

21. Baptism – part two: covenant and infant baptism

1. Recap: water baptism...

Given by Jesus... the job of the church (Matthew 28:19)

Sign of admission into the visible church (1 Cor. 12:13)

A sign and seal of redemption (Romans 4:11):

- ingrafting into Christ (Rom. 6:1-5)
- regeneration and forgiveness (Titus 3:5, Ezekiel 36:25)
- our surrender to God in repentance and faith (Romans 6:4)

Catholic baptismal regeneration is false

But the HS does use baptism (like preaching), in his own time, to confer God's grace (1 Peter 3:21)

The mode is not specified in scripture or essential to baptism:

- sprinkling (cf. sprinkled with the blood of Christ, Leviticus 4:5 etc)
- pouring (cf. the baptism of the Spirit, Acts 1:5, 2:27, Rom. 5:5)
- immersion (death & resurrection, Romans 6:2-4)

All people who profess faith in Jesus should be baptised (e.g. Acts 2:41, 8:12)

WCF 28.4. "Not only those who personally profess faith in and obedience to Christ, but also the infants of one or both believing parents, are to be baptized."

2. Covenant and baptism: understanding the question

Q: Where do you get your theology and practice from?

- Not just examples... or explicit proof texts... but the theology... of the whole Bible

Q: How do the different parts of the "covenant of grace" fit together?

- Covenant and covenants...
- One key division: pre-fall (covenant of creation / works)... post-fall (covenant of grace)

Q: Why is this relevant?

- Has the Lord ceased to work in families? How big are the differences between old and new covenants?

3. There is one "covenant of grace" – administered both to OT and NT believers

"Covenant of grace" = God's response to sin... from Gen 3-Rev22... centred on Jesus

One clue for the unity of the covenant of grace: the covenant "catchphrase"

Genesis 17:7-8. And see Exodus 3:15, Ezekiel 36:28, 2 Corinthians 6:16, Revelation 21:3.

The "substance" of the covenant does not change... the "administration" of the covenant does:

How it is visibly presented: OT ceremonial system... NT preaching & sacraments
But the Spirit presents the same Gospel in both... and saves people in both

[Alternative view: covenant of grace was not given in the OT, only promised. But experience of OT saints?]

WCF 7.7. "Therefore, there are not two covenants of grace differing in substance, but only one, under various administrations."

Implication: believers' children included in the covenant... then and now

Marked as covenant member (circumcision, Gen. 17 → baptism, Col. 2:11-15)

Q: What is the status of a believers' child? (pagan? church member?)

NT texts "fit":

- Acts 2:39, "For the promise is for you and for your children..."
- 1 Cor. 7:14, "...Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy."
- Ephesians 6:1-3

Modern individualism... vs. Family-centred covenant / covenant relationships

Greater inclusiveness of the new covenant points us in this direction

Implication: we still expect the visible church to be mixed

The "invisible" church... the "visible" church... & the "problem" of church members who aren't saved

Believers' children: necessity of repentance and faith... strong hope for Christian parents

Reality of unconverted people in church – e.g.

- Matthew 13:20-22 (soils), 13:24-30 (wheat, weeds),
- Acts 8:13-23 (Simon Magus – professed, baptised... but unconverted)
- 1 Cor. 10:1-6 (the NT church is like the OT church: "all" baptized... yet "most" fell)
- Hebrews 3:7ff, (the NT church is like the OT church: some fell)
- Hebrews 6:4-8, 10:26-31, Revelation 2-3

[Alternative view: only baptise those you're sure are converted. But how do you know...]

4. The Abrahamic, Mosaic and New covenants: how do they fit together?

The Abrahamic covenant: it is part of the covenant of grace – not merely external

Gen 12:1-7, 15:5-6, 17:6-10 = promises of people, place and blessing... experience of righteousness and relationship with God... everlasting covenant... sign/seal of circumcision

[Alternative view: the only covenant with Abraham is external not spiritual (Gen. 17, "circumcision"); the covenant of grace is promised for the future and is not experienced. But...]

- Gen. 12, 15, 17 belong together... & "covenant" not restricted to circumcision (15:8, 17:2-4)
- NT clear that Abrahamic covenant is part of covenant of grace, is mainly spiritual, and includes an external aspect.
Romans 4:11, "He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well..."

Mosaic covenant: it is part of the covenant of grace – not only condemnatory

- Exodus 6:2-8, 19:4, 20:1ff
- Works of the law can't save you (Gal. 3:10)... but the law is full of grace (sacrifices; John 1:16-17)

The new covenant: a fulfilment of the old, not rejection (see Jeremiah 31:31-34)

New: Deeper knowledge of God (but same promise as always)... All nations (Gentiles, not just Jews)... Administration (now preaching, baptism and Lord's Supper)

Membership of covenant people still mixed (see passages above)... and children of believers in the new covenant (Jer. 32:37-41)

Further reading: (1) Robert Letham, "A Christian's Pocket Guide to Baptism" (2) Jonty Rhodes, "Covenants made simple"