

Systematic Theology: Baptism and its Recipients Chapter 14 of Word, Water, and Spirit

Who should be baptized?

Was the sign of the covenant ever administered to those who had NOT made a profession of faith?

How do Christian parents view/treat our children today?

The more you understand that God relates to us, his people, by way of covenant, the more you will understand **why** we baptize our children.

The central question to ask as we consider the entire Scriptures—
Should covenant children, who have always been considered as being among the people of God, continue to receive the sacrament of initiation into his covenant people—or did something change regarding the status of these children as a result of the move from the old covenant to the new covenant?

Are children of Christian parents members of the covenant community—and therefore also right recipients of the sacrament of baptism?

Key point

**THE ADMINISTRATIVE GROUND OF BAPTISM IS NOT A PROFESSION OF FAITH,
BUT IS GOD'S COVENANT PROMISE...
and God's covenant promise is given to believers AND their children**

To help explain why we baptize children of believers, see:

- Circumcision signified both a physical and a spiritual relationship
and was a sign of the gospel
- The sign of the covenant was administered to infants of believing parents prior to their profession of faith
- The corporate nature of baptism
 - The testimony of the NT
- The Administrative Ground for Baptism—**
The covenant promise of God
Baptism seals God's promises, not our own

Who said it?

The new thing, since Jesus has come, is that the covenant people of God are no longer a political, ethnic nation, but a body of believers. John the Baptist inaugurated this change and introduced the new sign of baptism. By calling all *Jews* to repent and be baptized, John declared powerfully and offensively that physical descent does not make one part of God's family and that circumcision, which signifies a physical relationship, will now be replaced by baptism, which signifies a spiritual relationship. —??

The common assumption is that circumcision was tied to the Israelite theocracy and was administered to the physical descendants of Abraham, but with the dissolution of the theocracy, a new spiritual order was inaugurated. Hence, baptism is now to be administered only to those who are born of the Spirit.

This misreading fails to see two important points:

CIRCUMCISION SIGNIFIES A PHYSICAL RELATIONSHIP

sees this, but not fully

CIRCUMCISION SIGNIFIES A SPIRITUAL RELATIONSHIP

Circumcision signifies a physical relationship, but not primarily between Israelite fathers and sons, but between the men of Israel and the Messiah, between God's Son Israel and God's only begotten Son, Jesus Christ

Circumcision as a sign of the covenant looked forward to the Seed who was to come, who was to be cut off from the land of the living, and who was to suffer the curse of the covenant on behalf of God's people. **Hence, males were circumcised because they collectively pointed to the male Seed who would redeem God's people.** In this sense, circumcision certainly signified a physical relationship, but not the one Piper posits. He sets forth a physical relationship between a father and his male son who is born within the theocracy and therefore receives circumcision to identify him as a citizen of Israel. This import is certainly present, as circumcision separated Israelite from Gentile. **However, and perhaps more significant, the physical relationship denoted was also between the men of Israel and the Messiah. Collectively, the males of Israel, God's Son (Ex. 4:22), pointed to Jesus, God's only begotten Son.**

God gave the gift of circumcision to be a sacrament of the covenant of grace. It surely identified those who belonged to the nation, but it was **commanded** because of the significance of its function as a **spiritual mark** of those who belonged to the covenant people of God (i.e., the church). —Jason Helopoulos

CIRCUMCISION SIGNIFIES A SPIRITUAL RELATIONSHIP

—Connected to the work of Christ, the work of the Holy Spirit, & a sign of the gospel

CIRCUMCISION WAS CONNECTED TO THE WORK OF CHRIST

In his anti-typical baptism with the descent of the Spirit in avian form, as well as in His Spirit-led 40 days of wilderness temptation, Jesus recapitulated Israel's Red Sea baptism and wandering in the wilderness for 40 years. But where Old Testament Israel failed, Jesus succeeded. . . . Jesus embodies the Israel of God. This certainly shows that circumcision was not merely physical in nature, but pointed to the person and work of Christ. Circumcision was therefore not primarily a sign of family, racial, or national identity. Any such connection was secondary. The primary and essential significance of circumcision was that it was the sign and seal of the highest and richest spiritual blessings God would bestow on his people in the Messiah.

CIRCUMCISION WAS CONNECTED TO THE WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

This was evident in the ratification of the Mosaic covenant.

Moses exhorted the people: Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn.—Deut 10:16

Moses eventually tells the people: And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.—Deut 30:6

The only agent of effectual calling that the Bible knows is the Holy Spirit.

Therefore, circumcision pointed to the work of the Holy Spirit.

CIRCUMCISION WAS A SIGN OF THE GOSPEL

John 7:22—Moses gave you circumcision (not that it is from Moses, but from the fathers). . .

Jesus qualifies His statement by saying that though it is part of the Torah and therefore from Moses, circumcision actually came from the patriarchs.

Circumcision therefore was connected first and foremost with the Abrahamic covenant.

Paul identifies the Abrahamic covenant as the gospel:

Galatians 3:8—And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "In you shall all the nations be blessed."

Paul calls circumcision a seal of the righteousness that Abraham had by faith (Rom 4:11)

Stephen calls the Abrahamic covenant a covenant of circumcision (Acts 7:8), that is, circumcision characterizes the gospel promises given to Abraham.

Circumcision is a sign and seal of the gospel.

[not as clear as baptism but the same realities were connected to circumcision as to baptism]

Circumcision pointed to the work of Christ and the Spirit, and signified the blessings of the covenant: circumcision of the heart, forgiveness of sins, justification by faith alone, and union with God through the covenant Mediator.

Was the sign of the covenant ever administered to those who had NOT made a profession of faith?

That circumcision meant all these things and was applied to Abraham as an adult makes sense. However, circumcision was administered not only to adult converts such as Abraham, but also to male infants. Male infants received the sign of the covenant, the sign of justification by faith alone, **before** they were capable of making a profession of faith. Abraham received believers' circumcision and his male offspring received infant circumcision. **This means that to administer the sign of the covenant to those who have not made a profession of faith is not foreign to Scriptures.**

THE CORPORATE NATURE OF BAPTISM

The covenant signs of circumcision and baptism contain a corporate dimension. To acknowledge this corporate factor runs against the grain of today's individualism, but it certainly reflects threads found in the Scriptures. Individuals are saved by faith in Jesus, but they are saved as members of the covenant community, the church. This is true for the church in both the Old and New Testaments.

HOUSEHOLD BAPTISMS

Twelve instances of baptism are recorded in the NT:

Acts 2:41; 8:12, 13, 38; 9:18; 10:48; **16:15, 33**; 18:8; 19:5; 1 Corinthians 1:14, **16**
1/4 describe household baptisms; 5 more associated with it or n/a...

If a quarter of all the baptisms that the NT records involved entire households, and if the early church must have experienced a myriad of baptisms beyond these, it seems unlikely that none of the households that were baptized contained children. At the very least, there is no indication that children were excluded. —Jason Helopoulos

Baptist argue that when a household was baptized in the NT, only those capable of making a profession of faith were present. On the other hand, paedobaptists argue that given the use of the term *household* in the Old Testament, children were not necessarily present, but certainly could have been. The New Testament's unqualified use of the household principle lends greater credence to the paedobaptist position, namely, given its use in the Old Testament, a household allows for the presence of children or infants. Noah's household, for example, included his adult sons. Abraham's household, on the other hand, included infants. In fact, the Old Testament makes specific mention of infants and children as members of households (Gen 18:19; 36:6, 46:27; cf. vv. 5-7; 47:12; 1 Sam 22:15-19; Jer 38:17-23). By contrast, the Old Testament specifies when children or infants are excluded (Gen 50:8; 1 Sam 1:21-22). To argue that every single mention of the household formula in the New Testament excludes infants goes against the grain of Scripture. However, the key point is not the speculative question of whether infants and children were absent or present, but rather that in the New Testament, the household principle is still operative. The principle is operative without qualification, and the fact that the Old Testament does at times exclude children from the

household formula, but no such exclusion appears in New Testament occurrences, points in the direction of continuity, not discontinuity, as Baptists maintain.

See also 1 Corinthians 7:12-16

Paul can say that both the unbelieving spouse and the children, because of the one believing spouse, are holy. In what way are they holy? *Holy* is a cultic term. This is evident as Paul contrasts *holy* with the term *unclean*. In the canonical use of these terms, Gentile nations were unclean, and Israel was holy. Anyone or anything unclean was not allowed within the camp, the covenant community. The Israelite cult and covenant community were essentially the same. In other words, to be holy was to be in the covenant, but to be unclean was to be outside the covenant. The holy and unclean categories cannot be divorced from the concept of covenant. To do so is to abstract them from redemptive history, thus losing their historical anchor. The words become mere adjectives to describe independent individuals rather than terms that describe individuals within the covenant (or household) and indeed the church as the covenant community vis-a-vis the unbelieving world. Soteric holiness is therefore covenantal. However, in the Old Testament, Israel was holy and the Gentile nations were unclean. In the New Testament, it is the church (both Jew and Gentile) that is holy and the unbelieving world that is unclean.

Ephesians 6:4

Christian parents have the responsibility to raise their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.

What else can this mean but to raise them in the covenant, the place where the covenant Lord exercises His authority and where His people serve Him?

There is no isolated, individualistic avenue to God, only that of covenant. **But keep in mind the all-important point—the administration of the covenant is broader than election; the visible covenant community is not synonymous with the elect of God.**

THE ADMINISTRATIVE GROUND

This is where the whole debate rests

Baptists contend that a profession of faith is the administrative ground for baptism—only those who make a profession of faith receive the rite / are to be baptized.

- based on NT narrative that recounts the baptisms of converts to Christianity
- this understanding rests on only half of the Bible
- fails to account for the doctrine of the covenant

Circumcision and baptism are not a stage created by God only for man to profess his fidelity. The sacraments are the opposite—they are the revelatory stage (when accompanied by the Word) by which God heralds His covenant promises and trumpets the gospel of His Son.

THE TESTIMONY OF COVENANTAL CONTINUITY

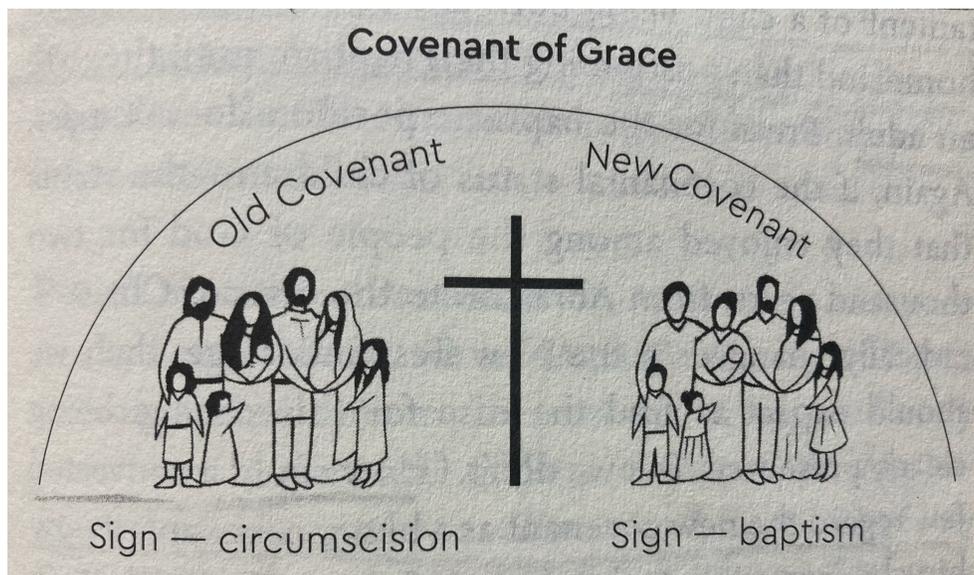
Are the children of believers to be baptized?

The answer to this question must come from the whole counsel of Scripture (not NT only)

The Covenant of grace is an overarching covenant that stands over the entire Bible. This has great implications for how we apply the sacrament of baptism.

From the very beginning, Reformed theology has drawn on the covenant to argue for infant baptism. Why? Because God is a covenant-keeping God. He chooses to work, administer his grace, and enter into relationship with man by means of a covenant. The Bible records the progressive unfolding of God's covenant, which covers all of human history and provides unity across the pages of Scripture and throughout every period.

Children were included and counted among the people of God under the old covenant, and God never repeals their inclusion under the new covenant. OT children received the sign of their inclusion—circumcision—and therefore children are to receive the sign of inclusion that applies now in the NT period: baptism. **Circumcision and baptism each serve as the rite of initiation for their respective times.**



This is the answer for the protest:

Show me in NT where a child is baptized, give me a proof-text

The actual burden of proof falls on those who do not baptize their children.

And the fundamental question is this:

Do children of believers continue to be members of the covenant community or not?

If children of believers are no longer included in the covenant, this would indicate a **monumental** change in redemptive history and the way that God has chosen to work. If such a change had occurred, the proof of it would need to be clear.

If the covenantal status of children—status they enjoyed among the people of God for 2000 years, from the time of Abraham to the time of Christ—radically changed in the NT age, then we should expect to find the case for this change being clearly presented. But we don't.

How could a converted Jew regard the new covenant as a better covenant, if now his children were to be excluded from God's dealings with his people, no longer receiving a sign of God's covenant promises? If such were the case, Peter and later Paul would surely have had to face that question repeatedly. And yet it is never debated or even mentioned in the NT. —Joel Beeke

Paul's Letters to the Ephesians and Colossians

How does Paul begin these letters? (Eph 1.1, Col 1.2)

Paul includes children among those he is addressing—Eph 6:1-4, Col 3:20-21

Paul considered children to be members of the covenant community—that is why he addressed them specifically, called them "saints" (set apart/cov community).

Paul admonishes children to obey their parents **in the Lord**, for this **pleases the Lord**. He exhorts them just as he exhorts husbands, wives, servants, masters within the church. Children were fully embraced within the covenant community—and if children were thus recognized and received in the churches, they were recognized as possessing the status of which baptism is the sign and seal. If children were included in the church enough to receive its instructions, then surely they were included in it enough to receive its sign of belonging.

The revelatory nature of the sign, and therefore its double edge, must not be forgotten. Baptism preaches both blessing and sanction, as did circumcision. Both Ishmael and Isaac received the sign, as did Esau and Jacob. Ishmael and Esau received it as a sign of covenant judgment, as there was no accompanying Spirit-wrought circumcision of the heart, whereas Isaac and Jacob received it as a sign of covenant blessing. The gospel and its sign, whether in the OT and the Abrahamic covenant or in the NT, is always double—edged.

This means that the administrative grounds for the sign of the covenant is the covenant promise of God.

To ground the application of the sign of the covenant on a profession of faith shifts the soteric center of gravity away from God to man—it is to say, "I am saved because I have believed." Instead, one must always say, "I am saved because God has saved me" (e.g., Gal. 4:9). Such a statement is not to minimize the faith of the one who is saved. Rather, it is to acknowledge that the covenant Lord has first condescended to His people—the sign of the covenant belongs to Him first and foremost. Baptism is the sign of *His* covenant promise. When received by faith, baptism is secondarily a sign of the response of the covenant servant.

Adult and infant baptism presents to the church an important and central element of the work of God in the gospel. The very helplessness of infants highlights the truth that God saves His people. Man cannot initiate, achieve, supplement, complement, or complete his own redemption. To attempt to do so is to marginalize the supreme place of Christ in man's redemption. If the temptation in adult baptism is to overemphasize an individual's faith in Jesus, then the temptation in infant baptism is to devalue the importance of faith and thereby destroy the evangelistic message of the news of God's saving actions. Adult and infant baptism maintain the necessary balance.

Bottom line issue:

Are our children members of the covenant community?

If they are, they should be baptized

If they are not, they should not be baptized

Baptism serves as a seal of what?

God's faithfulness or a person's subjective faith?

Baptism seals God's promises, not our own

What about: Repent and be baptized? (Acts 2:38)

AND—a **coordinating** conjunction, not a **causal** conjunction.

the repenting does not **cause** the being baptized

Word also does not indicate a **logical** order

instead, they are two **equally important commands:**

—Repent

—Be Baptized

Also: **FOR** in v39 links v39 w/v38

And Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. 39 **For** the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself."

v38 cannot be understood apart from v39

v39 provides the grounds for the commands of v38

Those who receive God's promises are to be baptized—

v39 includes cov children in that number

a clear connection with Genesis 17/Abrahamic Covenant