

Paedobaptism¹

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1. Covenantal Signs in the Old Testament (a brief survey)

a. Universal Covenant through Noah: Rainbow (Genesis 9:8-17)

Genesis 9:8-17

⁸ Then God spoke to Noah and to his sons with him, saying, ⁹ “Now behold, I Myself do establish My covenant with you, and with your descendants after you; ¹⁰ and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the cattle, and every beast of the earth with you; of all that comes out of the ark, even every beast of the earth. ¹¹ “I establish My covenant with you; and all flesh shall never again be cut off by the water of the flood, neither shall there again be a flood to destroy the earth.” ¹² God said, “This is the sign of the covenant which I am making between Me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all successive generations; ¹³ I set My bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a sign of a covenant between Me and the earth. ¹⁴ “It shall come about, when I bring a cloud over the earth, that the bow will be seen in the cloud, ¹⁵ and I will remember My covenant, which is between Me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and never again shall the water become a flood to destroy all flesh. ¹⁶ “When the bow is in the cloud, then I will look upon it, to remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.” ¹⁷ And God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant which I have established between Me and all flesh that is on the earth.”

Some things we learn from this passage

- The rainbow was a sign of the universal covenant with all creation
- The covenant and the sign were instituted by God
- The purpose of the sign of the rainbow was to be a reminder to God (explicit: Genesis 9:16) and every living creature (implicit)

b. Particular Covenant through Abraham: Circumcision (Genesis 17:1-14)

Genesis 17:1-14

¹ Now when Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, “I am God Almighty; Walk before Me, and be blameless. ² “I will establish My covenant between Me and you, And I will multiply you exceedingly.” ³ Abram fell on his face, and God talked with him, saying, ⁴ “As for Me, behold, My covenant is with you, And you will be the father of a multitude of nations. ⁵ “No longer shall your name be called Abram, But your name shall be Abraham; For I will make you the father of a multitude of nations. ⁶ “I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make nations of you, and kings will come forth from you. ⁷ “I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you. ⁸ “I will give to you and to your descendants after you, the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.” ⁹ God said further to Abraham, “Now as for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. ¹⁰ “This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: every male among you shall be circumcised. ¹¹ “And you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin, and it shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you. ¹² “And every male among you who is eight days old shall be circumcised throughout your generations, a *servant* who is born in the house or who is bought with money from any foreigner, who is not of your descendants. ¹³ “A *servant* who is born in your house or who is bought with your money shall surely be circumcised; thus shall My covenant be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant. ¹⁴ “But an uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant.”

¹ I also recommend the very readable essay by Dr. Dennis E. Johnson, “Infant Baptism: How My Mind Has Changed” (<http://reformedperspectives.org/files/reformedperspectives/theology/TH.Johnson.Baptism.html>).

Some things we learn from this passage

- Circumcision was a sign of the national covenant with Abraham's descendants (and his household)
- The covenant and the sign were instituted by God
- The purpose of the sign of circumcision was to set Abraham (his descendants and his household) apart as those who are in covenant with Him and to set a visible distinction between them and the rest of humanity (Genesis 17:14)
- The sign of circumcision was also a sign and seal of the righteousness of faith (Romans 4:11)
- The physical sign of circumcision was never intended to be the basis of salvation. Rather, it marked one's being "in covenant" with God. The physical sign of circumcision was always intended to point to the necessary inward reality of spiritual rebirth (Deuteronomy 30:6; Romans 2:28-29)

Deuteronomy 30:6 ⁶ "Moreover the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, so that you may live.

Romans 2:28-29 ²⁸ For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. ²⁹ But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God.

2. Covenantal Signs in the New Testament

a. The Old Covenant grows up into the New (Circumcision replaced by Baptism)

Jeremiah 31:31-34 (cf. Hebrews 8)

³¹ "Behold, days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, ³² not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them," declares the LORD. ³³ "But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days," declares the LORD, "I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. ³⁴ "They will not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them," declares the LORD, "for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more."

Acts 2:36-42

³⁶ "Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ-- this Jesus whom you crucified." ³⁷ Now when they heard *this*, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brethren, what shall we do?" ³⁸ Peter *said* to them, "Repent, and each of you be baptized 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 your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself." ⁴⁰ And with many other words he solemnly testified and kept on exhorting them, saying, "Be saved from this perverse generation!" ⁴¹ So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls. ⁴² They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

Some things we learn from these passages

- Baptism is a physical sign of set-apartness, of being made a member of the visible church (Matthew 28:18-20)
- Baptism points to the inward spiritual reality of the work of the Holy Spirit (1 Peter 3:21-22)
- The promises that are signified in baptism are made to believers and their children (1 Corinthians 7:13-14)

b. Like circumcision, Baptism marks one's being "in covenant" with God, yet the physical sign points to the necessary inward reality of spiritual rebirth

- At the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15, the covenant sign of circumcision was officially abrogated by the revelation given through the Apostles (Acts 15:5)

Colossians 2:9-12 ⁹ For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form, ¹⁰ and in Him you have been made complete, and He is the head over all rule and authority; ¹¹ and in Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ; ¹² having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead.

1 Peter 3:21-22 ²¹ Corresponding to that, baptism now saves you-- not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience-- through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, ²² who is at the right hand of God, having gone into heaven, after angels and authorities and powers had been subjected to Him.

c. Baptism as symbolizing the work of the Holy Spirit

John 3:5-8 ⁵ Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. ⁶ "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ "Do not be amazed that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' ⁸ "The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit."

Ezekiel 36:24-29 ²⁴ "For I will take you from the nations, gather you from all the lands and bring you into your own land. ²⁵ "Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. ²⁶ "Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ "I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances. ²⁸ "You will live in the land that I gave to your forefathers; so you will be My people, and I will be your God. ²⁹ "Moreover, I will save you from all your uncleanness; and I will call for the grain and multiply it, and I will not bring a famine on you.

Matthew 3:11, 16 ¹¹ "As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire

¹⁶ After being baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove *and* lighting on Him

Titus 3:5-7 ⁵ He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, ⁶ whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷ so that being justified by His grace we would be made heirs according to *the* hope of eternal life.

1 Corinthians 12:13 ¹³ For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

3. Common Objections: Mode, Household baptisms, and Baptism & Faith

a. Mode²

Immersionists argue that immersion is the Biblical mode typically based on three reasons: [1] the supposed meaning of the Greek word (baptizo); [2] supposed New Testament examples; [3] theology (baptism represents burial (Romans 6:4; Colossians 2:12)).

[1] With regard to the meaning of the Greek word for the verb baptize (“baptizo”) or the noun baptism (“baptismos”), there is a broader meaning than simply immerse. It can mean dip, immerse, wash, or sprinkle (most always with a ritual and religious connotation). There are several instances in the New Testament where these two words are obviously not used to connote immersion (Mark 7:4; Luke 11:38; Hebrews 6:2; 9:10).

[2] Concerning examples of baptisms in the Scriptures as always being immersions, the baptisms of Cornelius and his household in Acts 10, as well as the baptisms of Lydia (and her household) and the Philippian jailer (and his household) in Acts 16 seem highly unlikely to be baptisms by immersion.

[3] The theological significance of baptism is probably the most critical and helpful in understanding this question, however. This was the point made above in 2b. There are a couple of passages in Scripture that speak of baptism as representing our being buried with Christ (Romans 6:4; Colossians 2:12). This spiritual union with Christ in His death and resurrection, so symbolized in baptism, is most often spoken of in the Scriptures as the work of the Holy Spirit who applies and works this union in the individual (see the Scriptures above under 2b). This is not to say that immersion is wrong or an invalid mode of baptism, it is just to seek to emphasize the fact that baptism is a symbolic representation of the work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration.

b. Household Baptisms

In Acts 16:15, 33, 34, as well as in 1 Corinthians 1:16, we have a record of “household baptisms” where individuals believed and thus they along with their households (family and servants) were baptized. While it is not specifically stated that these households included infant children, it does point us to the fact that God’s covenant promises were intended to work in and through families, not just individuals. This is in keeping with the practice of household circumcisions of the Old Testament, and even the initial institution of circumcision in which all the males of Abraham’s household were circumcised (Genesis 17:23-27), including 318 trained men of Abraham’s household (Genesis 14:14).

c. Baptism & Faith

In the New Testament, most all of the baptisms that are recorded are those in which the sacrament of baptism was applied to people *after* they believed. This, they did out of obedience to Christ’s command (Matthew 28:18-20), as well as to demonstrate and publicly profess their new found allegiance to Christ and His church. This does not, however, take away from the fact that baptism represents God’s initial work of regeneration, to which our faith is a response. That is to say, baptism represents God’s initiatory promises to which we respond in faith. In example, the Israelites were delivered from slavery in Egypt and “all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea” (1 Corinthians 10:2) and yet with most of them God was not pleased (1 Corinthians 10:5) because the good news that was preached to them was not united by faith in those who heard (Hebrews 4:2).

This is yet another reason why we apply the sacrament of baptism to our infant children. We are declaring the promises of God in the New Covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-34) which our children (like us) must embrace in faith. We are maintaining and declaring that God initiates the work of salvation through His promises in His Son, Jesus Christ, and that these promises must be embraced by faith, otherwise the sign and seal is ineffectual.

² Robert Rayburn, *What About Baptism?* (St. Louis: Covenant Theological Seminary, 1957).