

Why Infant Baptism?

A Biblical Introduction

by Tim Gallant

Introduction

For many centuries, the practice of infant baptism reigned virtually unquestioned. Here and there a heretical group denied its validity, but very rarely did anyone within Christian orthodoxy do so. But at the time of the Reformation, the Anabaptists arose and said, “The command is to *believe* and be baptized. Infants can’t believe; therefore, they cannot be baptized.”

The problem with many biblical issues is one of *context*. To what context must we refer to settle an issue? Some people wish to stay narrowly within the confines of the New Testament. I happen to think that a case can still thus be built for infant baptism, but the problem is that those New Testament passages too, stand squarely upon the Old. In order to understand Scripture on any subject, we must recognize that “Christianity” is not a new religion plunked *de novo* into the first century. (And insofar as what is identified as “Christianity” *is* a new religion, it is not the biblical faith which Jesus fulfilled and the apostles proclaimed.) Jesus said He came to *fulfill*, not to abolish, the Law and the Prophets (Matthew 5.17).

To approach the issue of baptism, then, we need a bigger biblical picture than merely flipping to a verse on baptism here and a verse there. We need to see how baptism functions within the total biblical context. To that end, I will briefly discuss four issues: (1) the *original guilt* into which children are born; (2) *God’s stated intention* with regard to the children of believers; (3) the *function of baptism* within its *old covenant* context; and (4) the *function of baptism* within the *new covenant*.

1. We Are Not Born Innocent

There has been some movement since the 16th century in connection with the implications of the doctrine of “believers’ baptism.” At first, there were at least some who held to believers’ baptism, who inferred that infants who died were necessarily damned, because they had not believed.

We live in a kinder, gentler era. It is widely held, among both those who believe only in “believers’ baptism” and among those who hold to infant baptism, that all infants who die are saved.

On what basis is this belief held, however? It is difficult to determine a biblical passage that asserts this (on passages such as Matthew 19.13-14, see below: these are children of believers). We need to examine the witness of the Bible regarding how God views the human race as a whole, including infants.

Romans 5.12-21

In Romans 5, Paul provides a line of argument that compares and contrasts Adam and the effects of his transgression to Christ and the effects of His obedience (specifically, His self-offering upon the cross). In this passage, we find very clear evidence of the biblical view of what later came to be called “original guilt.”

Paul says that sin, and death through it, entered the world through Adam’s sin. This death became universal, “because all sinned” (5.12). From that, some have said: “All sinned, *by following Adam’s example.*” But Paul immediately denies that this is his intention, by adding the parenthetical remark: “for until the law sin was in the world; but sin is not imputed when there is no law. Nevertheless death reigned from Adam until Moses, *even over those who had not sinned in the likeness of the offense of Adam*” (5.13-14).

The form of Paul’s argument is to show that death is not merely to be attributed to the various individual sins of men. The reason death reigned, even over those who had not imitated Adam’s sin, is not simply due to a judgment against their own self-conscious acts, but first of all and primarily because they somehow participate in Adam’s sin. When people die apart from law, this shows that the transgression being punished is the original transgression of Adam. This is why death reigned, even before the law was introduced.

What Paul’s argument demonstrates is that: (1) Adam’s sin brings curse to the whole human race; (2) this curse is first of all due to participation in Adam’s transgression, not to later individual sins; (3) death is the evidence of this curse. In the unfolding argument which follows, Paul continues to insist that the race died due to the transgression of the one man, Adam (5.15), which means a judgment resulting in condemnation (5.16) - a condemnation which is universal to all (5.18).

A proper understanding and application of this passage forces the recognition that the Adam side of the equation (thus leaving aside the issue of Christ’s deliverance for a moment) has universal force. The entire human race is implicated in Adam’s sin, including infants. Indeed, that is why infants die. If infants were not implicated in Adam’s sin, they would not partake of the judgment upon Adam’s sin, which is death. (We acknowledge and insist that there is a solution to this problem, but we only have a right to go there by way of identifying the problem to begin with.)

Psalm 51

The issue of original corruption and original guilt is confirmed elsewhere in Scripture. David affirms this problem as his own when he confesses to God his sin with Bathsheba. He writes, “Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me” (Ps. 51.5).

Some interpreters, who wish to avoid a doctrine of original sin, have claimed that this verse is simply charging David’s mother with adultery. This interpretation, however, is absurd, because it turns David’s confession into a *non sequitur* (i.e. a line of speaking which does not logically “follow”). It also misses the fact that “brought forth” refers to the time of *birth*, not the time of conception. How can a *birth* be adulterous?

The context must be observed:

Against You, You only, have I sinned, and done this evil in Your sight - that You may be found just when You speak, and blameless when You judge. Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me. Behold, You desire truth in the inward parts, and in the hidden part You will make me to know wisdom. (Ps. 51.4-6 NKJV)

Verse 4 signals David's intention to vindicate God's judgment. His next move is to admit that he was brought forth in iniquity and conceived in sin. In short, his way of acknowledging the justness of God's judgment is by conceding the very depth and pervasiveness of his sin. He refuses to take the easy route (so common today) and say that "I didn't really *mean* it - that wasn't *really me*; in my heart I'm really such a good person."

Rather the opposite, he goes right to the core of his existence, beyond his recent acts, and says that he was brought forth, indeed *conceived*, in this state of iniquity.

That this is the correct reading is confirmed by David's next statement, that God "desires truth in the inward parts" - pervasive righteousness, as opposed to the pervasive sin which he has just confessed.

Now, it could be objected that David is not speaking here of original *guilt*, but only of original *corruption*. And in terms of what David says directly, that is true. But it raises two questions: (1) Can there be original corruption without original guilt? In other words, is not that very corruption worthy of condemnation? (2) Is not the fact that original corruption has been transmitted itself a *result* of original guilt? If the infant is not guilty, by what rule of justice does he receive a corrupt nature from his parents? So we see that focusing attention on original corruption in the passage only pushes back the issue, but does not dispel the conclusion: as far back as conception, the infant is the object of condemnation, of judgment.

The ban on Canaan and other judgments

A further illustration of this disturbing reality can be seen in the absolute ban which God placed upon Canaan. God delivered the Canaanites up to death at the hands of Israel - men, women, and little ones (Deut. 2.34; 3.6; 7.2, etc.). The question that confronts us is: was this mass destruction *divinely just*? Was it a righteous judgment?

Note that the question is *not* whether this is an *example to be imitated*, which must be denied; Israel had a unique redemptive-historical calling. But if God's judgment upon the Canaanites is retribution for their sins (as He insists it is), how is it righteous for Him to mandate the destruction of infants, if the doctrine of original guilt (and thus condemnation) is not true?

We could ask the same sort of question regarding the Great Flood. God delivered eight people - Noah and his family - and destroyed the rest: men, women and children. Or again, the time of the exodus: God destroyed all the firstborn of Egypt, young and old. Were those children "innocent"? If so, then God was unjust in destroying them.

A “king's X”?

This leaves us with a question. If infants are born into guilt and condemnation, then does God somehow, in spite of that, simply place a “king’s X” (a mark that automatically removes one from responsibilities regarding justice) upon them for the time being, until they can consciously sin or repent for themselves? Does He wait for some “age of accountability” before He views them as “really” under judgment?

This is the working assumption of most of the modern Church. The problem is: *where is the biblical evidence?* We are not, it is true, simply told that infants generally die and face eternal damnation. But the evidence we do have says that infants are subject to divine judgment, as is seen in the fact of death itself, and as is seen in the destruction of infants in various divine judgments in Scripture.

My point is not simply to assert that all infants of unbelievers go to eternal torment. God’s mercies are boundless. However, the Bible gives no positive promises regarding the destiny of the infants of unbelievers, and it *does* tell us that they *deserve* condemnation, by virtue of their union with Adam. And it *does* indicate that the one solution that God presents is found in the second Adam, Christ. Any notion of freedom from condemnation outside of Christ is simply unbiblical.

As Calvin writes, the infants of believers “have by covenant the right of adoption, by which they pass over unto a participation of Christ. Of the children of the godly I speak, to whom the promise of grace is addressed; for others are by no means exempted from the common lot” (*Commentary on Romans*, on 5.17).

To the argument for that “right of adoption” by covenant we now turn.

2. God’s Stated Intention Regarding Believers’ Children

The doctrine of solidarity (unity, common lot) with Adam that Paul teaches in Romans 5 implicates us all. It becomes clear that unless God intervenes, the whole human race is damned. That is, of course, Paul’s point in Romans 5: to show that even as all in Adam are condemned to death, all those in Christ are justified and given eternal life.

Our interest here is to ask the question of God’s stated intention with regard to the children of believers. Does He have one? And if so, is it an intention merely with a view to *an indefinite future point* (say, when the child is 12 years old) when the child will express personal faith? Or is it an intention that has force *at the outset of life*?

Our discussion of this point will be necessarily incomplete, but it is important to provide at least a sweeping overview of the biblical testimony.

Genesis 3

God did not allow even one generation to go by before He came with promises to deal with the condemnation that had fallen upon the human race due to Adam’s sin.

In Genesis 3.14-15, God pronounced His curse upon the serpent. He indicated that He was going to create enmity (warfare) between the serpent and the woman, and between the serpent's seed and the woman's seed. That means that God was reclaiming the woman and her seed for Himself, to do battle against the serpent.

Because of the biblical testimony that identifies Jesus as the seed of the woman (see e.g. Revelation 12), the broader reference often remains unrecognized. Eve herself, however, rightly heard the curse upon the serpent differently, not least in connection with the words which God immediately addressed to her in 3.16, directly after God's words to the serpent. There, God said that in pain and sorrow she would conceive and bring forth children. We tend to hear the curse, and fail to note the blessing: she *will* bring forth children; she will *bear the seed* of which God had just spoken to the serpent.

We can see Eve's reception of the promise, first, when she bears Cain, and declares that she has received a man from the Lord (4.1). (We too readily jump forward to Cain's sin and fail to note the prior implications.)

Even clearer, after Cain has turned away from the Lord, killed Abel, and been driven from God's presence, Eve bears another son. We read in Genesis 4.25:

And Adam knew his wife again, and she bore a son and named him *Seth*,
"For God has *appointed* another *seed* for me instead of Abel, whom Cain
killed." (NKJV)

The words which I have italicized are very important to understand what is happening. The name of the child, *Seth*, has to do with appointment - hence Eve's explanation. The word used here is the same word used by God in 3.15: "And I will *put* enmity between you and the woman." The reference to *seed* speaks for itself. The appearance together of these two words from 3.15 can hardly be considered merely coincidental. In Eve's mind, the children she receives are the seed whom God has promised. (Cain's defection makes him the stolen seed of the serpent, since the serpent cannot himself bear seed.)

Other texts

The foundation that is laid in Genesis 3 is reaffirmed in manifold ways throughout the Old Testament. For example:

- The parallel lines of Cain and of Seth in Genesis 4 and 5 indicates (1) a *positive relationship* to God being carried forward through one line and (2) an *adversarial relationship* to God on the other. The theme of the story, of course, is the pollution of the Sethite line, culminating in the intermarriage which occurs in chapter 6.
- God's promise of *descendants* (literally, *seed*) to Abraham in a covenant that eventually is marked by circumcision - a sign that is to be administered to the infant males of the household at eight days old (Genesis 17). (For more on the significance of circumcision, see the discussion below in the section on baptism in the Mosaic law.)
- The linking of *infants* and *triumph over enemies* - a pairing which surely seems strange, apart from a recognition of an allusion to Genesis 3.15. This link can be found in Psalms 8 and 127 (cf. the blessing upon Rebekah, that her *seed* would possess the gates of *those who hate them*

[i.e. their *enemies*], Gen. 24.60). Clearest is Psalm 8.2: “Out of the mouth of babes and nursing infants You have ordained strength, because of Your enemies, that You may silence the enemy and the avenger.” Similarly Psalm 127.3-5:

Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD, the fruit of the womb is a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior, so are the children of one’s youth. Happy is the man who has his quiver full of them; they shall not be ashamed, but shall speak with their enemies in the gate. (NKJV)

- God calls the children of even the apostate Israelites of the northern kingdom, “My children” (Ezekiel 16.20-21).

- God identifies the purpose of the marriage covenant thus: “He seeks godly offspring” - literally, *seed of God* (Malachi 2.15) - another unmistakable echo of Genesis 3.15.

From these texts, it is evident that God claims the children of believers as His own. It is His purpose to recover them, even though it is true that, from conception on, they have been participants in Adam’s condemnation.

This purpose is as true in the new covenant as in the old.

- When parents who believe on Jesus bring their children to Him for blessing, and the disciples try to hinder them, Jesus responds by saying that “of such is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 19.13-14). In the Gospels, “the kingdom of God” or “the kingdom of heaven” (the two terms are synonymous) refers specifically to the new covenant which is present in Jesus. This is reflected in Jesus’ statement that he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than John the Baptist - even though He has just identified John as the greatest of all the old covenant prophets (Matthew 11.11). Consequently, Jesus is saying that it is specifically the new covenant that belongs to believers’ children; they are, indeed, its epitome.

- Paul applies the promise of Genesis 3.15-16, regarding seed for the woman, to the Christian women of his day, who will find their vindication over the serpent and his temptation through childbearing (1 Timothy 2.15). (For a fuller exposition of this passage, see my Internet essay: “Saved in Childbearing: Paul’s Employment of a Biblical Theme.” Details can be found at the end of this paper.)

3. Baptism in Old Testament Context

We must now begin to speak of baptism itself. There are two Old Testament types of material which we need to consider in this regard: (a) *historical events* which are identified in the New Testament as baptisms; (b) the *employment of baptism in the Mosaic law*. What follows, as is the case with our whole discussion, is merely an outline, and cannot be considered exhaustive.

a. Baptismal Events

i. The Great Flood

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit, by whom also He went and preached to the spirits in prison, who formerly were disobedient, when once the Divine longsuffering waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight souls, were *saved through water*. There is also an antitype which now saves us - *baptism* (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God), through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, angels and authorities and powers having been made subject to Him. (1 Peter 3.18-22 NKJV)

It is not possible to do a thorough exposition of this (very difficult) passage here, but I introduce it to draw attention to the baptismal pattern which Peter recognizes in the Great Flood.

Peter's view of the Flood is somewhat surprising upon examination. He does not merely say, as we might expect, that eight souls were saved *through the ark*. Rather, he says that eight souls were saved *in the ark, through water*. The divine act which was judgment for the world that perished was at the same time itself salvation for Noah's household. An investigation of Genesis 6, which we alluded to above, explains why: the line of Seth had become completely intermingled with the line of Cain, so that only Noah was seen as righteous upon the earth. The flood was a necessary act of destruction to lead to a new creation in which the line of righteousness was preserved.

With that in view, it is clear that Noah and his family have been preserved as the line of the righteous, by way of the baptismal type, the Great Flood. The children who will be born will belong to the line of the righteous, as was the case back in Genesis 3-4.

ii. The Red Sea crossing

Moreover, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware that all our fathers were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, all were *baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea*, all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ. (1 Corinthians 10.1-4 NKJV)

The Red Sea has distinct echoes of the Flood, so the similar appeal to it is not so surprising. Paul in the context is warning the Corinthian church against covenant-breaking, insisting that participation in the sacraments is not a magical guarantee that they will never face judgment. To prove his point, he appeals to Israel in the wilderness. They participated in baptism and spiritual food and drink (a clear allusion to the Lord's Supper), and yet most of them fell in the wilderness. All of this became a pattern (10.6; literally, these things *became our types, or types of us*); they occurred as a pattern (10.11; literally, these things *happened typically*).

Even as by means of the Great Flood, God brought Noah and his family into a new creation, so too by means of the Red Sea, God set Israel upon the path of a new mini-cosmos, a miniature new creation promised in Canaan. (The picture here is more complex, for several reasons. First, it is not universal, even though there were believers beyond Israel. Second, Israel does not pass directly through the Red Sea into the land of promise, but has an intermediate period in the wilderness before undergoing a second baptismal journey through the Jordan.)

As with the Great Flood, God's people are delivered through the water, while His enemies perish in the water (although in this case, the judgment is not universal). The children of Israel are baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. The "cloud" refers to the glory-cloud of the divine presence which accompanied Israel (cf. the dove which accompanied Noah in the ark). Even as the Flood was the effective means which led to the covenant arrangement with Noah, so too the passage through the Red Sea was the effective means of baptism into the Mosaic covenant. (It should be observed that it was a baptism that included young and old.) The Red Sea which judged Pharaoh's army became the means of separation from Egypt, and thus deliverance, after the pattern of the Great Flood. The people who emerged on the other side were the people that God identified as His own - even though they too became subject to judgment when they rebelled.

As with Adam and Eve, as with Noah, as with Abraham: the Mosaic covenant included the little ones:

All of you stand today before the LORD your God: your leaders and your tribes and your elders and your officers, all the men of Israel, *your little ones* and your wives - also the stranger who is in your camp, from the one who cuts your wood to the one who draws your water - that you may *enter into covenant with the LORD your God*, and into His oath, which the LORD your God makes with you today, that He may *establish you today as a people for Himself*, and that He may be God to you, just as He has spoken to you, and just as He has sworn to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. (Deuteronomy 29.10-13 NKJV)

One of the interesting things about the passage through the Red Sea and the provision of manna and water in the wilderness (i.e. the things which Paul cites in 1 Corinthians 10) is that in some fashion they serve in connection with a semi-suspension of "normal" Abrahamic and Mosaic ritual. Circumcision was instituted in Genesis 17; yet we find in Joshua 5.7 that no circumcision had occurred while Israel was in the wilderness. Likewise, after the original Passover, there was only one more Passover in the wilderness. After that, it was not celebrated until the circumcision in Joshua 5: and the manna ceased at that very time (Josh. 5.11-12).

This is important to recognize, because it is widely denied that there was any genuine "sacramental significance" to either the Red Sea passage, or to the manna or the water from the rock. This denial requires a rather radical minimalizing of Paul's language (e.g. "spiritual food and drink" comes to mean something such as "miraculously supplied"). But if the long-term major sacraments were "in suspense" during this period, and were reintroduced precisely upon the exit of the wilderness and entrance into Canaan, whereupon the interim provision ceased. . . all this suggests that, on some level, the baptism through the Red Sea was as sacramental as circumcision, and that the manna and the water from the rock were as sacramental as Passover.

(It may be suggested that the components of water baptism, and simple food and drink such as manna and water [or bread and wine] are appropriate sacraments for the wilderness. Like Israel, the new covenant Church traverses the wilderness toward the renewal for which creation groans; cf. the Exodus motifs in Romans 8.)

b. Baptism in the Mosaic Law

As we have seen throughout our foregoing discussion, there is a close biblical connection between death and condemnation. Death is the primary example of the curse which Adam incurred. That is why Paul traces the history of Adam's sin as the history of death, in Romans 5. Likewise the condemnation of the world in the Flood was a death-judgment. God's judgment on Egypt included death in the Red Sea. Many other examples could be cited.

In the Mosaic law, the great matter of uncleanness is death, as well. An integral part of cleansing is washing. Hebrews 9.10 refers to this facet of life under the law when it speaks of "various baptisms" (Greek: *baptismois*; most English versions obscure this by translating the word as *washings*). (This language is also used in the Greek Old Testament [LXX], *Sirach* 34.25, referring to the washing for cleansing oneself after touching a corpse.)

Two passages regarding these "baptisms" are of particular relevance here.

In Leviticus 11-15, we are introduced to the great cycle of uncleanness and cleanness, what have often been called issues of "ritual purity."

The other crucially important passage is Numbers 19, which refers to the special cleansing required in connection with the touching of human corpses. This involves purification with the Old Testament version of "holy water": water mixed with the ashes of a red heifer, which was to be kept on hand for the cleansing of Israel (Num. 19.1-10). Whoever touched a corpse was to be purified with this special water by being sprinkled on the third and seventh days (Num. 19.12); he would thereby become clean.

There are varying degrees of uncleanness in the law. For example, *touching* a carcass of an unclean animal would render one unclean until evening, but no other action was necessary (Leviticus 11.24, 27). If one *picked up* the carcass, it became necessary to wash one's clothes, and one was again unclean until evening (Lev. 11.25, 28). Similarly, afflictions that did not quite amount to "leprosy" (which, incidentally, must be distinguished from what we know today as "leprosy") required the washing of one's clothes and nothing more (see Lev. 13.6, 34). If a man became unclean through a seminal emission, he needed to bathe in water, and would remain unclean until evening (Lev. 15.16-18).

Most matters of uncleanness, however, involved a combination of washing (baptism) and sacrifice. The law of leper cleansing in Leviticus 14 is a complex set of rites involving the sacrifice of a bird, the employment of another bird, the offering of a guilt offering and ascension offering, and much more. Among the sacrifices we find the sprinkling of the leper with blood, and (twice) the washing of his clothes and bathing himself in water. These would be among the rites which Hebrews 9.10 identifies as "baptisms."

An exception to the baptism/sacrifice combination is apparently the cleansing of a woman from her discharges. Although those who touched something she had made unclean were required to

wash their clothing and bathe (Lev. 15.21, 22, 27), the ritual for her own cleansing seems to lack any water rite.

This, however, is the exception, rather than the rule. It is not so surprising, upon reflection, that a ritual complex built upon the concepts of cleanness and uncleanness would lean heavily upon water rites as a means of effecting/signifying cleansing. After all, that is just what water does!

This thoroughgoing relationship between uncleanness and baptisms is likewise presupposed in the new covenant prophecy of Zechariah 13.1: “In that day a *fountain* shall be opened for the house of David and for the inhabitants of Jerusalem, for sin and for *uncleanness*” (emphasis mine). Here we see a linking of the existing concepts of cleanness/uncleanness, and cleansing through water, with the anticipation of the new covenant.

Before we take that step, however, we need to reflect upon the overall structure and intention of the system we have been describing.

First, the primary issue in view here has to do with *access to official worship*. Cleansing must take place so that the children of Israel do not defile the Lord’s tabernacle (Leviticus 15.31; this statement is made in the summary of the whole preceding discussion of uncleanness in chapters 11-15). There is thus a reiterative cycle of access to the Lord: cleansing → access → uncleanness → cleansing → access, etc.

Second, in line with our discussion of Romans 5, uncleanness seems unquestionably centered upon *death*. This does not appear to be the exclusive theme, but is sufficiently dominant to justify focus upon it. One of the most serious uncleannesses involves touching a corpse, which can only be cleansed by employing the “red heifer holy water.” Likewise, leprosy should be seen as a “death in the flesh.” Bodily discharges involving blood also seem related to this theme; the unclean one has been discharging the blood of life.

We learn in Leviticus 12 how this whole cycle begins. When a woman gives birth to a *male* child, she undergoes seven days of uncleanness; on the eighth day, the child is circumcised (Lev. 12.2-3). The mother then remains “in the blood of her purification” for 33 days longer, with the result that (as also suggested by 15.31, which we noted) she may not touch the consecrated things or enter the Lord’s sanctuary (12.4).

In the case of giving birth to a *female* child, the pattern is similar, except, of course, that there is no circumcision, and the periods of uncleanness are doubled. Following the days of purification, a “burnt” offering (better translated “ascension offering”) and a sin offering are undertaken, thus making atonement (literally, *providing covering*) and cleansing her from her flow of blood (12.6-7). (Note that the death theme in connection with uncleanness suggests a connection to the doctrine of original guilt. As James Jordan has suggested, the picture here is that the child is “born dead,” so that both he and his mother are polluted. The cleansing rituals are signs addressed to this issue of death and pollution.)

The question that arises comes from the difference between the birth of males and that of females. The mother remains unclean twice as long in connection with the birth of the latter. Is this because females are “more unclean” than males - some sort of Old Testament chauvinism?

This cannot be the case; the cleansing rites for men with discharges and those for women are strongly parallel (see Lev. 15.13-14, 28-30; the most significant difference is the additional

requirement for the man to wash his clothes and bathe). It is better to suppose that the difference in the period of uncleanness is connected to the *other* difference mentioned in Leviticus 12: namely, that *the male is circumcised*. It is precisely after *seven days*, when the infant male is circumcised on the eighth day, that the mother's primary uncleanness comes to an end; in the case of the female, the mother's primary uncleanness continues for another seven days.

All of this indicates several things. (1) Circumcision was a cleansing ritual that belonged to the same complex as the sacrificial/baptismal rites. This correlation is presupposed in Colossians 2:11-12, where Paul argues that Christians are participants in true circumcision by way of being united to Christ in baptism. (2) It is not entirely correct to suggest that females in Israel did not undergo a rite of initiation in any sense; it is apparent here that the mother's bearing of an extra period of uncleanness amounts to something equivalent for the female infant to circumcision for the male. (3) Thus, the events of Leviticus 12 indicate the entrance into the complex of ritual purity - that is, entrance into official access to God and His worship. This entrance occurs at the very beginning of life.

The situation, then, is that a newly circumcised male (or likewise, an infant female, probably from 14 days old) was thereby entered into the "norm" of ritual purity. This ritual purity was seen as the sphere of life as opposed to death. The cleansing rituals were designed to repeatedly bring the members of Israel back into that norm. The cleansings restored an individual to the state originally brought about by initiation (e.g. circumcision).

4. Baptism in New Covenant Context

Israel was a people under the law, a "kingdom of priests" (Exodus 19.6). Access to the Lord's tabernacle was related to Israel's priestly service of God. The transition to the new covenant involves a movement to a new temple, in which God dwells, not with Israel under the law, but with Jews and Gentiles bound together in Christ (Ephesians 2.11-22).

This new temple is not merely invisible: Paul's language in Ephesians 2 and 1 Corinthians 3 indicates that he is thinking of the visible Church. (In 1 Cor. 3.16-17, Paul warns against defiling or destroying the temple - how could an invisible temple be in danger of destruction?) We have already seen that tabernacle/temple access under the old covenant required rites of cleansing; the bringing forward of the temple theme into the new covenant leads us to anticipate that some form of that requirement will recur. An objective, visible temple implies an objective, visible rite providing access.

There is thus continuity as well as change in view when we consider the relationship between the new temple and the old, between the new covenant and the old.

Paul devotes a great deal of attention to exploring the purpose of the law, in order to explain the new covenant order that has now come. Rather surprisingly, perhaps, he argues that the law was given in order that the offense might increase (Romans 5.20). (Cf. also Galatians 3.22ff.; the law "confined all under sin.") By means of the law, the transgression of Adam was multiplied, "stacked up," in Israel. (Paul, of course, is aiming at showing God's purpose in Christ: in the terms of Romans 5.20, Christ was sent to "where sin abounded," so that there, "grace abounded much more." God concentrated sin in Israel under the law, and then condemned sin in the flesh

by having Jesus die under the law, “that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us;” see Romans 8.3-4; cf. 6.6.)

A recurring criticism of the Mosaic covenant, which is implicit already in Deuteronomy itself (see e.g. 9.4-6; 31.26-29; 32.28-29), as well as in the new covenant prophecy of Jeremiah 31.31-34, is that the people’s hearts did not measure up to the requirements of the law. Hence the frequent Pauline critique of the Mosaic covenant, that it was inadequate due to the hardness of the people’s hearts. What was needed was the advent of the new covenant Spirit (see especially 2 Corinthians 3).

John’s baptism

The outset of the new covenant period (or alternatively, the closure of the old covenant period, since John is considered an old covenant prophet; cf. Matthew 11.11) sees the advent of John, baptizing in the wilderness by the Jordan. This action resonates on several levels. With regard to the law, it suggests that notwithstanding the existence of the temple priesthood, the people are unclean. With regard to the exodus history, it suggests that Israel itself has become like the Egypt from which she was delivered at the Red Sea. (Notice especially Revelation 11.8, which identifies Jerusalem as “Sodom and Egypt.”) A new exodus, a new creation, has become necessary. By baptizing in the Jordan, on the way out of Israel, John is inviting Israel to go outside the camp (see Hebrews 13.13). The present Jerusalem can no longer be seen as a continuing city (Hebrews 13.14); in Christ Jerusalem will be re-created (see Hebrews 12.22: in Jesus, “you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem”).

John says that he baptizes with water (which has to do with cleansing), but he recognizes this as inadequate. As the final old covenant prophet, he cannot baptize with the new covenant Spirit, but there is One standing among his hearers who can (Matthew 3.11 and parallels). (This redemptive-historical setting indicates that the frequent notion that we need to suppose that there is a radical divide between the water of baptism and the Spirit-baptism of Christ is based upon a lack of attention to historical context. One thing to expect from the Gospels is that they are not likely to raise significant problems and fail to provide any resolution. Along with parallels in other Gospels, John’s statement appears in Matthew. How does Matthew resolve the problem? The only place in Matthew’s Gospel where we can find the provision of the Spirit of which John speaks is in the institution of water baptism in the Great Commission of 28.18-20: the nations are baptized into the name of the Father, the Son and the *Spirit*. While unusual separations of water and Spirit do occur in Acts 8 and 10, these are pointed out precisely as abnormal, and the cleavage serves specific redemptive-historical purposes. For further discussion of these and related matters, see especially my Internet article, “Pentecostal Ordination: The Newness of Christian Baptism;” details can be found at the end of this paper.)

John’s baptism, then, is a transitional moment that signals the arrival of the kingdom (the promised new covenant) in the Messiah, Jesus, who will baptize with the Spirit.

Pentecost

The Feast of Pentecost following Jesus’ ascension becomes the fulfillment of this anticipation. As a sign of the coming to pass of Moses’ own yearning in Numbers 11.29, the whole gathered

Church receives the eschatological (“last days”) Spirit (cf. also Joel 2.28-29, which Peter refers to in his sermon as now fulfilled).

The Israelites (both from Palestine itself, and those from the Dispersion throughout the Empire, who were present in Jerusalem for the Feast) and proselytes (Gentile converts to Judaism, probably circumcised) are astonished at the mighty display of God’s power, although some resort to mocking (Acts 2.7-13).

Peter’s response is a Christ-centered sermon, affirming that this Jesus whom they had crucified is indeed God’s *anointed One* (Christ, Messiah). Anointing in the Old Testament particularly was a sign of empowerment by the Holy Spirit. It is because Jesus has ascended to the Father that He has received the “promise of the Spirit” to communicate to His people, and thus is the source of the gifts and wonders now so much in evidence (see Acts 2.33). (The phrase “promise of the Spirit” indicates, not that Jesus has received merely a *promise*, but that the Spirit, who has long been promised, is now given to Jesus. Another way of putting this would be: “the promised Spirit.”) Jesus is thus vindicated as Lord and Messiah (2.36).

This powerful sermon evokes conviction upon Peter’s hearers, and they ask what they must do (2.37). Here is Peter’s response:

Then Peter said to them, “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call.” And with many other words he testified and exhorted them, saying, “Be saved from this perverse generation.” (Acts 2.38-40 NKJV)

A number of features are important to notice in connection with our purposes.

- The gospel Peter preaches presupposes the unity of the new covenant work. Peter does not suggest there are two stages of salvation (one involving forgiveness of sins and attachment to Christ, and a second involving the reception of the Spirit, for instance). He sees the new covenant gift as unitary, such that he can move from verse 38, with its promises of remission of sins and the gift of the Spirit, to verse 39, where the promise apparently includes both (even though in verse 33, the promise was specifically the Spirit). (More precisely, water baptism was already understood by Israel to convey forgiveness; what is new about this baptism is that the long-expected Spirit is now seen to be conferred with it. Again, see my essay “Pentecostal Ordination” for demonstration and development of this point.)
- The proper response is repentance and baptism. Unlike many modern Protestants, Peter has no strong dividing wall between either repentance and faith, or baptism and faith. “Repentance” simply means “turning.” (There is frequent confusion upon this point; in Scripture, good works are the *fruit* of repentance, not the equivalent of it.) Turning from Egypt to God is the motion of faith; likewise, baptism is an enactment or actualization of faith. The call to faith and repentance is thus neither a challenge to salvation by faith alone, nor yet is it particularly a call to parallel things, justification (forgiveness, right standing with God, received by faith) and sanctification (moral renovation, accomplished by repentance). It is simply the call to respond to the new covenant with the obedience of faith (cf. Romans 1.5).

- Approaching our own concerns here more directly, Peter says that this new covenant promise “is to you *and to your children*, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call.” It is important to recognize where this formula comes from. It is based squarely upon God’s repeated promises to Abraham that He would bless him, his seed, and the nations in him (see e.g. Genesis 12.1-3; 17.1-5, but these themes run throughout Gen. 12-22).

Some have tried to evade the force of this by laying stress upon the next-to-last clause: “*and to all those afar off*, as many as the Lord our God will call.” “See,” they say: “yes, the promise is to believers’ children - just as it is for *everybody*. There is no special promise to them at all.”

This interpretation, however, fails to account for the final clause. Why is it added? “As many as the Lord our God will call” does not refer to the whole world. It is true that in some places, “call” refers to the universal proclamation. But more often than not, it refers to the effectual calling of those joined to the Church. See especially Paul’s usage in 1 Corinthians 1: the saints are the *called* ones (1.2), who have been *called* into the *koinonia* (fellowship, participation) of Jesus (1.9). Not many wise, mighty or noble were *called* (1.26ff.).

This is the sense in which Peter is using the language. We know this, because any other usage would be redundant. If the final clause is not qualifying the preceding one, it is just hanging off the back, doing nothing.

More importantly, if Peter is just saying that the promise is universal, that fails to explain why he says “and to your children” to begin with. It is simply not a phrase that fits with a generalized statement. It does, however, fit wonderfully with the concepts we have already explored. When God recovers a people for himself, He includes their children as His own as the objects of His promises. (This passage indicates clearly that the Holy Spirit is promised to children; see also below.)

- The exhortation to “be saved from this perverse generation,” particularly in connection with the baptismal mandate, ought to evoke for us the baptismal events of the Old Testament, the Great Flood and the passage through the Red Sea. As was the case in those days, the “generation” of Peter’s hearers has become corrupt and subject to judgment. Thus the people of God must be drawn out and borne to safety to a new creation. The paradigm established at the time of Noah and the exodus again suggests that the inclusion of the children of the righteous in such a call would be presupposed.

- Thus the *content* of the promise (the new covenant, with the Spirit and remission of sins receiving particular focus, as in Jeremiah 31.31-34), the identification of *to whom* it is promised (you, your children, and those called from afar), and the *mandated means of reception* of the promise (turning in repentance from the present generation under destruction, and being baptized), together with the *overall biblical picture of God's covenantal dealings with believers and their children* which we explored above, all converge here: Peter’s hearers would unquestionably have understood him to be calling them to be baptized, together with their children. It simply would have been unprecedented for any Israelite parent, steeped in the covenant Scriptures, to suppose that Peter intended to exclude his children from the promised deliverance - particularly when Peter himself had not failed to say: “the promise is to your children”!

The kingdom of heaven for the little ones

Earlier, we mentioned Jesus' statement with regard to believers' children, that "of such is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 19.13-14). He laid hands upon them and blessed them. It is striking that this sort of activity was done by fathers in the patriarchal period, and in the Mosaic period, it was done particularly by priests. Jesus' activity indicates His priestly role in connection with these children, which should hardly be surprising, given the fact that He identifies them as epitomizing His kingdom. And what is access to Christ's priesthood, if not access to the new covenant temple? But then this must mean that children of new covenant believers qualify to be initiated into the "kingdom of priests" (cf. 1 Peter 2.9), even as was the case under the old covenant.

Can infants receive the Holy Spirit? Well, according to Peter they can. And if the kingdom of heaven is "of such as these," that fact is inescapable. How can the kingdom (i.e. the new covenant) be "of such," if the principal blessings of the new covenant are withheld from them? Jesus says: "of such is the kingdom of heaven." And Paul says: "the kingdom of God is not meat and drink, but righteousness, peace, and joy *in the Holy Spirit*" (Romans 14.17). The Spirit belongs to such as these. The Spirit who is promised in connection with baptism in Acts 2.38-39 and elsewhere.

"Believe and be baptized"?

Is the foregoing a denial of the command, however, to "believe and be baptized"? Is it not necessary for the one who is to be baptized to *believe first*?

It must be remembered that Peter's speech too, calls for repentance (which implies believing) as he addresses his hearers on Pentecost. Yet that speech says the promise is for his hearers *and their children*. Peter seems to assume that when parents repent and are baptized, their children are taken up into that repentance and included in it.

Nor may we forget what we have just seen: it is rightly said of the children of believers that "of such is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 19.13-14). That language indicates that believers' children are not "exceptions" - the kingdom is all about such as these. If the kingdom of heaven (the new covenant) is all about faith, then these words can only mean that we ought to understand that such children are truly children of faith.

Part of the problem is that we have defined *faith* itself in strictly "adult terms," and then build everything around that adult definition. This is not sound biblically. We must not reverse Jesus' statement: He said, "Unless you are converted and *become as little children*, you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18.3); we must not therefore imply that unless the *child* is converted and becomes more like an *adult*, he cannot enter the kingdom.

Beyond this, we need to note that *circumcision too was a faith-command*. Abraham repented and believed God's promises before he was circumcised. This was what was involved when God told him to leave his land and father's household and go to the place He would show him (Genesis 12.1), a call which was accompanied by great promises (Genesis 12.2-3). Abraham's family had been idol worshippers (see Joshua 24.2).

Thus God's call to Abraham was a call to turn (repentance) and believe His promises (faith). This call was later followed up by the commandment of circumcision (Genesis 17). Paul says in Romans 4.11 that circumcision was "a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while

still uncircumcised.” Thus, in the case of adults who joined Israel under the old covenant period, they needed to believe upon Israel’s God and become circumcised. But when they did so, their (male) children were circumcised along with them - even as Abraham had been called upon to circumcise the males in his household when they were eight days old (Genesis 17.12).

This too is what occurs under the new covenant. When the kingdom was preached to Israel and the nations, both Israel and the nations lay under God’s judgment, and thus needed to be called to repentance. The new covenant promises of the gospel, likewise, required a call to faith. Thus when the gospel was proclaimed to Israel and the nations in the New Testament, it was proclaimed in the context of a call to repent and believe. But as in the Old Testament, the promise proclaimed is once again a promise “to you and to your children,” as Peter affirms in Acts 2.38-39.

So it remains for us today in our gospel proclamation. For the adult, we expect adult indications of faith; for the infant, we recognize faith in the simple fact that his believing parent brings him for baptism. That is the pattern that runs throughout Scripture: “The promise is to you and to your children.” Of such children is the kingdom of heaven.

Baptism for the little ones

The world in Adam lies under the condemnation of death. The divine counterpoint is the work of Christ, in whom all live (Romans 5.17, 18, 21).

If the divine answer to Adamic condemnation is in Christ, how is this transfer to occur? The universal New Testament witness is that initiation and incorporation into Christ and His Church occurs by way of baptism. That is how the rite functions within the Great Commission: as the means whereby the nations are transferred *into* (Greek *eis*) the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28.19). This is the one rite which comes in the place of the whole Mosaic complex of circumcision and reinstatement rites of sacrifices and washings (cf. Colossians 2.11-12). Even as Christ has offered Himself once for all, the believer is inserted into Christ once for all in baptism, being joined to Him thereby in His death and resurrection (Romans 6.1-4).

My point here is not to claim that unbaptized children are all heading for eternal judgment. (What if the child died coming out of the womb?) My point is that *God’s stated intent is to adopt the children of believers as His own*, and that *the rite of adoption by which He does so is water baptism*. (We can retain a high view of baptism while also admitting that God’s preceding “statement of intent,” which itself provides us with the warrant to baptize to begin with, is already a powerful claim upon the covenant child.)

It is only in the light of the foregoing analysis, including the Old Testament considerations, that the household baptisms of the New Testament (e.g. Acts 16.15, 33; 1 Cor. 1.16) make sense. The question is not whether one side or the other can prove whether all members of the household were self-conscious believers, or whether there were or were not infants in the household. The question is: *why speak in terms of the household at all* in connection with baptism?

Once we frame the question in that fashion, we are reminded of the necessity of not isolating events. In order to understand, we require more than a grammatical analysis of the verse in front

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of us. We need to grasp the biblical picture within which the verse before us lives and moves and has its being. And once that picture is before us, the question is no longer whether infant baptism is *legitimate* - the question is whether its denial would have even been *thinkable*.

For related articles on baptismal issues, see the following, available on the Internet:

- “Toward a Theology of Baptismal Transition: Some Initial Reflections.” Does baptism actually *do* anything? Or is it completely “symbolic,” like a flannel-graph for the church? This essay makes beginning explorations in terms of the New Testament witness to what baptism accomplishes. You can find it on the Internet at:
<http://www.biblicalstudiescenter.org/ecclesiology/transition.htm>.
- “A Note on Circumcision and Baptism: Taking Account of Redemptive History.” Somewhat of a footnote to the above article on baptismal transition. Seeks to answer the question whether Paul’s negative statements regarding circumcision are equally applicable to baptism. Find it at:
<http://www.biblicalstudiescenter.org/ecclesiology/circumcisionandbaptism.htm>.
- “Pentecostal Ordination: The Newness of Christian Baptism.” A biblical-theological look at the difference between John’s baptism and Christian baptism, particularly in connection with John’s contrast between his baptism with water, and Jesus’ baptism with the Holy Spirit. Find it at: <http://www.biblicalstudiescenter.org/ecclesiology/pentecostalordination.htm>.

Further on God's covenant promises regarding the children of believers:

- “Saved in Childbearing: Paul’s Employment of a Biblical Theme.” An analysis of 1 Timothy 2, especially verse 15, showing that Paul is employing the promise of “seed for the woman” from Genesis 3, and applying it to Christian women. Find it at:
<http://www.rabbisaul.com/articles/childbearing.php>.
- “Bound Before God: A Sermon on Malachi 2:13-16.” The title is self-explanatory; most significant in connection with our discussion here is the exposition of Malachi 2.15, which says that the Lord is seeking “seed for God.” Find it at:
http://www.biblicalstudiescenter.org/sermons/malachi2_13-16.htm.