

The Four Foundations of a Biblical and Theological Basis for Covenant Baptism

To develop the doctrine of covenant baptism, one must turn to the underlying plan of salvation that unfolds throughout the whole of Scripture. There are basically four lines of truth which converge to develop the doctrine of covenant baptism.

First, there is the covenantal foundation underscoring the unity of God's covenant with his people. Second, there is the sacramental foundation underscoring the parallel unity both in the Old Testament and New Testament of the covenant marks of God's people, the Church. Thirdly, there is the organic foundation underscoring the holiness of the children of believers throughout the unfolding plan of the Covenant of Grace. Finally, there is the narrative foundation of truth illustrating the continuing mark of covenantal unity through household baptism.

The Covenantal Foundation

The covenant foundation of covenant baptism argues that the Scripture is the unfolding of a singular promise given to Adam and Eve after the fall. This promise, found in Genesis 3:15, states that he will give to the his people a deliverer who will crush the head of the serpent. From this point on, the people of God are those who believe and trust in God and his promise of deliverance and salvation. The Scripture is thus the revelation of one great promise that speaks of one great Savior who is to be believed upon through one means, faith. The people of God in Scripture are one. Whether in the Old Testament or in the New Testament, the people of God, the Church, are one people, believing the same promise, having the same Lord and faith, benefiting from the same salvation, and sharing in the same eternal destiny.

The covenantal unity of the Scripture is clearly seen in God's covenant with Abraham and its foundational nature throughout Scripture. It is a continuation of the promise found in Genesis 3:15.

In Genesis 17:1-4, God ratifies his covenant with Abraham. The terms of the covenant were that Abraham would walk uprightly before God and that God would multiply Abraham exceedingly, making Abraham a father of many nations (Genesis 17:1-4). God said that the promise was to Abraham and his seed after him. Through the years of Old Testament history God kept his promise to Abraham. Abraham's son, Jacob, had twelve sons who were to be progenitors of the twelve tribes of Israel. Thus through Abraham God established a nation under his covenant. The Commonwealth of Israel was not only God's established nation, but it was also his chosen people, the Church under the covenant (Berkhof 1952, 3:548).

In Exodus 19:5-6, God says to the people of Israel in the desert of Sinai, "Now then if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." The people of Israel were not just a nation but also a holy nation. In Acts 7:38, Stephen declares Moses to be of the church of the wilderness. In Romans 9:14, Paul states that he had rather be accursed rather than the Israelites, "to whom belongs the adoption as sons and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the temple service and the promises." From these two verses it can be readily seen that the Israelites were not only under the special care and blessings of God's covenant but that they were actually referred to as the church and shared in spiritual benefits as God's people (Hodge 1952, 3:548).

Paul, in Romans 4:13-18, recalling the imputation of God's righteousness to Abraham by faith, states that the covenant between God and Abraham is said to have been based on the righteousness of faith. Justification is thus accomplished in both the Old Testament and New Testament eras by faith alone in the gospel of Christ (Booth 1995, 79). This is opposed to a righteousness of the law so that the covenant would be based on grace. The apostle further states the reason that, "the promise may be certain to the descendants, not only to those who are of the Law (Old Testament saints), but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham (New Testament saints), who is the father of us all (believers Old and New Testament)" (Romans 4:16). In this single verse, one sees that the promise or covenant that applied to Old Testament saints applies to Christians as well.

In the gospels, Christ speaks of many coming from the east and west, which will eat at the banquet table with Abraham (Matthew 8:11,12; John 10:16). This ingathering of the Gentiles to the benefits of the promise of Abraham speaks of one promise and one salvation embraced by both Jews and Gentiles throughout redemptive history (McCoy 1991, 118). Similarly, in Romans 11:16-21, the church is compared to the olive tree with many branches. In Paul's analogy, there is not an old root for the Old Testament saints and a new root for New Testament saints but one root with engrafted branches. New Testament believers, the in-grafted branches, share the same unifying relationship to the root as the Old Testament believers (the natural branches) (Dabney 1972, 782).

In Hebrews 6:13-20, the writer shows that the promise to Abraham is the same promise made to believers and that the promise has, "the unchangeableness of His purpose." Also, Peter uses the same terminology for the New Testament people of God as

is used for the nation of Israel in Exodus 19:6. He writes in I Peter 2:9 of the church, “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession”(Kirby n.d., 28).

John Murray summarizes the import of these verses when he states, “It is this basic underlying unity of the Covenant of Grace and promise that establishes the generic unity and continuity of the church. In terms of covenant union and communion the church is but the covenant people of God in all ages and among all nations” (Murray 1980, 44).

Thus the people of God and the covenant of God are one through the ages since the fall of Adam. This Covenant of Grace that affirms one great promise, one great Savior, one great means, faith, and one people of God is singular in its nature. Charles Hodge writes, “The conclusion is that God has had but one Church in the world” (Hodge 1952, 3:551). The God of the Old Testament saints is the God of our covenant and our Savior is the savior of the saints of the Old Testament (Hodge 1952, 3:551).

The Sacramental Foundation

Not only is there a covenantal unity present in the unfolding process of redemption but also one sees continuity between the marks of the covenant in the Old Testament and the marks of the covenant in the New Testament. It is at this point of unity that one sees the underpinnings for the doctrine of covenant baptism.

In Genesis 17:9, Abraham is instructed to circumcise every male child. Further in Genesis 17:12-13, God instructs Abraham to circumcise the infant at the age of eight days and to circumcise every male under his care. In the nation of Israel every male child

born was circumcised along with every male proselyte who entered the nation. This can be seen in the circumcision of Issac in Genesis 21:4 and in the circumcision of the whole nation by Joshua in Joshua 5:3.

This circumcision was not only an external act signifying citizenship in Israel, but also a sign and seal of the highest and richest spiritual blessing, which God bestows on men (Murray 1980, 47). In Deuteronomy 10:16, God commanded Israel to circumcise the foreskin of their heart. In Jeremiah 9:5, God states that he will punish the outward circumcision with those who are not truly circumcised. These verses point to a spiritual dimension of which physical circumcision is a symbol. In Romans 2:26-29, Paul reiterated this principle by stating that a person is not a Jew who is circumcised outwardly. Rather a true Jew is one who is circumcised in the heart by the Spirit. This true circumcision, which is of God, changes the dead heart of stone into living flesh and causes a person to desire Christ and trust in his Word (Berkouwer 1969, 169). Circumcision is the outward sign that points to the need for the regeneration of the heart (Booth 1995, 105). Thus Paul wrote in Romans 2:29, "But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God."

Not only was circumcision a sign of regeneration, but it also signified the cleansing needed to enter into the presence of God. It was therefore a sign of communion and union (Murray 1980, 47). This is apparent in passages such as Exodus 6:12, which speaks of Pharaoh's uncircumcised lips; Leviticus 19:23, which speaks of uncircumcised fruit that is not to be eaten; Leviticus 26:41, which speaks of uncircumcised hearts; and Jeremiah 6:10, which speaks of the uncircumcised ear. These verses make it apparent that

a lack of circumcision is a mark of defilement while circumcision is a mark of sanctity to God (Berkouwer 1969, 169).

In Colossians 2:11-12, Paul declares that circumcision was the seal of righteousness in the old dispensation just as baptism is in the new. Colossians 2:11-12 reads, “And in Him you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands in the removal of the body by the circumcision of Christ; having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead.” On this passage B.B. Warfield writes, “This (Colossians 2:11-12) falls little, if any, short of a direct assertion that the Christian Church is Israel and has Israel’s circumcision, though now in the form of baptism” (Warfield 1981, IX, 404).

Is Warfield correct in his assertion? The question now arises: Does the practice of baptism replace that of circumcision under the new dispensation?

Galatians 5:6 states that circumcision no longer means anything, so the sign of circumcision is done away with in the new dispensation. A further question must be raised. If circumcision has been abrogated in the new dispensation and the covenant itself is an everlasting covenant as seen in Genesis 17:7, then what serves as the covenant mark in the New Testament? The Scriptural evidence points directly to baptism.

Lenski, the New Testament commentator, examines the relationship between circumcision, the mark of the covenant in the Old Testament, and baptism, the mark of the covenant in the New Testament. He writes that “the circumcision of Christ” referred to in this passage is not an objective genitive, which would refer to Christ’s circumcision on the eighth day, but, rather, it is a subjective genitive meaning a circumcision

inaugurated or performed by Christ which is baptism as Paul states in the next verse (Lenski 1946, 105). The New Testament scholar, Oscar Cullman, points to the binding relationship between circumcision and baptism based upon their common foundation in regeneration. He states, “The circumcision that is rightly understood, which takes place not merely outwardly by the hand of man, but which is the circumcision of the heart, Romans 2:29, leads directly over into Christian Baptism, that is “the circumcision of Christ” (Colossians 2:11) (Cullman 1954, 58).

Colossians 2:11-12 argues that the old circumcision has been replaced by a new circumcision, “the circumcision of Christ”, i.e., baptism (Hodge 1977, 621). The Christians in Colosse do not need to be circumcised because God has already circumcised them through regeneration. Thus Paul states in Philippians 3:3 that the believer is the true circumcision (Neilands 1980, 174).

Along with being symbols that point to the need for regeneration, the parallels between baptism and circumcision are many. In commissioning the church to the work of bringing people into his church Christ says, “Make disciples of all the nations baptizing them...” Baptism is the means of entry into the people of God just as circumcision was in the Old Testament. Similarly, as circumcision marked the symbolic removal of defilement, so in the New Testament baptism is seen as the symbolic means of removing defilement. Paul writes in Titus 3:5, “by the washing of regeneration and the renewing of the Holy Spirit.” In the Old Testament, circumcision was tied very closely with the covenant promise. In the New Testament, Peter ties the covenant promise with baptism. He declares on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2:39, “Repent and let each of you be baptized.... For the promise is for you and your children...” (Berkhof 1952, 320).

Interestingly, the same word, “seal”, is used both for baptism and circumcision in the New Testament, pointing to their parallel nature (Cullman 1950, 45-46). In Romans 4:11, circumcision is spoken of as a seal of the righteousness of faith. It does not produce righteousness but testifies to the promise of righteousness. In 2 Corinthians 1:22, Ephesians 1:13, and Ephesians 4:30, seal is used to speak of the work of God’s regenerative purposes through the Spirit (Cullman 1950, 46). This work of regeneration is symbolized by baptism and thus closely associated with it in Scripture. A seal refers to something that confirms a covenant. In the sacraments, the seal authenticates and guarantees the genuine nature of what it signifies (Neilands 1980, 60). The term seal is applied to both circumcision and baptism as a mark of authentication (Hodge 1977, 621).

The effects of both circumcision and baptism are spoken of in synonymous language. Circumcision symbolizes the removal of the corrupt stony heart that is replaced by a spiritually alive heart of flesh. Baptism points to the burial of our old lives to be raised to walk in newness of life (Romans 6). Finally, the fact that baptism is non-bloody like the Lord’s Supper, while their Old Testament counterparts, circumcision and Passover, are bloody exemplifies the fact that Christ has fulfilled the requirement of the law with His own blood upon the cross.

Since there are so many parallels between circumcision and baptism it seems that it would only be fitting that the sign and seal be given to the children of believers in the New Testament as it was in the Old Testament. There is no command in the New Testament to discontinue the covenant mark upon the children of believers.

One final point must be made regarding faith and the sacraments. Repeatedly, it is said by credo-Baptists that baptism requires faith on the part of the recipient.

Understanding the covenantal link between the covenantal marks is very helpful in answering this question.

In the Noahic Covenant, the covenant mark was the rainbow. It was given as a reminder to Noah and all who would follow that God would not destroy the earth again by water. The mark itself did not exist because of faith but called for faith in God's faithfulness. In the Abrahamic Covenant, God placed the covenant mark on covenant male children who could not believe. Why didn't God place His covenant mark on twelve-year old Jewish males after they came to maturity and would be able to profess their faith in Yahweh? The answer is twofold. First, God instituted circumcision on infants because it was a mark not of their faith but of his faithfulness to keep his covenant. Circumcision is the sealing mark that testifies to the veracity of God's promise (Strawbridge et al. 2003, 94).

Mark Ross writes in his excellent comparison of baptism and circumcision, "What is certified is not so much a truth about Abraham, or any other circumcised person but a truth about God. In particular, circumcision certifies the truth of God's word in the gospel, namely that all who believe will be counted righteous" (Strawbridge et al. 2003, 94).

Second, God placed circumcision before faith because regeneration, the spiritual truth symbolized by circumcision, precedes faith. By having covenants circumcised, God guaranteed a theological model of the very nature of salvation. As Genesis 15:17-18 teaches that God himself is the one who fulfills both parties' requirements in the Covenant of Grace, so the mark of circumcision points to the great truth of Scripture that God must regenerate the heart before faith can be present in the fallen sinner.

Since baptism is the covenantal fulfillment of circumcision, children of believers are baptized as a testimony of God's faithfulness. Certainly, the sacrament calls for faith on the part of the parents but the mark is not one that highlights the believing parents' commitment to God, their faith in Him. Rather it highlights the faithfulness of God to redeem their covenant child if the child turns in faith to him through Christ. If they do turn in faith, the covenant mark reminds them that it is because God himself has given them the faith to believe by regenerating their fallen and depraved heart.

The Organic Foundation

It has already been established that the Church is the same in both the Old and New Testaments and that the basis of the covenant, "the righteousness by faith," is the same for the Old Testament saints as well as the New Testament Christians. It has also been shown that circumcision is a sign and seal of the true circumcision or regeneration of the heart, which corresponds to baptism in the New Testament (Colossians 2:11-12).

A third foundation of covenant baptism is that the Scripture clearly points to a special relationship between God and the children of believers. This organic pillar of covenantal baptism is seen both in the Old Testament and the New Testament.

First, the biblical doctrine of God's sovereignty must be understood as a background to the covenantal inclusion of the children of believers in both Testaments. God has specifically placed in covenantal families, children that he desires to be influenced by the gospel and stand in close proximity to the blessings and responsibilities

of the covenant. To argue otherwise would be to believe that children are born into specific families solely by random selection and not by God's providential intention. Thus, God uses the means of a covenantal family as the means of bringing about the salvation of many of his elect. Inclusion in the covenant community by the covenantal mark is simply an outward affirmation of God's placement of children in believing families for his saving purposes. This does not mean every child will be saved. A lack of response to being brought up in the covenant and its benefits is a mark of overt rebellion against the abundant kindness of God toward that individual. If anyone, humanly speaking, should be a believer, it is the covenant child.

In the Old Testament, this organic relationship that God has with the children of believers is seen through the fact that in all manifestations of the Covenant of Grace the inclusion of the descendants of believers are included. God speaks to Abram in Genesis 17:7 saying, "I will establish My covenant between Me and you, and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God to you and to your descendants after you."

Specifically, in Genesis 17, the mark of the covenant is instituted to signify this covenantal relationship between God and Abraham and his descendants. Through the physical surgery of circumcision, the male children, being the representatives of the line, are marked out as part of the covenant promise of God.

This emphasis upon a special and spiritual relationship between the children's children of the promise and the living God is reiterated repeatedly throughout the Old Testament. This sense of blessing upon Abraham's children did not begin with Abraham but can be traced back through Shem, then through Noah, and through Seth (Hoeksema

1997, 87). Thus, there is not only an emphasis on the children of believers but also upon the naturally corollary, successive line of believers.

When Adam and Eve fell into sin, the protoeuangelion and the inauguration of the Covenant of Grace of Genesis 3:15 was accomplished by God through the physical agency of the seed of the woman. Not only would the seed be blessed of God but also it would be the source of blessing. When God established his covenant with Noah, it was a promise made not only to Noah but also with his descendants after him (Genesis 9:9). In the Abrahamic covenant as noted above, the promise is to Abraham and to his successive generations as an everlasting covenant. The passage in Genesis 17:7 speaks of a covenant that is everlasting in nature to continuing generations. Under the Mosaic administration of the Covenant of Grace, God speaks to his people about his covenant mercy on a thousand generations that love and serve him (Exodus 20:7). In the Davidic covenant of the Covenant of Grace, God promises David that his house and his kingdom will endure forever and that David's throne will be established forever (2 Samuel 7:15,16).

Throughout the Old Testament is a constant theme that the children of believers are included in the covenant. It is not an exaggeration to say that the children of believers in the Old Testament are the very human fabric of which the Covenant of Grace is composed. It is after-all organic, generational in its nature. For this reason, David writes in Psalm 78: 6-8, "For He established a testimony in Jacob and appointed a law in Israel, which He commanded our fathers that they should teach them to their children, that the generation to come might know, even the children yet to be born, that they might put their confidence in God and forget not the works of God, but keep His commandments."

Some argue that the children of believers certainly have a place in the Old Testament but not in the New Testament. One great difficulty with this view is that the Old Testament prophecies concerning the coming of the New Covenant are promises that include the children of believers. In Isaiah 65:22-23, the prophet speaking of the culmination of the New Covenant encourages his listeners with the words that their offspring will be blessed with them. In Jeremiah 30 and 31, a key passage on the New Covenant, the theme of God's blessing upon the children of the faithful is reiterated repeatedly (30:10, 20; 31:1, 8, 17, 36, 37). In this passage, the giving of the New Covenant is not inclusive of the children of the people of God, but the inclusion of the children is the essence of the promise. If it is not kept, then God will destroy the order of the universe (Jeremiah 31:36,37). In Ezekiel 35-37, Ezekiel gives a similar promise of renewal and inward transformation. Once again the passage speaks of God's blessings to the children of the faithful. Ezekiel writes in Ezekiel 37:24, "They will live on the land that I gave to Jacob my servant, in which their fathers lived; and they will live on it, they, and their sons' sons, forever; and David My servant will be prince forever." Finally in Malachi 4:5-6, the last words of the Old Testament describe the coming again of Elijah, John the Baptist, who will inaugurate the New Covenant administration of the Covenant of Grace. His mission will be covenantal in nature and include the children of believers. The New Covenant inaugurated by John the Baptist will be to restore the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers. The Old Testament prophecies concerning the continuing inclusion of believers' children in the blessings of the covenant speak very clearly.

The New Testament also underscores the inclusion of the children of believers in the Covenant of Grace. This would be rightly assumed since the benefits of the New Covenant are greater, and because there is no indication of the inclusion of the children of believers being revoked (Murray 1980, 41, 42).

When Peter preaches his sermon on the day of Pentecost, he directly outlines the benefits of the covenant following the ascension of Christ and the giving of the Spirit when he declares to the thousands of Jews present in Acts 2:39, “For the promise is for you and your children and who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself.”

Some commentators read this passage and state that Peter’s delineation of “you, your children, and those who are far off” is simply a rhetorical statement of the universal scope of the gospel offer (Larkin 1995, 59). Another commentator interprets it as referring to the unlimited scope of the mercy of God (Marshall 1980, 81). The phrase “your children” is interpreted to refer to future generations of Jewish children who will be saved. Pohill, writing from a Baptist perspective, says, “The universal scope of the promise is emphasized. Salvation is not only for the group of Jews present at Pentecost but for future generations (‘your children’) as well. It is not only for Jews but for Gentiles, for those ‘who are far off’” (Pohill 1992, 117).

The difficulty with this interpretation is the original audience. The phrase “your children” would not have been understood by the hearers to be anything other than their own biological children. To interpret “your children” as referring to the future generations of the Jewish people is to ignore the obvious and immediate meaning. There

are words Peter could have used for future generations; he did not. He used the words “your children”.

Why does Peter specifically say that the promise, the covenant promise, is for the children of the Jewish people? The answer is that the Jewish people have been from their genesis a covenantal community in which their children were included in the promises of God (Genesis 12, 17). In other words, Peter is not stating a new promise to them but the fulfillment of the covenantal promises they have already received. The passage from Joel just a few verses before clearly indicates that the sending of the Spirit was part of God’s promise all along. The promise is for the children because the covenantal purposes of God have not changed (Harrison 1975, 63). Simon Kistemaker writes, “The phrase for you and your children is an echo of God’s promise to Abraham to be a God to him and to his descendants to come (Gen. 17:7) (Kistemaker 1990, 107).

Since these words of Peter are not a new declaration but a renewal of the covenant promise given to Abraham, the continuing nature of the covenant is seen. The unity of the covenant is the truth that links Peter’s thought throughout chapter two. This unity specifically links his thought between speaking of baptism in verse 38 and speaking of the recipients of the covenant promise in verse 39. Peter is declaring that baptism will mark those in the New Covenant rather than circumcision. C. G. Kirby notes, “In this way Peter showed them how that ancient promise was still valid and would be then as effectually sealed to them and their children by baptism as it was in the former era by circumcision” (Kirby n.d., 66). Thus, it can be argued from Acts 2:38-39 that Peter is declaring that not only will the children of believers continue to be part of the covenant promise but also that they are to receive the mark of the covenant promise, baptism.

Not only does the passage in Acts 2 underscore the inclusion of children but the whole of Biblical teaching concerning the raising and behavior of children is clearly reliant upon the unity of the Covenant of Grace. The covenant principle is seen in God's directives toward the Christian family. In the book of Ephesians, Paul addresses those to whom he is writing as, "the saints in Ephesus." In chapter 6:1, he addresses their children and exhorts them to obedience. Also, in Colossians 3:20, Paul exhorts children to obey their parents (Murray 1980, 63). It should be noticed that the promise issued as a reward for the promise in Ephesians 6:2-3 is a covenantal promise given to the children of people of Israel. Thus, this promise under the Mosaic covenant is equally applicable to the children of the New Covenant church.

In both cases one sees God dealing with his people as a church, which is composed of families, fathers, mothers and children (Berkouwer 1969, 173). Thus, it can be said that God speaks to his people in the context of a family relationship and not exclusively in terms of individuals. This is the same covenantal way God spoke to the people of the Old Testament (Berkouwer 1969, 173).

Thirdly, in I Corinthians 7:14, a very important statement is made concerning the covenantal standing of children. In this passage, Paul says that both the unbelieving spouse and child of a believer are sanctified by that relationship. Paul writes in I Corinthians 7:14, "For the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her believing husband; for otherwise your children are unclean but now they are holy."

The Koine Greek scholar, Vincent, says the word "holy" does not mean a regenerate or morally holy person, but instead means one who is affiliated with the

Christian community. Therefore this verse shows the operation of the covenant and representative principle that the parent of the covenant child causes their offspring to be in a different type of relationship with God than an unbeliever. The relationship is said to be “sanctified” (Vincent 1914, 3:218).

How is this holiness of the child to be understood? Some commentators believe that this sanctification refers simply to the Christian influence a Christian parent has on their child (Thiselton 2000, 530). Other commentators see this holiness as a vague type of blessing and spiritual benefit to the child due to their physical proximity to the parent (MacArthur 1984, 167). Another view presented is that this “holiness” refers to the reception of baptism by these children and that upon receiving baptism they are as a consequence of their baptism deemed holy by the apostle (Fee 1987, 301).

All three of these views fall short of what Paul is speaking of in this passage. It is not an influence but a state that Paul is referencing. Nor can it be argued that this state is procured by baptism. It is not baptism that causes the child of a believer to be holy, but the believer’s child is declared holy by God and should therefore be marked with the sign of the covenant. Baptism does not affect the holiness of a believer’s child but testifies to their inherent position before God (Hodge 1974, 117).

Godet, in his commentary, says that the usage of the adjective, “holy” expresses not a potential quality due to outward influence but to an inherent quality found in the child (Godet 1977, 342). This inherent quality is derived from the corporate solidarity of the child being born or under the care of a believer in the covenant. The commentator, James Moffat, writes, “On entering the Christian faith, as on entering the Jewish, a householder or head of a family brought the family along with him; no ancient would

have understood the idea of such an individual accepting any responsible relationship to God apart from his immediate group” (Moffat 1938, 82). Our individualistic evangelical culture is a poor interpretive grid for the covenantal context of the corporate people of God. The child of believers therefore enjoys the benefit of the covenant just as the children of believers in the Old Testament (Kistemaker 1993, 225). The Old Testament revelation of God’s promise for covenantal children in the Covenant of Grace cannot be forgotten. As Charles Hodge writes, “The apostle constantly assumes that his readers were familiar with the principles and facts of the Old Testament” (Hodge 1974, 117).

This view that the word “holy” in 1 Corinthians 7:14 refers to a covenantal relationship is underscored by the fact that the adjective “unclean” is used in juxtaposition (Fee 1987, 301). The term “unclean” is the opposite of “holy”. Its use reminds the reader of those who are ceremonially impure and thus outside the worshipping community of God’s people (Grosheide 1955, 165). This lack of “uncleanness” is not ethical, moral or salvific for the children are not yet believers. It is a corporate or covenantal characteristic due to the child being the offspring of a believer.

It can be argued from this text that the covenantal inclusion of children, and thus their pronounced *de facto* holiness, was a common doctrine in the apostolic church. In 1 Corinthians 7:14, Paul argues from the lesser, the sanctification of unbelieving spouses, to the greater, the covenantal holiness of the children of believers. He states that Christians should understand their unbelieving mates as sanctified; otherwise their children would be unclean. This accepted truth of the covenantal holiness of the child is the basis of the argument for remaining with the unbelieving spouse. The spouses are being sanctified, a process denoted by the perfect tense, by their involvement with their

Christian spouses but the children are presently in a condition of holiness (Kistemaker 1993, 225). The adjective qualifier and the present verb “are” denotes a present unqualified condition (Godet 1977, 341). This condition of holiness is very clearly an accepted fact among the believing community. Thus, Paul is proclaiming new truth based on established truth.

The universal acceptance of this common doctrine is further presented by the fact that Paul addresses the whole Christian community in this verse by moving from the third person to the second person, “your children” (Godet 1977, 341). In essence, Paul is saying, “If it is a thing admitted by all, that notwithstanding their original pollution, your children who are not yet believers, are nevertheless already consecrated and holy in God’s eyes ... why would you have difficulty as recognizing also that an unbelieving husband may be regarded as consecrated to God in virtue of his union with a believing wife?” (Godet 1977, 341-342).

Based on I Corinthians 7:14, the child of a believer though not necessarily regenerate is nevertheless, holy, and a part of the covenant people of God. Albertus Peters writes:

If little children are thus members of the Christian church in New Testament thought, clearly that church is spoken of as a visible community, for one does not enter the Invisible Church by physical birth but by the new birth. That they are members by virtue of their birth from Christian parents rests upon the covenant principle: ‘I will be a God to thee and to Thy seed after thee.’ To be sure, such children may later repudiate the covenant and become ‘profane persons’ as Esau was, (Hebrews 12:16) but unless and until they do, they are ‘saints, members of the people of God’, the New Covenant Israel, the visible Christian church. (Pieters 1950, 78)

Fourthly, if the children of believers are no longer considered to be covenant children, then several issues relating to the theological integrity of Scripture are brought forward. First, the benefits of the New Covenant following Christ’s crucifixion,

resurrection and ascension, would be less for the children of believers than before the completion of his work. The doctrine of excluding children from the covenant in the New Testament would therefore be the only area of the New Covenant administration of the Covenant of Grace that would be less in its administration than under the Old Testament. Far from having less benefit in the New Testament, the greater New Covenant benefit is clearly seen. In the Mosaic Covenant a child of a mixed marriage was outside the camp (Nehemiah 13:23-28), but under the New Covenant the child of a mixed marriage is considered holy (1 Corinthians 7:14) (Dabney 1972, 778).

To remove the children of believers from the blessings of the covenant would be a spiritual anomaly in biblical theology. Every blessing whether it be access to the Father, the cleansing of the conscious, the bestowal of the Spirit, the spiritual unity of believers, the full realization of adoption and many other benefits are all far greater in the New Covenant administration of the Covenant of Grace. Why would the area of the covenant family be abrogated by the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ? As pointed out earlier, the prophecies of the Old Testament regarding the New Covenant administration point to the blessing of God upon His children's children, not to their isolation and separation from covenantal blessing.

A second theological anomaly would be if the children of believers are no longer considered covenant children, then Christian parents are left with virtually no instruction regarding the Christian nurture of their children. A review of the New Testament renders only two verses. Ephesians 6:4 commands fathers to not provoke their children to anger and to bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. In Colossians 3:21, a similar passage is given encouraging fathers to not exasperate their children and make

them lose heart. These two passages are virtually the only directives specifically to parents in the whole of the New Testament.

Lawrence Richards in his now standard text on ministry to children, A Theology of Children's Ministry, writes, "The New Testament itself tells us almost nothing about the child rearing. Oh, children are to obey their parents (Eph. 6:1; Col. 3:20). And parental discipline is to be distinctively Christian will not be provoked or discouraged (Eph. 6:4; Col. 3:21). But no definition of this 'Christian discipline' is included in the Epistles" (Richards 1983, 37).

The entire theological framework for the Christian nurture of children is given in the Old Testament. It is instruction in the raising of children under the covenant. The Scripture is silent on how to rear children not included in the covenant. Why would this be the case? The clear assumption of both the prophets and apostles is that there are no children outside of the covenant being raised by believers. It could be argued that even more instruction is needed for a child that is not under the blessing of the covenantal influence but none is given. The reasons that the apostles did not give New Covenant instruction on raising children is that they deferred to the instructions for child rearing in the Old Testament because both Old and New administrations of the Covenant of Grace included the children of believers. Thus, Deuteronomy 6, Proverbs 1-8 and various other Old Testament passages of Scripture concerning the nurture of children are equally applicable to the children of believers throughout the Covenant of Grace.

The organic foundation of covenant baptism rests on the biblical truth that God's covenant promise is not only to believers but also to their children. This great truth is upheld by the unity of God's purposes for the children of believers throughout the

Covenant of Grace, the Old Testament prophecies of the New Covenant which include the children of believers, the reiteration of the covenant inclusion of children by Peter on the day of Pentecost, the declaration of Paul in I Corinthians 7:14 stating that the children of believers are holy and the unfolding nature of God's revelation which points to greater spiritual benefit for the people of God, not less.

All of these arguments point to a God whose heart is bound to the children of his believing children. As he promised, "...to be a God to you and to your seed after you throughout their generations" (Genesis 17:7).

The Narrative Foundation

It has been established that the Church is the same in both the Old and New Testaments and that the basis of the covenant, "the righteousness by faith," is the same for the Old Testament saints as well as the New Testament Christians. It has also been shown that circumcision is a sign and seal of the true circumcision or regeneration of the heart, which corresponds to baptism in the New Testament (Colossians 2:11,12). Thirdly, along with the covenantal and sacramental unity of the Scripture, it has also been shown that there is a unity between testaments of a special relationship that God has with the children of believers.

Along with these three foundations for covenant baptism, a fourth foundation is found in the historical narrative of the New Testament. This foundational truth is the actual practice of household baptism in the New Testament.

First, the Old Testament gives clear examples and types of the salvation of households. Noah and his house are saved. The Passover involves a lamb for each house.

Rahab is saved along with her household. Joshua commits his household to serve the Lord (Reymond 1979, 75,76). As Robert Reymond writes in regard to the example of the Passover, “It was the households that were saved that night, not just individual believers on an individual basis. Yet the Passover is admittedly one of the clearest types of salvation through the blood of Christ found in the Word of God” (Reymond 1979, 76). The very clear practical implication of the covenant is that it incorporates the household in the covenant promise.

When applied to the New Testament, Old Testament precedent of dealing with households becomes clear. David Neilands, in Studies in the Covenant of Grace, writes:

Is it not significant that Scripture itself uses the term and designation of ‘household’ baptisms? It must mean that the New Testament church believed in the unity of the family. The principle of unity comes to us through the Old Testament teaching of the covenant of grace. (Neilands 1980, 172)

The New Testament speaks of twelve administrations of baptism (Acts 2:41; 8:12, 13, 38; 9:18; 10:48; 16:15, 33; 18:8; 19:5; 1 Corinthians 1:14, 16) (Murray 1980, 66). Of these, nine are mentioned by name. Of these nine, two did not have immediate families (Saul and the Ethiopian eunuch) and concerning three, no mention is made concerning their family relationships (Simon Magnus, Gaius and Crispus). Of the remaining four (Cornelius, Lydia, the Philipian jailer, Crispus, and Stephanas), all are household baptisms (Booth 1995, 142, 143). It can be stated, based upon the New Testament record, that without exception whenever the apostles administered baptism to a known head of a household, they also administered it to the entire household (Booth 1995, 143).

Of these four household baptisms, none either overtly state children are present or are not present. The baptism of the household of Cornelius has the strongest probability of the fact that no children were present. Luke, in Acts 18:8, states that Cornelius

believed “with all his household”. The remaining three household baptisms lend support to the possibility that small children were present (Murray 1980, 66). The household baptisms are found in I Corinthians 1:16 and Acts 16:15 and 33. Taking these passages in chronological order gives an unfolding understanding of the nature of household baptism.

First, in I Corinthians 1:16, Paul writes, “Now I did baptize the household of Stephanas; beyond that I do not know whether I baptized any other.” Paul in seeking to deflate party rivalry in Corinth reminds the Corinthian believers that he should be looked upon as nothing more than a servant of God who administered baptism to only a few. He then mentions only two individuals and one group. The individuals are Crispus and Gaius. The group is the household of Stephanas. Of the three known baptisms Paul administered in Corinth, statistically, one third was as a household. This gives us a simple pattern that is seen particularly in the book of Acts in that both individuals and households are the recipients of baptism.

The second reference to household baptism is given in Acts 16:15. During Paul’s Macedonian ministry, Lydia’s household is baptized in the city of Philippi. In Acts 16:14,15, Luke writes, “A woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple fabrics, a worshipper of God, was listening; and the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul. And when she and her household had been baptized she urged us saying, “If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord come into my house and stay. And she prevailed upon us.”

From this passage, it should first be noted that only Lydia’s regeneration and conversion are mentioned. It should also be noted that when appealing to Paul and his companions to use her home as a base of operations that she only appeals to her

faithfulness, not that of her household. The passage underscores a singular faith but multiple baptisms in a household. The driving conclusion is that the members of Lydia's household were baptized because of her belief in the gospel (Booth 1995, 147).

Who is Lydia's household? The word for household, {oikos}, refers to the entire family in the original Greek (Arndt and Gingrich 1957, 559). It is very hard to conceive that there were no infants or small children in these households. A household would be her immediate family members and possibly servants (Kistemaker 1990, 590). This definition of a household including children is upheld by 1 Timothy 3:4-5, 12 and 5:4 (Stott 1990, 263).

Does this mean that unbelieving adults in the household were baptized? No, the requirement for adult baptism is clear in Scripture. It is faith and repentance in Christ (Acts 2:38). Thus, by referring to household baptism, Luke is emphasizing either everyone in the household of believing age, presumably six and up became believers all at the same time. A more likely interpretation is that everyone under Lydia's familial and thus covenantal care (1 Corinthians 7:14) unable yet to believe, whether child or servant, was baptized. Luke is interested in presenting the covenantal foundation of the budding church in Philippi, which is composed of families and individuals (Kistemaker 1990, 590).

A few verses later in Acts 16:33-34, Luke gives the account of the Philippian jailer's baptism. He too has his household baptized with him. Luke writes in Acts 16:33 and 34, "And he took them that very hour of the night and washed their wounds, and immediately he was baptized, he and all his household. And he brought them into his house and set food before them, and rejoiced greatly, having believed in God with his

whole household.” Just as in the Lydia passage, the emphasis is placed on the singular belief of the head of the household, in this case the jailer. The word {pepisteukos} is a perfect active singular participle (Reymond 1998, 942). The Greek speaks specifically only about the jailer’s faith and not the faith of the other members of the household. The jailer’s family rejoices with him but nothing is said about their faith. Though it is not stated who is in the household, it must be once again underscored that household in the New Testament seems to very clearly include children (I Timothy 3:4) and certainly does not exclude them.

From these three passages dealing directly with household baptism, I Corinthians 1:16, Acts 16:15-16, and 34, several conclusions can be drawn. First, the practice of household baptism was very much a part of the sacramental ministry of the New Testament period. Not only were individuals baptized but also households were baptized. Second, the very definition of household points to the inclusion of children and in no way excludes children. The choice of the term underscores a corporate or covenantal identity. Third, the emphasis in all three passages is on the prominence of a believing family head. In both cases in Acts 16, the singular conversion of the family head is not only stated but also emphasized (Reymond 1998, 942).

Thus, household baptism was a common practice (Murray 1980, 66). This practice of baptism was based clearly upon the foundation of the head of the household coming to faith in Christ. This parallels the covenant concept seen in the Old Testament. Just as Abraham’s household received circumcision upon his reception of the covenant promise, the household of Stephanas, Lydia and the Philippian jailer received baptism upon their reception of the covenantal promise. Calvin writes concerning the baptism of

Lydia's household, "So Abraham, the father of the faithful, was commanded to circumcise all his servants with him; and he is commended for the care he had to govern his house and to instruct his family" (Calvin 1980, 7:74).

In summary, one is moved to the conclusion that covenant baptism is biblical for four reasons. First, the Church and Covenant of God are the same today as they have been since the fall of Adam. The Covenant of Grace is one plan based upon one promise pointing to one source of salvation, Christ, through one means of salvation, faith. God has always had one people, the Church, who live based upon this one great covenantal promise. Second, the sign of the covenant in the Old Testament was circumcision. It was a physical symbol of inward regeneration. This sign has been replaced now by baptism, also the visible symbol for regeneration. Thirdly, the children of believers are included in the covenant both in the Old and the New Testament. And fourthly, the practice of household baptism points to the continuation of the covenantal practice of setting apart the children of believers with the mark of God's covenant faithfulness. These four lines of truth form the foundation of covenant baptism and call for the practice of covenant baptism among New Testament believers.

Jeff Lowman, 2005

