

**“Who are Reformed Baptists?” (14):
The doctrine of a regenerate church membership**

Introduction:

For several months we have been considering the biblical distinctive of Reformed Baptists. We hold to the five *solas* of the Protestant Reformation. These include the principles of *Sola scriptura*, *Solus Christus*, *Sola gratia*, *Sola fide*, and *Soli Deo Gloria*, which in turn mean, *by Scripture alone*, *by Christ alone*, *by grace alone*, *by faith alone*, and *to the glory to God alone*. These are the main tenants and principles that were espoused through the Protestant Reformation. In addition, we recognize, celebrate, and proclaim the doctrines of grace, that is, the five doctrines of Calvinism, which include the biblical truths of the depravity of man, the unconditional election of the redeemed, the definite atonement of the death of Jesus for the elect, their effectual call to salvation, and their final perseverance in faith unto their full and final salvation. These truths are held by all who regard themselves as Reformed, that is, those who hold to historic Protestant understanding and teaching of the Bible as the Word of God.

But as we concluded saying last Lord’s Day, we are Baptists. And although we hold these truths in common with our Reformed brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ, there are other biblical truths that distinguish us from them, truths that have been historically held and proclaimed by Baptists. Now, most of my closest friends in the ministry are fellow Reformed men who happen to be paedobaptist in their understanding of the Scriptures; that is, they practice the baptism of infants, children of adult believers. These are dear men whom I respect highly and we stand shoulder to shoulder with one another in the ministry. But I differ with them and they with me on several matters, which are of importance, although they are not essential to the gospel.

One of the teachings that distinguish us as Baptists has to do with the nature of the local church. We have often expressed how similar our Reformed Baptist confession of faith of 1689 to the historic Westminster Confession of Faith of 1646 and the Savoy Declaration of 1658. The Westminster Confession is held by Reformed Presbyterians and The Church of Scotland. The Savoy Declaration is held by Reformed Congregationalists. The Congregationalists had taken The Westminster Confession that had been drafted a decade before and reworked a few of the articles, releasing it as The Savoy Declaration. The Baptists later revised the Savoy Declaration and published the (London) Baptist Confession of 1689. The result is three confessions that are 95% identical in belief and wording. What distinguishes the confessions from one another is what defines our Baptist convictions. These have to do with the nature of the local church and the matter of baptism. It is these Baptist distinctives to which we wish now to draw your attention.

Two views of church membership

First, let me show the difference between the view of the local church between ourselves as Baptists and other Reformed groups. Here is the definition of the local church according to The Westminster Confession, which is a Reformed, but non-baptistic confession:

The visible Church, which is also catholic or universal under the Gospel (not confined to one nation, as before under the law), *consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; and of their children...* (The Westminster Confession, Art. XXV, par. 2)

Here is the definition of the local church in The Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689.

All persons throughout the world, *professing the faith of the gospel, and obedience unto God by Christ according unto it*, not destroying their own profession by any errors perverting the foundation, or

unholiness of conversation, are and may be called visible saints; and *of such ought all particular congregations to be constituted.* (The Baptist Confession of 1689, Art. 26, par. 2.)

Here we have two different understandings of the nature of a local church. Baptists believe that the New Testament teaches that the membership of a local church should be comprised of regenerate people only, those born again by the Holy Spirit, those who have repented of sin and turned to the Lord Jesus Christ in faith and obedience; Baptists believe that only disciples of Jesus Christ, those who have experienced new life in Jesus Christ, should be admitted to church membership. In contrast to Baptists, paedobaptists, that is churches that practice infant baptism, do not believe the membership of a local church should be restricted to those who are born again. Rather, they believe that believers *and their children* are to be regarded as members of a new covenant church.

And so there is a fundamental difference in what we believe constitutes a local church. Paedobaptist churches believe that both those who are born again and those who are not born again may have a legitimate place and standing in local church membership. Yes, paedobaptist churches believe that communicant members, that is, members who are in good standing and partake of communion should be professing believers, but evidence of new life in Christ is not necessary. As long as one been born in the church, raised and taught the doctrine of the church, and upon professing to agree to the doctrine and purpose to be involved in the life of the church and not live in a scandalous manner, he or she is to be admitted and regarded as a legitimate church member.

Baptists (historically speaking) on the other hand, although requiring an affirmation to the essential truths of the gospel, look for more than mental acknowledgment of truth, but rather Baptists look for evidence of true spiritual life in Christ as a condition of church membership.

II. Biblical teaching respecting the composition of a local church

A. Those passages that describe local churches in terms of regenerate membership only.

1. **1 Corinthians 1:1-3.** *“Paul, called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ through the will of God, and Sosthenes our brother, ²to the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all who in every place call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours: ³Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”*

Take note first that Paul described these people in his greeting as members of a local church, “who are sanctified in Christ Jesus.” This describes Christians, true Christians, who have been had a work of God’s grace setting them apart from the world of unbelievers. Second, Paul describes them as “called (to be) saints.” “Saints” in the Bible are a reference to true Christians. These Christians had been the object of God’s effectual call to salvation, which we described several weeks ago. Third, they are described as callers upon the Lord Jesus. They live before Jesus and for Jesus, submitted to Him as their Lord. As far as Paul was concerned, this church was (to be) comprised of regenerate people only—true Christians.

2. **Acts 11:26.** *“And when he (Barnabus) had found him (Paul), he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for a whole year they assembled with the church and taught a great many people. And the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.”*

Barnabus and Paul came to serve Christ in the local church at Antioch. The context shows that the church was comprised of disciples of Jesus Christ only. Disciples are committed followers of Jesus Christ. They have repented of sin, turned to live unto God, believing and submitting to Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. The church at Antioch was comprised of disciples—true believers—only.

3. **Romans 1:7.** *“To all who are in Rome, beloved of God, called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”*

Here Paul identifies and describes the local church at Rome. First, he describes them as “beloved of God.” This is a description of God’s elect only. They only are beloved of God in a covenantal sense.

Although God is loving to all, even His enemies, He only loves His elect with an everlasting love, for He sees them and regards them as in union with His beloved Son. Colossians 1:12, “Therefore, *as the elect of God*, holy and *beloved*, put on tender mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering...” Second, here again, Paul refers to these church members as “called (to be) saints.” Paul is writing to this church assuming that they are born again, true Christians. Third, he pronounces a blessing upon them from God involving God imparting to them :grace and peace.” Only true Christians have access and privilege to receive these covenantal blessings from their God.

4. **Matthew 28:18-20.** *“¹⁸Then Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, ‘All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. ¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.’ Amen.”*

We will cite this passage next week as well, but I will draw your attention to it here and now also. Everyone recognizes that baptism is the entry door into church membership. Here Jesus gave His command that only disciples should be baptized. It is obvious that a church should do all it can do to assure that only true disciples are baptized. They and they only are to be baptized. It follows that only true disciples should be admitted to local church membership.

B. There are those passages that speak of only true believers to be in the new covenant, therefore they and only they, should be admitted to church membership in a new covenant church.

Paedobaptist Reformed churches believe and teach that not only are true believers within the new covenant that God has established in Jesus Christ, but that also the unregenerate children of believing parents are also in the covenant. These children of believers are often referred to as “covenant children.” The reason that this belief is asserted is because of a (faulty) parallel they draw between the New Testament local church and the Old Testament covenant community of Israel; specifically, as physical descendants of Abraham were viewed to be in covenant relationship with God due to their physical lineage to Abraham. As physical circumcision assured that a physical descendant of Abraham was in covenant relationship with God, so the New Testament parallel is infant baptism, that brings the child into a covenantal relationship with God.

The problem with this position is that the Bible teaches that all members of the new covenant are truly born of the Spirit, true Christians, not merely professing believers. Now do not misunderstand. There are many professing Christians who believe themselves and others believe them to be in the new covenant, but in reality they are strangers to the grace of God; they have no participation in the true life that is in Jesus Christ. If we could see the condition of their hearts, which we cannot do, we could say to them as Peter said of Simon Magus, “You have neither part nor portion in this matter, for your heart is not right in the sight of God” (Acts 8:21). But until we do see evidence of having entered the new covenant relationship in Jesus Christ, we should not admit one to church membership.

1. **Ezekiel 37:21-28.** *“²¹Then say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD: “Surely I will take the children of Israel from among the nations, wherever they have gone, and will gather them from every side and bring them into their own land; ²²and I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel; and one king shall be king over them all; they shall no longer be two nations, nor shall they ever be divided into two kingdoms again. ²³They shall not defile themselves anymore with their idols, nor with their detestable things, nor with any of their transgressions; but I will deliver them from all their dwelling places in which they have sinned, and will cleanse them. Then they shall be My people, and I will be their God. ²⁴David My servant shall be king over them, and they shall all have one shepherd; they shall also walk in My judgments and observe My statutes, and do them. ²⁵Then they shall dwell in the land that I have given to Jacob My servant, where your fathers dwelt; and they shall dwell there, they, their children, and their children’s children, forever; and My servant David shall be their prince forever. ²⁶Moreover I will make a covenant of peace with them, and it shall be an everlasting covenant with them; I will establish them and multiply them, and I will set My sanctuary in their midst forevermore. ²⁷My tabernacle also shall be with them; indeed I will be*

their God, and they shall be My people. ²⁸The nations also will know that I, the LORD, sanctify Israel, when My sanctuary is in their midst forevermore.””

God is promising to make a new covenant with a remnant of Israel. Everyone in this redeemed Israel is under the submission of the King, Jesus Christ (vs. 22, 24). They have repented of their sins, turning away from their former idolatry; they now live according to God’s law (v. 23, 24). God is their God and dwells among them (v. 26). This describes true Christians and they only. Unregenerate, unconverted children have no place promised to them by virtue of being children of those in the covenant.

2. **Hebrews 8:7-13** (Jeremiah 31:31ff). *“⁷For if that first covenant had been faultless, then no place would have been sought for a second. ⁸Because finding fault with them, He says: ‘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 -- ⁹not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; because they did not continue in My covenant, and I disregarded them, says the Lord. ¹⁰For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put My laws in their mind and write them on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. ¹¹None of them shall teach his neighbor, and none his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them. ¹²For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more.’ ¹³In that He says, ‘A new covenant,’ He has made the first obsolete. Now what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.”*

The writer to the Hebrews quoted at length the prophecy in Jeremiah 31 of the new covenant that God would establish with His people. He declares that this new covenant has been enacted with respect to new testament believers. Now take note of the description of all those who are in this new covenant relationship with God. First, God has put His laws in their minds and has written them on their hearts (v. 10); in other words, those in a new covenant relationship with God have been regenerated, given a new heart that loves God and desires to obey His law. Second, God promises that He will be their God and they would be His people; everyone in the new covenant is in a covenant relationship with God. Third, each and everyone in the covenant have a personal relationship with the Lord; they know the Lord. Fourth, God promises to be merciful, forgiving forever the sins of all those in this new covenant.

Now paedobaptists claim that unregenerate children of believing parents are in the covenant. But not until, or if, they become truly converted, can it be said that any of these new covenant promises be said to describe them. The biblical conclusion is that no one except those who have been born again by the Spirit are in this new covenant; therefore, only those who have given evidence of being in this new covenant should be admitted to the membership of a local church.

B. There are those passages that paedobaptists wrongly interpret to support their position that children of believing parents are in a covenant relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

1. **Acts 2:38, 39.** *“³⁸Then 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. ³⁹For 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.”*

Here Peter promises the gift of the Holy Spirit and forgiveness of sins, that is, salvation, to those who repent and are baptized. He is not attempting to give a doctrine of how God justifies a sinner through faith alone; rather, he is stating what God commands of every sinner who would be saved.

Now paedobaptists point to the promise of verse 39, “For the promise is to you and to your children.” They assume the parallel with this is the promise God made with Abraham that his physical descendants would also be blessed of God. But they neglect the qualifier that Peter includes in verse 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.*” The promise is only to those children who are effectually called to salvation in the same way that their parents were called of God.

2. **1 Corinthians 7: 12-14.** *“¹²But to the rest I, not the Lord, says: If any brother has a wife who does not believe, and she is willing to live with him, let him not divorce her. ¹³And a woman who has a husband who does not believe, if he is willing to live with her, let her not divorce him. ¹⁴For 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.”*

Paul was giving instruction respecting marriage of a believer to an unbeliever. A believer is not to divorce his/her unbelieving spouse. It may be that God will so work grace in the unbelieving spouse, that he/she will come to salvation. Paul declares that the unbelieving spouse is “sanctified” by the believing spouse. Moreover the children of parents of which one of them is a Christian, are regarded as “holy” by the Lord.

Paedobaptists focus on the end of verse 14 in which Paul declares the children of a believing parent is “holy.” They declare that the Lord regards these children as in covenant relationship with himself. They argue therefore, that these children of a believing parent are in the covenant and should be baptized, receiving the sign and seal of the covenant. There are at least two problems with this position. First, although God does regard a child of a believing parent “holy”, the passage says nothing of that child being in a covenant relationship with God. Indeed, every child who has at least one parent who is a believer is a child of privilege. God treats that child in a favorable manner and regard because of his/her relationship with the believing parent. But this is not a promise or guarantee of salvation. Nor does the passage teach that it is a basis for baptism. The second problem with viewing the child is in a covenant relationship with God because of the unbelieving parent, is that you would need to extend the same privilege and blessing upon the unbelieving spouse because of his/her relationship to his/her believing spouse. Verse 14 declares that “the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband.” The Greek word for the verb “sanctified” is the same Greek word in the form of the noun, “holy.” In other words, in manner in which the child is “holy”, the unbelieving spouse is also “holy.” If the paedobaptist were to be consistent with the passage, they should also be baptizing unbelieving spouses of Christians, which of course reveals the absurdity of their position.

III. Further explanation and qualification

1. A membership comprised of only regenerate souls is a goal that is difficult to attain or maintain.
2. When churches exist in a free society in which separation of church and state exists and church attendance is wholly “voluntary,” even paedobaptist Reformed churches, in which the truth is proclaimed, will tend to be comprised of more regenerate members than fewer. This is not true in a land in which a state church exists. Many people assume they are Christian, but few show biblical evidence that is so.
3. The majority of existing Baptist (and baptistic) churches have so dumbed down their understanding of what a true Christian is, that many churches are filled with unregenerate members.

IV. Concluding remarks respecting this important doctrine

1. It is very important that a church maintains its membership of believers who show evidence of their new birth.
2. A church that is true in this important matter will tend to have fewer and less serious church problems than a church that is weak in this matter. Paul questioned the legitimacy of the claim that the church at Corinth was comprised of true Christians because the church had so many serious spiritual and moral problems.

3. Children, if you have a Christian parent, you are very blessed of the Lord. God has a special concern and regard for you, because He loves your Christian parents. You have been born into a home in which the love for God is present. There is high regard is given to the Word of God. The love for righteousness is present and the desire to see you to live in faith and righteousness immerses your life.

But you must not presume upon His favor. The devil may seek to use your privilege to lull you in a false sense of well-being between you and God. Your privilege does not guarantee your salvation. You will not be saved from your sin because of your mother's faith. You must repent of sin and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. We would pray and urge you to do so.