

- d. Entirely consistent with the pattern of biblical typology, the realization in fulfillment of the “people of God” has seen, not the abrogation of that community’s former identity markers, but their individual fulfillment. The physical entities that marked out the Lord’s physical covenant household in the time of preparation have yielded, in the fullness of the times, to their spiritual counterparts, even as has the covenant community itself.

God’s people are still set apart to Him through circumcision and bound to Him by covenant union. Now, however, those physical signs that established and governed the physical (and prophetic) relationship between Yahweh and Abraham’s descendents have been replaced with the inward, authentic realities portrayed by their predecessors. Covenant relationship with God is no longer external and symbolic; men are related to Him in accordance with authentic spiritual union by the indwelling Spirit. Divine-human relationship has been fully realized in the recovery of sacred space.

This realization of relationship in fulfillment – especially as attested in the fulfillment of the identifying marks of the people of God – is vitally important in the next consideration respecting the identity of the covenant community, namely the salvation-historical relationship between Israel and the Church. Everything to this point indicates that Israel has found its fulfilled expression in the Church as God’s covenant people. All Christians acknowledge that, in some sense at least, Israel has yielded to the Church in the age of fulfillment. But this means radically different things to different people within differing Christian traditions.

- For dispensationalists, the Church’s supplanting of Israel in the present age is merely the indication that God’s purposes for His first and primary “chosen people” have been put on hold until a future time. Whether by fulfillment or outright replacement, Dispensationalism rejects any notion that the Church has become (and will forever be) the “people of God.”
- Historical Covenant Theology, on the other hand, fully embraces the fact that the Church is the fulfillment of Israel as God’s covenant household. However, it understands fulfillment in a manner that emphasizes constancy far more than transformation. Covenant Theology regards the Church as the “people of God” in the present age, but it conceives of that community as remaining essentially the same as it was in its Israelite expression. Most importantly to the present discussion, it regards the Church as constituting a composite society just as was the case with Israel.

At the risk of oversimplification, whereas Dispensationalism sees a distinct future for the covenant nation of Israel, Covenant Theology sees Israel’s continued existence in the Church. The “economy” of the “people of God” has changed with Christ’s coming, but the *constituency* of the covenant community – and so also at least some aspects of its *relationship* with God – remains the same. This is clearly evident in at least two important particulars:

- 1) The first involves the identity sign of circumcision. Covenant Theology sees the fulfillment of this sign, not in spiritual circumcision as such, but in *water baptism*. Just as circumcision was applied to “covenant children” under the former economy of the covenant community, so it is with baptism in the present economy. Circumcision was performed on an infant to identify him as a member of Abraham’s covenant household, and baptism is said to serve the same purpose today. The crucial point is this: *In Covenant Theology, personal faith in Christ – and, with it, the circumcision of the heart – isn’t the ground of membership in the covenant community; **membership is obtained by the application of a physical sign***. As it was for the people of Israel, so it is for the Church.

This understanding must obviously pass the test of the biblical text itself, and, in that regard, it’s noteworthy that it finds virtually no support:

- a) The most common defense is the **argument from silence**. That is, paedo-baptists argue that if God didn’t intend the children of Christians to be baptized, He would have forbidden the practice in the New Testament. Apart from the obvious problems inherent in using silence as an argument, this conclusion is invalid because it is grounded in assumed premises. The first underlying premise of paedo-baptists is that the early Church baptized their children as a normative practice. This premise has its origin in long-standing Church doctrine more than the New Testament text. In turn, it is facilitated by another assumption, namely the replacement of the sign of circumcision with water baptism. The logic is as follows:

*The early Christians recognized that baptism has replaced circumcision as the sign of the covenant and so baptized their infant children. This being the case, God’s silence regarding infant baptism indicates His affirmation of the practice.*

This line of reasoning notwithstanding, it is a basic principle of logic that a valid conclusion cannot be inferred from incorrect or unproven premises. Whatever one may believe about the practice of the early Church, the New Testament record of that period gives no indication that infant baptism was a normative (let alone prescribed) practice. Even less does the New Testament teach that baptism has replaced circumcision as covenant sign.

- b) A more subtle textual argument for paedo-baptism involves reasoning from the **symbolic nature of a sign**. Because a sign is a signifier – that is to say, it stands as a symbolic representation of something else, distinction must be made between a sign and the thing it signifies. Another way of expressing this is that a symbol must not be confused with that which it symbolizes.

This obvious distinction becomes an ingenious device in the hands of paedo-baptists. On the one hand, it allows them to acknowledge the fact that the New Testament everywhere associates water baptism with personal union with Christ by His Spirit. Baptism connotes purification by washing, and actual cleansing is the result of a person's share in Christ and His purifying work. Baptism speaks of the "*washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit*" (Titus 3:5; cf. Ephesians 5:25-27; 1 Peter 3:18-22), and so it also symbolizes a person's union with Christ in His death, burial and resurrection to newness of life (Colossians 2:8-13).

These considerations argue against baptizing those who haven't been personally cleansed from sin and joined to Christ, but this is where the distinction between *sign* and *thing signified* comes into play. Paedo-baptists argue that, because baptism is a sign, it simply signifies union with Christ; it neither effects that union nor presupposes it. A sign and that which it signifies are not the same thing; *so the sign of baptism doesn't indicate that the baptized person actually possesses that which baptism signifies.*

This may seem to be a powerful argument, but it fails to take into account a critical aspect of the relationship between "sign" and "thing signified": While they obviously must be distinguished as separate entities, *they are nonetheless mutually referential.* The whole point of a sign is to represent, in a physical, tangible form, the reality to which it refers. If baptism symbolizes union with Christ, but that union is never realized in the experience of the baptized person, then "sign" and "thing signified" have no actual relation to one another; *far from being mutually referential, the applied sign actually lies against the thing it purportedly signifies.*

- c) A third point of supposed biblical support for paedo-baptism is the presence of **household baptisms** in the New Testament. This is the best textual argument for baptizing babies, but a more careful consideration of the biblical witness actually supports the doctrine of believer's baptism (credo-baptism). Because there are only a handful of passages that address the issue of household baptisms, they can be examined in short order.

The first involves the baptizing of Cornelius' household following Peter's proclamation of the gospel to them (Acts 10:44-48). This was indeed a "household baptism," but the text is emphatic that Peter felt compelled to administer water baptism to them precisely because all present had been baptized in the Spirit just as had the apostles and those with them on Pentecost. Cornelius' entire household was baptized because they had all been joined to Christ.

Another incident of household baptism involved the Philippian jailer and his coming to faith in Christ in connection with a terrifying earthquake (Acts 16:25-34). At that time, he brought Paul and Silas from the jail to his home where he cleaned and dressed their wounds. While there, Paul preached the gospel to all present and they were all subsequently baptized. The key to this passage is the grammatical function of the Greek adverb translated “with his whole household” in the NAS. Robertson rightly notes that it can be understood in one of two ways: It modifies either the verb, “rejoiced,” or the participle rendered “having believed.”

- In the case of the former, the matter of the faith of the whole baptized household is left unresolved.
- With the second option, the meaning is that the jailer had believed together with his whole house, Luke thereby providing the basis for their baptism (ref. esp. v. 31).

Even assuming Luke intended the first meaning, that doesn't necessitate the conclusion that the jailer's household was baptized purely on the basis of *his* faith. On the other hand, the second meaning does demand the understanding that personal faith preceded the application of baptism. The most a paedo-baptist can derive from this passage is the support lent by ambiguity.

So it is with the preceding incident involving a woman named Lydia and her household. Luke records that, after the Lord had opened her heart to respond to Paul's gospel, she and her household were baptized (Acts 16:11-15). This is notably the only context in the New Testament that doesn't provide direct textual support for baptism on the basis of personal faith. However, like the account of the Philippian jailer, it provides no *unequivocal* proof that Lydia's unbelieving family members were baptized on the basis of her faith; it is simply silent on the matter.

Two other passages should be noted, one of which is Paul's statement regarding his baptizing of Stephanus' household (1 Corinthians 1:16). Since this was only a passing comment for which the Scripture provides no historical account, it's pointless to try to draw support for paedo-baptism from it. The other passage is also in the book of Acts (18:7-8), but a careful reading shows that it doesn't directly speak to the issue of household baptism. Luke records that Crispus *believed* with his whole household, not that his house was baptized. In fact, far from supporting paedo-baptism, the passage argues against it by explicitly stating that *believing* Corinthians were being baptized (v. 8).

Quite apart from the textual problems, the notion of household baptisms supporting the doctrine of paedobaptism is plagued by another critical difficulty. That is the fact that New Testament households included servants as well as family members. Using the example of early church households as biblical precedent for baptizing unbelieving children is actually saying too much, for the New Testament record takes paedobaptists beyond where they're willing to go. They want to apply water baptism only to their "covenant children," not household employees and other non-family members. But this is precisely where the text takes them if they're going to hold it up as establishing "household baptism."

The above considerations show the lack of New Testament support for baptizing unbelievers, but an equally compelling refutation is directed at the justification for it, namely the notion that water baptism has replaced circumcision as the sign of the covenant and primary identity marker of the covenant community. Whether or not this idea is biblically defensible, it has unquestionably facilitated the continuance of the deeply-entrenched practice of regarding baptized children as members of Christ's Church. The Reformers defended this practice because they were absolutely determined to retain it; such resolve insured that biblical justification would be found. This sort of passionate commitment continues to this day:

*"Are [these little ones, by virtue of the parents' relationship to Christ,] also brought into a new relationship with Christ even though they are too young intellectually to apprehend the gospel and to appropriate it for themselves in the conscious exercise of repentance and faith? Does their psychological inability to fulfill the conditions required of adult converts render the idea of discipleship meaningless so far as infants and small children are concerned? Or, [is their covenant status to be granted and baptism to be administered to them, and] are they to be disciplined along with their believing parents, given the solidarity of the family unit?"*  
(David C. Jones, from an unpublished classroom lecture)

Though this statement is marred by special pleading and confusion of categories, it does emphasize the real issue for paedobaptists, which is the important place Covenant Theology affords to "covenant children" within the covenant community.

While some traditions within Reformed Theology have historically associated baptism with the child's actual regeneration and union with Christ (as do Roman Catholic theology and some aberrant Christian sects), most paedobaptists regard baptism simply as a *sign* of those things. Their conviction is that baptism doesn't save, but that it grants the child formal membership in the covenant community and thereby confers upon him the grace that attends that community.

At the same time, Covenant Theology's insistence that baptism is also a *seal* of the person's regeneration and share in Christ appears to indicate more than mere membership in the visible community of God's people (ref. Westminster Confession of Faith, Section XXVIII). For, while a seal may not consummate the thing indicated by it, it certainly testifies to the real existence of the thing such that it is secured for the future (cf. Romans 4:9-11, 15:26-28; 1 Corinthians 9:1-2; 2 Timothy 2:19; Revelation 9:4)..

Even if most paedobaptists don't associate personal regeneration and actual union with Christ with the ordinance of baptism, they universally hold that baptism is the sign of the covenant whereby the baptized person becomes a true member of the covenant household. *Central to Covenant Theology is an ecclesiology of a composite Church*: The "people of God" consists of unsaved, unregenerate individuals as well as those who have been personally and authentically joined to Christ.

Given that this ecclesiology can't be supported from the New Testament (or from the Old Testament's definition of the people of God under the new covenant – Jeremiah 31:31-34), the obvious question is how did this doctrine arise in Covenant Theology?

The answer is found in the historical context of the Reformation. At that time in the sixteenth century, the Church had for more than a millennium embraced a sacral conception of the "people of God" in which every baptized member of the community was regarded as a Christian. By the act of *christening*, a child was made a member of *Christendom* – the church-state "kingdom" that first expressed itself as the Holy Roman Empire following the reign of Constantine.

While the Reformers rejected much of Roman Catholic doctrine, they refused to depart from its sacral ecclesiology; cultural and magisterial pressures dictated the perpetuation of Christendom within Protestantism, both on the European continent and in Great Britain. The Reformers were unwilling to depart from the notion of a sacral Church, but they were equally determined to biblically justify their position. However deeply ingrained, this doctrine, too, had to stand the test of *sola scriptura*.

In this regard, it is telling that the Reformers found the biblical vindication for the composite Church, not in the New Testament, but in the Old. *Not the new covenant Church, but old covenant Israel provided the exemplar for a covenant community consisting of unbelievers and believers alike*. Like Reformation Europe, Israel was a church-state: Membership in the "people of God" didn't derive from personal faith, but from personal possession of the physical sign of the covenant. This paradigm perfectly suited the entrenched and largely unquestioned medieval ecclesiology which taught membership in the Church through baptism.

True, the Reformers largely departed from Rome's contention that a person couldn't be finally saved apart from baptism, but they unashamedly retained its long-standing conviction that "christening" was the basis for a person's membership in the Church and status as a "Christian."

The Reformers found biblical warrant for their sacral ecclesiology in theocratic Israel, with the result that Israel soon was being referred to under the label of "Church." Indeed, this development was inevitable. For once it is assumed that old covenant Israel defines the nature and composition of the new covenant Church, it follows that the two must be substantially the same entity. This is precisely where Covenant Theology landed: Israel and the Church are essentially different expressions of the one "people of God," being distinguished primarily by the particular "economy" in which they exist.

And once the Church is equated with Israel in this way, the next step is to see membership in the community of the Church as being determined in the same way as it was for Israel, namely by possession of a covenantal sign. For Israel, that sign was circumcision; for Christendom, baptism had always secured membership in the Church. Didn't it make sense, then, to regard baptism as the sign of the covenant for the covenant community in the present age? In effect, hadn't the Church practiced this very thing for more than a thousand years? And if baptism is the sign of the covenant in the Christian era, it follows that it has replaced circumcision.

In the end, the notion of "covenant children" and their membership in the covenant community by virtue of their baptism is grounded in historical practice and long-standing ecclesiastical tradition rather than biblical exegesis. Ecclesiastical precedent isn't irrelevant, but the Church's conviction and practice mean nothing unless they're legitimated by the text of the Scripture, properly interpreted. Much more could be said about the failure of Covenant Theology to correctly understand the dynamic of promise and fulfillment in relation to the people of God, but a couple of final observations are important to make. This first is this:

*By finding in water baptism the fulfillment of the covenant sign of circumcision, Covenant Theology has violated the consistent biblical paradigm of promise and fulfillment.*

This study has noted repeatedly that the movement from promise to fulfillment is always upward, from a physical embodiment to its spiritual counterpart. Thus the New Testament everywhere indicates that circumcision has found its fulfillment in the inward, spiritual circumcision performed by the Spirit of Christ. But to claim that water baptism has replaced circumcision as the covenantal sign marking out the people of God is to depart from this biblical paradigm:

*It is to argue that a physical sign that merely signified a reality it didn't effect (ref. again Deuteronomy 10:11-16; Jeremiah 9:25-26), has found its christological fulfillment in yet another physical sign that likewise does nothing more than point to something it neither certifies nor effects.*

In this instance, the supposed “fulfillment” not only violates the biblical nature of christological fulfillment, **it is really no fulfillment at all.** Promise is simply replaced by a different promise – a promise that, unlike circumcision, never finds its fulfilled realization with respect to multitudes in the covenant household. In the time of preparation, the whole covenant community was identified by circumcision, and so it is in the age of fulfillment. But where is fulfillment in a covenant sign whose “promise” is never realized? *Many so-called “covenant children” who bear the alleged sign of the covenant and of membership in the covenant household never **truly** enter into that covenant or its community.* In their case, the sign is an empty fraud that communicates a lie.

One final important biblical argument against the notion of water baptism replacing circumcision is Paul's repeated association of true Abrahamic descent with *personal faith* in Christ. In the context of the fulfillment of the Abrahamic symbolism, the sons of the covenant – that is, the members of the covenant household – are those who personally share Abraham's faith, *regardless of their physical circumcision* (cf. Romans 4:1-12; Galatians 3:1-9). In this regard, Paul was simply reiterating what Jesus Himself had insisted upon (John 8:31-45). If, therefore, in the age of fulfillment Abraham's covenant children are distinguished by possessing the faith of their father, how can it be argued that unbelieving children – whether baptized or not – are members of his household?

In summary, Paul taught that the covenant community consists of all those and *only* those who have been joined to Christ by the new birth.

- This “life out of death” brings forth a “new man,” re-created in Christ by the Spirit and consecrated to God (Romans 6:1-10). It is this “cutting off of the body of the flesh” that fulfills the rite of circumcision, not the sprinkling of infants with water.
- For its part, baptism does correspond to circumcision in the sense that *it represents a personal and public testimony to the **fact** of one's spiritual circumcision.* Baptism hasn't replaced circumcision; it testifies to a person's participation in that which has replaced (by way of fulfillment) circumcision, namely the spiritual, inward circumcision done, not by human hands sprinkling water, but by the renewing, transforming power of the Spirit. Water baptism signifies – in fact, not in hope – a person's participation in the fulfillment of sacred space in Christ.