

# A Practical Assessment of Baptism

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The following is not an extensive treatment of baptism, much less an exhaustive treatment. But because baptism is often the subject of disputes between paedo-baptists (those who baptize infants) and credo-baptists (those who baptize professing “adults”), I thought I might at least set out the elements of the debate. Then I will offer (1) the limits I think are best to place on any discussion between believing brothers, (2) the respect I believe is due another believer’s differing views on the matter, and (3) some tentative conclusions that I have drawn. Let’s begin with what both sides agree to:

1. Baptism is a sacrament (a sacred element)
2. Baptism is required by Scripture (Mat 28:20)
3. Baptism is a sign and seal of a covenant relationship
4. Baptism is an external and visible sign of an internal and invisible change
5. Baptism does not save, whether for an infant or an adult

Why, when, and who we baptize is what is being debated. But because of the implied link between baptism and circumcision in the NT,<sup>1</sup> no assessment can begin without looking at the function of the ceremony of circumcision.

**ESV Genesis 17:10** This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised.

That’s the commandment. Circumcision, to be vulgar, is the physical removal of the male’s foreskin by cutting it off with a knife. It is obvious, and it is painful. What does it do? Or why has God asked Abraham to do this?

**Genesis 17:11** You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you.

So there is a link between circumcision and the validity or vitality of the covenant that God is making with Abraham. It is Abraham’s “signature” on that covenant. A covenant is a promise; it is not a contract in the usual sense, which would be two-sided. The word used in the OT generally indicates a unilateral pledge. Even so, for it to be valid, something of value must be exchanged – there must be a pledge or deposit paid up front against the final performance of the vow made in the covenant.

Now, what’s the promise or vow that God makes, and what is the pledge that is exchanged? Here is the required pledge on the part of Abraham:

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<sup>1</sup> I don’t think anyone is seriously debating or contesting this. The only issue is whether spiritual circumcision – a declaration of faith – can be expected of infants who lack capacity, or only of adults. The debate between paedo and credo baptists is whether baptism is the pledge (i.e. the covenant signature) of an adult, or the covering of the infant by a parent. We’ll get back to that.

**Genesis 17:12-14** <sup>12</sup> He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised. Every male throughout your generations, whether born in your house or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring, <sup>13</sup> both he who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money, shall surely be circumcised. So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. <sup>14</sup> Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.”

So the requirement is linked to the household of Abraham and not just to Abraham. *Everyone* in his household, whether children or slaves, must be circumcised. And it doesn't matter whether they are elect or not. Even Ishmael, who will not receive *this* promise but another one, *must* be circumcised. And what is God's pledge to Abraham in return?

**Genesis 17:15-16** And God said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. <sup>16</sup> I will bless her, and moreover, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall become nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.”

Although it sounds like Abraham is obligated to rename Sarai as part of his pledge, God is the one making the pledge here: a royal household for Abraham. Sarah means “noblewoman” while “Sarai” means “princess.” The change in words suggests that the relationship has changed from being a princess-in-waiting, to actually taking the throne – even though the “heir” has yet to be born. God further promises fertility to Sarah, and abundant offspring, “a great nation.” But Abraham is stuck in first gear. He still thinks Ishmael is the object of the pledge. He apparently dismisses the idea of Sarah being a mother. So God corrects his thinking:

**Genesis 17:17-21** <sup>17</sup> Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, “Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?” <sup>18</sup> And Abraham said to God, “Oh that Ishmael might live before you!” <sup>19</sup> God said, “No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. *I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him.*” <sup>20</sup> As for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I have blessed him and will make him fruitful and multiply him greatly. He shall father twelve princes, and I will make him into a great nation. <sup>21</sup> *But I will establish my covenant with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this time next year.*”

We see here that God has promised Abraham to be the father of nations – the nation of Ishmael, and the nation of Isaac. We see that although this covenant is made with Abraham, it is not only to him but to his household – everyone under his tent and authority, whether by flesh or by purchase (a type of adoption). And we also see that, even though Isaac is under this covenantal relationship, God will separately establish his covenant with Isaac later on, and give him his own blessings and resources (Gen 26:3). That is, Isaac is under the umbrella of his father's covenant. But the day will come when God establishes his covenant with Isaac directly. Today we say that you cannot be saved by the faith of your parents. This was as true then as it is now.

Ishmael was likewise under the umbrella of his father's covenant; and he derived many blessings from it and from God's promise to Abraham concerning Ishmael. He was *blessed for Abraham's*

sake. But he was not to receive a direct covenant with God – nor was he a child of the covenant that was made with Abraham, as God makes clear to Abraham. Ishmael does not inherit Abraham’s estate, nor does he inherit the promise God has made to Abraham; but Isaac *does* – even though that promise must be ratified by Isaac personally.

For the paedo-baptist, this is the controlling picture of baptism. It was not sufficient for Abraham to circumcise himself. His entire household had to be “baptized” in the flesh, regardless of age, regardless of the individual’s personal relationship with God, regardless of whether they were born of his flesh or by adoption, and regardless of whether they were elect. If they were in his household, they were getting circumcised. Why? So that the covenant would be effective and active, and so that the curse in verse 14 would not be triggered: <sup>14</sup> “Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.” Infants are baptized so that they are not “cut off” from the people of God, and treated as aliens and strangers.

What about the act of baptism and circumcision with regard to its efficacious nature? It doesn’t save, but what *does* it do? In the NT, 1Pet 3:21 points to Noah and the wiping away of sin. He draws a correlation with circumcision, and with the required pledge:

**1 Peter 3:18-21** <sup>18</sup> For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that He might bring you to God, after being put to death in the fleshly realm but made alive in the spiritual realm. <sup>19</sup> In that state He also went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison <sup>20</sup> who in the past were disobedient, when God patiently waited in the days of Noah while an ark was being prepared; in it, a few – that is, eight people – were saved through water. <sup>21</sup> Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the pledge of a good conscience toward God) through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

“**Baptism which corresponds to this**, now saves you...” It isn’t the baptism that saves, nor repentance, nor the good conduct which follows, but the “pledge of a good conscience toward God THROUGH the resurrection of Jesus Christ.” In other words, if our conscience were to be interrogated, what keeps it clean and good and acceptable, is knowing that everything necessary for our salvation was accomplished by Jesus Christ through his life, death, and resurrection. So when Peter says that baptism “**corresponds to this**”, what is he referring to? Is it the ark that preserved us? Is it the flood that washed away sin? Is it the circumcision that puts off the filthy flesh? Is it the repentance of personal obedience? It is NONE of these things. It is referring to **Christ’s suffering**, “the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring you to God...” Our faith is in Jesus Christ, in his finished work on the cross. Baptism is the *sign* of our faith, no different than our works are the *evidence* of that faith. Baptism is the pledge in the NT, just as circumcision was the pledge in the OT – *both* are the signatures of the Covenant.

Everyone in the ark was not part of the covenant with God. Only Noah was the recipient of the promise that he would be saved, “and those with him” in the ark (Gen 7:23). They made no pledge of faith, and had no track record of personal obedience; they did not sacrifice to God (that we know of), nor even acknowledge him. We only know that God told Noah that he would save

him, and he told Noah to build an ark according to the pattern he would be shown. Noah did all that God commanded him. His construction of the ark was his circumcision, his sign of faith, his “signature” on the covenant, a demonstration of his conviction of the truth of what God spoke.

Getting back to Abraham, how did he respond to God’s promise? What did he do to demonstrate his belief and trust, and to evidence his “signature” on the covenant? Here it is:

**Genesis 17:22-27** When he had finished talking with him, God went up from Abraham. <sup>23</sup> Then Abraham took Ishmael his son and all those born in his house or bought with his money, every male among the men of Abraham’s house, and he circumcised the flesh of their foreskins that very day, as God had said to him. <sup>24</sup> Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. <sup>25</sup> And Ishmael his son was thirteen years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. <sup>26</sup> That very day Abraham and his son Ishmael were circumcised. <sup>27</sup> And all the men of his house, those born in the house and those bought with money from a foreigner, were circumcised with him.

So how serious was Abraham about ensuring that everyone placed in his care, everyone in his household, was covered by the covenant? And how motivated was he to visibly demonstrate that they were to be part of God’s people? He didn’t hesitate and he made NO exceptions. Their own faith was not the basis of being circumcised (or “baptized”). It was Abraham’s part of the bargain to uphold the covenant, because God’s promise was made to Abraham’s household, and to succeeding generations. In the same way, Paul speaks of the promise to the jailer, and his household, and to succeeding generations:

<sup>ESV</sup> **Acts 2:39** For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.”

### ***Paedo-Baptism***

In the same way that Ishmael was circumcised even though God did not call Ishmael to Himself, the paedo-baptist baptizes his infant children without regard to their personal faith as his covenant pledge to God, as his signature on the Promise – knowing that he has no control over which of his children are elect, or when they may be called. Nonetheless, he pledges to God that he will identify his children from the earliest age as the people of God. He does so under the principle of headship, and because of the picture of circumcision given in the OT in the case of Abraham. But he also recognizes that circumcision is a circumcision of the heart, and not the physical act. He knows full well that the sacrament of baptism does not save his child; it only associates that child with the people of God. As happened with Isaac, he hopes and prays that one day his own child will come face to face with the Living God, and by faith personally sign that same Covenant of Grace, and forever be a true heir and child of God – by God’s calling.

In the meantime, his child will be raised in the fear and admonition of the Lord, knowing the comfort of being a covenant child who is under the protection of the Church – he is a non-communicant member of it. His behavior is subject to gentle correction, rather than church

discipline because being a *child*, he is not yet under the law. His relationship to the church corresponds nicely to the Jews of Israel. Every child is a Jew; every child is circumcised; but as we learn in the NT, not every Jew is a true Israelite (Rom 9:6). As Christ pointed out, whether child or adult, there are tares sown among the wheat, new stalks as well as old. As long as they look like wheat, they are tended as wheat, and enjoy the blessings of wheat in the form of food, water, and sunlight – the word of God, the fellowship of believers, and the counsel of their teachers. But whatever comfort is enjoyed by a child of the covenant family is *temporal*. It is distinct from the true and eternal comfort this child will enjoy by making a true and personal profession of faith which unites him to Christ eternally.

Hence, many paedo-baptist churches institute a rite of passage known as “confirmation.” This is the point at which the child, like Isaac, though a child of the covenant, now makes a personal profession of faith to confirm the work of the Spirit that hopefully was begun in them at their baptism, assuming they are elect.<sup>2</sup> Generally this occurs at age 12-13, the age of knowing right from wrong, when that quarter-inch of grey matter appears on top of the brain conveying analytical reasoning to the child. But there is no re-baptism, for the sacrament is unique and non-repeatable. It *initiates* the covenant, while the sacrament of communion is continuing, and it *maintains* the covenant. Here at the confirmation ceremony there is no sacrament going on. There is simply an affirmation that the original covenant “signature” is indeed valid for this child. As an aside, note that in the NT, some believers were baptized first and then believed, like John the Baptist’s disciples (Ac 18:25). Others believed and then were baptized, as happened with Paul (Ac 22:12). Either way, it is a one-time sacrament to begin the covenant.

**Sacraments** - What exactly do we mean by a “sacrament”? Here’s the definition: *it is a formal religious ceremony conferring a specific grace on those who receive it.*

What then is the grace bestowed by the sacrament of baptism? For the paedo-baptist, *and* for the credo-baptist, *it is receiving membership in the Visible Church*. The difference between them concerns when that membership begins, and what responsibilities are assumed. For the paedo-baptist, it is not until confirmation that the child is permitted to become a communicant member and share the communion table. For the credo-baptist, that privilege accompanies the sacrament.

### ***Credo-Baptism***

For the credo-baptist, the only relationship that counts is the one established directly by faith in Christ. The covenant relationship exists in a more direct, individual, and contractual way. The picture that baptism represents is not circumcision, but death, burial, and resurrection – and therefore the “sign” or mode of baptism should reflect that picture.

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<sup>2</sup> In 1681, Richard Baxter wrote of the effect of the infant baptismal vow, and of the need for the child to assume personal responsibility for it as soon as he is capable of performing it: “You were early on solemnly dedicated to God, as your God, your Father, your Saviour, and your Sanctifier, by your baptismal vow. And as that was a great mercy, it obliged you to great duty: you were capable in infancy of that holy dedication and relation; and your parents were presently obliged so to dedicate you *to God*, so to educate you *for God*: **and as soon as you are capable of performance, the vow is upon yourselves to do it.**” (Richard Baxter, *Practical Religion Vol 4* – “Compassionate Counsel to All Young Men,” Chap II, Sec 1., London 1681).

<sup>ESV</sup> **Romans 6:4** We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

The relation that circumcision has to the sign of baptism, is not that it identifies a *household* with the people of God (because everyone in the household is not baptized), but that it publicly identifies the *individual* with Christ. And so only the individual who professes his faith in Christ need be baptized. No infant is capable of professing his or her faith in Christ, and therefore the physical circumcision in the NT form of physical baptism, as a sign of faith, is inappropriate.

<sup>ESV</sup> **Romans 2:28-29** No one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter.

Therefore, in the same way that a Jew is not identified by circumcision of the flesh, but of the heart, so a Christian is not identified by baptism of the flesh, but of the heart. So the father has no need to baptize his infant children, nor is there any mandate to do so. The purpose of baptism is *not* to activate or maintain the Covenant on behalf of the household – that was the OT shadow, not the NT reality. It is *not* to cast the father in the role of a surety, so that the household is blessed for the father's sake or the mother's sake. ***The only surety is Jesus Christ.*** And the only way to receive the Promise is by personal faith in Christ alone. Faith alone is what unites the believer to Christ and qualifies him to inherit the blessings of the Covenant of Grace. It cannot be inherited by being a member of someone's household. Jesus directly ends that assumption by defining his household – his mothers, brothers, and sisters – as those who believe in him, *not* those who are related to him. (Mat 12:48-49).

That is the controlling verse that over-rules bringing forward Abraham's circumcision of his household. The precept taught in that OT passage is that God is the initiator of our election, and we have obligations with regard to that covenant relationship; nothing more. Thus children who are under the age of knowing right from wrong are either elect or non-elect by God's decree, and not by infant baptism or by any other act that the parent can perform. The infant is incapable of expressing faith in Christ; yet he or she is no less covered by the Covenant than someone who is elect but who has never heard the Gospel. Paul's reference to the circumcision of the heart indicates that it isn't the physical act that counts, whether by circumcision or baptism. It is the heart – our *faith* – that saves and identifies us as the people of God. The physical sign is the public declaration of that faith which unites us to Christ; but it is not and cannot be the effectual agent of that union (i.e. it is not *causative*).

### ***The Debate Goes On***

The paedo-baptist would acknowledge that baptism doesn't save – only faith saves. But what has that got to do with baptizing infants? What of the child who dies in infancy? If the covenant must be signed by performing the sacrament, and that sacrament is not performed, has that child been cut off from the Promise? In short, No. We were chosen in Christ before the foundation of the earth (Eph 1.4), and nothing we can do, or not do, can thwart God's will in the matter of election.

And certainly no child is going to be damned to hell because of the commissions or omissions of his parents (Deu 16.24). But what of the commandment to Abraham? The paedobaptist believes it still applies in the NT. The credobaptist disagrees, and does so for the reasons given above. So not only do they disagree as to the NT picture, but they disagree as to the continuity of the OT picture.

The *paedobaptist* concludes that if God made no exceptions in the household of Abraham, he can make no exceptions in his own household – any issue as to the effectiveness of the sacrament is irrelevant. It is a *sacrament* (which the credobaptist acknowledges) that *he personally* is required to fulfill, regardless of the logical validity of the object, or the eternal outcome of that sacrament for his child. If Abraham circumcised Ishmael, who was not elect, then the paedobaptist must baptize every child of his own without regard to election. It is *his own* covenantal duty, even if it does not establish the covenant for his child. The *credobaptist* can find no purpose for the sacrament, because the faith of the child cannot be evidenced by it, and faith cannot be infused in him by it. If it serves no function in the context of the NT's exclusive requirement of faith, then it must only be performed by those who are capable of informed faith.

AHAH! The paedobaptist leaps on that and asks, "What of the mentally handicapped who cannot comprehend faith in Christ? Are they therefore lost and not to be baptized? What of aborted fetuses?" The credobaptist is nonplussed. He replies, "Election is not dependent on our expression of faith, as if we controlled our eternal destiny with our lips and actions. Election is from God, *pre-ordained*. Baptism is required only for those who can make a *credible* profession of faith. Such persons, like infants, cannot make that profession; and therefore the sign is not for them. It would do no good if they were baptized, and it can do no harm if they are not." The paedobaptist retorts, "Why then should we evangelize if it's all settled?" The credobaptist responds, "Because we are the ordained means, and it's a commandment." "Exactly!" says the paedobaptist, "We agree completely. That's why we baptize infants!" And that's where the debate usually ends.

**IF** the paedobaptist is right about the picture, and about the covenantal requirement, then he has no choice but to baptize his infant children. **IF** the credobaptist is right about the picture, and about the requirement of a credible profession of faith, then he also has no choice but to exclude children from baptism. But there are certain issues that arise when these two covenant believers interact in the context of the Church. ***How are they to treat the children of the church? And how are they to treat the other's baptism?***

The *paedobaptist* must have no expectation that the credobaptist will accept his infant baptism as valid. For the credobaptist, the only reason for baptism is to signify (to *profess*) our saving faith in Christ, and that reason is absent in his paedobaptist brother. That is, the paedobaptist's adult profession of faith was not accompanied by the physical sign of baptism, and the physical sign of the baptism performed on him as an infant was not accompanied by a profession of faith. The credobaptist requires a public profession of faith, not just in words, but also in sacrament – for the sacrament without the profession, and the profession without the sacrament, *nullifies* the sacrament. And without the sacrament, there can be no Christian fellowship. This is because the

paedo-baptist is disobedient to the command to be baptized, at least as far as the credo-baptist understands that commandment. Therefore, if the paedo-baptist wants to join a local Baptist body, he must submit to that sacrament and abide by their view of baptism. If his conscience will not permit him to do that because he sees it as a repudiation of the infant Covenant, then he needs to find another local body of believers with whom to fellowship – one that is more in line with his covenant views.

The *credo-baptist*, by contrast, may have every expectation that the paedo-baptist will accept his adult baptism as a credible profession of faith; and so there is no corresponding barrier to Christian fellowship. However, if the credo-baptist joins that local body of paedo-baptists, he must submit to the direction of his elders who may insist that his infant children be baptized as a sign of the Covenant. So there is some element of turn-about being fair play here.

**Signs and Seals** – The idea of a sign is that it signifies or represents something. It is the “picture” that we described earlier. It is a marker, much like the stones that were set up when the Israelites crossed the Jordan; they were used as “witnesses” to covenantal providence.<sup>3</sup> Signs visibly and tangibly remind us of something about our covenantal relationship with God, about the promises he has made to us, or about our responsibilities to God and to one another. Keeping the Sabbath, for example, is a sign.<sup>4</sup> *But the seal* is what makes the covenant active and valid. It was said before that something of value must be offered in exchange as a deposit or pledge – a guarantee of the fulfillment of the promise. In marriage, it is the dowry or the ring.

In a contract, it is giving a dollar or some collateral. In the Gospel, the Holy Spirit is our pledge from God that all he has promised will inexorably be fulfilled – because the Spirit of God, being God, can bring all things to pass. Christ is our guarantor and security of a better covenant.<sup>5</sup> In human contracts, there are signatures (signs). But there must also be *witnesses* to those signatures (further signs) to certify the validity of the signatures. A notary public is someone of such status and reputation that the witness of his or her seal certifies or validates the entire contract. The Holy Spirit is such a witness, and such a seal.

*The sacrament of baptism is likewise a seal* when it is accompanied by witnesses and by the credible testimony of the person being baptized. That’s because, biblically, the baptism signifies the point at which that person enters into the *Visible Church*. But this is different than entering into the *Universal Church* when the person is actually and eternally united to Christ.<sup>6</sup> Each believer, upon a personal and knowing profession of faith, receives the Holy Spirit and enters into the *Universal Church*. Thus there is a difference in “status” between an infant who is uninformed at baptism and cannot profess Christ, and an adult who *is* informed at baptism and *does* profess Christ. We’ll talk about the interim status of the baptized infant shortly.

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<sup>3</sup> Jos 4:6; Gen 9:13; 17:11; 21:30; 31:44-45; Ex 12:13; Num 16:38; Dt 31:19; Jos 22:26-28; 24:27; Isa 19:19;

<sup>4</sup> Ezek 20:20

<sup>5</sup> 2Co 1:22; 5:5; Heb 6:16-18 and 7:22.

<sup>6</sup> We are united to Christ in two senses: objectively and subjectively. We were objectively united to Christ, chosen and given into his hand for redemption, before the foundation of the world (Eph 1:4). But we are subjectively and experientially united to Christ only upon a credible profession of faith.

The adult who is baptized receives the privilege of partaking in the communion meal, which is itself a sign and a seal. Of course, there may be a delay between the person's profession of faith upon which the Spirit is received, and receiving the sacrament of baptism.<sup>7</sup> The baptism is nonetheless the sign and seal of these things and it is made visible to the individual and to the Church by this ceremony. It is the occasion on which the "matrimonial vows" of fidelity are made between the believer and the church, with Christ as their mutual Head and Groom. And so there is an affirmation of God's Promise of salvation to the individual, a gift that is received by faith in Christ alone. The individual pledges his or her commitment to the Body of Christ by promising to put off the old self and put on the new. Thus, whether explicitly or implicitly, the local body promises to come alongside the person to instruct and encourage him in his walk and to hold the person accountable. In response, the person agrees to submit to that authority which has been entrusted to the elders and teachers of the Church. This mutual commitment contributes to the individual's ability to grow to maturity, to the full stature of Christ.<sup>8</sup>

### ***Mode of Baptism***

Because baptism is a sign, and because water is used predominantly to indicate cleansing from sin (sanctification), the amount of water isn't as important as the use of water. You should know that there were occasions in the history of the church when martyrs went to their deaths before they could be baptized. Theirs was called a "baptism of blood," and it was most certainly a credible testimony and an effectual profession of faith in Christ. With this in mind, the debate over the mode of baptism (sprinkling vs. immersion) moves from the *picture* of baptism, to the *function* of baptism.

Paedo-baptists see the function of baptism in a priestly sense; it is for *consecration* – setting the child aside for God's purposes and purifying the congregation. Indeed, baptism in the OT was done by spattering the assembly with the blood of an animal sacrifice.<sup>9</sup> However, Aaron and his sons were individually sprinkled with blood only when ordained as priests.<sup>10</sup> Water was not used because blood was necessary to cleanse their sin; they were sanctified in order to offer sacrifices on behalf of the assembly.<sup>11</sup> The Levites, by contrast, were sprinkled with water to purify them for their temple duties (Num. 8:7). The difficulty with using either of these "sprinkling" rites to support sprinkling infants is that the infant is *not* being sanctified for priestly or levitical service. The infant may be elect or *non*-elect, and so consecrating an infant for priestly duties is obviously inappropriate. Without a personal profession of faith, and lacking the capacity to fulfill the duties owed by the "royal priesthood," no infant is able to serve in such a priestly role. Therefore, cleansing or ordaining for priestly or levitical service is not the function of infant baptism, nor would a paedo-baptist assert that it is. And yet sprinkling is never employed in

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<sup>7</sup> In the NT, some believers were baptized first and then believed, like John the Baptist's disciples (Ac 18:25). Others believed and then were baptized, as with Paul (Ac 22:12). Sometimes the Spirit is given in power quickly, and other times that power comes later – such as when the Apostles waited in Jerusalem for forty days (Pentecost – Acts 1:8; 2:1ff) The Spirit was already given to them (Jn 20:22), but not yet in power.

<sup>8</sup> Eph 4:11-13

<sup>9</sup> Ex 24:8; Heb 9:18-20

<sup>10</sup> Exo 29:21

<sup>11</sup> Without blood there is no forgiveness of sin. Heb 9:7,12,22.

Scripture for any other purpose. Let's step aside from the *mode* of baptism for a moment, and look closer at the *function* of infant baptism on its own.

What many paedo-baptists assert is that baptism cleanses the infant from the guilt of Adam's sin. Should the child die before making a personal profession of faith, no death penalty will be imposed by God's Law.<sup>12</sup> Any sins the child commits prior to the age of knowing right from wrong will not result in the death penalty, because no child in Jewish tradition or in Christian tradition is subject to the full penalty of the law. They are, after all, *children*. They cannot fully and rationally comprehend the consequences of their actions; accordingly, they are exempted. It would therefore not be far off the mark to say that for a paedo-baptist, children are under the protection of their parents by the umbrella of God's grace towards them. They are preserved for their parents' sake until they reach maturity – much as Lot and Isaac were preserved for Abraham's sake. Baptism is the sign of that covering.

*Here we find a troubling line of logic:* if this is true, one must conclude that all children who die in childhood are saved if they are baptized by a believing parent. The baptism is not saving in itself, but for the paedo-baptist it is somehow the sign of a saving covenantal relationship. The covenant extends to preserving the souls of their young children. After all, if slaves who were bought may be included in the household under the promise made to Abraham, and they were part of the people of God, then surely any child of a believer must also be part of the people of God. So the reasoning goes.

That would be fine if it only applied to this world and to the *visible* church. But the assertion is that the child's *eternal* salvation is conveyed by baptism; it adds them to the *universal* church until they reach the age of knowing right from wrong. But is their conditional salvation then revoked, and what was saved is now lost? Consider further that the age of knowing right from wrong varies from child to child; for a Down's Syndrome child that age may never come. Whenever it's reached, the parental cover is removed under such a notion; the child must personally profess Christ to continue in a "saved status." It makes for a curious mixture of theologies and it must surely produce great anxiety on the part of growing children. It may perhaps coerce from them an insincere profession of faith to avoid the loss of salvation. Infant baptism may mislead others to believe that they are part of the *universal* church and not just the *visible* church. If so, they may never grasp their need to profess Christ themselves.

### ***Is Baptism for Consecration or Repentance?***

Now, in the NT, contrary to the function that has been ascribed to baptism by paedo-baptists, water baptism is not described as a baptism of consecration, but as a "baptism of repentance."<sup>13</sup> So the function of baptism, from a credo-baptist stance, is not forgiveness of sin, which is God's promise to believers, but a pledge of repentance, which is our promise to God. And so the application of water is not associated with the spattering of blood and water that we see in the

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<sup>12</sup> Here is a quote from Thomas Cranmer's Homilies of 1562: "Infants, being baptized and dying in their infancy, are washed from their sins by this sacrifice, brought to GOD'S favor, and made his children – made inheritors of his kingdom of heaven."

<sup>13</sup> Mk 1:4; Lk 3:3; Ac 19:4.

consecration of the assembly or of priests; instead, it is akin to washing robes by immersing and scrubbing them.<sup>14</sup> Thus the thing signified is not the same. The “direction” of the promise is completely different – it is not from God to us; it is from us to God. No infant, no child, is capable of making such a pledge for the same reason that infants and children may not sign contracts. They lack not just the legal and physical capacity to pledge, but the *moral* capacity to fulfill their duties under the covenant.

When David admitted that he was guilty of sin from birth, and “brought forth in iniquity” or “conceived in sin,”<sup>15</sup> he was speaking of his sinful condition as a child of Adam, and of his great need for God’s mercy and grace from the day of his birth.<sup>16</sup> The sacrament of baptism, as applied to infants, is a beautiful *sign* of this utter dependence on God’s mercy. But to say that baptism effectively removes original sin is unsupported in Scripture. Nonetheless, the fear that the infant might die in its state of original sin is what motivated infant baptism for Roman Catholics and even for some of the Reformers. If the infant cannot make a pledge to God, then the parents will make that pledge through baptism. Just as Abraham in the OT circumcised his infant son to bring him under the covenant, so baptism in the NT is thought to bring the infant under the covenant.

John Calvin addresses the issue of the efficacious nature of baptism in his *Institutes*. I’m going to quote one section and then bring to bear the things mentioned in the context of Calvin’s words:

6. Scripture gives us a still clearer knowledge of the truth. For it is most evident that the covenant, which the Lord once made with Abraham, is not less applicable to Christians now than it was anciently to the Jewish people, and, therefore, that word has no less reference to Christians than to Jews. Unless, indeed, we imagine that Christ, by his advent, diminished or curtailed the grace of the Father – an idea not free from execrable blasphemy. Wherefore, both the children of the Jews, because, when made heirs of that covenant, they were separated from the heathen, were called a holy seed, and for the same reason the children of Christians, or those who have only one believing parent, are called holy, and, by the testimony of the apostle, differ from the impure seed of idolaters. Then, since the Lord, immediately after the covenant was made with Abraham ordered it to be sealed, infants by an outward sacrament, how can it be said that Christians are not to attest it in the present day, and seal it in their children? Let it not be objected that the only symbol by which the Lord ordered his covenant to be confirmed was that of circumcision, which was long ago abrogated. It is easy to answer, that in accordance with the form of the old dispensation, he appointed circumcision to confirm his covenant, but that it being abrogated, the same reason for confirmation still continues, a reason which we have in common with the Jews.

Hence it is always necessary carefully to consider what is common to both, and wherein they differed from us. The covenant is common, and the reason for confirming it is common. The mode of confirming it is so far different that they had circumcision, instead of which we now have baptism. Otherwise, if the testimony by which the Jews were assured of the salvation of their seed is taken from us, the consequence will be that, by the advent of Christ, the grace of God, which was formerly given to the Jews, is more obscure and less perfectly attested to us. If this cannot be said without extreme insult to Christ, by whom the infinite goodness of the Father has been more brightly and

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<sup>14</sup> Tit 3:5

<sup>15</sup> Ps 51:5

<sup>16</sup> Ps 22:10; 71:6

benignly than ever shed upon the earth, and declared to men, it must be confessed that it cannot be more confined, and less clearly manifested, than under the obscure shadows of the law.<sup>17</sup>

Calvin's entire premise is this: "the covenant, which the Lord once made with Abraham, is not less applicable to Christians now than it was anciently to the Jewish people;" *But is that true?* If it is NOT true, or if the picture from the OT no longer fits the context of the NT, then Calvin's support for infant baptism falls. Why do I say that? Because Calvin himself says it: "Otherwise, if the testimony *by which the Jews were assured of the salvation of their seed* is taken from us, the consequence will be that, by the advent of Christ, the grace of God which was formerly given to the Jews, is more obscure and less perfectly attested to us." Now, I wouldn't conclude that the grace of God is less perfectly attested to us, but I would certainly conclude that it is differently and more specifically attested to us. What proof do I offer that the NT has limited the scope of the promise? We already saw it in Paul's limitation on what constitutes that portion of "Israel" which is saved: <sup>ESV</sup> **Romans 9:6** "But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel." Let's put it another way, "Not all the seed of Israel belong to Israel." He's saying that there is no such assurance of the salvation of their seed that Calvin asserts. I'm reluctant to say it, because I'm certainly not in his league, but Calvin was flat wrong on the point – though understandably so considering the times in which he lived. When we talk about Christ's definition of his household, we must conclude that it is by faith we are saved, and not by the sign of circumcision or baptism.

<sup>ESV</sup> **Mat 12:48-49** "But he replied to the man who told him, 'Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?'" <sup>49</sup> And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers!"

The covenant was made with Abraham, but the Promise was made to his 'Seed', not 'seeds'; his Seed (Christ) would inherit the world, so that all things might be placed under Him (Eph 1:22):

<sup>CSB</sup> **Gal 3:16** Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. He does not say "and to seeds," as though referring to many, but *and to your Seed, referring to one, who is Christ*.

<sup>CSB</sup> **Gal 3:19** Why the law then? It was added because of transgressions until *the Seed to whom the promise was made* would come.

What does that mean as far as salvation through the promise goes? Paul tells us straight out:

<sup>ESV</sup> **Rom 9:8** This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring.

That's as clear as it's going to get. So it is only those who are found in Christ who will inherit the benefits of the promise. And *how* are we found in Christ? We are placed there by God. And *who* is placed there by God? Only the elect. And who are the elect? Those whom God chose in Christ

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<sup>17</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.16, "On Infant Baptism." Source text, **A Puritan's Mind** website: <http://www.apuritansmind.com/Baptism/CalvinInfantBaptism.htm#1>.

before the foundation of the world. And is every child born to every believer chosen in Christ? *We simply don't know.* What we do know is that *not* every child born of Abraham was chosen in Christ. For “while they were not yet born, ... Esau I hated, and Jacob I loved.” (Rom 9.9-13) What about the promise to Abraham's household? It was NOT made to Abraham's household, and it was NOT made to Abraham *for* his household. It was made BY Abraham, and it *involved* his entire household. It was Abraham's obedience to God's command to circumcise his household that sealed the promise that God made to Abraham concerning Sarah and the kings of nations coming from her womb – those who would be as numerous as the sands on the shore. But the content of that group of elect was not universal, even within the household of Abraham. Ishmael was not a member of that covenant. And carrying forward the precept, nor is every child born to every believer. The number and identity of the elect is privy to God alone. We are not to presume so far as salvation goes. But that has nothing to do with our obligation to God to “circumcise” our entire household by raising them up “in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.” (Eph 6:4) Again, that's our promise to God, not his promise to us.

### ***Is Infant Baptism Wrong?***

As usual, getting the right answer isn't the challenge, but asking the right question. From all that's been said so far, you should know that the issue isn't the “sign” of baptism (how or when we do it), but the “thing signified” that matters. So if I were to phrase it, “Is infant baptism wrong when it's used to signify the salvation of the infant?” then the answer is, “Yes. It's wrong.” And that's for all the reasons given. But if I were to ask, “Is infant baptism wrong when it's used to signify the parents' obedience to ‘circumcise’ their household, in the sense of identifying their children with the people of God (raising them in the Church), and raising them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord?” then the answer is, “No. That's not wrong.” As a practical matter, that's exactly what credo-baptists do. And so the practice in a church that baptizes infants looks the same as the practice in a church that does *not* baptize infants. I think that's interesting, don't you?

What then is the *status* of a baptized child in a paedo-baptist church, versus the *status* of a child in a credo-baptist church? That depends. As I mentioned earlier, some paedo-baptist churches have a rite of passage known as “confirmation” and it's a big deal. They recognize that infant baptism is not saving once the child reaches the age of knowing right from wrong (which is thirteen years of age in Jewish and Christian tradition). At this point, the child must choose to follow Christ for themselves. In a credo-baptist church, there is nothing to confirm, and thus there is no particular point in time nor any “coming of age” ceremony. So there is no pressure; but neither is there any sense of urgency to challenge the young teenagers to profess their faith. Perhaps that's because of the alternative: if the child chooses not to make that decision or commitment, they may choose to leave the church. They are essentially being told that they are not saved, and so there's no reason to remain. But that's just not true. Non-believers are welcome to sit in our congregations under the hearing of the Word, and to join in the activities of the church – even though true fellowship is based on our shared faith in Christ. We shut the doors to the kingdom to no one, for who knows on which day God may circumcise their hearts?

On the flip side, if our un-professing children are never offered the opportunity to receive salvation through faith in Christ alone, and if it's the great *un-asked* question, then they may be misled into thinking they are saved simply because they've always attended church. Neither situation is satisfactory. What about those other paedo-baptist churches who don't have confirmation? They look and behave exactly the same as the credo-baptists. They wait for their children to reach the point that they finally ask how to be saved so they can commit their life to Christ and to the Church. Maybe it will happen at a youth retreat, maybe at a public school when they are led to Christ by another Christian student. But the danger of inaction on the part of adult believers, is that these children may alternatively be led into the beliefs of an atheist, a Mormon, or a Jehovah's Witness. That doesn't seem very satisfactory either, does it?

So the challenge for *every* church is not to give a false impression to its children that they are saved, either because they were baptized as a child, or because they attend church. But at the same time, the church is not to treat them like pagans who cannot understand the gospel, or who Jesus Christ is, or what happened on the cross, or what Scripture requires of us. And perhaps *that's* one of the graces that comes to every believer's child, and what might be signified by infant baptism: it is a sign that the believer's child has received enough grace to comprehend the gospel. By the same token, the credo-baptist must assume that his children have that same grace. Otherwise it makes no sense to instruct them in the Way of Christ because they are deaf, blind, and lame – they are by nature children of wrath, unable to come to Christ until they are born from above, *regenerated* by the Holy Spirit. Lest that lead to confusion, let's address it.

### ***Regeneration and Baptism***

At what point are we regenerated so that we can see, hear, and walk according to the word of God? We are *Reformed* in our theology. And therefore we know that we are regenerated *prior* to hearing the gospel, or else we cannot hear and accept the gospel truth, and respond to it in faith.

<sup>ESV</sup> **John 3:3** Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

When, then? How much prior to our salvation does God initiate regeneration? How long afterward does it take for us to come to Christ? Is regeneration necessary to receive gospel knowledge, or does it rather enable our *belief* of the gospel truth? If it is not necessary to receive knowledge, then knowledge is possible without belief. I think every believer recognizes that knowledge and belief are distinct things, just as faith and practice can be distinct things:

<sup>22</sup> “Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ <sup>23</sup> “And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!’ (Mat 7:22-23 <sup>NKJ</sup>)

Because knowledge and belief are distinct, we can confidently raise our children in the fear and admonition of the Lord, whether or not they are elect, and whether or not they savingly believe

the things in which we instruct them. Belief comes from God by grace (Eph 2:8-9); it does not come from knowledge by the instruction of men.

<sup>12</sup> But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: <sup>13</sup> who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. (Joh 1:12-13 <sup>NKJ</sup>)

Where then is our hope for our children's salvation? Our hope is in this: regeneration inevitably leads us to believe the gospel truth and to be united with Christ; and regeneration is from God:

<sup>ESV</sup> **Romans 8:29-30** For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. <sup>30</sup> And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

Let's bring this full circle. If regeneration, *new birth*, is tied to infant baptism, that is, if baptism regenerates the infant, then baptism leads to salvation as well. Why? Because regeneration will inevitably lead to being justified, cleansed, and renewed by the Holy Spirit.

<sup>ESV</sup> **Titus 3:5** <sup>5</sup> he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, *by the washing of regeneration* and renewal of the Holy Spirit,

No reformed theologian or believer would assert that baptism regenerates or saves. <sup>18</sup> If infants of believers are not regenerated at birth, then there is no basis for the sacrament being applied to them *unless* it is done as the parents' response to God's command to Abraham. It is their own pledge of obedience, and the sign and seal of their covenant with God, as suggested earlier.

And so I recognize that there may be a tenable basis for infant baptism. But I believe the Scripture is clearer in teaching the view of the credo-baptists. We should not go beyond what is written, nor should we base a doctrine on what is not being said. Curiously, the view of those who baptize infants is that it is "not prohibited" in the NT. And yet these same believers invoke the *Regulative Principle* to ensure that what is done in the worship service is only done if it is specifically authorized and commanded in Scripture. Any paedo-baptist would agree that we are not saved by faith; we are saved by God's gracious election (Eph 2.8-9). Nonetheless, the point at which we receive the graces and blessings of that election is the point at which we confess our faith in Christ. Children too young to profess Christ are too young to worship in spirit and in truth. And yet we would never keep them from Christ or the blessings of worship (Mat 19:14).

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<sup>18</sup> Baptismal regeneration is a Roman Catholic dogma, generally rejected by Protestants. **Spurgeon** wrote, "I am not aware that any Protestant Church in England teaches the doctrine of baptismal regeneration except one, and that happens to be the corporation which with none too much humility calls itself *the Church of England*." He goes on to quote from the Catechism of the Church of England, "*Then shall the priest say, 'We yield thee hearty thanks, most merciful Father, that it hath pleased thee to regenerate this infant with thy Holy Spirit, to receive him for thine own child by adoption, and to incorporate him into thy holy Church.'*" Sermon No. 573, June 5th, 1864. Thus it is obvious that the Church of England in 1864 did not perceive regeneration as merely enabling, but as efficacious and salvific – and thus baptism, in their mind, is a "saving grace" far beyond the normal Protestant understanding of that phrase – WHG.

What then of this child who has received the *sign of election* at birth, and who has been ingrafted into the Visible Church? If this child has not personally confessed Christ, then he may not fully participate in the worship of God, nor receive those graces and blessings which come by faith, and which are the benefits that flow from the cross. This creates confusion as to the condition of the child, seemingly saved and participating, and yet not fully Christ's! Between this "pre-sign" of infant baptism, and the full sign of baptism upon a profession of faith, I think the one that is least confusing to the child, and to the congregation, and the one that most accurately reflects the spiritual condition of the child, is credo-baptism.

Ishmael should not be misled into thinking that he is nonetheless an inheritor because he lives in his father's tent. And so God had Abraham circumcise Ishmael at age thirteen (Gen 17:25). But when Isaac the heir was weaned, and Ishmael began to mock the Father and the heir, knowing he would never receive the blessing of an inheritance in the kingdom (Gen 21:8ff), he was removed from the household. And here we see the basis of confirmation practiced by many of the paedobaptist churches: they want to see whether Isaac or Ishmael lives in the tent and tabernacle of God, which is the Visible Church.

Confirmation should never be done universally for all children in the church when they reach the age of knowing right from wrong. If it is, some children may be socially coerced into a false profession of faith, which only encourages them to continue in a state of unbelief. The child may falsely presume that he has those blessings which are only applied by the Spirit to those with a sincere faith in Christ alone, and not to those who merely participate in Kingdom activities.<sup>19</sup> The presumption of the Pharisees was that, being the descendants of Abraham, they were also the people of God – *that their salvation came by lineage and not by faith*. And so it would be cruel to mislead our children into thinking the same thing.

In a credo-baptist church the confusion or presumption caused by baptism-before-the-fact is absent. Even so, the same social pressure exists for our children to confess Christ in order to remain in fellowship with their friends as they grow up. And the same danger exists that they may believe going to church and being the children of believers are sufficient cause for being confident of their salvation. Credo-baptists and paedobaptists face the same challenges.

## Conclusion

My conclusion is that credo-baptism more accurately portrays the thing signified by baptism, which is *repentance* and **not** *consecration* (or "dedication", 1Sam 1.28). I believe it is less likely to produce a false sense of security in the children of believers. Even so, it is the duty of every church to properly instruct both parents and children that according to the Scriptures no one comes to the Father without saving faith in Jesus Christ.

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<sup>19</sup> My own experience in a Presbyterian USA church was that every child in 7<sup>th</sup> grade went through a confirmation class, memorized the answers to the questions, raised their right hand before the congregation, and publicly affirmed their faith in Christ en masse. I was not a believer at the time. I was merely a participant.