

Dabney Center
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Sacraments, Part 1: Baptism

Lecture #1: What just happened?

Imagine you don't know anything about the Christian religion. You just happen to stumble into a church one morning, and you see a man pouring water over the head of a baby while he says a few words. You're wondering what this strange event could be. Several questions come to mind: What just happened? Why water? Why sprinkling? And why a baby? Suppose that after the baptism, you are given an opportunity to chat with the pastor. What would he say to your queries? In these four lectures, we seek to give biblical answers to these four questions.

The single most fundamental fact that must be grasped about baptism is this: Baptism is God's act. It is God's work. Whatever happens in baptism happens because God is the chief actor in the event.

What does God in baptism? To be blunt, baptism saves. Or to be more precise, God saves through means of baptism. Baptism is obviously not the act of the one baptized – he is a passive recipient. The one baptized is no more involved in his baptism than a patient is in his surgery.

Is baptism the act of the human agent, e.g., the pastor? Yes, but he is acting as God's representative and agent. God works through means. (How did God join you and your spouse together? How does God provide your daily bread? How does God make babies? How did God give Samson his strength? Etc.)

This does not mean God is dividing credit between himself and the water or the officiant. All glory for salvation belongs to God alone. (The very fact that the Reformers, like John Calvin, had to address this question shows you they were serious about sacramental efficacy!) God has chosen appropriate instruments to work through, as a surgeon might choose the sharpest of scalpels to make his incision, but we must give God all praise for what he effects through these means. To "trust" the water or the pastor would be like the cancer patient trusting the scalpel rather than the surgeon who wields it skillfully.

Consider some texts, taken at face value:

- Acts 2:38
- Acts 22:12-16
- Romans 6:1-4
- 1 Cor. 6:9-11
- 1 Cor. 12:13
- Gal. 3:26-28
- Col. 2:11-12
- Eph. 5:25-26
- Titus 3:4-7

- Heb. 10:19-25
- 1 Pt. 3:18-21

What do these texts, taken together, mean? How do we know all these references must be to the rite of water baptism? Could they refer to a Spiritual baptism?

Eph. 4:5 answers: there is one baptism in the new covenant era. Further, none of the passages surveyed describe baptism as a symbol that merely pictures, rather effects, the promised blessings. Besides, if baptism is a picture, it is a bad one! The rite hardly pictures clothing, union, new birth, etc.

Neither can the efficacy of baptism be evacuated by describing baptism as a “sign.” There is biblical warrant for this (e.g., Gen. 17 calls circumcision a sign of the covenant, and Col. 2 links baptism to circumcision). But we must allow the Bible to define what “sign” means. The place to look is John’s gospel. There, we find that signs are miraculous, restorative, saving actions of God. Yes, the picture the kingdom, but they do much else besides. Indeed, we should see the sacraments as extensions of Jesus’ miraculous deed ministry (even as preaching extensions Jesus’ word ministry). John Calvin’s formula is right: in the sacraments, God performs and effects what he pictures. Baptism is no empty symbol; you can count on God to deliver on his promise and do what he said he would do.

Are the promised blessings given at a time distinct from baptism? That is possible, if the one baptized rejects what God offers in the sacrament in unbelief. In such cases, the person may repent later and then receive what was offered to him in his baptism. But all the texts we examined look at baptism in a normative fashion. Normally/ordinarily/properly, baptism is not separated from faith. Thus, normatively and ordinarily, reception of baptism’s blessings is coordinated with reception of the sacrament itself.

This is why the Reformers developed a doctrine of sacramental union: the thing signified is ordinarily joined to the sign itself. Only unbelief can pry apart the sign and thing signified, and even then, the sacramental union hold true objectively. It is only subjectively considered, that we can say a baptized unbeliever received the outward sign but not the proffered blessings.

The Bible’s teaching on sacramental efficacy more generally backs this up. Consider some other “sacramental” events and rites in the Scriptures:

- The trees in the Garden were sacramental, and efficacious. All sacramental theology must begin here.
- The flood is a baptism event, according to 1 Pt. 3. It was really efficacious in cleansing and renewing the world.
- The Passover sacrament effectually kept away the avenger of blood.
- The Red Sea crossing was a baptism event according to 1 Cor. 10. It was an effective baptism in saving Israel and destroying the Egyptians.
- Cleansings in the old covenant Levitical system were effective in restoring access at the time of administration.
- Circumcision was effective in establishing full (as opposed to liminal) covenant membership.

- Priestly ordination and kingly anointing were forerunners of baptism, and both clearly served to confer office and corresponding privileges.
- Jesus' baptism was effective: he was ordained, received the Holy Spirit, and heard the Father's declaration, all as part of the "package" of his baptism. Of course, his baptism is the prototype of all new covenant baptism.

This is simply the historic Christian teaching on baptism, late medieval Roman Catholic and modern American evangelical corruptions and distortions notwithstanding. Consider the pre-Nicene church fathers, the Nicene Creed, the Council of Orange, Augustine, the Reformers like Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Martin Bucer, the Reformed Confessions, and even many of the Reformed scholastics.

Does this mean that baptism is a form of magic? Or that the sacrament confers salvation automatically? No. Several further considerations should be kept in mind.

We are saved by baptism, but not by baptism alone. Baptism is always placed in a broader context that includes the work of God's Spirit, the administration of the Word (e.g., preaching), the church, faith, repentance, and so on. Only if baptism is abstracted from this total package do problems arise. Salvation comes through a variety of means taken together.

We also need to consider how baptism, covenant, and election all fit together. To begin, we should think of the baptismal covenant as a kind of marriage. In baptism, you are united to God through Christ. You have the blessings and privileges that come with being a part of God's people. But, sadly, some break this covenant by apostasy (unbelief). This apostasy should not be confused with sins that can be forgiven within the covenant relation. Apostasy is "the sin" of turning away from *the God* to serve *a god*. If we ask, "Why do some baptized persons persevere while others break covenant?" the answer is found in God's free and sovereign election. From within the general election of baptism emerges the specially elect who will receive the full and eternal fruit of the sacrament.

This is why the same groups of people can be addressed as both "elect" and threatened with the dangers of apostasy (e.g., Eph. 1 and Acts 20; Rom. 8 and 11). The new covenant, like the old, has a conditional element, though the conditions of the covenant are always a matter of "by grace through faith." As far as the need of endurance and the danger of apostasy, new covenant believers are in a position analogous to old covenant Israelites (Jn. 15, 1 Cor. 9-10, Heb., etc.). Baptism is the beginning of salvation, but does not guarantee salvation apart from perseverance.

Pastorally, we have to order our lives according to God's revealed covenant, not his hidden decree (Dt. 29:29). In this way, we can treat the baptized and speak to the baptized as Scripture does. As God's baptized people, we should cling by faith to the promises he made to us when we were baptized. But we should not inoculate ourselves against the covenant warnings.

1 Pt. 3 presents a helpful test case for how all this works out. Peter tells us that 8 lives were "saved" through the baptismal flood. But one of those "saved" – Ham – later apostatized and was cursed.

What about the person who is baptized as an infant, but then tells us that he didn't become a Christian until a campus minister explained the gospel to him in college? Without devaluing his experience, we should help him reinterpret it along more covenantal lines. He became a Christian when he was baptized. He *may* have been an unfaithful Christian for some time (though this doubtful if he grew up in a family and church in which Christ was honored). If so, he was a prodigal son and adulterer who has now returned home and repented. But more likely, he was simply immature and has now entered into a higher level of Christian maturity. Such quantum leaps of growth are wonderful, but should not be confused with one's initiation into the Christian family.

Is baptism necessary for salvation? Ordinarily, yes, though it not an absolute necessity. Essentially, this is the same as saying that there is no ordinary possibility outside the visible church (WCF 25).

Lecture #2: Why water?

Why has God chosen to use water as the means of initiation into his church and into new life in Christ? To understand further why God chose water, think about some alternatives he could have appointed. Why not have the initiate sign on the dotted line or raise his right hand to swear an oath?

First, we have to come to grips with the sheer fact that God does use physical means in this way. It is at precisely this point that so many modern “Protestant Gnostics” (as Philip Lee calls them) go wrong. They want a “spiritual” relationship with God, a relationship that isn’t mediated through mundane, everyday things like water, bread, and wine.

However, even before the fall, God communed with his people through physical sacraments (the trees in the garden). The physical world is a perfectly designed medium for interaction between God and man. It was only when Adam and Eve fell that they were excluded from the physical sacrament. Thus, the “Protestant Gnostic” has things backwards. True communion with God takes place through physical and earthly means. Think about what we know of the eternal state: Will each saved individual lock himself in a closet to close his eyes and contemplate the divine for all eternity? No, the consummation of all things is depicted as a communal feast.

B. B. Warfield was a wonderful Presbyterian, but he models this tendency to pit the physical against the “spiritual.” He argued for “immediacy” as the essence of true biblical religion. But this is clearly not the case. We do not need to choose between God’s sovereignty in salvation and God’s use of creaturely instruments in salvation. The two fit together well enough. If pressed, Warfield’s conception not only marginalizes the sacraments, but also preaching. Salvation becomes a “bolt from the blue yonder,” disconnected from the church and the means of grace. In this view, the church becomes nothing more than a vestibule or receptacle for the saved. But in the Scriptures, the church is not merely a container for holding saved individuals; it is God’s agent in the application of salvation.

Warfield’s approach also has the tendency to turn biblical religion in a ideology or philosophy. It over-intellectualizes the faith. This has been one of the great sins of Western Protestantism, especially Calvinism. But we are not saved by our assent to ideas or by our theological understanding. Because the sacraments are effectual means of salvation, even those who are too young or too old or too handicapped to grasp the preached word are not cut off from God’s saving work. To focus on the word without the sacraments is like saying the merely studying medicine is enough to heal you -- that it, you don’t have to actually swallow the pill.

WSC 88 insists that the process of salvation ordinarily includes the external means of Word and sacrament – which is to say, the Westminster standards endorse an ecclesially oriented doctrine of salvation.

God’s chosen means are perfectly suited to the task he assigns them. In other words, there is nothing arbitrary about God’s use of water in Christian initiation.

So: Why water? Why has God chosen to work such wonders through such a common means? There are two ways to answer this question – by looking at a biblical theology of water (how water is used in the Bible) and by looking at a creational theology of water (examining water's natural properties).

We cannot dive into (pun intended) all the biblical references to water. But even a brief survey will open up insight into the question “Why water?” In biblical theology, water accumulates meaning as you move through the biblical story to its climax. Water accumulates a huge number of connections and associations.

In Gen. 1, the earth is covered with water. God takes some of that water up to heaven to form a barrier between heaven and earth. That barrier is not called “good” by God (2nd day of creation week). It was not intended to remain. Water from below is protological; water from above is eschatological. When we are watered from above it is a sign that heaven and earth are being merged.

The first created animals swam in the waters. Later on the fish became a symbol of Christians, the first creatures of the new creation, born in water.

In Gen. 2, we find Eden is a watered land. Rivers flow out of Eden into the world. However, the land is not yet fruitful because there is no man to till the earth and the land has not yet been sprinkled with water (cf. Dt. 11:8ff; Heb. 6). Human labor + heavenly water = transformed creation. Of course, this is fulfilled at Pentecost. God pours out his Spirit on human flesh which is dirt/grass.

The flood event is a type of Christian baptism. The water is both tomb and womb – the death of the old world and the birth of a new world (1 Pt. 3, 2 Pt. 3). Eight people were saved, and ‘8’ happens to be the number of the new creation.

The Red Sea crossing was baptism event. This stands in the background of Paul's use of baptism in Rom. 6. Indeed, Rom 6-8 track with Israel's history from Egypt to the Promised Land.

Many OT ceremonial laws used water as an instrument of cleansing, renewal, restoration, and resurrection. There are washings in Lev. 11-16, Num. 19, etc.

Priestly ordination included a washing with water. The priests were new Adam figures with (semi-)restored sanctuary access. They could pass through water and flame back into the presence of God. Likewise, the sacrificial animals passed through water and fire. This stands behind the NT teaching that Jesus will baptize with water and fire. It fulfills the Levitical sacrificial typology. Other links between priestly ordination and baptism include the investiture aspect (cf. Gal. 3:27) and the conferral of access (Heb. 10:19ff).

River crossings are baptism events as well. Israel had to cross the Jordan into the Promised Land. Indeed, the Promised Land is symbolically surrounded by water, like a moat around a castle.

The Psalmist often spoke of water. For example, Ps. 42 is often regarded as the great “water psalm.” The water which quenches men’s thirst ultimately represents God himself. The psalmist drinks his own tears but that drink cannot satisfy.

The temple had lavers, which symbolically became a river in Ezekiel’s new temple vision. These “heavenly waters” (elevated off the ground) were used to wash the priests and sacrifices. These waters flow out of God’s sanctuary, through the city (Ps. 46; Rev. 21-22), and out into the world, bringing total transformation.

The prophets associated the Spirit with water, especially in the his work of transforming the fallen, desert-like world into a newly glorified garden (Isa. 32).

Jesus baptism brings together several earlier strands of biblical typology: water, voice, Spirit/dove, heaven opening, and the Jordan. This is the story of the creation and flood rolled into one. Jesus is the new Noah, even the new ark.

When Jesus is crucified, water mixed with blood flows from his side (Jn. 19). This points to the sacraments (water, blood, body) as the means through which God forms his church. The church is formed from the side of Christ, even as Adam’s bride was built out of his side.

The natural properties of water reinforce the biblical images. Water’s use as a cleansing agent makes it the perfect symbolic instrument for forgiveness of sins. But water can also be dangerous. We can imagine no worse way to die than drowning. Baptism includes the promise of cleansing, but the threat of drowning if we are not faithful.

Water is also the “stuff” of life. God grants new life through the waters of baptism. Water is the agent of the new creation. In baptism, we are given birth by God our Father and the Church our Mother.

There is something odd about the use of water. It’s invisible after-the-fact. There is no immediately recognizable, overt way to identify who is baptized. Circumcision made a permanent mark on the body. But baptism does not.

This is all the stranger given that baptism is called a “seal” and the NT’s seal language is probably baptismal. What kind of owner puts an invisible stamp on his possessions? In the new covenant, God’s people are not visibly set apart as in the old covenant. So how do we distinguish ourselves from the world? In the old covenant, it was by “works of the law” – and the law had many public and explicit ways of establishing a barrier between Jew and Gentile. But in the new covenant, the way we make our baptism visible is by how we live. We are to be morally and ethically distinctive. If the Christian community is to live in a consistently holy fashion, so that people can look at your life from a distance, and say, “Hey, he must be baptized. There’s no tattoo on his forehead, but he’s such a different kind of person.

Lecture #3: Why sprinkling/pouring?

We've seen why God chose water. Now we turn to what is done with the water. What mode of baptism has God ordained? Does it matter?

Before we get to the sprinkling/pouring vs. immersion debate, we need to consider a broader question. Both sprinkling and immersion have something in common – they apply water to the *outside* of the body. They are both external applications of water.

Again, we can ask a question: Why not an internal application of the water? Why not have the initiate drink a glass of water? After all, isn't it our hearts, not our bodies, that need cleansing before God?

The perplexing thing is that the external use of water has internal effects. Peters says that baptism does not cleanse the filth of the flesh but the conscience. How can that be?

What does this external washing tell us about the nature of the kingdom and salvation?

There is an important point here: New life comes to us from outside-in. This is obvious with preaching (Rom. 10, Gal. 3). There are numerous other analogies (e.g., spanking shapes the child's heart even though the rod is applied to the body). There is no sharp body/soul dualism in Scripture.

Also, both immersion and sprinkling are administered by someone else. No one ever baptizes himself in the new covenant. This means no one is baptized in isolation, in solitude, in utter privacy. Baptism is inescapably public and communal. This is necessarily so – after all, baptism joins us to community of God's people, so it cannot take place apart from the community. In baptism, the Spirit works through an external means and through the church to apply salvation.

Why sprinkle rather immerse? Both modes are valid because they fit the biblical description of baptism (washing with water + Triune formula). However, they are equally appropriate. There are no sound arguments for the practice of immersion. Biblical theology strongly favors sprinkling. (I will discuss primarily sprinkling here, but all the same arguments work for pouring. The only difference between sprinkling and pouring is that pouring uses a pitcher rather than hand in order to apply the water.)

Contrary to some claims, the issue cannot be settled by a lexicon alone. The meaning of the term "baptism" does not indicate anything about mode one way or the other. It could refer to immersion, but also to almost any other kind of washing. The mode debate has to be settled by wider biblical-theological concerns.

The key difference between immersion and sprinkling is not the amount of water, or how much of the body gets watered, but the location of the water. Do we baptize with water from above or below? With heavenly or earthly water?

Every baptismal event and ritual in Scripture involves sprinkling or pouring and none involve immersion. The flood is a baptism. The earth was rained upon as the heavens broke

open. The Red Sea crossing is a baptism, and the Israelites were rained upon by the glory cloud (Ps. 77:17). In Heb. 9:10, 18-20 various old covenant baptisms are referred to, but all those baptisms (yes, it speaks of a plurality of baptisms!) were by sprinkling. There are several old covenant baptisms: the Day of Atonement ritual, baptism for the dead (touching dead bodies), baptism for lepers, baptism unto redemption, baptism of the book and the people, priestly ordination, etc. None of these prescribe immersion.

The prophets depict the coming baptism of God's people in terms of sprinkling and pouring (e.g., Ezek. 36:25, Isa. 32, and Isa. 52:15, which is the background for the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8). John the Baptist announced that Jesus would baptize the church with the Spirit. What form did that baptism take at Pentecost? The Spirit was poured out upon the church. How could the 3000 baptized that day be baptized any other way (especially given the practical difficulties of finding a suitable pool for immersing that many people!)? Other descriptions of the Spirit coming in Acts use the language of pouring (e.g., Acts 10:44-48).

Paul's language in Titus 3:5 confirms this. He speaks of the Spirit being poured out in the same context in which he describes baptism as the washing of regeneration.

Heb. 6:7-8 uses rain for baptismal imagery (among other means of grace).

Rom. 6 does *not* suggest that baptism is a kind of burial (corresponding to an immersion in the water). For one thing, Rom. 6 indicates that we united to Christ in every facet of his work – his death on the cross, his burial, his resurrection, and even (by implication) his ascension and session (cf. Eph. 2). Immersion simply cannot symbolize that. But more specifically, it cannot even symbolize Jesus' burial. After all, Jesus was buried in a cave, not in the ground.

The clincher in this case is the baptism of Jesus by John. If Jesus' baptism was by immersion it would have no connection with any old covenant baptisms, and thus could hardly "fulfill" anything. But this isn't the case. Jesus was baptized at age 30, and immediately afterwards began his public ministry. In other words, it was ordination in the priesthood. While Jesus' priesthood transcends that of the Levites, their priesthood pointed to his typologically. Levitical ordination included a washing with water, but not an immersion. Thus, this must have been the mode of Jesus' baptism (and therefore all of John's baptisms, which reconstituted Israel as a nation of priests).

Further, Jesus' baptism fulfills both flood and Red Sea crossing typologies and in those cases baptism was by sprinkling. If John's baptism was not by immersion, it hardly makes sense to say the apostles later began baptizing by immersion.

The use of water from above rather than below ultimately traces back to the 2nd day of creation in Gen. 1. The earth was covered with water. God scooped some of that water up and took it to heaven with him (Ps. 148), creating a barrier between heaven and earth. To enter God's heavenly presence, one must cross through this heavenly ocean (Ezek. 1, Rev. 4-5; cf. the "glassy sea" in the hymn "Holy, Holy, Holy"). This heavenly ocean corresponded to the bronze sea/laver in Solomon's temple (1 Ki. 7:23-25). When we are baptized with water from above, we are passing through this heavenly ocean into the heavenlies. This is

why baptism is connected with sanctuary access (Heb. 10:19ff). In baptism, the heavens are torn open for us (cf. Mk. 1). Baptism is holy rain.

Gen. 2:4-6 further works out the contrast between the waters above and the waters below, the protological waters and the eschatological waters (cf. 1 Cor. 15 contrast between Adam from below and Adam from above). While the earth is initially watered from below, there is the promise of heavenly watering. God always intended to pour out his heavenly waters on the earth, thus merging heaven and earth into one. If man was faithful, those waters would have been pure blessing. If not, they would include judgment (as in the flood – the waters from above were only a blessing to eight people in that case).

Dt. 11:11, 14 describe the Promised Land in these terms. The land drinks in the water from heaven, which accounts for the fruitfulness of the soil (it flows with milk and honey). This makes it a better land than Egypt which was watered from below (and the Egyptians got a taste of those earthly waters when they followed the Israelites into the Red Sea!). In the new covenant, the people are the holy-land-come-to-life. We need to be watered with heavenly water to bear fruit and grow to maturity. (The waters from below are essentially corrupt after the fall.)

Thus, the imagery of water from above is right at the heart of the meaning of baptism. In Jn. 19, it is when Jesus is lifted up on the cross that water flows down from side (corresponding to the elevated water in the temple that flowed out to the world to bring transformation). The Spirit is poured out from above. We need water from heaven the same way we need the bread from above (Ps. 78:24; Jn. 6).

This is why baptism by immersion is valid but grotesquely inappropriate. The earthly waters are associated with the first Adam, not the heavenly Adam, or the Holy Spirit, or the glory cloud. Symbolically, immersion could only incorporate you into the old, fallen, earthly creation. It's much better to receive the water of heaven (cf. Jn. 3 – the new birth by water and the Spirit is from above). Immersionists cut themselves off from the Bible's rich "water from above" theme that makes baptism so deep with meaning. Clearly, the modern notion that symbols and forms don't really matter is utterly foreign to Scripture.

Once again, the witness of church history is helpful. Historically, baptism by sprinkling has been the overwhelming practice of the church. There are references to immersion fairly early on in the historical record, but by then baptism had already been encrusted with all kinds of extra-biblical practices (anointing with oil, investiture, exorcism, etc.). Clearly, the baptisms in Acts were much simpler events. According to Wayne Meeks, the earliest artistic depictions we have of Christian baptism show water being poured over the head. Plus, archeological data from the earliest Christian meeting houses indicates the water basins would have been too small for immersions.

There is a fundamental problem with the practice of immersion. It inverts the meaning of baptism. Pouring clearly indicates that baptism is God's work. The one baptized is totally passive. It's the water that does all the moving. In immersion, the water is still and the one being baptized is in motion. This because immersionists typically focus on the work or experience performed by the baptizee (his faith, his decision, his experience, etc.).

It is simply a fact that believer's baptism and immersion are relatively unknown practices before the radical reformers (the Anabaptists) of the 16th century. Given the shakiness of Anabaptist orthodoxy, it is very tenuous to see them as the preservers of the true understanding of baptism.

Lecture #4: Why babies?

Why baptize a baby? Babies cannot understand what is happening. They will most likely either sleep or cry through the event. So why bother baptizing infants?

I will develop four lines of argumentation for infant baptism that I think form an impregnable defense of the practice as in accord with Scripture and God's will for the church.

1. Redemption restores and glorifies the fallen creation. This is the broadest theological consideration we can make, and so it serves as a helpful starting point.

If Adam and Eve had not fallen, their children would have grown up, loving and serving God from their earliest existence. They would have been free to join with their parents in partaking of the Tree of Life. They would have needed to grow and mature in the faith, but it would have been there all along.

Because of the fall, Adam and Eve and their children were excluded from God's sacraments. In redemption, God heals and restores the fallen creation. Through Christ, he accomplishes his original purpose for the creation, bringing it to its intended consummation.

Thus, children must be included in the covenant of redemption. Otherwise, there is a segment of the creation/humanity that is outside the scope of Christ's redeeming work. The children of Christians are not naturally believers because they inherit faith as some kind of "Spiritual DNA." Flesh can only give birth to flesh. But God promises to include the children of his people in a gracious covenant relationship with himself from the very beginning of their existence. The promise is "to you and to your children," not "to you and your teenagers," or even "to you and your toddlers."

But if these promises are applicable to our children from their earliest days, there is simply unbelief to refuse to baptize them. Baptism forms their covenant relationship with God in a public official way, the same way a wedding ceremony formalizes the relationship between an engaged couple.

2. The children of God's people participated in the sacramental life of the old covenant church. The new covenant Scriptures contain no explicit command to baptize infants, but many converging lines of evidence that are consistent with the practice and inconsistent with its abrogation. In fact, all the evidence suggests that new covenant children are even more blessed and privileged than their old covenant counterparts.

Children were included in the Noahic covenant, obviously, since Noah was told to take his sons and their wives on board the ark. But the inclusion of even the youngest children becomes most explicit with the Abrahamic covenant. In Gen. 17, God includes the children of Abraham in the same covenant relationship he has with Abraham himself. As far as the blessings of covenant membership, the possibility of apostasy, and the demand to walk before God in persevering blamelessness, covenant children are in precisely the same position as their parents.

Gal. 2-4 and Rom. 4 argue that the church is the new covenant fulfillment of the promises God made to Abraham. In other words, we are the sons of Abraham because we share in his faith. But that faith includes trusting God to be the God of one's progeny. If the Abrahamic covenant included children, then our children must be included in the provisions of the new covenant.

Further, the sign of the Abrahamic covenant, circumcision, has been taken up into the meaning of baptism (cf. Col. 2). Circumcision has been transformed and transfigured into baptism. In Col. 2, Paul essentially says, "You were circumcised when you were baptized." Baptism swallows up the meaning and practice of circumcision as a covenant sign. If circumcision, a seal of the righteousness that comes by faith (namely Christ) could be applied to infants, then there is no objection to baptizing the infants of God's people today. Our baptized children are not merely in place of privilege, but a place the Bible calls "salvation."

Of course, the new covenant is also more inclusive and gracious (more "catholic") and thus it includes females as well as males and Gentiles as well as Jews.

But we do not simply argue from the Abrahamic covenant to the new covenant, from circumcision to baptism; we also argue from the Mosaic covenant to the new covenant, from baptism (in its old covenant form) to baptism (in its new covenant form). The Mosaic covenant was a temporary addendum to the Abrahamic covenant that served a limited but critical purpose in redemptive history. However, the Mosaic covenant was also a gracious covenant that pointed ahead typologically to the new covenant. Thus, the principles and practices of the Mosaic covenant are important to us.

The Mosaic covenant began with a baptism that included children, even infants. The Red Sea crossing was a baptismal event. Of the thousands who crossed the sea, many were children. This is an explicit example of infant baptism in the Bible! Even if the household baptisms of Acts didn't include any infants (and given the sheer probability of the case, it is very likely they did include infants), this is a case where infants were inescapably included in baptism. In 1 Cor. 10, Paul argues by analogy from this historical event to the new covenant. There is a comparison, not a contrast, with the Red Sea baptism and new covenant baptism.

The Mosaic ceremonial system included numerous infant baptisms (cf. Heb. 9, which calls the Mosaic washings "baptisms"). When a woman gave birth, she became unclean, as did her child (Lev. 12, 15). This necessitated a washing. Thus, every child born in Israel was baptized in his infancy (cf. Ezek. 16:4, 9).

We can also come at the question from another angle. All children in Israel were invited to attend the sacramental feasts (Ex. 10; Dt. 16). But to attend these feasts, one had to be ceremonially clean. Eligibility for the feast was connected with being under the laws of cleanness for the Jews. Its conceivable – even likely – that a weaned child in Israel would have undergone numerous baptisms by the time he had grown up.

The new covenant fulfills all these baptismal types and shadows in the one rite of triune baptism (Eph. 4:7). This one baptism, administered once, is sufficient to make us clean before God. It has abiding efficacy so we do not have to be continually rebaptized.

3. The new covenant is said to explicitly include children. This is true of prophecies of the new covenant found in the OT (e.g., Ps. 103:17, Isa. 52:17, Mal. 4). The structure of these covenant promises indicate that our children need to persevere in grace, not that they need to be converted out of unbelief. But if they are already favored by God, there can be no hindrance to their baptism.

The evidence in the NT goes on to confirm this and clinch the case. There are too many relevant passages to mention, but we'll consider a few:

- Lk. 1 – Mary's song includes future generations. Covenant succession is not coming to an end with the coming of the Christ.
- Mt. 18-19, Lk. 18, etc. – Jesus didn't say children had to become adults to enter the kingdom, but vice versa. He said the kingdom belongs to the children of his people. If this is so, then children are ideal candidates for baptism!
- Acts 2 – The first sermon of the new age explicitly includes children in the promise, and if in the promise, then they must have a right to the instrument through which that promise is bestowed (baptism).
- Household baptisms in Acts, 1 Cor – Whether or not infants were actually present (it is likely at least one family had a baby!), the fact that households as such were included in baptism is itself sufficient to establish the inclusion of infants. The household is treated as a covenantal entity.
- Eph. 6 -- Paul includes children in the designation "saints." Children are addressed as part of the covenant community and elect people (Eph. 1). They are to be raised "in the Lord."

4. The witness of church history is strongly in favor of infant baptism. The first true Baptists in church history do not appear until the 16th century, and only then in a context that makes the practice quite doubtful.

There is really no solid evidence against infant baptism from the early centuries of the church, and much that is consistent with it, or points to it. We have no information from the ancient past that suggests that the church overthrew the Jewish practice of including their infants in the covenant.

In the fourth century, Augustine appealed to infant baptism to refute Pelagius in the controversy over (original) sin and grace. At the time of the Reformation, the leading Reformers all entertained the arguments of the Anabaptists, only to reject and refute them. Instead, they sought to reform ways the late medieval church had corrupted the practice of baptism. The growth of the Baptist movement has largely coincided with America's rejection of traditional, historic Christianity, in favor of a democratized, egalitarian version of the gospel.

What are the implications of infant baptism? Simply put, we are to regard our children as Christians, as elect, as regenerate, as fellow heirs until and unless they prove otherwise. They are not little unbelievers in need of initial conversion; they are little saints in need of training in discipleship and perseverance.

As parents and pastors, we should do all we can to reinforce the covenant identity in our children. All too often, well meaning parents undermine all that baptism meant for their children by treating them as outsiders. We should treat infant baptism as the basis of covenant nurture, as we seek to disciple our children, forming them into mature disciples of Christ (cf. Dt. 6). We train them to call God “Father.”

There is actually biblical evidence that our children has a loving, faithful relationship with the Lord from their earliest days, long before they can talk or reason (Ps. 22, 71, 103, Mt. 18). The experience of the psalmist as an infant believer is especially important because every Israelite would have made those words his own; that is, they would have all put themselves in the place of the infant believer. Christian kids, ideally, will grow up never knowing a day when they did not know the Lord Jesus. Christian kids should grow up with “boring” testimonies. We are not expecting them to become Christians, but to remain Christians.

To treat baptized children as unbelievers until they later “prove” themselves by passing a theological exam or having a conversion experience is a sin. It is refusing to take God’s covenant seriously. It treats baptism as an empty sign. It is unbelief. It ends up turning the means of grace into means of doubt and confusion. It communicates that God’s promise in baptism is untrustworthy. The child ends up getting mixed signals about his identity. How would you like it if I tried to get your kids to doubt your parental love for them . . . ok, how do you think God feels about those who train their baptized children to doubt that God already loves and has accepted them?

In infant baptism we also see the communal nature of the faith. Children are given an initial faith by God, but their parents are called upon to nurture and grow that faith, lest it wither and die. Infants become the beneficiaries of the faith of their parents, who bring them in humble trust to the font. For example, a believing mother who chooses to carry her child across the Red Sea in the exodus is serving as a means of salvation to her child. This should be the pattern we live by.

We do not teach our children to pursue a conversion experience, but to pursue maturity in Christ. We seek to inculcate a sense of covenant identity in them, impressing upon them both the privileges and obligations of covenant membership.

Parents should be careful to not confuse faith with presumption. We believe God’s covenant promises, but we do not presume upon them. Real faith bears fruit and so parents who bring their children to baptism in faith will in turn raise their children accordingly. When our children sin we should (as Phillip Henry said) “grab them by their baptisms” and bring them back in line with the gospel (Rom. 6). We need to provide for them a parental *paideia* that will cultivate a comprehensive understanding of the world in biblical terms and categories.

Because our children already belong to God from their earliest days, we should not wait to begin the work of disciplining them. They are like wet cement, or tender saplings. We can impress truth upon them and point them in the right direction from the beginning. All our parenting practices should aim at maturity.