the elect, Jew or Gentile. God has determined to save them, he has decreed it, he has promised it, and they all come to faith. Thus it is that his word has not failed (Rom. 9:6). Certainly not! For all the elect (whether Jew or Gentile) will be regenerated, they will all come to faith. The covenant of God stands firm.<sup>20</sup> ‘Therefore it is of faith that it might be according to grace, so that the promise might be sure to all the seed, not only to those who are of the law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all’ (Rom. 4:16); that is, the father of us – the believing elect – all – whether Jew or Gentile. Abraham was ‘fully convinced that what [God] had promised he was also able to perform’ (Rom. 4:21). God’s predestination is so powerful, he can even raise up his elect from stones (Luke 3:8).

To summarise all this. There is a descent from Abraham according to the flesh, and there is a descent according to the Spirit. The children of the flesh are the natural children of Abraham, whereas the children of the promise are the spiritual children – they are the children of God,

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<sup>19</sup> Note the distinction between a Jew and a disciple in the words of Christ: ‘As I said to the Jews... so now I say to you’ (John 13:33).

<sup>20</sup> ‘All Israel will be saved... for the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable’ (Rom. 11:25-29). Whether ‘all Israel’ means ‘all elect Jews’ or ‘all the elect, the new Israel’, does not affect the point. All the elect will be saved; God’s covenant is absolute.



## *Argument 2: The Abrahamic Covenant*

and they only. The physical promises of the covenant applied to the physical children,<sup>21</sup> but the spiritual promises apply only to the spiritual children.

Reader, you might well ask: What bearing does all this have on the question of infant baptism? As I said earlier, infant baptisers do not act according to the principles of Romans 9:6-8. They take the *physical* promises (or some of them – they are selective!) which were made to Abraham in Genesis 17, and apply them to *spiritual* men – to believers. They confuse the two strands in the line of descent. This is just downright foolishness, and worse. The physical promises and conditions of the covenant (circumcision, the promised land, and so on) applied to the physical descendants of Abraham, and only to them. On the other hand, the spiritual promises apply only to the spiritual children of Abraham, to the elect who prove their election by their saving faith. These two strands must not be mixed up; they must not, under any circumstances, be confused. But this is exactly what infant baptisers do. They try to apply the physical covenant to believers. In particular, they take the terms, conditions and promises involved in physical circumcision, and then apply them to the physical children of believers in baptism. It is an appalling mistake, and one with dire consequences.

But it is not only infant baptisers who mix up the two strands in the Abrahamic covenant. Far from it. In fact they repeat the error of many Jews themselves; as for example the Jews in Luke 3:8. The Jews in question, who had been circumcised, but were not spiritually minded, made exactly the same mistake as can be made by infant baptisers today. Those physical Israelites forgot – or did not understand, or chose to neglect – the distinction between the physical and the spiritual descendants of Abraham. They confused the double aspect of the Abrahamic covenant. And it had disastrous results. They thought that just because they were the children of Abraham they must be the children of God. ‘We have Abraham as our father’, they protested, they bragged. ‘We are Abraham’s descendants... Abraham is our father... We have one Father – God... Our father [is] Abraham’ (John 8:33,39,41,53). John the Baptist disabused them of this mistaken

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<sup>21</sup> I will not plunge into an examination of prophecy to look at the future (if any) of physical Israel and the land *etc.* It is not relevant to the work in hand.

## *Argument 2: The Abrahamic Covenant*

notion in no uncertain terms (Luke 3:8); as did Christ (John 8:37-47,53-55). They were most definitely not the children of God, even though they were Abraham's physical children. Yes, they had descended from Abraham and had been circumcised, but that did not make them the true sons of Abraham, the children of God.

William Hendriksen justly commented on Luke 3:8:

The reason why these people were headed for damnation was that for their eternal security they were relying on their descent from Abraham... John the Baptist was fully aware of the fact that physical descent from Abraham did not guarantee being a true son of Abraham.<sup>22</sup>

The application of this to the present discussion of infant baptism lies in this: Those who have been brought up under the infant baptism system stand exposed to precisely the same dangerous assumption as the Jews of Luke 3:8, and over exactly the same issue. What about those who were baptised as infants, but are never regenerated? If they have been baptised as infants on the basis of the covenant, but they are not regenerate, they can plead – falsely like the Jews – that since their father is in the covenant, and they were dealt with as infants in accordance with the covenant, then it follows they are in the covenant themselves. I do not say that all who were baptised as infants, but who are never regenerated, do argue this way. I say it is a possibility. And a completely understandable possibility from their point of view. It is possible that they might claim that they are in the covenant, when they are not. They might claim they are Christians, when they are nothing of the sort – just like the physical Jews tried to claim they were spiritual Jews, when they were not. To use Hendriksen's words – they can make the mistake of 'relying on their descent' from a man who is in the covenant. If so, they are 'headed for damnation'.

I go further. I say that if those who were baptised as infants actually believe what they have been told times without number by their teachers, it is likely they will argue this way, even if they are not regenerated. Why? Those who have been baptised as infants can very easily make the mistaken claim that they are Christians, when they are not, because – after all – from their earliest days they have been assured by the teaching of many – if not all – of their elders, their catechisms and the Confessions under which they have been reared,

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<sup>22</sup> Hendriksen: *Luke* p205.

## *Argument 2: The Abrahamic Covenant*

that they are Christians. Since they have been treated and regarded as Christians from childhood, it cannot be wondered-at if they actually do believe their teachers and parents, and think they are saved! They have been ‘received as children of God’, they have been told that they are ‘in some sense the children of God, accounted members of Christ from the womb, ingrafted into the church, and have put on Christ’. They have been ‘taught from the first to recognise themselves as children of God’. They have been told they are in the covenant.

What if they actually do believe such horrific and erroneous statements? It would not be at all surprising if they did. What if they act upon them?<sup>23</sup> What if they die relying upon them? What will the minister who baptised an infant – an infant who never was regenerated – say to the unregenerate but professing Christian on the day of judgement? What will the minister say to him just before he is cast into hell? It will not do, it will be no comfort on that awful day – it will be no excuse – to try to explain at that frightful moment that the Confession said that not ‘all who are baptised are undoubtedly regenerated’. It will be cold comfort to say that the unregenerate professor ought to have listened more carefully to the qualifying statements of the theologians who warned him that not all baptised children would definitely become believers. An apt reply suggests itself – which end of the dog was I supposed to believe – his wagging tail or his slaving jaws?<sup>24</sup> You told me I was a Christian! I believed it. I was mistaken. You were mistaken. Now what...?

Reader, please do not run away with the idea that I pretend that all those baptised as believers are truly regenerate. In the day of judgement, we shall have many surprises – and some shocks – no doubt. And all those responsible for baptising believers will have to answer for what they have done. If they have been lax or corrupt, the

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<sup>23</sup> I have not moved much in infant-baptist circles, but when preaching in one of their strongholds, I had a new experience. I met an unbeliever (aged about 60) who thus far had been impervious to the gospel, precisely on this basis: ‘My father was in the covenant!’ was his reply to all offers of mercy and the direst of warnings. Indeed, so I was told, he liked nothing better than a strong sermon on judgement! His believing son, rightly, was seriously concerned about it. This experience, as I say, was new to me. I ask those who do move among infant-baptisers: ‘Is it an isolated case?’

<sup>24</sup> See end note on p109 for excursus: ‘Reformed double-speak’.

## *Argument 2: The Abrahamic Covenant*

burden of their responsibility will be great. But if they have sincerely and honourably applied the tests of Scripture to those they baptised, and if they have been honest in saying that they have no right or power to guarantee that the candidate is truly believing – not being able to read men’s hearts – no more can be asked of them.

My point about infant baptisers is that the infant was told two directly contradictory things. Which was he supposed to believe? True, he was warned that not all baptised infants are regenerated. But nevertheless he was also treated and addressed as a Christian. Above all, he was *assured* that he is regenerate, when he was not. For my own part, if I may be forgiven for the introduction of another personal note, I never assure anyone whom I baptise that he is a believer. I say that I baptise on the best evidence I have before me, and on the basis of the most searching tests I can apply. But only God knows the truth. I sincerely aim to act now so that no one on the day of judgement will be able to say that I told him he was a Christian.<sup>25</sup> This is the point I

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<sup>25</sup> Speaking for myself, Lloyd-Jones posed a man of straw: ‘There are people who seem to think that they can solve this problem very simply. They say infant baptism must be wrong because baptism is the seal and sign of regeneration, and we do not as yet know whether a child will be regenerate or not. But that is a very dangerous argument, surely, because are you certain that the adult is regenerate? Someone may certainly say that he believes in the Lord Jesus Christ, but does that prove that he is regenerate? If you say that you are sure he is, because he has said that he believes, then what do you say later on when he denies the faith entirely, as many have done? No, we cannot be certain that anybody is regenerate. It is not for us to decide who is born again and who is not... Similarly, people often say something like this: “Look at the thousands of children who were baptised when they were infants. They were accepted into the Christian Church but subsequently they lapsed, proving that they were never really Christians at all”. The answer again, of course, is exactly the same’ (Lloyd-Jones: *The Church* pp42-43).

With respect, no, it is not! There are several mistakes here. As I will explain, baptism is not a seal of anything; it is a sign. As to the practice of baptising believers, I apologise once again for the personal note, but since I do not know what everyone else does, I can only speak for myself. I do not baptise anybody assuring him he is definitely regenerate. If he later proves apostate, I admit, as it turns out, I had made a mistake – even though I did my best at the time to find out if he was truly converted – but he can never say I deceived him by giving him a false assurance. Above all, there is a vast difference between baptising an adult who voluntarily confesses Christ – and I look for

## *Argument 2: The Abrahamic Covenant*

have tried to raise here. I say, with respect and a sense of horror and sadness, that some – if not many – infant baptisers will have to face those whom they assured that they were regenerate, when they were not.

No wonder the term ‘lapsed Christians’ has to be invented to cope with this body of so-called ‘unregenerate Christians’. What is an unregenerate Christian? Lapsed? They never were Christians in the first place! But they have been repeatedly assured throughout their childhood that they are. They have been received and regarded as such. And all the time they were anything but. This dreadful – literally, full of dread – possibility is reason enough to abandon the practice of infant baptism. To build its practice on the covenant is fallacious. It arises out of a confusion of the two strands of the Abrahamic covenant.

### ***3. Confusion of the Abrahamic, Mosaic and new covenants***

Some infant baptisers muddle the various covenants in Scripture, virtually boiling them down into one.<sup>26</sup> For instance, they believe that the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants are ‘essentially the same’, to use Berkhof’s words. Then they say that these two covenants are the same as the new covenant. Berkhof stated that the covenant ‘is essentially the same in all dispensations’. In particular, he alleged that ‘the covenant of Sinai was *essentially* the same as that established with Abraham... Little need be said respecting the New Testament dispensation of the covenant’, he went on. ‘The covenant of grace, as it is revealed in the New Testament, is essentially the same as that which governed the relation of Old Testament believers to God’, he maintained.<sup>27</sup>

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more than a mere verbal testimony – and taking a baby and telling everybody that it is being baptised because it is regenerate, or because we presume it is regenerate, or will be regenerate, and that it is in the covenant, that it is holy, and so on. If tragic disappointment comes after baptism – and, sadly, it is not unknown – someone is responsible. In the case of believer’s baptism, if the baptiser has dealt faithfully with the person being baptised, the responsibility falls squarely on the professing believer. Who carries the can for the baby who is baptised but proves to be finally unregenerate? The baby, the parent, the minister, the theologian, or...?

<sup>26</sup> See my forthcoming book on the law for more on this.

<sup>27</sup> Berkhof pp279,297,299.

## *Argument 2: The Abrahamic Covenant*

This last statement of Berkhof's is perfectly correct as it stands – the Old Testament saints, along with the New Testament saints, are in the new covenant, which is the spiritual aspect of the Abrahamic covenant. However, that is not all that Berkhof meant, as can be readily seen. He said that the Abrahamic covenant, the Mosaic covenant and the new covenant are all essentially the same covenant.

Yet this is manifestly not true, and his statement confuses the issue terribly. Berkhof failed to distinguish the twofold aspect of the Abrahamic covenant at this point. If only infant baptisers would agree that the essential unity and continuance of the covenant between the two Testaments consists of that oneness between the new covenant and the spiritual aspect of the Abrahamic covenant, the debate would be over. Berkhof certainly kept to his assertion that he thought little need be said about the new covenant, since his subsequent explanation of the glorious changes under that covenant was woefully inadequate. What a mistake, seeing that these glorious changes found in the new covenant lie at the very heart of the gospel!

It is clear that other infant baptisers – besides Berkhof – also fail to distinguish between the covenants when they claim that the Abrahamic covenant, the Mosaic covenant and the new covenant are virtually one and the same. Engelsma, for instance, wrote of *the* covenant. He referred to Genesis 17:7, Jeremiah 31:31-34, Ezekiel 16:20-21 and Exodus 4:22 applying all the references to *the* covenant, as he called it.<sup>28</sup> Reader, this is clearly wrong. How can references to the Abrahamic covenant, the Mosaic covenant and the new covenant all apply to *the* covenant? After all, the Jeremiah passage could not be plainer. The new covenant is the *new* covenant, and it is expressly said to be 'not according to' the Mosaic covenant. It must be different. It cannot be the same covenant, can it?

Nevertheless, Calvin certainly thought the various covenants were one covenant. He went even further when he attacked 'some madmen of the sect of the Anabaptists', as he called them, for daring to express their views on the differences between the old and new covenants. He declared that 'the covenant made with all the fathers in so far from differing from ours in reality and substance, that it is altogether one

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<sup>28</sup> Engelsma pp4-5.

## *Argument 2: The Abrahamic Covenant*

and the same'. To say anything to the contrary was, according to Calvin, a 'pestilential error'.<sup>29</sup>

But risking Calvin's strictures, are we not told very plainly and bluntly that the old covenant has been abolished and the new has come? (See Rom. 6:14-15; 7:1-6; 8:2-11; 2 Cor. 3:7-11; Heb. 7:11-19; 8:6-13; 9:15; 10:16-20). We know that the Mosaic covenant has been abolished (2 Cor. 3:7-11).<sup>30</sup> What is more, as the old covenant was abolished and the new covenant came in, a comparison, even a stark contrast, was drawn between the two. Far from being 'altogether one and the same' covenant, as Calvin put it, they are very, very different. How different can be easily seen in Paul's words. He said: 'God... made us... ministers of the new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. But if the ministry of death, written and engraved on stones, was glorious... which glory was passing away, how will the ministry of the Spirit not be more glorious? For if the ministry of condemnation had glory, the ministry of righteousness exceeds much more in glory. For even what was made glorious had no glory in this respect, because of the glory that excels. For if what is passing away was glorious, what remains is much more glorious' (2 Cor. 3:5-11).

This is a vital point. The Bible contrasts the two covenants, the old and the new, and contrasts them very sharply indeed. In the following quotations, please observe the use of the words *but*, *yet* and *on the other hand*. They are words of contrast. Two covenants are clearly contrasted in the following passages:

For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ (John 1:17).

You are not under law but under grace (Rom. 6:14).

For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes. For Moses writes about the righteousness which is of the law, 'The man who does those things shall live by them'. But the righteousness of faith speaks in this way... if you confess with your mouth the Lord

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<sup>29</sup> Calvin: *Institutes* Vol.1 pp369-370. Calvin, as I have explained, allowed his judgement to be badly warped by his inordinate zeal against the Anabaptists. We will meet this again.

<sup>30</sup> I link the physical aspect of the Abrahamic covenant with the Mosaic covenant, and take the two to be the old covenant. See John 7:22.

## *Argument 2: The Abrahamic Covenant*

Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised him from the dead, you will be saved (Rom. 10:4-9).

For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse; for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them'. But that no one is justified by the law in the sight of God is evident, for 'The just shall live by faith'. Yet the law is not of faith, but 'The man who does them shall live by them'. Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us... that the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith (Gal. 3:10-14).

For these are the two covenants: the one from Mount Sinai which gives birth to bondage, which is Hagar – for this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and corresponds to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children – but the Jerusalem above is free (Gal. 4:24-26).

For on the one hand there is an annulling of the former commandment because of its weakness and unprofitableness, for the law made nothing perfect; on the other hand, there is a bringing in of a better hope, through which we draw near to God (Heb. 7:18-19).

But now he has obtained a more excellent ministry, inasmuch as he is also the mediator of a better covenant, which was established on better promises. For if the first covenant had been faultless, then no place would have been sought for a second (Heb. 8:6-7).

Are these quotations not sufficient to prove that the old and new covenants are very different? Do they not show that the new is far superior to the old? How can anyone maintain that they are 'essentially the same', or 'altogether the same', as infant baptisers do? Rather, we must stand with Paul in Romans 8:2-3: 'For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh...'. There it is – two laws, two systems, two economies, two covenants. The old, the law of sin and death; the new, the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus. The contrast, I say again, could not be greater. The old was a covenant of death, the new is a covenant of life. There is no greater contrast than between death and life! No wonder Hebrews 8:13 declares: 'In that he says: "A new covenant", he has made the first obsolete'. Christ has taken 'away the first that he may establish the second' (Heb. 10:9).

Think of the highly significant words of Christ in Mark 2:18-22. Infant baptisers like Calvin, Matthew Henry and Hendriksen prove



## *Argument 2: The Abrahamic Covenant*

woefully inadequate in their comments on the passage, a passage in which Christ draws a very clear contrast between the old and the new covenants. He illustrates this in two ways: It is futile both to sew a piece of new cloth onto an old garment, and to put new wine in old wineskins. The lesson? The two covenants are very different; they cannot be cobbled together.

The same point is made in Hebrews 2:1-4, which reads:

Therefore we must give the more earnest heed to the things we have heard, lest we drift away. For if the word spoken through angels proved steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just reward, how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation, which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed to us by those who heard him...?

The contrast is drawn, as before, between two covenants, and once again the contrast is stark. One covenant is ‘the word spoken through angels’, which is the law (Acts 7:53; Gal. 3:19); the other covenant is ‘the things which we have heard... so great a salvation’, which is the gospel. In other words, a clear contrast is marked out between the law and the gospel, between the old and the new covenants. The old covenant was concerned with ‘transgression and disobedience’, in that every sin ‘received a just reward’, retribution or penalty; the new covenant is also concerned with sin, but instead of bringing punishment it brings salvation. As before, the contrast could not be more sharply made. The new covenant, of course, is far superior to the old, and that is why ‘we must give the more earnest heed to the things we have heard’. These things are so much better than what was heard under the Mosaic covenant.

John Brown commented on the passage, justly saying that ‘there is a beautiful contrast between the... “letter that killeth”, the ministration of condemnation and death – and the salvation, the revelation of mercy, the ministration of justification and life’. Yes, it is ‘a beautiful contrast’.<sup>31</sup> As William Plumer declared: ‘It is right in us to follow the Scriptures and distinguish between the Mosaic and the Christian dispensations. Many and great errors proceed from a neglect to do

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<sup>31</sup> Brown: *Hebrews* p75.

## *Argument 2: The Abrahamic Covenant*

this'.<sup>32</sup> They certainly do. Infant baptism is one. That is why I have written this book!

The same contrast is underlined in Hebrews 9. The old covenant was done away with at 'the time of reformation' (Heb. 9:10); that is, by the work of Christ. As far as benefits go, the new covenant is on a totally different plane to the old. The first covenant was all outward, it accomplished no salvation and it was done away with. But when we come to the new... What a difference! What a change! The old, 'the blood of bulls and goats', is sharply contrasted with the new, 'the blood of Christ'. What conclusion ought the inspired penman be expected to draw after such a contrast as that? 'How much more shall the blood of Christ... purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? And for this reason he is the mediator of the new covenant'. As he said, it was necessary that Christ should redeem from 'the transgressions under the first covenant' because the first covenant was useless to save. And that is the very thing which Christ did (Heb. 9:11-15)! How is it possible for infant baptisers to say these covenants are one and the same?

Hebrews 10:1 keeps up the argument. Omitting the 'and', which is not in the original, the verse reads: 'For the law, having a shadow of the good things to come, not the very image of the things, can never...'. Once again, we have a contrast. Indeed, as Plumer observed: 'In this verse shadow and image are directly opposed to each other'.<sup>33</sup> Colossians 2:17 supports this claim. And the contrast, the opposition, is between the law and the gospel as most commentators agree. John Owen put it this way: 'There is a great difference between the shadow of good things to come, and the good things themselves actually exhibited and granted unto the church. This is the fundamental difference between the two Testaments, the law and the gospel, from whence all others do arise, and into which they are resolved'.<sup>34</sup>

The rest of Hebrews 10 goes on to draw the same contrast between the two covenants, and comes to the same conclusion as earlier

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<sup>32</sup> Plumer p85.

<sup>33</sup> Plumer p386. The concept of 'shadow' is very important; I will have more to say on it in my forthcoming book on the law. Infant baptisers cling too much to the shadow; the reality has come! See, also, my comments (above and below) on the part played by circumcision in the infant baptiser's argument.

<sup>34</sup> Owen: *Hebrews* Vol.3 Part 1 p429.

## *Argument 2: The Abrahamic Covenant*

passages, but from the opposite point of view; namely, from the point of view of punishment, not mercy. The two covenants both carried punishments, but since the new covenant is so superior to the old, it is only to be expected that the punishments under the new covenant are far more serious than those under the old. And they certainly are. 'Anyone who has rejected Moses' law dies without mercy... Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace?' (Heb. 10:28-29). Note the 'of how much worse punishment' under the new covenant. How can the covenants be the same? Their punishments are as different as their benefits.

Hebrews 12:18-29 stresses exactly the same distinction between the covenants. The old covenant was physical; the new is spiritual. The old was full of burning and blackness, darkness and tempest; the new is full of joy and happiness. The old said: 'Stay away, keep off'. The new cries: 'Come and welcome'. The old brought terror, fear and trembling – even for Moses! The new brought peace and salvation. It is impossible that these covenants should be the same covenant. How can anyone say that they are? I prefer the verdict of Isaac Watts:

*Curs'd be the man, for ever curs'd,  
That does one wilful sin commit;  
Death and damnation for the first,  
Without relief, and infinite.*

*Thus Sinai roars, and round the earth  
Thunder, and fire, and vengeance flings;  
But Jesus, thy dear gasping breath  
And Calvary, say gentler things:*

*'Pardon and grace, and boundless love,  
Streaming along a Saviour's blood;  
And life, and joy, and crowns above,  
Obtained by a dear bleeding God'.*

*Hark! How he prays (the charming sound  
Dwells on his dying lips), 'Forgive!'  
And every groan and gaping wound  
Cries, 'Father, let the rebels live!'*

## *Argument 2: The Abrahamic Covenant*

*Go, ye that rest upon the law,  
And toil and seek salvation there,  
Look to the flame that Moses saw,  
And shrink, and tremble, and despair.*

*But I'll retire beneath the cross;  
Saviour, at thy dear feet I'll lie!  
And the keen sword that justice draws,  
Flaming and red, shall pass me by.<sup>35</sup>*

I have spent some time in showing the contrast between the law and the gospel, between the old covenant and the new, because some infant baptisers are very definite in their view that all the covenants – the Abrahamic, the Mosaic and the new – are one and the same. This is manifestly not true.

Unfortunately, as Plumer said, ‘many and great errors’ come from the misunderstanding – principally as far as the present purpose is concerned, the error of infant baptism. I am well aware of the ways in which infant baptisers explain (or, rather, explain away) the Hebrews passages, for instance. But the contrast is not drawn in Scripture between *certain aspects* of the old covenant and the new. The contrast is *root and branch*. The two covenants themselves are contrasted, the two covenants in their entirety, not only some aspects of the covenants.<sup>36</sup>

What is more, a very serious pastoral question arises at this juncture. What if those who are taught that the two covenants are essentially the same, actually believe it? Does it matter? It certainly does. There is a very real danger that those who think the two covenants are the same might try to find salvation by the old covenant. If so, it would be disastrous. Watts had it right. The gospel is at stake in all this. Personal eternal issues are at stake.

The New Testament is clear. The two covenants are not the same. The Mosaic covenant is abolished in Christ, but the spiritual aspect of

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<sup>35</sup> *Gospel Hymns* number 394.

<sup>36</sup> The Mosaic covenant was a (I did not say ‘the’) covenant of works. Christ was born under it, and earned the salvation of his people by keeping its commands and suffering its curse (Gal. 4:4-5). Do covenant theologians who think the covenants are all one and the same, think Christ was born, lived, was cursed and died under what they call the covenant of grace?

## *Argument 2: The Abrahamic Covenant*

the Abrahamic covenant lives on, and lives on with vigour – it is the new covenant.

To that covenant, we must now turn.

### **4. The new covenant**

The terms and promises of the new covenant are to be read in Jeremiah 31:31-34; Hebrews 8:8-12; 10:16-17. They are:

Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah – not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant which they broke, though I was a husband to them, says the LORD. But 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. No more shall every man teach his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD’, for they all shall know me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more (Jer. 31:31-34).<sup>37</sup>

As we have seen, the covenant has changed dramatically from the old to the new. The Mosaic covenant has been abolished, but the spiritual aspect of the Abrahamic covenant lives on in the new. But, reader, I must remind you once more, Reformed infant-baptisers staunchly disagree. They think the covenants are ‘essentially the same’. And consequently they ignore or play down the dramatic changes which have come with the changes in the covenant. But these changes are vital, and cannot be stressed too much. They must not be suppressed or passed over or swamped in a deluge of metaphysics. What are the changes? What do these verses from Jeremiah and Hebrews teach?

In the new covenant, God makes promises to his people. Note, to his people. But, unlike the old, not to his people *and their children*. There is no reference whatsoever to children. The silence about children in the new covenant is deafening, when compared to the old covenant, the physical aspect of the Abrahamic, and the Mosaic. Again, the new covenant is internal; not external, as was the old. In the

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<sup>37</sup> See end note on p110 for excursus: ‘Reformed misunderstandings about the new covenant’.

## *Argument 2: The Abrahamic Covenant*

new covenant, the work is done in the mind and heart; in the old, it was written on tablets of stone, and was in the flesh. Further, in the new covenant, all who are in the covenant receive all its benefits; God says that they all shall know him, from the least to the greatest, and all the sins of all of them shall be forgiven. Not one of them is left out, they all obtain the full benefits of the covenant. There is no exception. But, as has already been shown, in the old covenant many received only the physical benefits, they never did receive the spiritual promises. While they were all of Israel, they were not all true Israelites (Rom. 9:6-8). Jacob was, Esau was not (Rom. 9:10-13). But in the new covenant, all who are in the covenant receive all the benefits of it. This is another staggering contrast to the old.

Lest my argument should be dismissed as Antinomianism, let me hasten to say that under the new covenant, the terms are more strict, more searching, far more penetrating than under the old. 'For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace. What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? Certainly not! Do you not know...?... Having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness' (Rom. 6:14-18). (See the entire passage, Rom. 5:20 – 8:17). Believers have to 'give the more earnest heed' to the new covenant (Heb. 2:1-4), when compared to the old. The law of God is now written, not on tablets of stone but on the minds and hearts of believers (2 Cor. 3:3; Heb. 8:10). They delight in the law of God, they love it (Ps. 119:77,97) because God has given them a new mind, a new heart, a new will, putting his Spirit within them (Ezek. 36:25-27; 2 Cor. 3:3; 5:17). Thus the believer will keep the law of God – God's Spirit will cause him to do so. 'I will put my Spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes, and you will keep my judgements and do them' (Ezek. 36:27). Only the regenerate can keep the commandments of God, but they all will keep them. If men do not, however much they profess they know God, they are liars (1 John 2:3-5).

The difference between the old and the new covenant is not only in the fact that the law is now written on the heart, and not on tablets of stone. A (the?) principal part of the difference in the two covenants lies in this: That law which is written on the heart in the new covenant is not the law of Moses, but the law of Christ (1 Cor. 9:21; Gal. 6:2; see John 13 – 16). And this makes the conditions and terms of obedience

## *Argument 2: The Abrahamic Covenant*

far more incisive under the new covenant than under the old.<sup>38</sup> Jesus declared that he had not come to destroy the law; indeed he affirmed that not ‘one jot or one tittle’ would pass from it. Furthermore, he said that whoever breaks ‘one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven’ (Matt. 5:17-19). That is not all. ‘Unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven’ (Matt. 5:20). Christ took several of the ten commandments, and on each occasion he tightened the screw, saying: ‘You have heard that it was said... but I say to you’ (Matt. 5:21-22,27-28,31-32,33-34,38-39,43-44). Under the new covenant the laws are far more strict than the old; they deal with the heart, the mind and the motive for obedience, not only a mere outward conformity to a written code. Christ concluded his discourse by stating bluntly: ‘Not everyone who says to me, “Lord, Lord,” shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father in heaven’ (Matt. 7:21). Holiness is essential (Heb. 12:14). See also 1 John 3:7,10,22,24; 5:2-3; 2 John 6.

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Let me sum up this look at the way the practice of infant baptism is based upon the Abrahamic covenant: I have examined this under four headings, and I have tried to show that the physical aspects of the covenant with Abraham do not apply to believers. It is the new covenant – the spiritual aspect of the Abrahamic covenant – which applies to them. Therefore it follows that the children of believers are not included with their parents in the covenant on the grounds that their parents are believers and are in the covenant. The children can only be said to be in the covenant after they have come to faith – not because they are the children of believers. Hence there is no justification for the baptism of infants on the basis that their parents are believers. Until the children demonstrate that they themselves have been brought to saving faith, it is impossible to say that they are in the covenant. It is wrong to baptise them on the assumption that they are – or will be.

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<sup>38</sup> This is a large subject, upon which, as I explained at the start, my views have clarified since writing *Battle*. Given that I intend to publish on the matter, I will say no more about it now. It has no effect on this book.