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Covenant Presbyterian Church

Why Do We Baptize Infants?



By Dr. J. Render Caines

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Why Do We Baptize Infants?

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Apples and oranges are both “fruit,” but their descriptions differ greatly. One is red; the other, orange. One is somewhat flat on top and bottom, with a thin, edible skin. The other mostly round with an unpalatable, thick skin.

Imagine the problems arising if you asked two people to define the term “fruit,” and one had an apple in mind while the other, an orange. Their definitions would seem confusing and contradictory. If they were aware of the other’s definition of “fruit,” they might become irritated, wondering how the “other guy” could be so stupid. Clearly, there would be little hope of finding common ground, unless they both came to the understanding that one was describing apples and the other, oranges.

That’s often the way it is when people from different backgrounds discuss “baptism.” They think they are talking about the same thing and become terribly exasperated trying to understand how their definitions can differ radically. What they often do not understand is they are describing radically different sacraments. When someone from a baptistic background discusses baptism with someone from a covenantal background, they frequently end up talking past each other, because one speaks of apples, and the other, oranges. Because their understanding of the significance of baptism differs radically, they are, in reality, not discussing the same subject.

A Profession of Faith

Churches which are baptistic in their theology define baptism as “a public profession of faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.” They believe that an individual is baptized after confessing his or her faith in Jesus. Understanding their view of baptism makes it easy to sympathize with why it upsets them when covenantal churches baptize infants. Clearly an infant is not capable of making a public profession of faith. And since those from a baptistic background believe baptism is the outward demonstration of such a profession, they are not able to accept or understand why anyone would baptize an infant.

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able to say: "I'm not sure I fully agree yet, but I know how they view the Scriptures, and I understand their reasons for doing what they do."

Obviously, I would love to win them over to a covenantal understanding of God's Word. But my major objective is not to argue or present a defense of our practices, but to offer a brief explanation for why we do what we do.

A Covenantal Understanding of God's Word

God first entered into a covenant with man at the time of the creation. God gave Adam and Eve the responsibility of tending the garden and keeping only one command: "Do not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil."

If Adam and Eve had kept perfectly this command, then one day they would have been allowed to eat from the Tree of Life and would have been granted the gift of eternal life. Instead, they deliberately chose to disobey.

When Adam and Eve chose to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, their relationship with God was horribly injured. God had warned them that the day they ate the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil they would die. The God-ordained punishment for sin is death. Sin is any act of disobedience against the will of God. To eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was a sin. Sin was punishable by death. Therefore, the day they chose to sin would be the day they suffered God's penalty for sin, death.

They had disobeyed the Lord, and furthermore they were unwilling to accept any responsibility for their actions. Adam blamed the woman. The woman blamed the serpent. But in fact, they were blaming God for their transgressions.

God, Who is patient and longsuffering, used this moment to demonstrate both His justice and mercy. He punished them. But, even in His pronouncement of punishment, He revealed His merciful, redemptive, covenantal purposes, He made clear His intention of saving them from the consequences of their sin. He had every right to damn them, but He chose instead to save them.

God told the man he would live by the sweat of his brow. His work would become difficult. The ground would be infested with weeds and thorns. God, however, was merciful; man would live. He would be able to bring forth from the ground food to preserve his life.

The woman would experience pain in childbirth and prove resentful toward her husband's position of headship, but she would bear children. That was important because God had told the serpent that one day his seed would bruise the heel of the woman's seed, but the woman's Seed would in turn crush the serpent's head. God promised that from the woman would be born a Seed Who would overcome the serpent and all his evil schemes.

After Adam and Eve had eaten the fruit, their first experience of the change that had taken place within them was their sense of shame over being naked in one another's presence. They unsuccessfully tried to cover themselves with fig leaves. But after God had pronounced His judgments and demonstrated His covenantal mercy, He graciously proceeded to cover their nakedness, to cover their sins, with the skins of animals, slain in the place of Adam and Eve. By the blood of these animals, they were forgiven and allowed to live.

God entered into a covenant with Adam and all his descendants. This covenant of redemption promised one day the Redeemer, the Seed of the woman, would come and offer up the final sacrifice for sin. The animals which had died in Adam and Eve's place were not magical

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Those blessings spoken by God to Abraham are now ours, because of Jesus Christ's life, death, resurrection and reign.

And finally in verse 29 we are told:

If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

If you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed and heirs of the covenant.

If you believe in the God of Abraham, then you are a child of Abraham's. The covenant blessings promised by God to Abraham are now yours. For if you claim Christ as your Savior and Lord, then you are Abraham's seed, an heir of all God's covenant blessings. You are one of those stars God showed Abraham the night He promised that Abraham's offspring would be as numerous as the lights above.

The New Testament Sign of the Covenant

Now if God gave Abraham a sign of this eternal covenant that existed between Himself and His people, and we are now part of Abraham's extended family, what sign has God given to indicate we are now citizens of His covenant community?

Look at Colossians 2:11,12. While Paul was ministering in Ephesus, he sent Epaphras inland to the Lycus Valley. God used Epaphras to establish three churches, one at Hierapolis, one at Laodecia, and the church at Colosse. The Lord chose to save many of the citizens of Colosse. But as soon as Epaphras left Colosse, the town was infiltrated by Judaizers, who taught that faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord was not sufficient for salvation. In order to merit salvation, the Mosaic law had to be kept. In particular, one had to be circumcised.

Paul wrote to the believers at Colosse to correct the false teachings of the Judaizers. He assured these Gentiles that salvation is fully obtained by faith in Jesus Christ. And then, in reference to circumcision, he made the following comment: "You don't need to be circumcised, because you already are circumcised!" I'm sure that came as a shock to these Greeks, whose culture considered circumcision a mutilation of the flesh.

But look at Colossians 2:11,12. Paul writes:

In Him you were also circumcised . . . having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God.

Paul's argument in verses eleven and twelve reduces to this simple formula: "You have been circumcised . . . because you have been baptized." They had not been literally circumcised. Their foreskins had not been cut away, but they had received the sign of their covenant relationship with the Lord in that they had received the waters of baptism. The NT sign of one's covenant relationship is baptism. Therefore, Paul could say to the Gentile believers at Colosse: "You have been circumcised, because you have been baptized."

Just as the Lord's Supper was a continuation of the OT celebration of Passover, so baptism became the NT equivalent of circumcision. Baptism is not something completely new, having no ties to the OT Scriptures. If that were true, then it would indeed be unique. Scripture is a continual unfolding and developing of foundational truths set firmly into place from the very beginning of God's revelation to man. The New Testament does not confront us with ideas unrelated to what has gone on before in God's dealings with His people. The Old Testament

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Baptizing Our Little Ones

When our children reach the age when they are able to make public their profession of faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, we bring them to the Lord's Table and rejoice, as for the first time they eat the bread and drink the cup.

Both baptistic and covenantal believers understand something special should happen when a child is born and when a child can first convincingly articulate his or her faith in Jesus. In baptistic circles, at birth the child is dedicated, and then upon public profession of faith he or she is baptized. In covenantal circles, the infant is baptized as a sign of his or her covenantal relationship with the Lord, and when that child is able to articulate his or her faith, he or she receives for the first time the bread and cup.

Apples and oranges. I hope you appreciate the differences. I wish they didn't exist. I wish we could all be of one mind. But that is not the way it is, despite the fact there are redeemed, faithful, Bible-believing brothers and sisters on both sides of this issue.

As I have already said, I hope you more clearly understand why we baptize our little ones. I realize I may not have changed your mind, but I hope I have at least given you the confidence to believe that what we do is based upon our understanding of Scripture.

If your thinking has been swayed, I encourage you to carefully study the covenantal structure of Scripture. For this is where the key is found, the key that unlocks for us a richer appreciation of what God has been about during the past several thousand years. He has been redeeming for Himself a covenant people, through whom He intends to build His church, and to expand His kingdom from shore to shore.

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