

From Circumcision to Baptism

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“From Circumcision to Baptism: A Baptist Covenantal Rejoinder to John Calvin”

Introduction

Calvin’s argument for infant baptism (which has become the standard justification for the practice in Reformed paedobaptist churches) applies to the church God’s command that Abraham circumcise his household, and appeals to the New Testament analogy between circumcision and baptism as a strong confirmation of this application. In this paper I argue that Calvin (and his Reformed paedobaptist heirs) misapplies the command and misconstrues the analogy. In fact, the biblical material to which Calvin appeals provides significant reason to reject infant baptism and embrace its alternative: believers’ baptism. I close by noting some advantages of the believers’ baptism view.

I. Calvin’s Two Main Assumptions

A. *The baptism/circumcision analogy*

Calvin’s argument for infant baptism is premised on two main assumptions. First, Calvin contends that baptism and circumcision are interchangeable in their meaning, signifying the same promises and therefore the same redemptive realities. Calvin repeatedly makes particular appeal to Rom 4:11 as a means of showing this equivalence.

For instance, in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* Calvin generalizes from Rom 4:11 as a way of making circumcision and baptism interchangeable in meaning. In his chapter “Of the Sacraments” he writes:

Nor can we justly attribute more to our baptism than he elsewhere attributes to circumcision, when he terms it a seal of the righteousness of faith (Rom. 4:11). Whatever, therefore, is now exhibited to us in the sacraments, the Jews formerly received in theirs—viz. Christ, with his spiritual riches. The same efficacy which ours possess they experienced in theirs—viz. that they were seals of the divine favour toward them in regard to the hope of eternal salvation (4.14.23).¹

In his chapter “Paedobaptism. Its Accordance With the Institution of Christ, and the Nature of the Sign,” Calvin defends the practice by referring to the alleged interchangeability of circumcision and baptism with respect to their meaning:

...the truth and completion of baptism is the truth and completion of circumcision, since they represent one thing... baptism is the same thing to

¹All citations are from the Henry Beveridge translation of Calvin’s *Institutes*, available online at <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/institutes.html>. The nomenclature used in this paper is Book.Chapter.Section. Thus “4.14.23” refers to Book IV, Chapter 14, Section 23.

Christians that circumcision formerly was to the Jews... the promises of both signs, and the mysteries which are represented by them, agree... the apostle makes the one to be not a whit more spiritual than the other (4.16.11).

A bit later he argues that there is a “very complete resemblance between baptism and circumcision, as seen in the internal office, the promise, the use, and the effect” (4.16.16).

Later in the same chapter there is again the appeal to Rom 4:11:

Thus Paul terms it a seal of the righteousness of faith (Rom. 4:11). Let God, then, be demanded why he ordered circumcision to be performed on the bodies of infants? For baptism and circumcision being here in the same case, they cannot give anything to the latter without conceding it to the former... We say, then, that since God imparted circumcision, the sign of repentance and faith, to infants, it should not seem absurd that they are now made partakers of baptism, unless men choose to clamour against an institution of God (4.16.20).

B. The command to Abraham

Second, Calvin contends that God’s command to Abraham to circumcise his household (Gen 17) is applicable to the church today by way of baptism, due to the fundamental continuity of the Abrahamic Covenant with the New Covenant.

Thus, Calvin argues for infant baptism on the grounds of continuity with the Abrahamic Covenant, saying that “the covenant remains firm and fixed”:

He distinctly declares, that the circumcision of the infant will be instead of a seal of the promise of the covenant. But if the covenant remains firm and fixed, it is no less applicable to the children of Christians in the present day, than to the children of the Jews under the Old Testament. Now, if they are partakers of the thing signified, how can they be denied the sign? If they obtain the reality, how can they be refused the figure? (4.16.5).

In the next section, Calvin again argues from covenantal continuity, saying:

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 (4.16.6).

A bit later, in the context of arguing for the benefits of infant baptism to the church, Calvin makes express reference to God’s earlier circumcision command to Abraham:

In fine, we ought to stand greatly in awe of the denunciation, that God will take vengeance on every one who despises to impress the symbol of the covenant on his child (Gen. 17:15), such contempt being a rejection, and, as it were, abjuration

of the offered grace (4.16.9).²

The command given to Abraham again makes an appearance, as a means of putting Calvin's critics in a predicament:

They always remain caught in this dilemma. The command of God to circumcise infants was either legitimate and exempt from cavil, or deserved reprehension. If there was nothing incompetent or absurd in it, no absurdity can be shown in the observance of paedobaptism (4.16.20).

II. Calvin's First Assumption Examined: The Baptism/Circumcision Analogy

A. Even paedobaptists recognize that fundamental continuity is compatible with significant discontinuity

Calvin's two assumptions should strike the reflective reader of Scripture as initially plausible, and as containing a measure of truth. In this lies the persuasiveness of the Reformed paedobaptist argument for many. However, Calvin has chosen to formulate these key assumptions in a way that renders them false. At best, the use to which he puts them is misleading. They simply cannot bear the weight of the paedobaptist inference. Indeed, properly construing these twin assumptions of analogy and continuity might militate against that inference.

Consider first the notion that baptism and circumcision are interchangeable in their meaning. There are both direct and indirect arguments against this notion. The direct arguments simply point to the fact that, according to the biblical record, circumcision signified specific promises and blessings that baptism does not signify, and has never signified. God made many promises to Abraham in the covenant of circumcision (Genesis 17, which confirmed the covenant of Genesis 15), and circumcision signified the promises of that covenant. For instance: "I will make you very fruitful" (physical descendants as many as the stars in the sky)—baptism does not signify this promise, but circumcision did. Or "you will be a father of many nations"—baptism does not signify this promise, but circumcision did. Or "kings will come from you"—baptism does not signify this promise, but circumcision did. Or "the whole land of Canaan, where you are now an alien, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you"—baptism does not signify this promise, but circumcision did. Thus, the meaning of circumcision and baptism is not interchangeable. Here there has clearly been a change in meaning: the specific, earthly, generational promises are no longer signified.

The indirect arguments are threefold. First, if these rites were interchangeable in meaning, then why was there a change in the recipients of these rites, from males only (circumcision) to males and females (baptism)? Does this not argue quite strongly for the

²Notice that Calvin's first main assumption makes an appearance here as well, for he appeals to the alleged interchangeability of circumcision with baptism when he implies that both are "the symbol of the covenant."

notion that there was something signified in circumcision (namely, the promised Seed, and the promise of blessing to the nations through the seed of Abraham) which is not and cannot be signified in baptism? Second, if these rites were interchangeable in meaning, then why was there a change in the rite itself, from circumcision to baptism? If circumcision was sufficient for the covenant community under Abraham, Moses, David, etc., why was it insufficient for the New Covenant community? And third, if these rites were interchangeable in meaning, then why baptize those who had already been circumcised (as was universally the case in the early church)? Since even paedobaptists recognize the three main facts just adduced, they must concede that any continuing significance of the Abrahamic Covenant into the New Covenant era is compatible with quite a bit of significant change.

So even if Baptists and paedobaptists were to agree with respect to fundamental continuity of the Abrahamic covenant, there remains a disagreement over the degree of that continuity. Since paedobaptists already accept – despite the “everlasting” nature of the Abrahamic covenant – that there has in fact been a change in sign, meaning of sign, and recipients of sign, they will be very hard pressed indeed to insist that fundamental continuity ensures infant recipients of sign. So it looks like the Baptist position is quite compatible with a confession of essential continuity with respect to the Abrahamic Covenant. The disagreement is over the degree, not over the fact, of continuity and discontinuity.

Calvin insists that when critics of paedobaptism are pressed with:

the resemblance between baptism and circumcision, they contend that there is a wide difference between the two signs, that the one has nothing in common with the other. They maintain that the things meant are different, that the covenant is altogether different (4.16.10).

But this is incorrect. The Baptist does not have to say that the one has nothing in common with the other, or that the covenant is altogether different. Overlap and continuity can be recognized, as well as relevant difference and discontinuity.

B. Romans 4:11 does not teach what paedobaptists want it to teach

A test case here would be Rom 4:11, a text which we have seen figures prominently in Calvin’s case for interchangeability of meaning between circumcision and baptism. Paul’s statement here in fact brings out a relevant disanalogy between Abraham’s circumcision and every other circumcision mandated in Gen 17. This implication is often missed because paedobaptists frequently paraphrase Rom 4:11 in fairly misleading terms, such as: “Paul says that the sign of circumcision is a seal of the righteousness of faith.” Indeed, many polemics on behalf of infant baptism give the impression that the text is simply about circumcision, and not about Abraham!³ Let’s

³Such abbreviated or paraphrased “citations” of crucial texts are all too common in paedobaptist writers. One regularly reads such “biblical” claims as “The promise is to you and to your children...” (Acts 2:39), “Your children... are holy” (1 Cor 7:14), and “In him you were also circumcised... having been buried with him in baptism” (Col 2:11-12). The reader is rarely apprised of the inconvenient exegetical implications of the elided material.

look at Rom 4:11 in full:

and he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised, that he might be the father of all who believe without being circumcised, that righteousness might be reckoned to them,

This is a fascinating text, especially when we compare its content with the typical paedobaptist commentary upon it. First, the text is not talking about circumcision in general, but about the circumcision of a particular individual, namely, Abraham. This is crucial, because this text is about the specific place of Abraham within the flow of redemptive history, and the significance of that special place he holds, for those who are redeemed apart from circumcision.⁴ Second, the text says that Abraham's circumcision was a seal, but it does not say it was a seal of "the righteousness of faith" in general, that is, for all who received circumcision. Rather, it is a seal of Abraham's righteousness by faith, "a seal of the righteousness of the faith which *he had* while uncircumcised." Third, the text does not say that circumcision sealed a "promise" that the recipient of circumcision is justified by faith or would in the future be justified by faith, or a "promise" that if the recipient trusts God he will be justified. Rather, Abraham's circumcision was a seal of Abraham's faith, a faith which he already had, in the past tense. As a seal, it confirms and guarantees that what it signifies is indeed the case. The seal of King Ahasuerus's signet ring (Esth 8:8) guaranteed that the letters thus sealed truly possessed royal authority. It did not make it merely probable that the letters carried royal authority, or make it that the letters would carry such authority given certain conditions to be fulfilled in the future. Similarly, the seal of the Holy Spirit (Eph 1:13-14, 4:30) guarantees that the recipient will gain the promised inheritance. Seals guarantee things; they do not just picture something while we sit back and wistfully hope that what is pictured is actually the case, or actually comes to pass.

Why was Abraham circumcised? Well, in his case, he believed God, his faith was reckoned as righteousness, and in recognition of that God took him into his intimate friendship, and established his covenant of circumcision with him. Anyone thus circumcised, in *those* peculiar circumstances, certainly had a seal of his righteousness by faith. The fact that God would take Abraham into his confidence, and begin his covenant of circumcision with him, sealed to an unworthy Abraham his righteousness by faith. Abraham's circumcision testified to him that God had indeed accepted him by faith, had not imputed his many transgressions to him, and had instead inaugurated a special relationship of gracious favor and privilege with him. When Abraham reflected upon the circumstances in which he was commanded to be circumcised, his thoughts went directly to one thing: "God has justified me, God regards me as his special friend, God has marked me out for his special purpose, and this is the significance of the mark which I have received. It seals to me that truth of my own justification, for gracious divine acceptance of my entire person is the whole reason why I have that mark today. I am not

⁴Calvin seems to acknowledge this point in 4.14.5. However, as we saw earlier in 4.14.23 and 4.16.20, he generalizes Rom 4:11 as a way of making circumcision and baptism interchangeable in meaning.

justified because I was circumcised; rather, I was circumcised because I was justified.” Thus, when we examine Abraham’s place in redemptive history, we see the unique circumstances surrounding his circumcision. And this is precisely why Abraham’s circumcision can function as a seal of *his* righteousness by faith.

Before continuing, note that these three points alone are sufficient to undermine the usual paedobaptist contention from this text, that circumcision, for any and all who received it, signified and sealed their righteousness by faith, by sealing either an unconditional “promise” of justification (that the recipient is justified by faith, or will be justified by faith) or a conditional “promise” of justification (that if the recipient will only believe, he will be justified). Simply put, the text says no such thing. It does not speak of a general “promise” at all, but of the present justified status of a particular person. To miss this is to engage in the typical paedobaptist flattening of redemptive-historical detail in the exegesis of the text. A favorite proof-text is converted into a “spoof-text”: circumcision “means” justification by faith; therefore, it was applied to all Israelites in virtue of that general “meaning”.

But it is a fourth and final point which clearly brings out how the typical paedobaptist spin on this text is so misleading. Why was Abraham circumcised? And by “why?” I mean: for what purpose in redemptive history was Abraham circumcised? What is its real meaning, its historical-redemptive meaning? For that is the question Paul is asking (even if it is not the question paedobaptists usually ask when they come to this text). The text answers this question very clearly, with a purpose clause in the Greek: Abraham was circumcised,

that he might be the father of all who believe without being circumcised, that righteousness might be reckoned to them, and the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also follow in the steps of the faith of our father Abraham which he had while uncircumcised.

The historical-redemptive significance of Abraham’s circumcision was to prophesy the future gracious inclusion of uncircumcised Gentiles into the family of God, to prophesy that justification by faith comes first, prior to any works of the flesh which may follow (in Abraham’s case, there was a fourteen-year gap between his justification and his circumcision). Its significance was to prophesy the teaching of the Jerusalem Council, and the teaching of Paul in particular, that the saving faith of Gentiles will be *the faith of the uncircumcised*. Abraham is the “father” – not by genetic material, but by prototypical example – “of all who believe without being circumcised”.

Because God mandated that every Abrahamic descendant be circumcised from infancy, what Abraham’s circumcision signified is something that could not be signified by the circumcision of any descendant of Abraham. Since every descendant of Abraham was circumcised at birth (or close to it), such a ritual could not clearly signify the future justification of the uncircumcised. It could not seal, to the Abrahamic descendants who received it, a righteousness which they had by faith while *uncircumcised*, for the simple reason that they started their existence in the Abrahamic community as *circumcised* individuals.

There is a crucial disanalogy, then, between the circumcision of Abraham and the circumcision of any of his descendants, which Paul brings out in Romans 4:11-12. And he dwells upon it precisely because he sees it as a divinely intended disanalogy that

speaks to the unique New Covenant moment in redemptive history in which the Roman Christians find themselves. Paul presses home the lesson of Abraham's circumcision to his largely Gentile readers, because no other circumcision in redemptive history will do the job. There is a reason why as a matter of pedagogy Paul selects Abraham's circumcision and not the circumcision of any other Jew in history: it is the unique circumstances of Abraham's circumcision which make it peculiarly appropriate as a sign of the gospel for the Gentiles, and therefore uniquely suited to teach the Gentiles the gospel of God's grace. Thus, to assimilate the meaning of any and every circumcision in redemptive history to the meaning of Abraham's circumcision (as a means of constructing some subtle argument for paedobaptism which is wholly extraneous to Paul's context) is to, quite frankly, miss the point, and turn Paul on his head in the service of paedobaptism. Abraham's circumcision was, we Baptists might say, an instance of "believer's circumcision," and it is in virtue of that that it functions as "a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised."

C. A refutation from logical analogy: even if baptism and circumcision do overlap in meaning, this offers no safe inference to paedobaptism

At this point, the paedobaptist may demur: "Even if we have characteristically misinterpreted one of our favorite proof texts (Rom 4:11), surely it is the case that several other texts of Scripture bring out how circumcision points to inward cleansing (Deut 10:16, 30:6; Jer 4:4, 9:25-26; Ezek 44:7; Rom 2:28-29). Surely circumcision and baptism point in some way to the same redemptive realities (Col 2:11-12)." This is a reasonable reply, and calls for an examination of these other texts which is at least as searching as the treatment of Rom 4:11 above. But rather than investigating these other texts in detail, there is a quicker strategy at hand for exposing the weakness of the paedobaptist inference. Merely for the sake of argument, let us (temporarily) concede the point in question: there is indeed an overlap of meaning between the two signs. Does it follow from this that the rules governing circumcision in the OT – in particular, its applicability to infants – give us guidance for the rules governing baptism in the NT? Not at all.

We can expose the invalidity of this inference by way of refutation from logical analogy.⁵ Is there an overlap of meaning between the OT sacrifices and the sacrifice of Christ? Certainly. The OT sacrifices signified the reality of atonement, propitiation, removal of guilt, and forgiveness (Lev 1:4, 4:20, 4:26, 4:31, 5:10, 5:13, 5:16, 5:18, 6:7, 7:7; Num 15: 25, 28; 2Ch 29:24). But does it follow from the fact that the OT sacrifices and the sacrifice of Christ bear an overlap of meaning, that therefore the rules applying to the OT sacrifices—in the concrete practice of the people of God—similarly apply to the sacrifice of Christ? By no means! The OT sacrifices were offered continually; the sacrifice of Christ is offered once. The OT sacrifices were offered for Israel; the sacrifice of Christ is offered for the world. The OT sacrifices were offered by imperfect priests, who had to offer sacrifices for their own sins; the sacrifice of Christ is offered by a

⁵This method of proving the invalidity of an inference is outlined in Irving M. Copi and Carl Cohen, *Introduction to Logic (12th ed.)* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2005). It is defined as "Exhibiting the fault of an argument by presenting another argument with the same form whose premises are known to be true and whose conclusion is known to be false" (332).

perfect priest who was without sin. The OT sacrifices were offered by the sons of Levi; the sacrifice of Christ is offered by a priest according to the order of Melchizedek. Surely therefore it would be folly to insist that the contemporary church apply the sacrifice of Christ according to the OT rules for sacrifices, on the mere grounds that there is an “overlap of meaning” between the two.⁶ Paedobaptists clearly recognize this inference as invalid, in the case of Christ’s death. They ought to equally recognize its invalidity in the case of baptism. Reformed paedobaptists are fond of interpreting OT prophecy and practices in light of their NT interpretation, and I share great sympathy with them in this. But they seem to have abandoned their hermeneutic when it comes to baptism.

It is quite easy to diagnose what has gone wrong in the paedobaptist inference from infant circumcision to infant baptism. The fact that circumcision may signify redemptive needs and realities (such as forgiveness and cleansing) does not by itself exhaust the meaning of circumcision. In addition, circumcision had a prophetic significance, pointing to and signifying the promised Seed to come. Every OT believer was well aware that the promised Messiah, the seed of the woman (Gen 3:15), was to come from their loins, from the seed of Abraham, through whom would come blessing for the nations. It is quite plausible to hold that circumcision was specifically applied to the seed of the OT people of God in virtue of this prophetic significance of the sign itself. Likewise, it is in virtue of circumcision’s prophetic significance being fulfilled in Christ, that that sign was abolished. The Seed to whom the Abrahamic promises referred had come. On this view, there is no need to perpetuate within the New Covenant some baptismal practice analogous to circumcision and applicable to infants. Not because there is no overlap of meaning between circumcision and baptism (perhaps there is), but because the typology of infant circumcision has been fulfilled.

Exactly similar reasoning explains the abolition of the OT sacrifices. These offerings signified God’s commitment to forgive his people through atonement for their sins. The need for such forgiveness and cleansing is a universal human need in every age. But these sacrifices (like circumcision) also had a prophetic significance, as they prophesied of the greater Sacrifice to come. It would be as obtuse to reimpose circumcision on infants today (by way of infant baptism), on the grounds that OT circumcision signified the unchanging human need for cleansing and forgiveness, as it would be to reimpose some new set of sacrifices today, on the grounds that the OT sacrifices signified the unchanging human need for forgiveness. The fact of the matter is that although the OT sacrifices signified spiritual needs and spiritual realities, they were abolished because their prophetic significance was fulfilled in Christ.⁷ Similarly, even if OT circumcision signified spiritual needs and spiritual realities, it also has been abolished

⁶Perhaps this is how some Roman Catholics justify their interpretation of the Lord’s Supper as a re-sacrifice of Christ perpetuated in the church today. But then this should further confirm the point, at least for evangelical paedobaptists, of the invalidity of the inference under discussion.

⁷They certainly weren’t abolished because their *universal* significance is no longer applicable! It is ever and always the case, even in the New Covenant era, that humans need forgiveness and cleansing, and God is committed to forgiving his people through atonement for their sins. Nevertheless, this does not argue for the perpetuity of sacrifices, for it was in virtue of their *prophetic* significance being fulfilled that they were abolished.

because its prophetic significance was fulfilled in Christ. There is no more need to offer sacrifices in the temple. There is likewise no more need to apply a redemptive sign to infants.

All of Calvin's main arguments for paedobaptism founder on this dilemma. Calvin continually presses the critic to acknowledge that circumcision signifies spiritual realities also signified in baptism, inferring that if this overlap of meaning is really there, then we ought to apply baptism to infants. But one might as well argue that since OT sacrifices signified spiritual realities, we have warrant for continuing their use today. Clearly, we do not. In each case, it was the typological, forward-looking nature of the OT statute that prophesied its own obsolescence when the fullness of time drew near in the New Covenant. This is why the author of Hebrews records the obsolescence of the sacrifices (Heb 8:13, 10:9, 10:18). It is also why Paul in Corinthians (1 Cor 7:19) and Galatians (5:6, 6:15) records the obsolescence of circumcision. To the larger significance of this latter fact, I now turn.

III. Calvin's Second Assumption Examined: The Command to Abraham

A. *The continuity with the Abrahamic Covenant*

Consider now Calvin's second main assumption: the relevance for the contemporary church of the Abrahamic covenant, and in particular, the relevance of the command given to Abraham in the inauguration of that covenant. Here we come to the heart of the issue. Even if the meaning of circumcision were interchangeable with the meaning of baptism, it would not follow that infants should be baptized. That would only follow if the rules governing circumcision were of standing authority in the church today. This is the crucial link in the argument. Infant baptism is neither clearly commanded nor exemplified anywhere in the Scriptures. But if the ancient instruction concerning circumcision has abiding authority for the people of God, and baptism has replaced circumcision in virtue of its sameness of meaning, then infant baptism becomes much more plausible. How should Baptists reply?

Consider the following two texts:

What I am saying is this: the Law, which came four hundred and thirty years later, does not invalidate a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to nullify the promise. (Gal 3:17)

And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise. (Gal 3:29)

According to Gal 3:17, the Abrahamic Covenant is not wholly invalidated, but rather continues in some form today, especially in terms of its promises. According to Gal 3:29, Christians are considered to be Abraham's seed, and their specifically Christian inheritance is according to the promises of the Abrahamic Covenant. In other words, the promises of the Abrahamic Covenant are fulfilled—at the very least, in significant measure—in the church. Christians are the seed of Abraham, and heirs of the promises given to Abraham. Does not this fundamental perpetuity of the Abrahamic Covenant into the New Covenant era argue for infant baptism?

B. The obsolescence of the Abrahamic command

Before issuing a reply, I register my agreement with Calvin in recognizing a significant link between the Abrahamic Covenant and the New Covenant.⁸ However, that fundamental relationship should be construed in terms of a dynamic process of earlier divine promise and later historical-redemptive fulfillment, rather than in terms of a static, eschatologically sterile notion of simple, ethical continuity. There cannot be simple ethical continuity between the command given to Abraham and the commands binding upon us today, because the command in Gen 17 has been explicitly rescinded by apostolic authority. And this is why no contemporary practice in the church can be reliably founded upon it.

What was the heresy of the Judaizers in the book of Galatians? Fundamentally, their error was to contend that the command to circumcise was essential to the perpetuity of the Abrahamic Covenant and its promises and blessings. Thus, according to them, Gentile converts were required to be circumcised in order to be members of the family of God. But in this they were greatly mistaken, for in the New Covenant order of things, “circumcision is nothing” (1 Cor 7:19), and “neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything” (Gal 5:6; cf. Gal 6:15). What they took to be essential to this everlasting covenant was in fact nonessential, and therefore done away with.

While their error is usually not as serious as that of the Judaizers, the paedobaptist commits a similar error, by contending that the command to apply a covenant sign to one’s children is essential to the perpetuity of the Abrahamic Covenant, and its promises and blessings. But surely, if the Judaizers were in error on this score, then so are the paedobaptists. For the only command in redemptive history, to the effect that a covenant sign should be applied to one’s children, is precisely that command which Paul has said is completely abolished: the command to circumcise the members of one’s household. It continues only as a permission, to satisfy Jewish scruples in relevant social contexts of Christian ministry (Acts 21:18-25), not as an obligation. Thus, if this command is of no authority to contemporary Christians, neither is the practice the paedobaptist infers from it: infant baptism.

This is the fundamental bind in which the paedobaptist finds himself. The only positive, exegetical foundation by which to derive a present parental obligation to have one’s infants baptized, is the very command to Abraham which Paul clearly states is now obsolete. Thus, the only scriptural foundation for pressing a paedobaptist duty upon Christian parents has been removed, and that by nothing less than apostolic authority. And this is all the Baptist needs to conclude that paedobaptist arguments, while interesting, are ultimately unconvincing. In the end, paedobaptism fails the classic test of a consistently Reformed hermeneutic: binding unless explicitly repealed. The command to circumcise infants has been explicitly repealed, and no new, positive command with respect to infants has been put in its place. This general pattern is true of the sacrificial laws, which is why no one would dream of reimposing them in any form upon believers today. It is also true of the command to circumcise, and any alleged present ethical duty founded upon it (such as infant baptism).

⁸Some Baptists, usually classically dispensational ones, appear to deny this link altogether. I do not follow them in this, although clearly this is a quicker way of dispensing with infant baptism.

Paedobaptists often appear offended at the notion that God would “kick babies out of the covenant”. But the blunt reality is that babies were “kicked out” of the covenant when the only command that ever put them “in” the covenant was explicitly said by subsequent apostolic authority to be “nothing” (1 Cor 7:19; Gal 5:6) and non-binding on Gentiles (Acts 15:5, 28). Let’s be honest: what other possible grounds for an ethical obligation for infant baptism are there in the Scriptures, besides the command to Abraham? Calvin was right: it all goes back to this. Which is why Calvin was clearly wrong about infant baptism.

Return then to Calvin’s appeal to the Abrahamic command, as a means of raising difficulties for critics of paedobaptism:

They always remain caught in this dilemma. The command of God to circumcise infants was either legitimate and exempt from cavil, or deserved reprehension. If there was nothing incompetent or absurd in it, no absurdity can be shown in the observance of paedobaptism (4.16.20).

But here Calvin insists on a false dilemma. Why can’t the command of God to circumcise infants be legitimate for the people of God in their infancy, but illegitimate for the people of God in their maturity?⁹ “The command of God to circumcise infants” was surely legitimate; Gen 17:10-14 stands in Scripture as God’s inspired word to Abraham. That is plain for all to see. But it would be clearly illegitimate to found a contemporary ethical obligation upon the authority of an obsolete command, and yet this is just what paedobaptists have done.

C. Calvin’s reply considered

Calvin does have a reply of sorts to the preceding reasoning, and honesty should compel us to consider it carefully:

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 (4.16.6).

Here Calvin’s two main assumptions are brought together. Baptism is now “instead of” circumcision, and “the covenant is common, and the reason for confirming it

⁹Such a distinction is already accepted by Calvin anyway. Cf. the extended discussion in his chapter on “The Difference Between the Two Testaments” (2.11), especially his appeal in section 2 to Gal 4:1 in which the people of God are likened to “an heir in pupillarity”. Says Calvin: “They had the same Church, though it was still in puerility.”

is common.” The only difference pertains to “the mode of confirming it.” So Calvin here acknowledges a distinction between what is “common” and what is “different”. The question is whether this distinction saves paedobaptism from the Baptist critique. It appears that it does not, for it can be easily accommodated by the Baptist.

Here is a list of items which Calvin would regard as merely pertaining to “the mode of confirming” the covenant, and therefore subject to modification in the historical transition from circumcision to baptism:

- (1) Circumcision was the removal of the foreskin; baptism is different because it involves immersion in water.¹⁰
- (2) Circumcision was applied to males only; baptism is different because it is applied to both males and females.
- (3) Circumcision was performed on the eighth day; baptism is different because no particular day is prescribed.

Calvin would regard these as specifics about circumcision which were “in accordance with the form of the old dispensation,” and therefore subject to “being abrogated.” By way of contrast, Calvin insists that “the covenant is common, and the reason for confirming it is common.” The question then is how to classify the fact, additional to the three facts above, that circumcision was applied to infants. Is this, like the three facts above, also a transitory feature of God’s covenantal dealings with men, pertaining only to “the mode of confirming” the covenant at a particular point in history, and therefore subject to abrogation? Or is it (as Calvin would have it) essential to the covenant and the reason for confirming it? What if a Baptist were to say:

- (4) Circumcision was applied to infants; baptism is different because it is applied after a credible profession of faith.

This thesis is wholly compatible with Calvin’s distinction between what is “common” and what is “different”. Indeed, Calvin’s distinction gives us no guidance – in itself – as to whether we should affirm or deny (4). But it is noteworthy that (4) above is confirmed by all relevant NT data about baptism. Jesus’ institution of the sign of Christian baptism commanded that it be applied to disciples, as “disciples” is defined by the NT (Matt 28:16-20; Mark 16:16). Throughout the rest of the NT, and especially displayed in the book of Acts, baptism functions in accordance with Jesus’ institution of it. It is a sign for disciples, who have placed their faith in Jesus; after Peter’s Pentecost sermon, it was only “those who accepted his message” who were baptized (cf. Acts 2:38, 41). And so we follow the apostolic policy and example of only baptizing those who received the apostolic gospel. All clear cases of baptism in the NT reflect this “believers’ baptism” policy, for the vast majority of cases of baptism in the NT come after a credible

¹⁰Not everyone is aware of the fact that on Calvin’s view, “it is evident that the term *baptise* means to immerse, and that this was the form used by the primitive Church” (4.15.19).

profession of faith. Indeed, the household baptisms in Acts and elsewhere were of *believing families* (Cornelius, the Philippian jailor, Crispus, Stephanus), and we use this significant datum to interpret the one household baptism (Lydia) where Luke does not tell us the details as he does with all the rest. The consistent policy is to baptize those who received the apostolic gospel. There may be one or two cases where this pattern may not be clearly exemplified, but this offers no support to the view that, in those cases, baptism was applied in the absence of a credible profession of faith, much less to infants. Thus, the reasonable thing to do, in light of the clear NT pattern, is to classify (4) with (1)-(3) above.

IV. Some Advantages of the Believers' Baptism View

A. Believers' baptism is supported by a proper construal of the parallel between circumcision and baptism

In 4.16.4, Calvin argues:

For just as circumcision, which was a kind of badge to the Jews, assuring them that they were adopted as the people and family of God, was their first entrance into the Church, while they, in their turn, professed their allegiance to God, so now we are initiated by baptism, so as to be enrolled among his people, and at the same time swear unto his name. Hence it is incontrovertible, that baptism has been substituted for circumcision, and performs the same office.

But this is not the only way to preserve the parallel between circumcision and baptism. Clearly the greater spirituality of the New Covenant must count for something. The physical sacrifices of the OT have given way to the greater spiritual sacrifices offered by the NT Christian (1 Pet 2:5). The OT temple finds its counterpart in the greater temple of Christ's body (John 2:19-21). The OT priesthood has been fulfilled in Christ our High Priest (Heb 7-10), and transformed into the priesthood of all believers (1 Pet 2:9; Heb 13:10, 15; Rom 12:1). Similarly, OT circumcision finds its fulfillment, not in baptism, but in spiritual circumcision, or regeneration (Col 2:11-12).¹¹ Indeed, it is never baptism, but only the Holy Spirit, which is said to be the NT "seal" on believers (Eph 1:13). Given that these historical continuities are in terms of spiritual fulfillment rather than literal identity, we can agree with Calvin that "circumcision... was their first entrance into the Church." But then the appropriate NT counterpart to this is not water baptism as a means for infants to enter the church. Rather, even as in the OT circumcision followed physical birth into physical Israel, so in the NT baptism follows spiritual birth into spiritual Israel. Here the parallel between circumcision and baptism – much insisted

¹¹Notice that this text (another favorite proof text for paedobaptists) is talking about believers, and says that those who are "circumcised" in God's sight are those who have put off the flesh, and have been raised with Christ through their faith. It is this inward experience of spiritual circumcision that is tied to baptism in the NT.

upon by the Reformed – is not only preserved but is seen to actually support a believers’ baptism policy. It preserves the analogy with OT practice, and a theological analogy – not an identity – is all we have to go on with respect to circumcision and baptism. In any event, the paedobaptist will be hard pressed to argue that his construal of the circumcision/baptism parallel is more plausible than the Baptist’s.

B. Believers’ baptism explains why there was a transition from circumcision to baptism at all, whereas the paedobaptist view leaves this a complete mystery

In 4.16.16, Calvin says:

Equally ingenious is their cavil, that women should not be baptised if baptism is to be made conformable to circumcision. For if it is most certain that the sanctification of the seed of Israel was attested by the sign of circumcision, it cannot be doubted that it was appointed alike for the sanctification of males and females. But though the rite could only be performed on males, yet the females were, through them, partners and associates in circumcision.

But if “it cannot be doubted that it was appointed alike for the sanctification of males and females,” why was there need for a new sign, explicitly applied to females as well as males? If “the females were, through them, partners and associates in circumcision,” then any need for baptism remains a mystery.

If “the truth and completion of baptism is the truth and completion of circumcision, since they represent one thing,” and if “baptism is the same thing to Christians that circumcision formerly was to the Jews,” and if “the promises of both signs, and the mysteries which are represented by them, agree,” and if “the apostle makes the one to be not a whit more spiritual than the other” (4.16.11), and if there is a “very complete resemblance between baptism and circumcision, as seen in the internal office, the promise, the use, and the effect” (4.16.16), then it follows that whatever is signified in baptism was already signified in circumcision. Why then the need for baptism at all? Calvin leaves a fairly significant transition in redemptive history entirely unmotivated. Christ’s institution of baptism looks wholly arbitrary and superfluous. If, as Calvin says, “it is most certain that the sanctification of the seed of Israel was attested by the sign of circumcision,” then why rescind such a sign if the sanctification of the seed is still in need of being attested? Is not the retiring of the sign of circumcision itself a sign that the seed concept has been retired with it?

By way of contrast, on the Baptist view a sign was needed that was completely freed from association with generational promises pertaining to offspring (these having been fulfilled), and yet retained the symbolism of cleansing and renewal. Above all, a sign was needed that signified the believer’s union with Christ by faith in his death, burial, and resurrection. Baptism by immersion, wherein the recipient goes down into and comes up out of the water, is perfectly suited towards this end. The ritual which for millennia had been performed upon the organ of physical generation was in the providence of God made obsolete and therefore retired, since the Seed to whom the Abrahamic promise was made had come.

This conclusion is not unbridled speculation, but follows from a careful consideration of the progress of redemptive history, and the uniqueness of the New

Covenant within that history. One among many aspects of the New Covenant that is unique, and that clearly sets it apart from all previous historical-redemptive covenants, is that the New Covenant does not administer God's redeeming grace to a *Messiah-bearing people*. The people of God no longer have the promise that the Messiah shall come forth from their seed. From Adam to Abraham, the people of God were encouraged by the "mother promise" of Gen 3:15, a promise essentially having to do with the seed of the woman: "And I will put enmity Between you and the woman, And between your seed and her seed; He shall bruise you on the head, And you shall bruise him on the heel." From the very beginning, the people of God knew that it was not from the seed of angels or some other heavenly beings, but from earthly seed, human seed, their seed, that a Victorious Conqueror would indeed come into the world. The One who was to come would bruise the very head of the deceiving Serpent, reverse the curse and bring blessing in its place. The people of God from Adam to Abraham had this promise which centered specifically on their seed: from that seed a Deliverer would surely come.

From Abraham onwards, this promise of a Seed which would bring blessing and not curse was narrowed down to the family of Abraham. Once again, the people of God were encouraged with respect to their seed, by the promises to Abraham in Gen 12: 2-3:

And I will make you a great nation, And I will bless you, And make your name great; And so you shall be a blessing; And I will bless those who bless you, And the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

From Moses onwards it was obvious that the Seed to come would not merely be the offspring of Abraham, but would be an Israelite, a member of God's holy nation, which comprises not merely people, but land and law as well. The fundamental Abrahamic promise – of blessing to the nations via their seed – was not done away with. Rather, the structures were providentially set in place for the conditions of its fulfillment. From David onwards the people of God again received the promise with respect to their seed. Namely, that David shall never fail to have a descendant sitting upon his throne:

When your days are complete and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your descendant after you, who will come forth from you, and I will establish his kingdom. 13 He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever...16 And your house and your kingdom shall endure before Me forever; your throne shall be established forever (2 Sam 7:12-13, 16).

Thus we see that in every historical-redemptive covenant, the central covenant promise centered not merely on their seed in general, but more specifically on the fact that it was through their seed that all nations would be blessed and that an eternal kingdom and throne would be established. And yet these are precisely the promises which are fulfilled in the New Covenant, since that is the covenant which was inaugurated by the "Seed to come" who had finally come. No longer would the people of God cherish the promise that it would be through their seed that salvation and worldwide blessing would come. Covenantal promises with respect to one's descendants simply drop away, as anachronisms in the age of fulfillment.

Let no one be deceived. Is the New Covenant a complete fulfillment of the

promises of God? Is the New Covenant purely “already” without any of the “not yet”? By no means. We await the new heavens and the new earth, and the redemption of our bodies. We await the final judgment, and above all we await the return of Jesus Christ and the full consummation of the Kingdom. But these have no particular reference to our descendants. One thing we do not await is the coming of a blessed Deliverer through our seed. The sustained and crucially important focus upon the seed of the people of God, from Adam to Christ, has now shifted, precisely because of where the New Covenant is as a matter of fact placed within the history of redemption. Paul is clear that the unique Seed to whom the Abrahamic promises were really spoken has come: “Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. He does not say, ‘And to seeds,’ as referring to many, but rather to one, ‘And to your seed,’ that is, Christ” (Gal 3:16). The seed of the people of God from Adam to Christ was significant precisely because it was the means of bringing into the world the Seed who was to come.

Why has Christ come? To redeem his people from their sins. And why does he redeem them?

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree”—14 in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith (Gal 3:13-14).

It is in Jesus Christ that “the blessing of Abraham” *has come* to the Gentiles. No longer are the people of God to look to their seed for the blessing that is to come. That blessing has come. The seed of Abraham had covenantal significance in the purposes of God insofar as it would bring Christ into the world. But in the era of the New Covenant, the seed of Abraham simply are those who are in Christ, that Seed. Prior to the New Covenant, it was the seed of Abraham who would bring Christ into the world. But in the era of the New Covenant, Christ acknowledges no seed to be his, except that seed which is in Christ: “And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise” (Gal 3:29). In context, “belong to Christ” is a reference to those united to Christ by faith (cf. Gal 3:9, 14, 22). If the command given to Abraham has any relevance at all to the New Covenant era, *these* are the subjects of baptism in the age of the New Covenant. Therefore the progress of redemptive history both explains the transition from circumcision to baptism, and confirms a believers’ baptism policy.

V. Conclusion

Some Southern Baptists are broadly sympathetic with the historically Reformed emphasis upon the continuity of God’s redemptive covenants in history. They are also sympathetic to what has been historically designated as “the covenant of works,” “the covenant of grace,” and “the covenant of redemption”.¹² Many of these Southern Baptists

¹² By the way, this is only one of many ways a body of thought can be characterized as “Reformed”. Another usage would apply to someone who, while rejecting Reformed covenant theology altogether, fully embraced the “five points of Calvinism.” Yet another usage would apply to someone who, while rejecting both covenant theology *and* many of the “five points,” nevertheless fully embraced the

identify themselves as “Reformed Baptists”. While some would argue that this latter designation is a contradiction in terms, it is quite possible to regard it as a qualification of terms, a subjecting of the traditional Reformed soteriological and ecclesiological categories to a more searching biblical scrutiny. (For instance, by construing covenantal continuity in terms of historical progress rather than strict identity.) In my view, the foregoing critique of paedobaptism is fully compatible with taking these historical theological categories seriously as accurate summaries of the relevant biblical data. These categories do not require paedobaptism.

Of course, providing a positive argument for these broadly Reformed commitments is outside the scope of this paper, since the focus here is on baptism. Suffice it to say that while the *Baptist Faith and Message* clearly and rightly excludes the practice of paedobaptism, it does not require a particular scheme of relating the covenants of God (dispensational or otherwise). Baptists who affirm *or* reject the broad outlines of historic “covenant theology” ought to be equally welcomed within the Southern Baptist fold, where a charitable dialogue on these matters can and ought to continue in the context of more fundamental theological agreement.

In conclusion, then, the Baptist’s main argument for believers’ baptism is not theological inference from “the covenant,” but simply from the NT data about a distinctively NT ordinance. It’s up to the paedobaptist to come up with a good and necessary inference for a practice that is not positively commanded or clearly exemplified anywhere in the entire Bible. Calvin’s argument does not appear to meet this standard. Indeed, the two main assumptions to which Calvin appeals – the baptism/circumcision analogy and the command to Abraham – seem to be most satisfactorily understood in the New Covenant era as confirming a believers’ baptism policy. The seed of Abraham today are believers in Christ (Gal 3:29), both Jew and Gentile, who are spiritually circumcised in Christ *through faith* in the working of God (Col 2:11-12). We must baptize all and only those who give a credible profession of such faith.

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“five solas” of the Reformation (*sola scriptura, sola fide, sola gratia, solus Christus, soli deo gloria*). I certainly see no reason to restrict the word to the first usage alone. I adopt that first usage in the text of this paper for convenience sake only.

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