



Joining the HARVEST

Bringing Our Children to Jesus through Covenantal Baptism

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God in His glorious grace condescends to give outward covenant signs to believers and to their children that are in essence a beautiful picture of the salvation that is found in Jesus Christ for all who believe.

As Confessional, Reformed Presbyterians in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, we recognize both the continuity and discontinuity, both the similarities and the differences, between the Old and New Testaments. Let us emphasize clearly that although we make a distinction between the Old and New Testament time periods, there is one and the same Covenant of Grace in both testaments. Although there are differences between the administrations of the one covenant, particularly with regard to the outward signs given, the important continuity between the different administrations of the Covenant of Grace is ultimately Christ Jesus and all of His benefits that are offered to believers and to their children (Gal. 3:14, 16; Rom. 3:21-23, 30; 4:16-17, 23-24; Heb. 13:8).¹

In the Old Covenant, Abraham was promised that he would be the father of a multitude of nations (Gen. 12:1-3). In fact, God promises: “...***In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed***” (Gen. 12:3b). The blessings to Abraham and his own family would be a blessing to all families who believed like Father Abraham (Romans 4:11-12, 16).² This wonderful Gospel promise from God came to Abraham within the context of the overarching, historical Covenant of Grace that was inaugurated with Adam and Eve in the Garden after their fall into sin when the Covenant of Works was broken (Genesis 3:15; Acts 3:25; Galatians 3:8).³

The covenant sign for the Old Covenant administration was circumcision that symbolized a separation unto God from the world as His Beloved (Gen. 17:7-11). “***And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you***” (Gen. 17:7). This was a sign in blood. How gracious is our covenant God! He says to us who believe: “**To be God to you and to your children!**” Those who are blessed to be recipients of the promises of Jesus Christ within the Covenant of Grace are to receive the outward signs of the covenant. Because God is kind and merciful, He also includes the children of believers in the covenant (cf. 1 Cor. 7:14). This is why in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church we call our children particularly and proudly “covenant children” because they are privileged to be born into the covenant.

¹ As the Westminster Confession of Faith states clearly: “There are not therefore two covenants of grace differing in substance, but one and the same under various dispensations” (WCOF, Chap. 7.6). “The covenant is the same in essence in both the Old and the New Testaments” (OPC BOCO, Directory for Worship, III.B.1(4)).

² “That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring- not only to the adherent of the law but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all, as it is written, “I have made you the father of many nations”...” (ESV **Romans 4:16-17a**).

³ See Westminster Confession of Faith, Chap. 7, sections 2-3, 6.

This sign of circumcision was applied to male children during the time of the administration of the Old Covenant (Gen. 17:10-11). The covenant sign was applied to believers and their children, but particularly males only during the Old Covenant, because the expectations and hopes of the Old Covenant was that the son of the woman, a male, the blessed Seed of the Woman would ultimately come and crush the head of the serpent as fulfillment of the Covenant of Grace God had made with Adam and Eve. In the fullness of time, after the coming of Jesus Christ, the covenant sign changed from circumcision to baptism. Because of the fullness of the covenant, and the grace fully revealed and realized in Jesus Christ, the covenantal sign of baptism was now expanded to include both male and females.⁴ ***“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise”*** (Gal. 3:28-29). All are one in Christ Jesus, and from Genesis to Galatians we see that believers and their children are included in the covenant privileges, all who have Abraham as their father. Because of the final sacrifice in the shed blood of Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, circumcision, the sign of blood, became a bloodless sign of cleansing and purification through water.

Baptized into Moses, Circumcised in Christ

The signs of circumcision and baptism, although administered differently, were actually symbolizing aspects of union with Jesus Christ (that would be fully revealed in the New Testament). This is why the Apostle Paul can write to the predominantly Gentile Christians at Corinth (from very pagan, non-Jewish backgrounds and worldviews) to tell them that the Old Covenant Jews were their spiritual "fathers" who like them were "baptized into Moses" (1 Cor. 10:1-4). Paul could teach that the New Covenant believers at predominantly Gentile Colossae were circumcised in Christ, even though many of them had not been necessarily circumcised (Col. 2:11-14).

The signs, although different, and administered differently within the one Covenant of Grace, nevertheless pointed to union with Christ, and were so similar in meaning that if one was in union with Christ, one was circumcised and baptized. This is the continuity we want to emphasize as Christians submitted to the Bible: ***“In [Jesus] also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead”*** (ESV Colossians 2:11-12). Both of the signs, though different, come to fruition in the Person and Work of Jesus Christ. Both circumcision and baptism, though different signs, all are God's gracious pictures of the benefits of the saving work of Jesus Christ!

“For the promise is for you and for your children...”

We baptize our children because in the time of the Old Covenant, the children were included in the covenant privileges and so this is also emphasized in the New Covenant. The Apostle Paul and other New Testament writers address all kinds of changes in the time of fulfillment (for example: circumcision for Gentiles, life in the congregation, cultural matters, etc.; see Acts 15, 1 Corinthians), but in no place do any of the inspired writers take time to inform parents that in the new covenant period, their children are no longer included in the promises of the

⁴ Westminster Confession of Faith helps with understanding this discontinuity between the Old and New Covenants: “This covenant was differently administered in the time of the law, and in the time of the gospel; under the law it was administered by promises, prophecies, sacrifices, circumcision, the paschal lamb, and other types and ordinances delivered to the people of the Jews, all foreshadowing Christ to come, which were for that time sufficient and efficacious, through the operation of the Spirit, to instruct and build up the elect in faith in the promised Messiah, by whom they had full remission of sins, and eternal salvation; and is called the Old Testament” (WCOF, Chap. 7.5).

Covenant of Grace. Surely, this most important truth *if it had been changed* would have been addressed, because it was a most important aspect of Old Covenant family identity.

What is abundantly clear is that at Pentecost, Peter's anointed Pentecost sermon emphasizes the continuity between the promise that God made to Abraham and his children in Genesis 17, and the promises he still makes to us and to our children who live in the fullness of times, when Christ has come: ***"And Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. 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."*** (^{ESV} Acts 2:38-39). Even in the preaching of the Gospel in the Book of Acts, the promises of the Covenant of Grace that are received by the head of the home are also for all who live within the house: ***"Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household."*** (^{ESV} Acts 16:31).

Why do some not understand this and do not baptize their children? Some overly stress the discontinuity between National Israel and the international church of the New Testament. These can easily overlook the way that the unity is emphasized between the two, and this can lead to misunderstandings of the one Covenant of Grace, how one understands the Old Testament, and even have a negative effect on such practices as the keeping of the Sabbath, and the kinds of millennial views one holds.⁵ In other words, some do not emphasize enough the fact that the Old Covenant administration is a particular administration of the one Covenant of Grace (or even within the larger Eternal Covenant, that is mentioned in Hebrews 13:20-21 that is rooted in eternity past in the counsel of the Triune God). Some do not stress the similarities between the meaning and substance of the two signs of circumcision and baptism and emphasize only their differences. ***The discontinuity is found in the signs not in the substance, which is Christ.***

If you are a Christian, you are a child of Abraham, united by faith because of God's grace to Christ, who is Abraham's seed (Gal. 3:16). Christ is the circumcised, baptized Israelite within whom all of the blessings of the covenant are found both for us and for our children (Acts 2:38-39). If you have died with Christ and been raised with Him, you have been circumcised properly, or have received the benefits of what that sign symbolized during the Mosaic Covenant Administration (Col. 2:11-14; cf. Rom. 2:28-29; Phil. 3:3ff). ***"For we are the real circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh..."*** (^{ESV} Philippians 3:3)

If you are a Christian, you were also in a sense baptized into Moses (1 Cor. 10:1-4, 6-13) and are a part of that larger Grand Narrative of which the Israelites were a part, and you are the True Israel of God (Gal. 6:16; Romans 2:28-29; 1 Pet. 2:9-11).⁶ The promise in the Old Covenant administration of the Covenant of Grace was to believers

⁵ See Wilhelmus a Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service, Vol. IV: Ethics and Eschatology*, Appendix: "The Administration of the Covenant of Grace in the Old and New Testaments," p.373ff. Note the important differences between covenant theologians Gisbertus Voetius and Johannes Cocceius during the 17th century. The problematic Cocceian view of the Old Testament church were (among other problems) the notion that the Old Testament began at Mount Horeb; the non-binding nature of the fourth commandment for the New Testament believer; distinctions in forgiveness in the two testaments; Old Testament believers did not enjoy the same spiritual benefits as New Testament believers, etc. Ultimately, the problem with Cocceius' view was that he overstressed the discontinuity between the covenants.

⁶ "[The Old Testament] Church is identically the same with the New Testament Church It has the same foundation; the same condition of membership, faith and obedience; sacraments of the same spiritual significancy and binding force...Infants were members of the Church under the Old Testament from the beginning, being circumcised upon the faith of their parents. Now, as the Church is the same Church; as the conditions of membership were the same then as now; as Circumcision signified and bound to precisely what Baptism does; and since Baptism has taken precisely the place of Circumcision—it follows that the church membership of the children of professors should be recognized now as it was then, and that they should be baptized. The only ground upon which this conclusion could be obviated would be that Christ in the Gospel explicitly turns them out of their ancient birth-right in the Church." A. A. Hodge, *The Confession of Faith*, (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1998 reprint), pg. 347.

and their children, how much more in the New Covenant administration of the Covenant of Grace, revealed in all its fullness in Christ, should be to believers and their children as well!

Let us bow in obedience to our Sovereign God and baptize our children. Let us be grateful for these covenant signs that are theirs because of God's mercies to believers *and their households!* Let us not neglect the means God has provided for our children to be nurtured and admonished in the faith as they are growing up in the covenant here at this congregation. As the Orthodox Presbyterian Church Book of Church Order admonishes us: *"Although our young children do not yet understand these things, they are nevertheless to be baptized. For God commands that all who are under His covenant of grace be given the sign of the covenant."*⁷

Questions for Parents at the Baptism of Your Covenant Children

As you bring your children for baptism, please soberly remember the questions that will be asked of you as parents. Make no vows you do not intend to keep in reliance upon God's grace in Christ. Make these vows in full assurance and hope and faith in Christ, and expectancy of what our God can do by the power of His Spirit in our lives and in the lives of our children, ***"For nothing shall be impossible with God!"***:

(1) Do you acknowledge that although our children are conceived and born in sin and therefore are subject to condemnation, they are holy in Christ by virtue of the covenant of grace, and as children of the covenant are to be baptized?

(2) Do you promise to teach diligently to your child the principles of our holy Christian faith, revealed in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments and summarized in the Confession of Faith and Catechisms of this Church?

(3) Do you promise to pray regularly with and for [name of child], and to set an example of piety and godliness before (him/her)?

(4) Do you promise to endeavor, by all the means that God has appointed, to bring your child up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, encouraging (him/her) to appropriate for (himself/herself) the blessings and fulfill the obligations of the covenant?

As you bring your children in obedience to God, and in light of his condescending grace to you and your children, remember the Lord Jesus' words:

"Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me" (Mark 9:37). ***"Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God"*** (Mark 10:14).

In Christ's love,

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⁷ Directory for Worship, III.B.1 (4), 2011 Edition.