

**The Covenant
and
Infant Baptism**

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Introduction

The Two Basic Positions

The subject of the covenant and infant baptism involves two broad positions within evangelical Protestantism. For the sake of clarity, these may be called the *Baptist* position and the *Reformed* position. The difference between them concerns especially two matters: first, *the status of the children of believers*; and secondly, *the meaning of baptism*.

What are the children of believers? And what does baptism signify and seal?

According to the Baptist position, the children of believers are *not in the covenant in any special sense*. They are *not regarded as heirs of covenant promises distinct from the children of unbelievers*. They may have *outward privileges*. They live *within the sphere of the church*, hear the gospel preached, *have believing parents who pray for them* and are *exposed to Christian instruction*. But these benefits are viewed as *external*. The children themselves are usually regarded as *unregenerate* and *unsaved* unless and until they grow older, make a credible profession of faith and are then baptized.

In some Baptist circles, the phrase “vipers in diapers” has even been used to describe the children of believers before conversion. The phrase is striking, and deliberately so. It expresses the Baptist assumption that the children of believers are to be *treated as outside the covenant, outside the promises and outside the church, until they give evidence of personal faith*.

The Reformed position is very different. The children of believers are viewed as *being in the covenant of grace, included in the promise and promises of God* and *regarded as holy*. This does not mean that *every* physical child of believing parents is elect or regenerate. Scripture itself forbids that conclusion. “They are not all Israel, which are of Israel” (Rom. 9:6), and in the same family God loved Jacob and hated Esau (Rom. 9:13). Not all the physical children of believers are the spiritual children of God.

The Reformed view, therefore, is *organic* and *covenantal*. The minister may address the congregation as “beloved in the Lord Jesus Christ” and as “the people of God,” while recognizing that hypocrites may be present. In the same way, the children of believers are viewed *according to the covenant promise*, while recognizing that there may be Jacobs and Esaus in the covenant line. This is often painful for believing parents, but it does not overthrow the covenantal status of the children of believers.

The Meaning of Baptism

The two positions also differ regarding the *meaning of baptism*.

For many Baptists, baptism is principally a sign of *something the baptized person has done*. It is a sign of *that person's repentance from sin and faith in Jesus Christ*. On this view, the infant cannot be a proper candidate for baptism, because the infant cannot make a credible profession of faith.

For the Reformed, baptism is first of all a sign and seal of *what God does*. Baptism signifies and seals *God's work of saving His people*. The central symbol in baptism is *water*, and water speaks of *washing*. When water is applied outwardly to the body, it points to *inward cleansing*: the washing away of sins by the blood of Jesus Christ and the gracious outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

Baptism, therefore, signifies and seals *Trinitarian salvation*. The Father gives His people to Christ. The Son cleanses them by His blood. The Holy Spirit applies that salvation to them. Man is *passive* in the saving reality signified by baptism. God comes to His people, washes them, cleanses them and pours His Spirit upon them.

This is why the Reformed do not make baptism primarily a sign of *man's act of repentance and faith*. Repentance and faith are necessary, but they are *not the first thing signified by the water*. The water signifies washing, and that washing is God's gracious act. Baptism is therefore a sign and seal of divine grace, not first a badge of human response.

The two positions may be put in the form of two simple arguments.

The Baptist argument is this: the infant is not in the covenant, has no covenant promise distinct from the children of unbelievers, is unregenerate and cannot make a credible profession of repentance and faith. Baptism is a sign of one's own repentance and faith. Therefore the infant is not a candidate for baptism.

The Reformed argument is this: the infant child of believers is in the covenant of God, in the visible church and in the kingdom of God. He is included in the promise of the Holy Spirit bringing Christ's salvation. The biblical image for such a child is not a viper but a *lamb*. Baptism is a sign and seal of God's saving work: sprinkling with the blood of Jesus Christ and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit. Therefore the infant child of believers is a proper recipient of baptism. For this reason infant baptism may also be called *covenant baptism*, *household baptism* or *family baptism*.

(1)

Old Testament Texts

The Covenant Promise to Abraham

The biblical argument begins with Genesis 17:7:

And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee.

This is the first text in Scripture that explicitly speaks of God's covenant and the infant children of believers. It also introduces the Old Testament sign and seal of that covenant: circumcision.

Several features of the text are crucial. First, God says, "I will establish my covenant between me and thee." The covenant begins with *God*. Secondly, the covenant includes Abraham's *seed*: "and thy seed after thee." Thirdly, the covenant is *generational*: "in their generations." Fourthly, it is "an *everlasting* covenant." Fifthly, the substance of the covenant is expressed in the covenant formula: "*to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee.*"

Twice in the verse God speaks of Abraham and his seed. The covenant is not merely with Abraham as an isolated individual. It is with Abraham *and his children in their generations*. The following verses explain that Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac and the male children thereafter were to receive circumcision on the eighth day. Romans 4:11 then identifies circumcision as "a sign" and "a seal" of *the righteousness of faith*. Circumcision was not a merely national mark or ethnic badge. It was the sign and seal of *the covenant promise, given to believers and their seed*.

This promise to Abraham must be understood *in relation to Christ*. Romans 15:8 teaches that "Jesus Christ was a minister of the circumcision for the truth of God, to confirm the promises made unto the fathers." Abraham is one of those fathers, and Christ came to confirm the promises made to him.

II Corinthians 1:20 gives the same truth in broader form: "For all the promises of God in him are yea, and in him Amen, unto the glory of God by us." The promises made to Abraham, including the promise to Abraham and his seed, are not *abolished* in Christ. They are *confirmed* in Him.

Galatians 3 is especially decisive. Paul writes, "Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made," and then adds, "He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of

one, And to thy seed, *which is Christ*" (16). The covenant and the promises are made centrally to Christ. Then Paul adds, "And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (29). Christ is the promised seed in the central and saving sense, and believers, whether Jews or Gentiles, are *Abraham's seed in Him*.

The Threefold Promise to Abraham

The promise to Abraham may be viewed under three main aspects: blessedness, land and seed.

First, Abraham and his seed are promised *blessedness*. Galatians 3:14 says, "That the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ; that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith." The blessing of Abraham is not a merely earthly or outward favour. It is *the saving blessing of the Holy Spirit, received through faith in Jesus Christ*. It is the opposite of the curse. In Christ, the children of Abraham are blessed with spiritual blessings.

Secondly, Abraham and his seed are promised the *land*. In the Old Testament, this promise was typified by the land of Canaan, later conquered under Joshua and distributed among the tribes. But the New Testament interprets the promise more fully. Romans 4:13 says that the promise was not merely that Abraham should inherit *Canaan*, but that he should be "the heir of *the world*." Hebrews 11 teaches that Abraham looked beyond Canaan to a better country, that is, an heavenly (10, 13-16). The land of Canaan was a type and pledge of *the world to come, the new heavens and the new earth*. The inheritance promised to Abraham is not less than Canaan, but *far more* than Canaan. It is *the whole renewed creation*.

Thirdly, Abraham is promised *seed*. The promise of blessing, land and seed belongs together. God blesses Abraham and his seed in the promised inheritance. The covenant promise is therefore *comprehensive*. In God, Abraham and his seed have not only one isolated benefit, but *the whole inheritance of salvation*.

This is important for the children of believers. If the promise to Abraham and his seed included *the seed of believers in the Old Testament*, and if Christ fulfils all the promises made to Abraham, then the seed-promise cannot simply vanish in the New Testament. If it did vanish, Christ would not have fulfilled that part of the Abrahamic promise. But II Corinthians 1:20 says that all the promises of God are yea and amen in Christ. Romans 15:8 says that Christ came to confirm the promises made unto the fathers. Galatians 3 says that the promises were made to Abraham and to his seed, which is Christ, and that believers in Christ are Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise.

Nor may it be said that *Old Testament* believers possessed a covenantal promise regarding their children, while *New Testament* believers have lost it. Scripture repeatedly teaches that the new covenant is *better*, not poorer. Hebrews speaks of the *better covenant* (8:6). John 1:17 says, "For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ." II Corinthians 3 contrasts the old covenant, written on stones, with the new covenant written by the Spirit in the hearts of God's people (3). If the children of believers were included in the covenant in the Old Testament but

excluded in the New, the New Testament would be impoverished at precisely the point where Scripture teaches that it is richer.

Babes and Sucklings in the Praise of God

Psalm 8:2 gives another important testimony:

Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings hast thou ordained strength because of thine enemies, that thou mightest still the enemy and the avenger.

The Lord Jesus quotes this text in Matthew 21:16: “Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings thou hast perfected praise.” The word “strength” in Psalm 8 is thus explained by Christ as “praise.” God ordains strength, and that strength is *the praise of Himself*.

The text speaks of “babes and sucklings.” These are not merely older children capable of formal theological instruction. Sucklings are *nursing children*, those who feed at their mother’s breast. Yet God ordains and perfects praise from *their* mouths.

Such praise is not valuable if it is merely external noise. True praise must come from the *heart*. If babes and sucklings praise God acceptably, that praise has first been worked in their hearts by God Himself. The only way true praise can be in the heart of any sinner, whether adult or infant, is by *regeneration*, the new birth. God works within the hearts of His elect little ones so that they praise their Maker.

This does not mean that *every infant without exception* praises God savingly. The reference is to the *elect* children of believers in the covenant of God. Psalm 8 belongs to Israel, the Old Testament church, but Christ Himself quotes it in the New Testament during the week of His suffering, only days before the cross. He thereby confirms that the truth of this text continues in the days of the Messiah.

The Shepherd and His Lambs

Isaiah 40:10-11 speaks of the coming Lord as the Shepherd of His flock:

Behold, the Lord God will come with strong hand, and his arm shall rule for him ... He shall feed his flock like a shepherd: he shall gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them in his bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young.

The question of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8 is appropriate here: “Of whom speaketh the prophet this?” The answer is Jesus Christ. Isaiah 40 opens with the voice crying in the wilderness, preparing the way of the Lord (3). The New Testament repeatedly applies those words to John the Baptist, the forerunner of Christ. The King of glory is coming, and John prepares His way.

In this messianic context, Isaiah says that the Lord God will come with strength, rule with His arm, receive His reward and feed His flock like a shepherd. The Shepherd

is Christ. His flock is not a literal flock of animals, for Christ was not a literal shepherd tending physical sheep. His flock is *His people*.

The striking detail is that the flock includes *lambs*. It is not a flock consisting only of adult sheep, or adult sheep with a few older children. “He shall gather *the lambs* with his arm, and carry *them* in his bosom.” The lambs are the little ones of the flock, the children of believers. They correspond to the “babes and sucklings” of Psalm 8. The passage also speaks of Christ gently leading “those that are with young,” that is, mothers in the covenant community carrying children in the womb or nursing them.

The imagery is tender and covenantal. Christ does not merely *tolerate* the lambs. He *gathers them with His arm and carries them in His bosom*. The children of believers are not presented as strangers to the flock, but as lambs under the care of the Shepherd.

The Spirit Poured upon the Seed

Isaiah 44:2-5 gives a rich promise concerning the seed of God’s people:

Thus saith the Lord that made thee, and formed thee from the womb, which will help thee; Fear not, O Jacob, my servant; and thou, Jesurun, whom I have chosen. For I will pour water upon him that is thirsty, and floods upon the dry ground: I will pour my spirit upon thy seed, and my blessing upon thine offspring: and they shall spring up as among the grass, as willows by the water courses.

The promise is addressed to Jacob and Jesurun, that is, to Israel, the Old Testament church. But it looks beyond the Old Testament to the great outpouring of the Spirit. God says, “I will pour my spirit upon thy seed, and my blessing upon thine offspring.” The seed and offspring are *the children of the covenant people*.

The blessings promised are not merely outward privileges. God promises *His Spirit* and *His blessing*. The Spirit is the Holy Spirit, the third person of the blessed Trinity. His blessing is the blessing of *regeneration, sanctification and covenant life*. Apart from the Spirit there *is* no blessing, and God’s (saving) blessings are brought by the Spirit.

The result is growth. The seed “shall spring up as among the grass, as willows by the water courses” (4). This is the growth of life under divine blessing. The children grow physically, and, according to the promise, they grow *spiritually*.

The next verse describes *confession*: “One shall say, I am the Lord’s; and another shall call himself by the name of Jacob; and another shall subscribe with his hand unto the Lord, and surname himself by the name of Israel” (5). The seed, having received the Spirit and blessing, openly identify themselves with Jehovah and His people. One speaks: “I am the Lord’s.” Another calls himself by the name of Jacob. Another writes or subscribes with his hand unto Jehovah. In present terms, they *make confession of faith*. They identify themselves vertically with the living God and horizontally with the church and people of God.

This passage points especially to the New Testament age, because it speaks of the Spirit being poured out in floods. The Spirit was certainly present and active in the Old Testament, but the great outpouring of the Spirit belongs to Pentecost. Compared with the Old Testament measure of the Spirit, Pentecost brought floods, a *monsoon* of spiritual blessing. And when God speaks of that outpouring, He does not say that the children will be removed from the covenant. He says, “I will pour my spirit *upon thy seed*, and my blessing *upon thine offspring*.”

The Children Taught of the Lord

Isaiah 54:13 states:

And all thy children shall be taught of the Lord; and great shall be the peace of thy children.

The verse twice speaks of the church’s children: “all *thy children ... of thy children*.” These children are taught *of Jehovah*. This teaching is not merely external instruction by parents or ministers. It is chiefly *internal teaching by God Himself*. The Lord teaches through means, but the decisive teaching is *inward, powerful and saving*.

The result is *peace*: “great shall be the peace of thy children.” This peace is not merely peaceful relations with neighbours or outward tranquillity in earthly life. It is peace *with God*. Romans 5:1 says, “Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace *with God through our Lord Jesus Christ*.” Peace is also a fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22). The children of the church are taught inwardly by Jehovah and brought into peace with Him through Jesus Christ.

The context confirms that this promise belongs to the messianic and New Testament age. Isaiah 52:13 through chapter 53 contains the great prophecy of the suffering servant, who is “wounded for our transgressions” and “bruised for our iniquities.” Isaiah 54 then calls the barren woman to sing, because she will have many children (1). Her tent must be enlarged. Her curtains must be stretched. Her cords must be lengthened and her stakes strengthened (2). The church, once small and barren, will break forth on the right hand and on the left. Her children will include the Gentiles (4), saved on the basis of Christ’s atoning death.

The passage continues with covenant and marriage language. The Lord is the husband of His people (5), and His marriage to the church will be fruitful (10). It is in this context that Isaiah says, “All thy children shall be taught of the Lord; and great shall be the peace of thy children” (13).

Isaiah 55 then opens with the free gospel call: “Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters” (1). It speaks of the everlasting covenant, even the sure mercies of David (3). It also speaks of the Messiah as a witness, leader and commander to the peoples, and of nations that did not know God being called by Him (4-5). Thus Isaiah 53, 54 and 55 together present the suffering Christ, the enlargement of the church, the salvation of the Gentiles, the everlasting covenant and the children of the church taught of Jehovah.

The New Testament confirms this interpretation. Christ quotes Isaiah 54:13 in John 6:45: “It is written in the prophets, And they shall be all taught of God.” The Lord Himself applies this promise to the gospel age. The children of the church are not excluded from the New Testament covenant. They are included in the promise of divine teaching and peace.

The Redeemer, His Seed and Their Seed

Isaiah 59:20-21 is one of the clearest covenantal promises concerning Christ, His people and their children:

And the Redeemer shall come to Zion, and unto them that turn from transgression in Jacob, saith the Lord. As for me, this is my covenant with them, saith the Lord; My spirit that is upon thee, and my words which I have put in thy mouth, shall not depart out of thy mouth, nor out of the mouth of thy seed, nor out of the mouth of thy seed’s seed, saith the Lord, from henceforth and for ever.

The Redeemer is Jesus Christ. The King James Version rightly capitalizes “Redeemer,” and the New Testament quotes this passage in Romans 11:26-27 with reference to Christ. The Redeemer comes to Zion and to those who turn from transgression in Jacob.

The covenant language is explicit: “This is my covenant with them.” The “them” refers to those who “turn from transgression in Jacob.” Then the content of the covenant is stated. God speaks to the Messiah: “My spirit that is upon thee, and my words which I have put in thy mouth.” The Spirit is upon Christ, and the words of God are in His mouth.

But the promise does not stop with Christ considered alone. God says that His words shall not depart out of Christ’s mouth, “nor out of the mouth of thy seed, nor out of the mouth of *thy seed’s seed*.” Christ has a seed. His seed are *believers*. His seed’s seed are the *children* of believers. The promise is that God’s Spirit and words remain with Christ, with His people *and with their children*.

This is covenantal and generational language. The covenant runs “from henceforth and for ever.” It is the development and unfolding of the covenant made with Abraham in Genesis 17. The Redeemer comes; the Spirit rests upon Him; God’s words are in His mouth; and those words remain in the mouth of His seed and His seed’s seed. The words are in their mouths because they are first in their hearts, for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh (Luke 6:45).

The passage is also clearly messianic and New Testament in its focus. It speaks of the future coming of the Redeemer (Isa. 59:20), and the New Testament identifies that Redeemer as Christ (cf. Rom. 11:26-27; Matt. 1:21; Luke 1:68-75). In that New Testament fulfilment, believers and their seed are not deprived of the covenant promise. They are expressly included in it.

Sons and Daughters in the Light of Zion

Isaiah 60 continues the thought of Isaiah 59. The Redeemer comes to Zion, and then Zion is commanded: “Arise, shine; for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee” (Isa. 60:1).

This is the coming of divine glory in a dark and sinful world. The Gentiles are gathered to this light: “And the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising” (3). The calling of the Gentiles belongs especially to the New Testament age, from Pentecost onward.

Then verse 4 says:

Lift up thine eyes round about, and see: all they gather themselves together, they come to thee: thy sons shall come from far, and thy daughters shall be nursed at thy side.

The passage speaks of sons and daughters being gathered to Zion. The reference is not limited to adult descendants. A man may have sons and daughters who are grown, but the verse specifically mentions daughters being “nursed” at the side. These are little children. They are included in the gathering of Zion in the messianic age.

The order of thought is important. The Redeemer comes (Isa. 59:20). The Spirit and the word remain with His seed and His seed’s seed (59:21). Zion is commanded to arise and shine (60:1). The Gentiles come to her light (60:3). Her sons and daughters are gathered, including little nursing children (60:4). The children are not excluded from the covenant, salvation, the people of God or the worship of God in the New Testament era. The prophetic vision keeps the children in.

The Everlasting Covenant in Jeremiah

Jeremiah 32:38-40 gives another rich statement of the covenant:

And they shall be my people, and I will be their God: and I will give them one heart, and one way, that they may fear me for ever, for the good of them, and of their children after them: and I will make an everlasting covenant with them, that I will not turn away from them, to do them good; but I will put my fear in their hearts, that they shall not depart from me.

The covenant formula appears in verse 38: “They shall be my people, and I will be their God.” This is the heart of the covenant: *God and His people joined together in fellowship and communion*. Verse 40 calls this an “everlasting covenant,” the same phrase used in Genesis 17:7.

The context is the new covenant. Jeremiah 31:31-34 uses that very term, and Jeremiah 32 continues the same section of prophecy. Jeremiah 30-33 forms a unit in

which the prophet speaks of restoration, covenant, salvation and the future work of God. Jeremiah 31 speaks of the new covenant; Jeremiah 32 adds further content concerning the same covenant grace.

With whom is this covenant made? Verse 39 says that the blessing is “for the good of them, *and of their children after them.*” The language echoes Genesis 17:7. The covenant blessing is not only for believers considered as isolated individuals, but for them *and their children after them.*

The blessings promised in the passage are spiritual. God says, “I will give them one heart, and one way.” This is *regeneration*, the gift of the new heart. Since God gives His people one heart, He also unites them in the same faith and way. He adds, “I will put my fear in their hearts.” This fear is not natural terror, but *reverent, saving fear worked by the Spirit.* It belongs to *sanctification.*

The passage also teaches perseverance. God says, “I will put my fear in their hearts, that they shall not depart from me.” True believers may backslide for a time, but God brings His people back. Not one of His elect, regenerate people shall be finally lost. He works in them so that they do not depart from Him.

Jeremiah 32:38-40 is therefore *monergistic.* The word *monergism* comes from *mono*, meaning one, and *ergon*, meaning work. In salvation, one works decisively: the true and living God. The verbs in the passage are all divine acts: “I will give,” “I will make,” “I will not turn away,” “I will put.” God gives the heart. God establishes the covenant. God does good to His people. God puts His fear in their hearts. The result is that they fear Him and do not depart from Him.

The covenant is not conditional in the Arminian sense. Man does not choose himself into the covenant or determine its saving efficacy. God puts His Spirit within His people; *therefore* they repent, believe, fear Him and persevere. And this promise is explicitly “for the good of them, and of their children after them.”

David, the Shepherd-King, and the Children

Ezekiel 37:23-26 speaks in similar terms:

I will cleanse them: so shall they be my people, and I will be their God. And David my servant shall be king over them; and they all shall have one shepherd ... and they shall dwell therein, even they, and their children, and their children's children for ever ... Moreover I will make a covenant of peace with them; it shall be an everlasting covenant with them.

The covenant formula appears again: “they shall be my people, and I will be their God.” The covenant is called a covenant of peace and an everlasting covenant. The passage also speaks of cleansing, obedience, one shepherd, one king and covenant life.

Jeremiah and Ezekiel were contemporaries, though in different places: Jeremiah in Jerusalem, Ezekiel in Babylon. Yet they teach the same truth concerning the coming of Christ, the future covenant and salvation in Him. Jeremiah speaks of the new covenant

and the children after them. Ezekiel speaks of the covenant of peace and the children and children's children.

The "David" in Ezekiel 37 is not David literally returned to an earthly throne. He is the great Son of David, Jesus Christ. Christ is David's Lord and David's son. David is the type; Christ is the fulfilment. The prophecy calls Him king, prince and one shepherd. This matches the shepherd imagery of Isaiah 40.

Included in this messianic covenant are "their children, and their children's children" (25). The promise reaches not only to believers, but also to their children and grandchildren. The passage does not say that when the Messiah comes, the children will be cut out of the covenant. It says the opposite. The Messiah comes; the covenant of peace is established; the everlasting covenant is made; and believers, their children and their children's children are *included in the promise*.

Again, this must be understood according to election. Not all physical children are elect. There are Jacobs and Esaus in the generations of believers. Nevertheless, God saves His elect children in the covenant line according to His sovereign purpose, through the means He appoints in godly families and in the church.

(2)

New Testament Texts

The Covenant Promise in Early New Testament History

Having considered Old Testament passages from Genesis 17, the Psalms, Isaiah, Ezekiel and Jeremiah, we now turn to the New Testament. The question is whether the New Testament removes the children of believers from the covenant, or whether it continues the same covenant principle already revealed in Genesis 17.

The New Testament continues this same covenantal line. It does not abolish the promise to believers and their seed. It confirms, expands and fulfils it in Jesus Christ. The first passages to consider come from early New Testament history, especially the opening chapter of Luke.

Luke records the meeting of Mary and Elizabeth while both women were carrying children in their wombs. Mary carried the Lord Jesus Christ, conceived by the Holy Ghost. Elizabeth carried John the Baptist, the forerunner of Christ. When Mary greeted Elizabeth, “the babe leaped in her womb; and Elisabeth was filled with the Holy Ghost” (Luke 1:41). Elizabeth then explained what had happened: “For, lo, as soon as the voice of thy salutation sounded in mine ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy” (44).

Several things are important here. John the Baptist was still in his mother’s womb. Yet he leaped in the presence of Christ. Luke records the leaping twice, and Elizabeth says that the babe leaped “for joy.” Joy is not a natural physical movement merely. Joy is a fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:22). Therefore John the Baptist, even in the womb, possessed true spiritual joy in the presence of the incarnate Christ. Luke 1:15 confirms this when it says that John “shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother’s womb.”

John was born to covenant parents—Zacharias and Elizabeth—not unbelieving outsiders. Luke describes them as righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless (Luke 1:6). John’s case is therefore a striking New Testament example of God’s gracious work in a covenant child even before birth.

Mary’s Song and Generational Mercy

The same chapter contains Mary’s song, often called the *Magnificat*. Mary’s words are deeply covenantal. She says, “And his mercy is on them that fear him from generation

to generation” (Luke 1:50). God’s mercy is not presented as detached from the generations of His people. It is covenant mercy, mercy that runs in the line of generations according to God’s sovereign election and grace.

Mary continues: “He hath holpen [i.e, helped] his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy; as he spake to our fathers, to Abraham, and to his seed for ever” (54-55). The mercy of God is connected with Israel, with the fathers, with Abraham and with Abraham’s seed. This reaches back to Genesis 17:7, where God promised to establish His covenant with Abraham and his seed after him in their generations for an everlasting covenant.

Mary is not singing of a new arrangement in which the seed of believers are removed from the covenant. She rejoices in the fulfilment of the covenant promise. God remembers His mercy. He remembers what He spoke to Abraham and to his seed for ever. The coming of Christ is therefore the *confirmation* of the Abrahamic covenant, not its cancellation.

The generational principle is clear. God’s mercy is “from generation to generation” (Luke 1:50). He helps Israel “in remembrance of his mercy” (54). He acts according to what He spoke “to Abraham, and to his seed for ever” (55). The opening chapter of Luke already teaches that the New Testament begins in the atmosphere of covenant fulfilment.

The Little Ones Who Believe in Christ

The next major passage is Matthew 18. In this chapter, Christ uses a little child to teach His disciples about the kingdom of heaven. The passage does not teach that little children must become like adults in order to be saved. Rather, it teaches that adults must become like little children. The great moral quality emphasized is *humility*.

Jesus called a little child unto Him, set him in the midst of the disciples and said, “Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven” (3). Then He added, “Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (4).

The scene is significant. The child is not merely an illustration of innocence or weakness. Christ speaks of “one such little child” received in His name (5), and then warns against offending “one of these little ones which believe in me” (6). These little ones *believe in Christ*. Faith is in their hearts. They are not described as pagans, outsiders or vipers. They are little ones who believe in Him.

This is covenantal language. These children were children in Israel, the Old Testament church. They belonged to the covenant community and were brought within the sphere of Christ’s ministry by adult believers who followed Him. Christ does not treat them as strangers to the kingdom, but as *little believers who must not be despised or offended*.

The warning is severe. Whoever offends one of these little ones who believe in Christ would be better off with a millstone hanged about his neck and drowned in the depth of the sea (6). Christ’s little ones are precious to Him. To despise, harm, mislead or scandalize them is a grievous sin.

The Angels of the Little Ones

Matthew 18 continues with another remarkable statement concerning these little ones: “Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones; for I say unto you, That in heaven their angels do always behold the face of my Father which is in heaven” (10).

Christ teaches that His little ones are under the care of the holy angels. These angels behold the face of the Father in heaven and minister under God’s sovereign decree and gracious providence *for the good of the heirs of salvation*. Hebrews 1:14 describes the angels as “ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for *them who shall be heirs of salvation*.”

This does not mean that every child without exception is elect and saved. Scripture elsewhere makes clear that there are Jacobs and Esaus in the covenant line. But it does mean that the elect little ones of Christ are not outside His saving care. They are guarded by the providential ministry of angels.

The passage then speaks of the *saving will of God* regarding these little ones: “Even so it is not the will of your Father which is in heaven, that one of these little ones should perish” (14). The will of God here is not a weak, frustrated wish. It is the sovereign saving will of the Father. It is not His will that one of these little ones should perish, and none can resist His will (cf. Rom. 9:19).

The meaning is not that every physical child of believers is elect. The meaning is that every elect little one of Christ shall certainly be saved. The Father wills their salvation. Christ receives them. The angels minister for them. They believe in Him. *They belong to the kingdom.*

Infants Brought to Christ

Mark 10 gives another important passage. Parents brought young children to Christ that He should touch them, but the disciples rebuked those who brought them. When Jesus saw this, “he was much displeased” and said, “Suffer [i.e., allow; permit] the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God” (Mark 10:14).

The children in Mark are very young. The parallel passage in Luke uses a word that more specifically means infants: “And they brought unto him also infants, that he would touch them” (Luke 18:15). These were not merely older children capable of walking to Christ by themselves, as in Matthew 18. These were infants brought by others, infants whom Christ took up in His arms.

Christ’s command is plain: “Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not.” The disciples thought the infants should be kept away. Christ was displeased with that attitude. He corrected them sharply and declared, “for of such is the kingdom of God” (Mark 10:14).

The infants are connected with the kingdom. Christ does not say merely that adults must have some vague childlike quality. He says, with reference to *these little children* brought to Him, “of such is the kingdom of God.” Then He adds, “Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, he shall not enter therein” (15).

In Matthew 18, the child who comes to Jesus is a picture of humility. In Mark 10, the infants teach something slightly different. They teach the sinner's *passivity in regeneration*. An infant lifted into Christ's arms does not first understand, choose, decide, walk forward or make a profession. The infant is *acted upon*. Christ lifts the child. Christ receives the child. Christ blesses the child.

This is exactly the point regarding the beginning of salvation: Regeneration is *not something the sinner performs*. It is *something God works in him*. Christ teaches the same truth in John 3. A man must be "born again." Birth is not an act of the one born. The Spirit blows where He wills (John 3:8). The new birth is *sovereign, gracious and irresistible*.

The common objection to infant baptism is that infants cannot repent, believe or understand. But Mark 10 turns that argument around. Infants are a fitting picture of the sinner's passivity in regeneration. The beginning of salvation is not man acting upon God, but God acting upon man.

The Infants in Christ's Arms

Mark 10 concludes with the tender action of Christ: "And he took them up in his arms, put his hands upon them, and blessed them" (16). Here Christ fulfils the prophecy of Isaiah 40:11: "He shall gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them in his bosom."

The infants are lambs in the arms of the Shepherd. They are not treated as little vipers. They are not rebuked, excluded or regarded as outsiders. Christ takes them up, touches them and blesses them.

The blessing of Christ is not empty sentiment. He is the Messiah. His blessing is *covenantal and saving*. He blesses with the blessings He purchases by His cross, applies by His Spirit and gives according to His intercession. The kingdom belongs to such as these, and Christ Himself receives them.

This passage also shows that Christ's view of covenant children differed from the disciples' mistaken view. The disciples hindered the children. Christ forbade the hindrance. The disciples thought Christ had more important business. Christ declared that the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. The disciples rebuked the parents. Christ was much displeased with the disciples and blessed the children.

The church must learn from Christ, not from the mistaken disciples. The children of believers must not be forbidden from coming to Christ. They are to be *viewed and treated as lambs of the flock, as members of the kingdom and as recipients of Christ's covenant blessing*.

Feed My Lambs

John 21 gives another testimony. After His resurrection, Christ spoke to Simon Peter by the Sea of Tiberias. He asked, "Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me more than these?" Peter answered, "Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee." Christ replied, "Feed my lambs" (15).

The distinction between lambs and sheep is significant. Christ goes on to say, “Feed my sheep” (16-17). Sheep are the adult members of the flock; lambs are the little ones. Christ therefore commands Peter to feed not only the sheep but also the lambs.

This does not mean that Peter alone was responsible for the children of the church, while the other apostles cared only for adults. Peter here represents the pastoral office more broadly. Ministers and elders, as under-shepherds of Christ, are called to care for the lambs as well as the sheep.

The lambs must be fed. They are fed by prayer, by the word of God and by instruction suited to their capacity. They are fed in catechism, in family worship, in the preaching of the gospel and in the pastoral care of the church. The sacraments also signify and seal the grace by which God nourishes His people.

The very fact that Christ calls them *lambs* is important. A viper is not fed in green pastures. A lamb is. Christ’s lambs are *elect, redeemed and regenerated children in the covenant line, viewed according to the promise of God*. They need spiritual feeding, and because they are lambs, they *can* be spiritually fed. Christ says, “Feed my lambs.”

The Promise to Believers and Their Children

The book of Acts gives two great gospel promises regarding households and children. The first is Acts 2:39, spoken by Peter on the day of Pentecost:

For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call.

The immediate context identifies the promise as the promise of the Holy Spirit. Peter has just said, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost” (38). He then explains: “For the promise is unto you, and to your children ...” (39).

Three groups are mentioned. First, the promise is “unto you,” that is, to the adult Jews present in Jerusalem who are called to repentance and faith. Secondly, it is “to your children.” Thirdly, it is “to all that are afar off,” that is, the Gentiles, who are brought in through the gospel.

This is crucial. The change from Old Testament to New Testament is not the *subtraction of children* but the *addition of the Gentiles*. The Jews already knew the covenant principle: the promise is to *believers and their seed*. That had been taught since Abraham. The startling New Testament expansion is that the promise now also goes to *those afar off*. The Gentiles are included. The promise becomes wider, not narrower.

The final phrase qualifies the whole promise: “even as many as the Lord our God shall call.” This call is the effectual call of God according to election. Romans 8:30 says, “whom he did predestinate, them he also called.” The promise is not an Arminian universalism. It is to *believers*, their *children* and the *Gentiles*—namely, as many as the Lord effectually calls.

Acts 2 belongs to the last days, as Peter says by quoting Joel: “And it shall come to pass in the last days, saith God, I will pour out of my Spirit upon all flesh” (17). The

last days began with Christ's first coming, His death, resurrection and the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost, and they continue until His second coming. In this New Testament age, the promise remains to believers and their children, and it now extends to the Gentiles also.

Good News for Households

The second great gospel promise in Acts is Acts 16:31. Paul and Silas speak to the Philippian jailer: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house."

This verse is often misquoted. It is sometimes quoted only as, "*Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved,*" while the final words, "*and thy house,*" are omitted. But those words belong to the promise. They are part of the good news!

The gospel first comes to the jailer personally: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved." But the promise is richer still: "and thy house." The good news is good news for *households*! The covenantal pattern remains. God saves believers *and their seed*. The jailer is not told that salvation is promised to him only as an isolated individual, with no covenant word concerning his household. The promise embraces the house!

This is the same biblical view taught by Peter in Acts 2 and by Paul in Acts 16. These two men are the two major human figures in the book of Acts, and both speak in covenantal terms. Peter says the promise is to believers and their children. Paul says to the jailer, "thou shalt be saved, and thy house."

The setting is also striking. Acts 2 records Pentecost—the birthday of the New Testament church in its New Testament form. Acts 16 records Paul's ministry in Philippi, the first city in Europe where he preached the gospel. At Pentecost in Jerusalem, the promise is to believers and their children. In Philippi, as the gospel enters Europe, the promise remains good news for households.

The covenant promise has not changed by excluding children. It has changed by *including the Gentiles*. The same gospel comes to Jews and Gentiles, to Asia and Europe, to believers and their houses.

The Holiness of the Children

I Corinthians 7:14 gives a direct statement concerning the children of believers:

For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband: else were your children unclean; but now are they holy.

The context concerns mixed marriages, that is, marriages in which one spouse is a believer and the other is an unbeliever. The believer is not to divorce the unbelieving spouse merely because the spouse is unbelieving, if the unbeliever is pleased to dwell with the believer (12-13).

This raises the issue of the antithesis. Scripture teaches that believers must not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers (II Cor. 6:14). Ungodly fellowship corrupts. Ordinarily, ensnaring relationships with unbelievers must be broken off. But a marriage *already existing* between a believer and an unbeliever is not to be dissolved merely on that account. The believing spouse is not to reason, “I am unequally yoked, therefore I must divorce.” Paul says the opposite: if the unbelieving spouse is pleased to dwell, the believer must not depart.

Why? Because “the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband” (I Cor. 7:14). This does not mean that the unbelieving spouse is automatically regenerated or saved. It means that the unbelieving spouse is *set apart in relation to the believer and the covenant home*. The marriage is not defiled simply because one spouse is unbelieving.

Then Paul adds the decisive point: “else were your children unclean; but now are they holy.” If the believer’s union with the unbelieving spouse defiled the marriage, then the children would be unclean. But they are not unclean. They are holy.

The children of even one believing parent are therefore set apart as holy. They are not to be regarded as unclean outsiders. They belong to the covenant sphere. This holiness is *covenantal*. It accords with Genesis 17:7, Acts 2:39 and Acts 16:31. It does not deny election, for there may still be Jacobs and Esaus. But it does establish that the children of believers are holy, not unclean.

Children Addressed as Members of the Church

Ephesians 6:1-4 addresses children directly:

Children, obey your parents in the Lord: for this is right. Honour thy father and mother; which is the first commandment with promise ... And, ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath: but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.

Paul writes to the church at Ephesus and *addresses children as part of that church*. In the surrounding context, he addresses wives, husbands, servants and masters. No one doubts that wives, husbands, servants and masters were members of the church. In the same way, the children addressed in Ephesians 6 are *members of the visible church*.

The command given to them is the fifth commandment: “Honour thy father and mother.” Paul calls it “the first commandment with promise” (2). It is not the first commandment in the whole Decalogue that contains any promise whatsoever, for the second commandment also contains generational language: God shows mercy unto thousands of them that love Him and keep His commandments, while visiting iniquity upon the generations of those who hate Him (Ex. 20:5-6). Rather, the fifth commandment is *the first commandment that comes directly to the child in the order of his covenant life*. The child’s first great duty is to honour father and mother.

This command comes with promise: “That it may be well with thee, and thou mayest live long on the earth” (Eph. 6:3). This is the way of covenant obedience and

blessing. Children are not addressed as pagans waiting to become Christians someday. They are addressed in the Lord: “Children, obey your parents in the Lord” (1).

The fathers are also commanded: “bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord” (4). The children are to be reared in the Lord’s discipline and instruction. This makes sense *only if they belong to the covenant sphere and are to be treated as children of the church*.

The implications are large. Paul begins Ephesians by addressing “the saints which are at Ephesus, and to the faithful in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 1:1). He pronounces upon them the benediction: “Grace be to you, and peace, from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ” (2). He then unfolds the riches of salvation in Christ: election before the foundation of the world, adoption, redemption through Christ’s blood, forgiveness of sins and sealing with the Holy Spirit (3-14).

The children addressed in Ephesians 6 are *included in the church to which this epistle is written*. That does not mean that every child in the church is elect, just as it does not mean that every adult professor is elect. But the children are *addressed as members of the church, as holy ones, as those who must obey in the Lord and be brought up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord*.

The same principle appears in Colossians 3:20-21: “Children, obey your parents in all things: for this is well pleasing unto the Lord. Fathers, provoke not your children to anger, lest they be discouraged.” The children in Colossae, like the children in Ephesus, are addressed as members of the church and instructed in their covenant calling.

Timothy and the Covenant Line

II Timothy gives a beautiful example of the covenant line in operation. Paul writes to Timothy:

When I call to remembrance the unfeigned faith that is in thee,
which dwelt first in thy grandmother Lois, and thy mother Eunice;
and I am persuaded that in thee also (II Tim. 1:5).

Here are three generations: Lois, Eunice and Timothy. The grandmother has true faith. The mother has true faith. Timothy has true faith. This is the covenant line in the New Testament age. It is what one would expect from Genesis 17:7, Acts 2:39, I Corinthians 7:14 and the prophetic promises concerning believers and their seed.

This is especially striking because Timothy’s father was apparently an unbeliever. Acts 16:1 says that Timothy was “the son of a certain woman, which was a Jewess, and believed; but his father was a Greek.” Timothy had not been circumcised, which strongly indicates that his Greek father did not embrace the covenant faith and did not permit circumcision. Yet the promise came through one believing parent. Eunice’s faith was not nullified by the unbelief of Timothy’s father. Timothy was a *covenant child*.

II Timothy 3:15 adds another detail:

And that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.

Timothy knew the Holy Scriptures from childhood. His believing mother, and no doubt his grandmother, taught him the word of God. The Old Testament Scriptures made him wise unto salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

This is covenant nurture. Timothy was not treated as an outsider until adulthood. He was instructed from childhood in the Scriptures. God used that instruction as a means to bring him to conscious faith and service. The covenant line ran from Lois to Eunice to Timothy, even in a household where the father was an unbeliever.

(3)

Theological Arguments

Regeneration in Infancy

The Bible teaches that the elect children of believers are often, and ordinarily, regenerated in infancy. This does not mean that *every* child of a believing parent is regenerated, nor does it mean that every elect covenant child is regenerated *at the same point*. Some are regenerated later in life. Some wander grievously and are brought back, like the prodigal son. In many cases, the precise moment of regeneration cannot be dated. Nevertheless, Scripture gives strong reason to believe that God often works saving grace in His elect covenant children very early.

Many believers can never remember a time when they did not believe in Jesus Christ. From their earliest consciousness, they trusted Him, prayed to Him and knew Him as their Saviour. This is not to be dismissed as mere habit or natural religion. It is often the fruit of regeneration in infancy and covenant nurture.

Scripture gives specific examples of God's saving work in children before or from birth.

John the Baptist was filled with the Holy Ghost from his mother's womb (Luke 1:15). He leaped for joy in the presence of Christ while still unborn (41, 44).

Jacob is another example. In the womb, he struggled with Esau, grasping his brother's heel (Gen. 25:22-26). Hosea later reflects on Jacob's striving (Hos. 12:3-4). Jacob's name and history are significant. He was later renamed *Israel*, and "Jacob" and "Israel" became the great covenant names for the people of God. Jacob is therefore not merely an isolated individual. He represents the *covenant people* and illustrates God's sovereign grace in the covenant line.

Jeremiah is a third example. God said to him, "Before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee, and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations" (Jer. 1:5). Jeremiah needed grace from the earliest days, for God called him to be a prophet in his youth and appointed him to suffer much from the false prophets and apostate church of his day.

Other examples may also be noted. Isaac appears in Scripture as the child of promise in contrast to Ishmael (Gen. 21:1-12; Rom. 9:6-9). Joseph, while still young, stood apart from the wickedness of his brothers and received revelation from God in dreams (Gen. 37:2-11). Moses was described at birth as "a goodly child" (Ex. 2:2), and Acts 7:20 says, more literally, that he was "fair to God" or well pleasing to God. Samuel, as a little boy at the tabernacle, was a holy and obedient covenant child, given in answer to prayer

and used by God for the reformation of Israel (I Sam. 1:20-28; 2:18; 3:1-21). David, even as a youth, trusted Jehovah and fought Goliath when adult Israel trembled (I Sam. 17:33-51). Josiah was a godly boy king, ruling in the fear of God from his youth (II Kings 22:1-2). Timothy knew the Scriptures from childhood and was made wise unto salvation through faith in Christ (II Tim. 3:15).

These examples are not all identical. They do not prove that every covenant child is regenerated in infancy. But they do show that Scripture is not embarrassed by the idea of saving grace in children, even very young children. The Bible presents God as working in His elect covenant seed from the womb, from birth and from earliest childhood.

Circumcision and Baptism

The relationship between circumcision and baptism is crucial. Colossians 2:11-12 places them side by side:

In whom also ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands ... buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with him through the faith of the operation of God.

Believers in Christ receive the true spiritual circumcision, the circumcision made without hands. This is not the removal of a piece of physical flesh, but the putting off of the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ. Paul then immediately speaks of baptism: “buried with him in baptism.” Circumcision and baptism are *parallel signs*.

Both circumcision in the Old Testament and baptism in the New Testament are signs and seals of *entrance*. They mark *entrance into the covenant, the visible people of God and the sphere of salvation*. Circumcision was the Old Testament sign; baptism is the New Testament sign that replaces it.

They also signify and seal the *same spiritual blessings*. Romans 4:11 says that circumcision was “a sign” and “a seal” of the righteousness of faith. Circumcision therefore signified *justification by faith alone*. It also signified the removal of sin, the putting off of the flesh, regeneration and sanctification. These are the same essential blessings signified in baptism: *washing from sin, union with Christ, new life and the work of the Spirit*.

This is important because circumcision was administered to infants on the eighth day. Those infants could not yet make a conscious profession of faith, yet God commanded that they receive the sign and seal of the righteousness of faith. The sign did not depend on their prior act of profession. It depended on *God’s covenant promise*.

If baptism replaces circumcision as the New Testament sign of entrance into the covenant, and if the children of believers remain in the covenant, then the children of believers are *proper recipients of baptism*.

The Subjects of Baptism

The subjects of baptism must be determined by Scripture, not by abstract reasoning about what infants can or cannot do. The decisive question is not, “Can infants make an adult profession?” but, “What does Scripture say about the children of believers, and what does Scripture say baptism signifies?”

The Bible teaches that the children of believers are *in God’s covenant, in His church and in His kingdom*. They are *objects of God’s saving will according to election*. God’s mercy is upon His people *from generation to generation* (Luke 1:50). The children are called *lambs*, not *vipers* (Isa. 40:11; John 21:15). They are *cared for by angels* (Matt. 18:10). They are *carried in Christ’s arms* (Mark 10:16). They are *promised divine teaching and peace* (Isa. 54:13). They are *promised the Redeemer, His Spirit and His words* (Isa. 59:20-21). They are *promised the Holy Spirit* (Acts 2:39). They are *holy* (I Cor. 7:14). They are to be *brought up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord* (Eph. 6:4).

What, then, is baptism? It is a sign and seal of God’s saving work in Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit. It signifies washing, cleansing, remission of sins, union with Christ and the Spirit’s renewal.

If a class of persons is spoken of in Scripture as belonging to the covenant and receiving the reality of God’s saving promise, they ought not to be denied the sign. Peter makes this sort of argument in Acts 10:47: “Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized, which have received the Holy Ghost as well as we?” If God gives the *reality*, the church must not withhold the *sign*. The same principle applies to the children of believers as Scripture describes them covenantally. They are not to be forbidden water.

Household Baptisms

The New Testament records surprisingly few specific instances of Christian water baptism after Pentecost. There are many references to baptism and its meaning, but not many concrete accounts of named people or groups being baptized. The recorded instances are significant.

Paul was baptized after his conversion (Acts 9:18; 22:16). His children were not baptized *because he had none*. He was unmarried. The Ethiopian eunuch was baptized (Acts 8:36-38). His children were not baptized because, as a eunuch, *he had none*. On the day of Pentecost, many were baptized (Acts 2:41). The occasion was a pilgrimage feast in Jerusalem. The command to appear at the feasts especially concerned adult males, though women and children could also attend. Pentecost was a one-day feast, so the emphasis naturally falls on the adult men present in Jerusalem.

In Samaria, men and women were baptized, and the passage gives particular attention to Simon Magus, who was baptized and soon revealed himself to be a hypocrite (Acts 8:12-24). This shows that adult baptism does not guarantee regeneration. Adults may be baptized upon profession and later prove false.

The remaining cases are strikingly *household* baptisms. Cornelius and his household were baptized (Acts 10:47-48; 11:14). Lydia and her household were

baptized (Acts 16:14-15). The Philippian jailer and his household were baptized (Acts 16:31-34). Crispus believed with all his house (Acts 18:8). Paul also baptized the household of Stephanas (I Cor. 1:16).

It is true that the ages of the members of these households are not stated. One cannot prove from the word “household” alone that infants were present in every case. But one also cannot prove that children were *absent*. The issue must be decided by *reading Scripture with Scripture*.

The Bible has already taught that God’s covenant is with believers and their seed, that the promise is to believers and their children, that the children of even one believing parent are holy, that the children are members of the church and that the household promise belongs to the gospel. When household baptisms are read within that biblical framework, they fit naturally with *covenant baptism*. Households ordinarily include children, and the covenant sign belongs to households because the covenant promise is *household-shaped*.

Infants Baptized into Moses

I Corinthians 10:1-2 provides another important parallel:

Moreover, brethren, I would not that ye should be ignorant, how that all our fathers were under the cloud, and all passed through the sea; and were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea.

Paul speaks of Israel’s passage through the Red Sea as a baptism unto Moses. Moses was the Old Testament mediator and type of Christ. Israel came under his leadership through this redemptive event.

The striking point is that the children were included. Israel did not pass through the Red Sea as *adults only*. The nation included men, women *and children*. They were “*all*” baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea. The children shared in this covenantal baptismal event along with their parents.

Granted, this was not New Testament water baptism, but it was nevertheless a *spiritual and typological* baptism, and Paul uses it as such. The children of the covenant people were included in the baptismal passage from bondage to covenant life under the mediator.

Discipling the Nations

The Great Commission also bears on the question:

Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost (Matt. 28:19).

The word translated “teach” has the sense of making disciples. The nations are to be disciplined by baptizing them and teaching them to observe all things whatsoever Christ commanded (Matt. 28:19-20). Baptism is not presented as an optional afterthought. It belongs to the discipling of the nations.

The command is to disciple “all nations.” Nations include children. The Republic of the Philippines includes children. The United Kingdom includes children. Every nation includes children! One cannot disciple nations while deliberately excluding the children of those nations from the covenant sign, unless Scripture itself teaches such exclusion. But Scripture teaches the opposite. The covenant promise includes the children of believers.

The Great Commission therefore fits the covenantal pattern. The church goes to the nations, preaches the gospel, baptizes and teaches. When households and families are brought under Christ’s rule, the children are not treated as outsiders to the disciplined nation or household. They are marked with the sign of the covenant and taught to observe Christ’s commandments.

The Deeper Reason for Infant Baptism

The baptism of the children of believers rests first upon the word of God. Scripture teaches the covenant status of believers’ children. Scripture teaches that baptism signifies God’s saving work. Scripture gives covenant promises to believers and their seed. Scripture records household baptisms and addresses children as members of the church.

But behind the word of God stands the *will* of God. God has one eternal purpose to glorify Himself in Jesus Christ through the salvation of His church. In that decree, He wills to save believers and their seed in their generations according to His covenant. He also wills reprobation to serve election, and He permits reprobates even within the visible church to test, sift and trouble the church according to His sovereign wisdom. But His saving will gathers His elect people organically and covenantally.

Behind the will of God stands God Himself, the Holy Trinity. God is, in Himself, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The first person is the Father; the second person is the Son. God is not a solitary person. He is the *triune* God, and in Himself there is eternal generation. The Son is *eternally begotten* of the Father. This generation is not temporal or creaturely. It does not occur by growth, marriage or physical reproduction. It is *eternal, divine and incomprehensible*. Yet it means that God is, in Himself, the *covenantal and familial* God.

When this triune God decrees salvation and reveals His word, He reveals *covenantal* salvation. He saves believers *and their seed*. He gathers fathers *and sons*; mothers *and daughters*. The covenant pattern in history reflects the God who is eternally Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Therefore infant baptism is not a sentimental tradition, nor a mere ecclesiastical custom. It rests upon Scripture, upon God’s sovereign saving will and upon the triune God Himself. The God who establishes His covenant with believers and their seed gives baptism as the sign and seal of His cleansing grace in Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit.

(4)

Additional Considerations

Not All Baptisms Are Water Baptisms

A common mistake in discussions on baptism is to assume that every biblical use of the word *baptism* refers to water baptism. This is not the case. Scripture speaks of different kinds of baptisms, and not all of them involve a person being placed in water.

Hebrews 9 refers to Old Testament ceremonial baptisms or washings connected with blood, water, scarlet wool, hyssop and the ashes of an heifer. These were not Christian baptisms with water administered to persons in the name of the Triune God. They were *ceremonial purifications under the old covenant* (10, 13, 19-21).

The day of Pentecost also involved a baptism that was not water baptism. Christ had promised His disciples that they would be “baptized with the *Holy Ghost* not many days hence” (Acts 1:5). That baptism came at Pentecost when the Holy Spirit was poured out upon the church (Acts 2:1-4, 17-18). It was a real baptism, but it was not a baptism with water.

The same point appears in I Corinthians 10. Paul says that the Israelites “were all baptized unto Moses *in the cloud and in the sea*” (I Cor. 10:2). Yet the Israelites were not immersed in the Red Sea. They passed through safely. The *Egyptians* were the ones who were immersed. The Bible says that Israel was baptized; the Egyptians were submerged.

I Peter 3 presents a similar pattern with the flood. The world was immersed and perished. Noah and his family were saved in the ark. Peter connects this with baptism, saying, “The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us” (I Pet. 3:21). Again, the party immersed was destroyed, while the covenant family were saved through the waters.

This is important because in Scripture going under water is often connected with *trouble, judgement and destruction*. Jonah went down into the deep. The Egyptians were drowned in the Red Sea. The ungodly world was overwhelmed in the flood. Immersion, therefore, is not naturally the biblical picture of salvation. It is often a picture of distress or judgement.

By contrast, Scripture uses *sprinkling* and *pouring* in connection with salvation. Believers are saved by the “sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ” (I Pet. 1:2). In the Old Testament, persons and objects were sprinkled to be cleansed or consecrated. The Holy Spirit is said to be *poured out* upon the church (Acts 2:17-18). Pouring and

sprinkling therefore fit the saving realities signified in baptism: cleansing by the blood of Christ and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

Christian baptism must be with water. A person is baptized with water in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost (Matt. 28:19). But the mode by which water is applied must be determined by Scripture's teaching about *what baptism signifies*. Sprinkling and pouring fit the biblical realities of cleansing and Spirit-outpouring. Immersion, while valid when done with water in the Triune name by a lawful minister, does not best picture the saving reality and carries difficult biblical associations with judgement and destruction.

The Baptism of Jesus

The baptism of Jesus raises several important questions. Christ was baptized by John in the Jordan River. Heaven was opened, the Spirit descended like a dove and rested upon Him, and the Father declared, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:16-17).

Christ's baptism was different from ours. In *our* baptism, the water signifies the *washing away of sins by the blood and Spirit of Christ*. But *Christ had no sin*. He did not need cleansing. Therefore His baptism cannot mean what our baptism means in every respect.

The baptism of Christ marked a change in His public work. Before His baptism, He had not preached publicly, performed miracles or gathered disciples. After His baptism, He entered into direct conflict with the devil in the wilderness, preached the gospel, worked miracles and gathered disciples. His baptism was His *public induction into the ministry of the word of God*.

The descent of the Holy Spirit explains this. Christ, according to His human nature, was anointed and equipped by the Spirit for His public office. The Father's voice declared His pleasure in the Son, and the Spirit rested upon Him as the anointed Messiah. His baptism was therefore connected with His ordination to His public ministry as Prophet, Priest and King.

This also explains Christ's words to John: "Suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness" (Matt. 3:15). John came from the priestly line, being the son of Zacharias, a priest of the course of Abia (Luke 1:5). Christ, the Messiah, was publicly set apart to His office. Righteousness required that this divine appointment be carried out in the way God had ordained.

No man may take church office to himself. Hebrews 5 teaches that even Aaron was called of God, and that Christ Himself did not glorify Himself to be made an high priest, but was appointed by the Father (Heb. 5:4-5). Christ's baptism was the public historical point at which He was manifested as the anointed servant of Jehovah for His messianic ministry.

Does the Jordan Prove Immersion?

The fact that Christ was baptized at the Jordan River does not prove that He was immersed. A river may be used for immersion, but it may also be used for pouring or sprinkling. The location *supplies water*; it does not determine the *mode*.

In a dry land, a river is an obvious place to administer baptism because it provides a reliable supply of water. The same is true of Aenon, where John baptized because “there was much water there” (John 3:23). The name *Aenon* is related to the idea of *springs*. A place with springs would provide a dependable supply of water. But the presence of abundant water does not by itself prove immersion. Water is needed for sprinkling and pouring as well.

Nor do the prepositions prove immersion. Mark 1:4 says that John baptized “*in* the wilderness.” Mark 1:9 says that Jesus was baptized “of John *in* Jordan.” The language of “*in*” or “*at*” does not settle the mode. If “*in* Jordan” proved immersion in water, then “*in* the wilderness” would require immersion in *sand*. The prepositions indicate *location*, not necessarily mode.

Matthew 3:16 says that Jesus “went up straightway *out of* the water.” This also does not prove immersion. Water is found in low places. One naturally *goes down to* a river and *comes up from* it. A person may stand in a river while water is poured or sprinkled upon him, and then come up out of the water. The movement *to* and *from* the water is not the same thing as *the mode by which the water is applied*.

The same applies to the Ethiopian eunuch. Acts 8 says that Philip and the eunuch “went *down both into* the water” and that Philip baptized him (Acts 8:38). Then they *came up out of* the water (39). But *both* Philip and the eunuch went down into the water. The *going down* itself was not the baptism, otherwise *both* men were baptized. The baptism occurred after they went down. The passage is compatible with immersion, but it does not *prove* immersion. Philip could have applied water to the eunuch by pouring or sprinkling.

The Meaning of the Word “Baptize”

The word *baptize* does not itself mean “immerse.” Nor does it simply mean “sprinkle” or “pour.” Its basic idea is that something is *changed by being brought into contact with something else*.

This can be seen from various uses of the word. A person may be said to be *baptized* by strong drink, not because he is immersed in alcohol, but because alcohol *changes him from sobriety to drunkenness*. Curtains or garments may be *baptized* by the sun, not because they are immersed in the sun, but because the sun *changes them by fading them*. A ship may be *baptized* by an iceberg or some destructive force, not because the iceberg is the element into which the ship is ritually immersed, but because the ship is *changed from floating to sinking*.

Hebrews 9 helps to clarify the biblical use. The passage speaks of “divers washings”—literally diverse *baptisms*—under the Old Testament ceremonial system (10). It then refers to cleansing by sprinkling: “the ashes of an heifer sprinkling the

unclean” (13), and Moses sprinkling the book, the people, the tabernacle and the vessels of ministry with blood (19-21). These ceremonial *baptisms* involved *sprinkling*.

The point is not that *baptize* means “sprinkle.” It does not. The point is that *baptize* does not demand immersion. A baptism may be administered by sprinkling, pouring or another form of contact, depending upon the nature of the rite. Therefore the mode must be decided by *the theology* of baptism, not by assuming that the word itself means immersion.

Christian baptism signifies cleansing by Christ’s blood and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Since Scripture speaks of salvation as *sprinkling with Christ’s blood and of the Spirit as being poured out*, sprinkling and pouring fit the sacramental meaning of baptism especially well (I Pet. 1:2; Acts 2:17-18).

Paul’s Baptism and the Unsuitability of Immersion

The baptism of Paul gives another indication that immersion is not required by the word *baptize*. Ananias said to Paul, “arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord” (Acts 22:16). Acts 9 says that Paul “received sight forthwith, and arose, and was baptized” (Acts 9:18).

The language is simple. Paul was sitting or lying in the house. He arose and was baptized. The natural reading is not that he stood up, travelled to a river or pool and was then immersed. The action is *immediate and domestic*. He arose, and baptism was administered.

This does not fit the claim that baptism must be immersion. A man standing in a house is not in a suitable position for immersion. The passage fits far more naturally with water being brought to Paul and applied to him. It also connects baptism with *washing away sins*, which fits the symbolism of *sprinkling or pouring*.

Valid Baptism

The validity of baptism does not depend upon immersion. The Reformed churches have ordinarily recognized three things as necessary for valid Christian baptism.

First, baptism must be *administered by a lawful minister of the word*. A person does not baptize himself, nor is baptism to be treated as a private rite administered by any individual at will.

Secondly, baptism must be *administered in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost*. Christ Himself gives this formula in the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19).

Thirdly, baptism must be with *water*. Christian baptism is *water* baptism. The church may not substitute sand, spittle, oil, powder or any other element. Whatever practical difficulties may arise in very dry regions, the answer is not to invent another element, but to use water, even if only a small amount is available.

Therefore, if a person has been baptized with water, by a lawful minister, in the name of the Triune God, that baptism is valid. If the water was applied by immersion,

the baptism need not be repeated. Immersion is not the best mode, but it is still a valid mode when the essential elements are present.

Sprinkling and pouring are preferable because they better picture the saving realities. Sprinkling points to cleansing by the blood of Christ. Pouring points to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. But baptism does not need to be repeated merely because it was administered by immersion.

The Baptism Formula

A further question concerns the baptismal formula. What words were used when John baptized? What words were used when Jesus was baptized?

Scripture does not tell us exactly what John said when he baptized Jesus or others. Since Christ had no sin, John's baptism of Jesus could not have been a confession of Christ's repentance or washing from sin. It is possible that John simply applied the water, and then the Father supplied the decisive word from heaven: "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:17). The Spirit descended upon Him, equipping Him for His public ministry.

It is also unlikely that John used the full Trinitarian formula in the same way as the New Testament church after Christ's resurrection. The formula is given by the risen Christ in Matthew 28:19, after His incarnation, public ministry, death and resurrection. Christian baptism, properly so called, is administered in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.

This also answers the claim sometimes made from the book of Acts that baptism should be administered only "in the name of Jesus." Acts does indeed speak of persons being baptized in the name of Jesus Christ (Acts 2:38; 10:48). But those phrases do not give the *baptismal formula spoken by the minister*. They identify the baptism as *Christian baptism, baptism under the authority of Jesus Christ, in confession of Him as the only Saviour*.

Matthew 28:19 gives the formula: "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." Acts emphasizes that baptism is in the name of Jesus, because Jesus is the Saviour, the Mediator and the only name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved (Acts 4:12). There is no conflict between Matthew and Acts. The church baptizes with the *Trinitarian* formula, and that baptism is baptism into the name and salvation of Jesus Christ.

The Covenant and the Gentiles

The covenant is not restricted to ethnic Israel. Acts 2:39 says, "For the promise is unto you, and to your children, *and to all that are afar off*." The promise comes to the Jews, to their children and to those afar off, that is, the Gentiles. The inclusion of the Gentiles is part of the glory of the catholic church.

Gentile believers are not outside the covenant. They are grafted in. When the gospel comes to an unbeliever, the call is, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house" (Acts 16:31). The covenant does not exclude the first believer in

a family simply because he has no believing ancestry. God brings in those who were strangers and foreigners, joining them to Christ and His church.

A person need not be able to trace a line of believing parents or grandparents in order to be saved. The Philippian jailer was brought in by the gospel. Cornelius and his household were brought in. Gentiles who were afar off are called by God and included in Christ. Once brought in, the covenant promise also embraces *their* households according to God's sovereign grace.

The covenant is therefore with God's people, Jews and Gentiles, believers and their seed, as many as the Lord our God shall call. It is particular, because it is governed by election. It is catholic, because it gathers God's elect from all nations.

Reprobate Children in the Covenant Sphere

A final question concerns the children of believers who are not elect. Are they included in the covenant, or are they excluded?

The answer requires the distinction between the *outward administration* of the covenant and the *inward saving reality*. The children of believers are baptized because of *God's covenant promise*. They are brought up in the church, instructed in catechism, addressed by the word and treated according to the revealed covenantal rule. The church does not know infallibly which children are elect and which are reprobate, just as it does not know infallibly which adult professors are elect.

If a covenant child is not elect, he will not truly believe. He may resist instruction, reject admonition and eventually manifest unbelief. In such a case, the preaching of the word exposes him. Catechism instruction, parental discipline and pastoral oversight confront him. If he persists in unbelief or worldly behaviour, he becomes the object of church discipline. Often such a person leaves the church; or the church, discovering manifest ungodliness, admonishes him and, if necessary, excludes him.

This does not corrupt the church if the church also obeys Scripture's teaching on discipline. The presence of reprobates in the covenant sphere is not new. It existed in the Old Testament. There were carnal seed in Israel. There were hypocrites in the visible church. Paul teaches in Romans 9 that not all the physical children are children of the promise (cf. 6-8). God willed that reality in order to serve His sovereign purpose of election and reprobation.

The same principle applies in the New Testament. Baptizing the children of believers is not a claim that every one of them is elect. It is *obedience to the covenant promise*. The church baptizes according to *God's revealed word*, not according to secret election. The secret things belong unto the Lord our God, but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children (Deut. 29:29).

The church can never have absolute certainty regarding every *adult* professor either. Simon Magus was baptized upon profession and soon revealed himself to be a hypocrite (Acts 8:13, 18-23). Adult baptism does not solve the problem of hypocrisy. The real safeguard is *faithful preaching, catechizing, pastoral oversight and church discipline*.

The Power of Baptism

The power of baptism does not rest in the amount of water or in the mode by which the water is applied. The power lies in *the reality signified and sealed: the blood of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit.*

Sprinkling points to the blood of Christ sprinkled upon His people for cleansing (I Pet. 1:2). Pouring points to the Holy Spirit poured out upon the church (Acts 2:17-18). Immersion, when administered with water in the name of the Triune God by a lawful minister, is valid; but it is not the best picture of the saving reality.

Baptism does not work by magic. It is not powerful because of the quantity of water or because the recipient is placed under the water. It is powerful as a sacrament of Christ, by the appointment of God, when received in faith and used by the Spirit according to God's promise. Baptism directs faith away from man and toward the saving work of the Triune God: the Father who elects, the Son who washes by His blood and the Spirit who renews and sanctifies.