

What About Infant Baptism?



“Why does your church baptize babies?” This is a common question asked by visitors to a Reformed church. Since the historic practice of baptizing the children of believers has fallen on hard times, what used to be the norm among Protestants is now a foreign concept to many. Consequently, the doctrine of infant baptism can be a difficult hurdle for a person who is interested in joining a confessional, Reformed church.

So why *do* Reformed churches baptize children? The answer is simple: *We baptize the children of believers because they belong to the covenant and people of God.* While this answer is simple, it nevertheless requires some explanation. As with many doctrines, such as the Trinity or the deity of Christ, the doctrine of infant baptism requires a broader approach to Scripture than reading a few proof-texts. In order for us to understand this doctrine, we must first think about God’s covenant of grace with his people, and the nature of his church.

Perhaps the simplest approach to understanding this doctrine is by beginning with the Heidelberg Catechism’s concise explanation of infant baptism:

Q. 74. Should infants, too, be baptized?

A. Yes. Infants as well as adults are in God’s covenant and are his people. They, no less than adults, are promised the forgiveness of sin through Christ’s blood and the Holy Spirit who produces faith. Therefore, by baptism, the mark of the covenant, infants should be received into the Christian church and should be distinguished from the

children of unbelievers. This was done in the Old Testament by circumcision, which was replaced in the New Testament by baptism.

There are four parts to this answer which we should consider carefully: (1) there is one covenant of grace; (2) in the old covenant, God included children in his church; (3) in the new covenant, God still includes children in his church; (4) there is a promise made in baptism that must be believed.

There is One Covenant of Grace

The Heidelberg Catechism makes the claim that the children of believers “are in God’s covenant and are his people.” What is this covenant to which the Catechism refers?

The concept of covenant is important for Christians to grasp because it is the organizing framework of the Scriptures. A covenant, simply defined, is a formal agreement, with oaths and promises, creating a solemn relationship between its parties. Most of us are in a number of different covenants. Marriage, for example, is a covenant between one man and one woman. A mortgage is a covenant between the lender and the borrower. In Scripture, we find covenants between God and humans throughout redemptive history. Anyone who has read through the Bible even once knows that God’s covenant-making is central to the story. God makes covenants with such key figures as Noah, Abraham, the nation of Israel, and David. While there are many different covenants of various natures and purposes recorded in the Bible, there is ultimately one covenant in which the benefits of redemption are bestowed upon God’s people, a covenant we rightly call the “covenant of grace.” In this covenant, God promises salvation to sinners through faith in Christ, who merited salvation for his people through his life, death, and resurrection.

The covenant of grace begins in Genesis 3:15, just after Adam and Eve were expelled from the holy garden as punishment for having sinned against God. Although Adam, our federal representative, plunged the entire human race into sin and death (Rom. 5:12–19), he subsequently received a promise from the Lord that a Champion would come to bruise the serpent’s head, and merit eternal life for his people (Gen. 3:15; Rom. 5:14–21; Rev. 12:4–11). That is to say, Christ would be sent as the

second Adam to fulfill the work that the first Adam failed to do (1 Cor. 15:21–22, 45). In this promise, we see the beginning of the covenant of grace. God promised to send a mediator, and to take for himself a people, the offspring of the woman, separating them from the offspring of the serpent.

The covenant of grace continues as the Bible traces the lineage of God’s redeemed people (the offspring of the woman) from Seth to Abraham (Gen. 4–11). Once Abraham is brought into the picture, the speed of the story slows down. God then expands upon his covenant of grace by making particular promises to Abraham. He would make of Abraham “a great nation” (Gen. 12:2), and in him “all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (12:3). He would give Abraham an offspring numbered as the stars in heaven (15:5), and a land for them to possess (15:7). God then sealed these promises with a solemn covenant ritual involving the shedding of blood. He passed between severed animals, swearing an oath that he would fulfill his promises to Abraham (15:8–21; cf. Jer. 34:18–19).

God fulfilled these promises later in redemptive history. From Abraham came the twelve tribes of Israel, who grew in number like the stars in heaven (Deut. 1:10). After freeing them from slavery in Egypt, God brought them into the Promised Land. In Joshua 21:43–45 we read,

Thus the LORD gave to Israel all the land that he swore to give to their fathers. And they took possession of it, and they settled there. And the LORD gave them rest on every side just as he had sworn to their fathers. Not one of all their enemies had withstood them, for the LORD had given all their enemies into their hands. Not one word of all the good promises that the LORD had made to the house of Israel had failed; all came to pass.

As the Bible moves from the Old Testament to the New Testament, God fulfills these promises in an even greater way. In Galatians, the apostle Paul tells us how one becomes a true descendent of Abraham. In Galatians 3:7–9 he says,

Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “In you shall all the nations

of the earth be blessed.” So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.

What does all of this show us? It shows us that there is *one* plan of salvation for the *one* people of God, whom the Bible describes as the seed or offspring of Abraham (Gal 3:29; cf. Rom. 2:28–29; 11:17–20). There is no other way to be a child of God than to be included into Abraham’s covenant. Thus, when Reformed people speak of “*the* covenant,” we are speaking of the one covenant of grace that was first promised in Genesis 3:15, was expanded in detail to Abraham in Genesis 12, 15, and 17, was finally fulfilled in Christ, and continues until the consummation of all things. Anyone who ever has been or will be saved, during any period of human history, is a member of this one covenant of grace. Salvation is always the same: by grace alone, through faith alone, because of Christ alone, the one Mediator of the covenant.

In the Old Covenant, God Included Children in His Visible Church

Having looked briefly at the covenant of grace in redemptive history, we must now ask the question, *if believers participate in the covenant and people of God, what is the status of their children?* The Old Testament reveals that God not only allowed the children of believers to be brought into his covenant and visible people, but that he also commanded them to be included. In Genesis 17:6–8 we read of God reminding Abraham of the promises he made in his covenant, which extended to his offspring:

I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you. And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God.

God then commanded that a covenant-sign be given to Abraham and his descendants. That covenant-sign was circumcision. In Genesis 17:9–14 we find God’s direction to Abraham:

As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised. Every male throughout your generations, whether born in your house or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring, both he who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money, shall surely be circumcised. So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.

Circumcision was a “sign of the covenant.” The bloody ritual of cutting the flesh in the male reproductive organ signified the covenant that God made with Abraham and his descendants when he walked between the bloody animal halves. This was no mere formality; to be circumcised meant to receive a sign of the deepest spiritual significance. Circumcision even pointed to the realities of regeneration and justification (Deut. 10:16; 30:6; Rom. 4:11). It was a sign carved in flesh as a constant reminder of God’s promises to Abraham and his descendants.

While this covenant sign did not guarantee that every recipient of it possessed the spiritual realities that it signified, it nevertheless functioned in every case as the official act of consecration, so that each recipient was made a member of the covenant community. Every male in Abraham’s household, whether sons or servants, as well as every male in the covenant community thereafter, was to receive this sign in his flesh if he was to be identified with God’s covenant people. Conversely, anyone who rejected the sign of the covenant was to be cut off from the covenant community. To reject the *sign* of the covenant was to reject God’s *promises* in the covenant. Ultimately, it was to reject fellowship with the God who walked between the severed animal halves as a guarantee of his promises to Abraham.

In the New Covenant, God Still Includes Children in His Visible Church

Regarding the children of believers, the Heidelberg Catechism says in Answer 74, “Therefore, by baptism, the mark of the covenant, infants should be received into the Christian church and should be distinguished from the children of unbelievers. This was done in the Old Testament by circumcision, which was replaced in the New Testament by baptism.” The covenantal sign that is administered upon initiation into the visible church is no longer circumcision, but baptism (Col. 2:11–12). Like circumcision, baptism is a one-time, initiatory sign and seal of God’s covenant promise, which marks out an individual as belonging to God’s visible covenant people. Like circumcision, baptism is for the believer *and his children*.

Our Baptist brothers often argue that the children of believers should not be baptized until making a credible profession of faith because the New Testament never gives an explicit command or example of infant baptism. To this we must ask: Where in the New Testament do we find an example or command to *exclude* the children of believers from the visible church? Defending the doctrine of infant baptism in his day, the great Princeton theologian B.B. Warfield put it in the most straightforward of terms when he said, “The argument [for infant baptism] in a nutshell is simply this: God established his church in the days of Abraham and put children into it. They must remain there until he puts them out. He has nowhere put them out. They are still then members of his church and as such entitled to its ordinances.” Clearly, no such command to remove the children of believers from God’s covenant exists. On the contrary, Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 19:14).

More importantly, however, is the obvious trend in the New Testament of including those who once were excluded from the church. The greatest example of this is the gospel going out to the Gentiles. People who formerly were not of the physical family of Abraham but were “separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world” (Eph. 2:12) are now in Christ Jesus “no longer strangers and aliens” but “fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God” (Eph. 2:19). We also see

this in the fact that baptism was applied to females as well as males (Acts 8:12), in contrast to circumcision, which was only for males. Thus, Paul says, “there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). While there is still a distinction between men and women with regard to their assigned roles in the family and the church, baptism shows that men and women are the same in terms of personal worth to God, for both are created in his image (Gen. 1:26–28) and equally redeemed in Christ. Christian women, therefore, are not to worship in a separate courtyard as they did at the Jerusalem temple. They are to worship alongside men in the congregation (Col. 3:18–19).

Considering these things, are we really to think that while God includes Gentiles into his covenant people and includes women more fully by extending to them the covenant sign just as he does to males, that he also takes an opposite position with regard to the children of believers? While God extends his grace more abundantly in the New Covenant by including those who once were excluded, why would he then *exclude* children who once were *included*? Indeed, first-century Hebrew parents that became Christians would have been horrified at the suggestion that their children were now outside of the covenant of grace.

On the contrary, the apostles brought good news to parents. Preaching on the day of Pentecost, Peter proclaimed the gospel to a large audience of Jews and Gentiles and told them to repent and be baptized in Jesus’ name. He concluded by saying, “For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself” (Acts 2:39). Those who are “far off” are the Gentiles, now included in God’s covenant. But notice that Peter specifically points out that the promise is still “for your children.” Children of believers are not excluded from membership in God’s covenant community but included, just as they were from the beginning.

For this reason, Paul addresses the children of believers as members of the covenant of grace: “Children, obey your parents in the Lord” (Eph 6:1). He reminds them of the Fifth Commandment in the very next verse, showing that New Covenant children have the same responsibilities and privileges as Old Covenant children. They are to be raised as disciples of Christ: “Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (Eph 6:4; cf. Deut 6:4–9). Clearly, these children are con-

sidered members of the visible church no less than they were in the Old Covenant. As such, they should receive the sign of the covenant and be baptized.

There Is a Promise Made in Baptism That Must Be Believed

The promise to which Peter referred in his Pentecost sermon is mentioned in Heidelberg Catechism, Question and Answer 74. It says that our children, “no less than adults, are promised the forgiveness of sin through Christ’s blood and the Holy Spirit who produces faith.”

For this reason, parents must take great care to catechize and pray for their children, bringing them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord (Eph. 6:4). It is why parents are required to take vows at the baptismal font, promising to the utmost of our power to teach our children and have them taught the doctrine of salvation. Baptized children must not only grow up with the understanding that they have been “received into the Christian church” and “distinguished from the children of unbelievers” (Heidelberg Catechism 74), but must—in light of their baptism—be asked the questions, *Do you believe the gospel?* Do you trust that Christ’s blood alone washes away your sins as certainly as you see water washing away dirt from the body?

Do you believe what is signified in your baptism?

If he rejects the gospel, then the waters of baptism are not a sign of blessing, but a sign of judgment. Like the unbelieving Israelite whose circumcision symbolized the cursing of being “cut off” from the favor of God, the New Covenant child who rejects what is signified in his baptism will become like those unbelievers who perished in the floodwaters of God’s judgment while Noah and his family were brought safely through water (1 Pet. 3:20–22).

On the other hand, the covenant child who believes the gospel, embracing Christ with a true faith, is able to see in his baptism God’s pledge and token that gives us assurance that we are as really washed from our sins spiritually, as our bodies are washed with water (Heidelberg Catechism 73).