

Covenant Baptism

Though baptism is an important Christian doctrine, it (along with other beliefs, like eschatology) is something we do not want to divide over. We're okay with some differences, as long as they don't cross the line of an essential Christian belief. For example, the belief that baptism saves a person is inconsistent with the gospel that says salvation is not a work, but is by God's grace alone through faith alone, in Christ alone. So we reject a view of baptism that believes it saves, but we're okay with differing views regarding the recipients of baptism.

We have a 25-year history that's sympathetic to a Reformed view, which says the recipients of baptism are both believers, and the children of believers. This is not something we have ever pushed or require, but have left to the discretion of each family. It is not even something our elders agree on, and yet we agree that there are biblical arguments for it, and that it's a historic view of the Christian church.

I want to mention this before the campout because I hope to have the joy and privilege of baptizing each of my three grandchildren, the youngest being only two years old. I also understand that some of you may not have read our website, or even witnessed Pastor Dale or Pastor Jim baptizing an infant in the past.

With this in mind, I'd like to share my own journey, and where I currently land on the topic of infant (or a better term), covenant baptism.

I grew up Baptist and so my understanding of baptism was that it is something we do to express our faith in Christ. I viewed it as a public declaration of my personal faith in Jesus, and so baptism seemed more like something I was saying, rather than something God was saying.

When I began to understand Reformed theology through the ministry and writings of R. C. Sproul, I was surprised to hear that he believed in infant baptism! In my ignorance I thought only Catholics baptized babies, and that the only people who did this thought they were doing a work to save their babies. I read a little of the Reformed understanding and realized that it was completely different, and that there was a good biblical argument for it. Though not convinced, I appreciated the understanding and saw that instead of the individualistic, personal view that I held to, this had more to do with a covenantal, or church community relationship.

Because both R. C. and Pastor Dale were men I admired and wanted to agree with, I kept going back and forth. I thought I understood, and it made sense, but if push came to shove and I had a baby of my own, I knew I wouldn't do it. Many of the books I read did not fully convince me, and I think this was because they didn't help me understand the nature of covenants, but tried to use proof texts. I've realized that this approach doesn't work because the proof texts only have weight if you rightly understand how God consistently relates to people through covenants.

Finally, I read a book that was very helpful (if you're interested, I'd be happy to give you a copy). I also addressed some personal questions related to my own daughter's death at infancy, and why I assumed that God set her apart as distinct from the babies of unbelievers, and that Jenn and I would one day be with her. So, this is not simply an intellectual exercise for me, but something very personal.

I understand this can be a long and complicated topic, so for the purposes of an email, I'll keep it very basic and relatively short. Since you may witness a very young baptism I feel the need to give you something, with the hope that you'll understand to the point of at least sharing in what should be a joy for all of us. Though I'd like to change your mind, my goal is not to convince, but to at least bring you to the point of thinking it's not weird, or without a biblical argument.

My big question begins with, "Does God view the babies of believers different than the babies of unbelievers?"

One comforting verse is found in 2 Samuel 12, when David's infant son dies, and he says, "Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he will not return to me." And then David comforts his wife with this truth, so we know there is hope and reassurance that the children of believers are set apart by the Lord.

The child is too young to verbally express personal faith, but apparently God views David's child differently because it's David's child and David has faith. Combine this with what's said in 1 Corinthians 7, and we see this important teaching - that God views the children of believers in a different way than the children of unbelievers.

1 Corinthians 7 is where Paul is encouraging a believing spouse to remain with their unbelieving spouse (as long as they're willing to stay). And his argument for staying has to do with the benefit to the children. Paul says to do so, "Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy." (v.14). To be holy is to be set apart by God, or viewed by God as different.

For me, this was the starting point. God sets apart or views the children of believers (in both the old and new covenants) as "holy," based upon the faith of the parent. Is the growing child saved because of this? No, but they're viewed by God as different (and placed into a covenant community) because of His promise to their parents.

This is not a small thing. It's the consistent view of Scripture. It's how covenants work, and it extends to the new covenant not only because we see it in 1 Corinthians 7, but also because we know the new covenant to be even more expansive and more gracious. One obvious example of this is that the sign of the covenant is now applied to both male and female. But, if the children of believers were not included in the new covenant and (as always) given the sign, we should expect a big controversy, and yet nothing is even hinted at in our New Testaments.

Another consistency with covenants is an outward sign and seal that points to an inner (spiritual) reality. Abraham was not saved by being circumcised, he was saved by faith. And as a part of God's covenant with him, an outward sign of his inner faith was circumcision. This symbolized the cutting away of sin – that our hearts need to be circumcised, or have sin cut away from us. It's an outward sign of an inner reality. Abraham had faith and this sign was given not only to him, but to his family, including his infant children. Did the circumcision save the children? No, in every covenant the only way of salvation is by faith in the promise of God – the promise concerning His Messiah.

So, circumcision didn't save then, and baptism doesn't save now... but both of these are outward signs pointing to an inner reality of faith.

And the next question we tend to have is, “But an infant child doesn’t express that inner reality, so why do they get the sign? What difference does it make for them?” And the answer is, because this is God’s design in making covenants. It’s the nature of covenant relationships... it’s how they’ve always worked. God has always given the sign to those who have faith, and to their household... to their infants. It’s the gracious blessing of God to set our children apart as “holy,” so that we might raise them in the nurture and admonition of the Lord... or, in a covenant community where they’ll be taught about faith. They’re really a part of this covenant community (or church), and instead of assuming they’re little pagans we should assume and treat them as children that are set apart by God. It’s a massive blessing and benefit to be raised in this community. It’s a primary means God uses to bring about their salvation.

And another consistent nature of covenants is that they have blessings and curses. So, if a child eventually leaves and doesn’t believe, they bear the curse of the covenant, and if they stay and come to faith, they receive the blessing promised to them – the promise that God spoke, when they were baptized.

A covenantal view of baptism understands that the sign is not so much our declaration, as it’s God’s declaration of His promise within His covenant community.

So... I know there are many more questions, and (again) it’s not my goal to convince you as much as it is to get you thinking biblically about covenants, and to know we’re not doing this without a biblical conviction. Keep in mind that we’re under a new covenant and so we should assume it to function in a covenantal way... and not as a non-covenant. Covenants by nature have always had signs related to families and not exclusively to individuals. So the challenge is, are we thinking biblically, or is our time (which tends to be individualistic) informing our view?

Either way, this is an area where we’ve always shown grace, and not divided. I know some who disagree and yet are blessed when a baby is baptized because it’s such a beautiful display of our unity and our commitment to bless and include the children as being a part of this church. I hope you’ll come this Saturday and be blessed by God’s promise to us, as seen in these baptisms.

And, as always, I love your questions and am happy to answer any questions you might have about this, and other subjects.

In Christ,

Pastor Brian

Question:

What if that infant grows up and responds to the Spirit drawing him or her and wants to be baptized. Will they be denied because they were baptized as infants? What about the statement “repent and be baptized”?

Reply:

Good question. I think a lot of people resist infant baptism because they don't want to deny a wonderful experience to their children when they're older and will remember it better. And this is a good heart, but I think it's because of a wrong understanding of what baptism actually is.

The biblical statement to repent (or to go and make disciples) and baptize them is in regard to a person's conversion. Originally, everyone was a new convert entering into the new covenant, so making disciples involved a first generation of believers. But notice that the sign of baptism is not only for them, but for their entire household (Acts 16:15, 1 Cor. 1:16). This shows the consistent mindset of how God has always viewed a covenant relationship - with the sign being for them, and their household.

But I understand your question. What about the generations to come, and the infant who received the sign (because of their parent's faith) who then comes to a personal faith of their own? Are they deprived of something? If you're thinking in a non-covenantal way... in a western individualistic church tradition kind of way... in a way that defines the sign as the individual saying something about their faith, and the experience of it... then yes, they are missing out. But this wouldn't have been the mindset with the first-century church, because this is more of a culturally-informed view that's common in our day, instead of a biblical, covenantal way of thinking. What they're actually missing out on is an experience associated with baptism, and not the actual biblical blessing of baptism.

(This is also why churches have done catechism. Because it leads to an opportunity for a public confession. It's not a biblical sacrament, but it does give that opportunity to do something that's a meaningful experience... to publicly confess your faith.)

Did the child under the old covenant, who came to faith later on (believing the promise of God while still being in the old covenant) get re-circumcised? No, because they already had the sign of the covenant, and their personal faith was a result of being in that covenant community. The sign was never understood as their personal expression. It was God's sign... it was God communicating His promise, and that He views them as a part of His family, and He promises to save all who have faith in the Messiah.

It really comes back to understanding whether the sign is us saying something, or God saying something. If we understand that it's God saying something then we shouldn't feel the need to have Him say it again.

So a related question would be, "Is it sinful to get re-baptized?" I don't think it's necessarily sinful, though I do think it's misguided. If a person really wanted to be re-baptized I'd try to explain to them why I don't think they need to, but I'd also want to be gracious, and wouldn't feel wrong to do it in some circumstances. But here's a related question: what if a person kept wanting to do it over and over again? At some point we should say, "No," shouldn't we? But why? Is 3 too many? Is 4? Why say no if a person wants to repeat a great experience and tell even more people that they belong to Jesus? At some point we should say, "No," but with a non-covenantal view, aren't we just being arbitrary? With a covenantal view there's an actual biblical reason to say "No." So, again, I'd want to be gracious in re-baptizing, but I'd also sense that the person doesn't rightly understand the depths of what they're doing.