

A STRING OF PEARLS
UNSTRUNG

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*A THEOLOGICAL JOURNEY
INTO BELIEVERS BAPTISM*



FRED MALONE

A String of Pearls Unstrung:
A Theological Journey into Believers' Baptism

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Foreword

I was a young college student when I first read *A String of Pearls Unstrung*. Dr. Fred Malone's arguments, coupled with his gracious and personal manner of writing, helped keep me a Baptist. I had just finished wrestling with the doctrines of grace for several years and had finally concluded that the Bible teaches God's sovereignty in salvation. But then I began to struggle with what Scripture teaches about baptism because most of the authors who convinced me of my newfound Calvinistic soteriology were also Presbyterian in their ecclesiology. I was ready to be persuaded of paedobaptism, but I wanted to make sure I understood the arguments on both sides, and that's when I stumbled across Malone's pamphlet, which he narrates like a journal.

It persuaded me on a number of levels. First, it helped me to see key areas of hermeneutical inconsistency in Reformed paedobaptist theology. The most stark inconsistency is that the Reformed orthodox baptize the children of believers, but they will not allow those children to take the Lord's Supper, until they make a credible profession of faith. Yet Malone shows that in the old covenant, baby boys were circumcised and they were also allowed to take the Passover meal as soon as they could eat. Yet many Presbyterian theologians argue from New Testament priority that children may not partake of the Lord's Supper. They argue that the New Testament

requires participants to examine themselves, and since young children are unable to obey that command, they may not take the Supper. But these same Presbyterian theologians do not allow the New Testament to determine who may be admitted to baptism. For me, that inconsistency exposed a weakness and arbitrariness in Reformed paedobaptist hermeneutical practice.

Second, Malone's work helped me begin to see that Jesus Christ fulfills the old covenant shadows. While Reformed paedobaptists think that old covenant circumcision is fulfilled in baptism and the Passover is fulfilled in the Lord's Supper, the Bible teaches that the old covenant types are fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Reformed paedobaptists also want to see a close correspondence between the mixed body of believers and unbelievers under the old covenant and the new covenant people. But Dr. Malone rightly argues that the old covenant people were actually a shadow of the true people of God, who are redeemed by the blood of Jesus. The only way to determine the nature of the new covenant people is to look to the revelation of the new covenant in Jeremiah 31 and Hebrews 8. Malone writes, "Christ is the Circumcision and Isaac of the Abrahamic Covenant. Christ is the Paschal Lamb and Annual Atonement for its continuation through Sinai. And Christ is the sole Mediator of the New Covenant fulfillment as the effectual sacrifice for all those considered 'in' the New Covenant, Christ's redeemed church. These redeemed ones—and only these—are the New Covenant participants."

Third, this booklet is not only an argument for credobaptism over and against paedobaptism, it also has blood and tears mixed with it. Malone was trained at a Presbyterian seminary and he served as a Presbyterian pastor for years before he came to Baptist convictions. He states the views of Reformed paedobaptist theology ever so carefully, but he also carefully and sincerely disassembles that position with the Word of God. Malone's change to Baptist ecclesiology cost him greatly. I observed too many Baptists becoming Presbyterians from what appeared to be convenience, but the depth of Malone's conviction earned my respect and made me take his arguments that much more seriously.

In God's good providence, I now have the joy of serving as the Senior Pastor at First Baptist Church of Clinton, Louisiana, where Fred is the Pastor Emeritus. I can tell you that he is still every bit as convinced of what he wrote in this pamphlet so many years ago. And it has been one of the great blessings of my life to serve alongside him in the kingdom of Christ. I encourage you to read this pamphlet carefully and share it with others, both Baptists and Reformed paedobaptists alike.

—Tom Hicks

First Baptist Church
Clinton, LA
July 18, 2022

Preface to the First Edition

This pamphlet is not intended to be a definitive work on baptism. Originally written in 1977, it is simply a journal I narrated for myself and for my friends who are interested in understanding why I moved from a paedobaptist (infant baptism) position to a Baptist (disciples/confessors' baptism only) position. This journal has been edited for use as a booklet, but I have reserved a full revision for an upcoming book.

Any discussion about baptism, as with other doctrines in Scripture, is fruitless unless all parties are willing to sit down with open Bibles, open minds, and prayer-kept hearts. Infant baptism is an emotional issue because it involves our children and the promises of salvation to them. I simply ask that those who challenge my conclusions would sincerely and charitably study my arguments before they pass judgment.

It would have been easy to pass over this controversial topic and remain in the sphere of the Presbyterian Church. It still saddens my heart that my vows required me to

withdraw myself voluntarily from that arena of service with its fellowship and opportunities. However, my conscience and practice must be ruled by Christ Himself through the guidance of His written Word and by no other man, tradition, or logical extension. Therefore, this journal sets forth what I understand to be His guidance of me through the Scriptures.

Stated briefly, as a covenant theologian I have come to believe that according to the Bible, the only proper subjects for Christian baptism are disciples of Christ. Jesus and His disciples were “making and baptizing more disciples than John” (John 4:1). First they became disciples, then they were baptized. Jesus and the apostles baptized people who had become believers (“disciples”). Further, the Great Commission commands to “make disciples of all nations [individuals from all nations, not the national entities], baptizing *them* [those who were made disciples, my emphasis] . . . teaching *them* [the disciples, my emphasis] to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:19–20). This is exactly what happened at Pentecost. Only those who “received his [Peter’s] word were baptized” (Acts 2:41), not infant children of believers. In the Westminster Confession and the Second London Baptist Confession, baptism and its subjects are included as elements of worship under the regulative principle of worship, positively instituted by God and “limited by His own revealed will”.¹ The only form of baptism which fits this principle is that which was “instituted” and “prescribed in the Holy Scripture;” that is, baptism of disciples/confessors, not of infants.

Introduction

The greatest struggle in my theology has not been, oddly enough, the five points of Calvinism and the Reformed faith. I find these clear and well-defined from Genesis to Revelation. Rather, the thorn in my theological flesh has been baptism.

Although I was raised a Baptist, in seminary I came to the paedobaptist position because of several points of theology. These included the covenant with Abraham, the relationship between circumcision and baptism, the supposed disjunction between John's and Jesus' baptisms and Christian baptism, the argument of silence, the proof-texts concerning children in the covenant, and the testimony of tradition. The work which influenced me most was John Murray's *Christian Baptism*.

As I look back to those days as a sincere and searching seminary student I often wonder if I was as honestly searching for the truth as I thought I was. For in the hard crucible of sometimes bitter rejection by my Baptist friends over the doctrines of sovereign grace, and in the warm fellowship

of my like-minded paedobaptist brethren, it is more than possible that I allowed subjective feelings to influence my interpretation of the objective truth about baptism. I do not believe that I am the only Baptist who became a Presbyterian under these circumstances. In fact, I believe many Baptists, frustrated with doctrinal shallowness, have left Baptist churches to find a theologically comfortable home in sound Presbyterian churches. However, the sacraments are never minor issues of doctrine, and it is my hope that this pamphlet will persuade many to stay in, help reform, and build more sound Baptist churches.

In any case, after graduation I reexamined my position on infant baptism and found many inconsistencies that, for whatever reasons, I did not find in seminary. I have attempted to let most of my work be as original as possible. However, two books which helped me verbalize many things already discovered are *Should Infants Be Baptized?*, by T. E. Watson, and *The Children of Abraham*, by David Kingdon. I highly recommend these works to my paedobaptist and Baptist friends.

I have dealt only with the proper subjects of baptism because I believe this to be the most important factor with which to begin. John Calvin himself believed that the Bible teaches immersion and that the early church practiced immersion.² I accept Calvin's analysis though he allowed diverse practices.

As I cover each point of theology in an informal narrative fashion, I hope to give glory to God by letting His infallible

Word be the absolute and final authority for each conclusion. My continual prayer is for the Holy Spirit to illumine my mind and the mind of the reader as we gaze together into the mind of God as revealed in the written Word.

THE THORN

The change to Baptist convictions began as I was reading Exodus 12 as part of my devotional exercises. Surely I had read it many times before, but this time a question pestered my soul. In the institution of the Passover feast, I read: “And you shall observe this rite as a statute for you and for your sons *forever* [emphasis added]” (Ex. 12:24). My question concerned the participation of the children in the feast, which is a foreshadowing of the Lord’s Supper. And if they did participate, at what age did they begin? Further, what does this have to say about children’s participation in the Lord’s Supper? As I meditated, I wondered if this might not be simply a command to continue the ordinance from parent to child in unbroken generations. Therefore, I decided to research the point for a clearer understanding.

I concluded that the text can favor the participation of the household children of any age in the feast as well as be a command to continue the ordinance indefinitely. That the word “forever” implies the perpetuity of the ordinance is obvious. But in the covenant family context, the Hebrew *vav* conjunction (“and”) seems to define the ordinance for all children of the household as well. The context seems to support this inclusion of the children in the meal because there were no other leavened breads and meats allowed

to be present in the household (12:19–20, 28). With the exception of infants still on the breast, there was literally nothing left for the children to eat but the Passover meal! Some speculate that the children's question about the meal (v. 26) indicates their lack of participation in it. However, they certainly could have participated in the meal and even been able to ask the question about it long before they had the conceptual ability to understand its import.

I found it interesting how Berkhof and Murray differed regarding this situation, yet both disagreed with paedocommunion. Berkhof states:

Children, though they were allowed to eat the passover in the days of the Old Testament, cannot be permitted to partake of the table of the Lord, since they cannot meet the requirements for worthy participation.³

While admitting that Old Testament children participated in the Passover, Berkhof excludes them from the Lord's Supper because the New Testament prescribes self-examination and discerning the body.

Murray, on the other hand, discounts the interpretation that infants participated in the Passover for two reasons: (1) there is no mention of infants in the text, and (2) the diet was not suitable for infants. One problem with Murray's objections is that the same reasoning may be consistently applied to the silence concerning infants in household baptisms. Also, his contention is presumptuous, that the children were of an age to understand the meaning of the Passover when they asked what it meant. How many times

have our own children asked questions about Christ or the Lord's Supper and were not able to understand the answers? Further, Murray does not recognize that children are capable of ingesting both unleavened bread and meat as infants before one year of age.⁴

Therefore, I conclude from the text, context, and supporting Reformed comment that the children of the household who were capable of ingesting meat and unleavened bread partook of the Passover feast simply by their Old Covenant position in the household.

What are the implications of this fact? It amazed me that I ran across an article in the *Open Letter* the next month (1977), using this same fact for the basis of "Covenant Children's" communion. This publication by the Covenant Fellowship of Presbyterians printed an article by the pastor of Canal Street Presbyterian Church in New Orleans, advocating the passage of the P.C.U.S. amendment allowing baptized infant children entrance to the Lord's Table as soon as they are able to take the elements! The argument was based upon the transformation of circumcision into infant baptism as the principle for transforming the subjects of the Passover into the subjects of the Lord's Supper.

As I began to assimilate and analyze this article, several arguments against its conclusions came to mind. The two clearest were that (1) there is the scripturally-instituted command to examine oneself before participating, and (2) there is no positive command to include infants and small children in the supper. The first is an argument of

precept according to the regulative principle of Scripture, and the second an argument of silence and inference. Both arguments seem to limit participation in the Lord's Supper observance to baptized disciples who are capable of understanding the meaning of the supper and are able to examine their inward spiritual motivation when taking it. I concluded, along with most Reformed theologians, that these two arguments are sufficient to show the error of infant or covenant communion.

What now is my point? Simply this: Why is New Testament regulation sufficient to define the subjects of the Lord's Supper but not infant baptism? Assuming that household children in the Old Covenant administration were allowed to participate in the Passover feast as soon as they were able to consume the elements, and assuming that household children in the New Covenant administration are not allowed to participate until professing faith and self-examination are evidenced, my questions are:

- ❖ What has changed in the application of the covenant family concept from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant?
- ❖ Why does the household child participate in the Passover and not in the Lord's Supper?
- ❖ Has the New Covenant child of believers less blessings than the household Old Covenant child?
- ❖ What exactly *are* the covenant blessings for the New Covenant household child, if any?

THE STRING OF PEARLS

While I recognized disagreement concerning the conclusion that the Old Covenant children participated in the Passover by covenant position, there remained in my mind a growing desire to reexamine the biblical basis for infant baptism. I thought that perhaps God was guiding me to restudy the doctrine so that I might be confirmed in my own mind that earlier in seminary I had not let subjective influences guide my search for objective truth. However, I reasoned that if I came to be a Baptist I had nothing to lose in accepting God's truth in the Word. Either way, I would be stronger in the end.

While all paedobaptist covenant theologians that I have read heartily agree that there is no positive command to baptize covenant infants, they cite what can appear to be an impressive number of individual pearls which can be strung together as a beautiful and unified necklace. This is the principle of hermeneutics called "good and necessary inference." John Murray has stated this principle for infant baptism:

One of the most persuasive objections and one which closes the argument for a great many people is that there is no express command to baptise infants and no record in the New Testament of a clear case of infant baptism.... The evidence for infant baptism falls into the category of good and necessary inference, and it is therefore quite indefensible to demand that the evidence required must be in the category of express command or explicit instance.⁵

The problem with this statement is that it allows Old Testament inference from the Abrahamic Covenant to overrule the clearer and final New Testament fulfillment, prescription, and institution by revelation. According to Murray, one would have to present a command or example against infant baptism to overrule his Old Testament inference, even if it was never practiced. This is an absurd position hermeneutically.

The principle of “good and necessary inference” is legitimately used to support the cessation of such things as written revelation and modern day apostles. Yet in these cases, the basis for such inference is always New Testament revelation, not Old Testament implication. “The New is in the Old concealed; and the Old is in the New revealed” is an agreed upon hermeneutic which places more authority upon New Testament institution than upon Old Testament inference.

There may be an impressive collection of pearls strung upon the string of “good and necessary inference,” yet both T. E. Watson and Herman Hoeksema (*Believers and Their Seed*) have aptly demonstrated that there is enough disagreement among covenant paedobaptist theologians on each specific pearl to warrant a reexamination of the “good and necessary inference” which strings them all together. Since this is a brief journal, I will simply use Watson’s well-documented book (*Should Infants Be Baptized?*) to show that there is serious disagreement regarding specific Scriptures among major Reformed theologians on almost every point and ground supporting infant baptism.

What then are the pearls on the string? Since I am dealing with my own acceptance of paedobaptism, here are the pearls whose beauty caused me to add them to my string:

1. The covenant theology of the Old and New Testaments
2. The relationship between circumcision and baptism
3. The proof-texts concerning baptism
4. Jesus' attitude toward the children
5. The sanctification of believers' children
6. The disjunction of the baptism of John's and Christian baptism
7. The argument of silence
8. The argument of expanded blessings
9. The testimony of tradition

I have not dealt with mode in this journal because the issue of the biblical subjects of baptism is a far more important one.

THE FIRST PEARL

COVENANT THEOLOGY
IN THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENTS

The primary basis for the baptism of the covenant child is claimed to be found in God's promise of covenant blessing to Abraham and to his "offspring." Abraham was justified by faith through believing in God's promises to be his God and to make him the father of many nations (Gen. 12–17; Rom. 4). He and his "offspring" would inherit Canaan as an everlasting possession. And, most important of all, the Lord promised to be the God of Abraham and of his "offspring." Then God granted the sign of this covenant, circumcision, to Abraham and to his "offspring" forever. This sign was also to be administered to all males in the household, born and bought. Since Abraham is called "the father of us all" (Rom. 4:16), and since Christians are

referred to as “Abraham’s offspring” (Gal. 3:29) and “heirs according to the promise,” it seems “good and necessary” to infer that the sign of New Testament baptism should be applied to the children of Abraham’s “offspring” of faith as circumcision was applied to the children of Abraham’s “offspring” of flesh (Col. 2:11–12). This is a compelling pearl for infant baptism.

THE COVENANT PARTICIPANTS

Several questions, however, must be put to this conclusion. First, if Christians, Jewish or Gentile, are the “offspring” of Abraham, should we both claim physical Canaan as our rightful territory and “everlasting” possession as well? Second, if circumcision is a “forever” sign of the Abrahamic Covenant, then why do the New Covenant “offspring” of Abraham not continue circumcision as a religious act? And, third, should Christians baptize not only infants but also all males bought or born into their homes?

It has often been objected that it is not legitimate to identify both children and physical land in the same category concerning the covenant promises to Abraham. I quite agree. However, what about the 318 male servants of the household of Abraham who were circumcised by virtue of their being in Abraham’s household? How does this aspect of *people* in the covenant household, not *land*, apply in the New Covenant application of the Abrahamic Covenant?

There was a theological question concerning slaves’ baptism in the pre-Civil War South among Presbyterians.

Meredith Kline attempts to deal with this issue of the application of covenantal household authority in the New Covenant administration of the Abrahamic Covenant in his book, *By Oath Consigned*.⁶ However, Kline is unclear about whether or not the baptism of slaves is a legitimate application in the New Covenant administration. He shies away from saying that this practice is legitimate because of the silence of the New Testament and the difficulty of church discipline.⁷ On the other hand, in the same paragraph, he seems to allow the plausibility of servant baptism in certain mission situations for temporary cultural expediency. The decision seems to be left to the individual covenant head in his application of the principles of culture, family, and church to his particular situation. The question of what is the scriptural way of handling one's slaves in this regard is really not answered. Are covenant theology and the New Covenant participant so loosely defined?

Along with most covenant theologians, I conclude that these land and servant elements of the Abrahamic Covenant do not presently apply to the New Testament Christian and church since Christ's kingdom is "not of this world" nor is it a theocratic nation, yet is still the "Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16). Most of us believe that Christians will possess Canaan in the New Heavens and the New Earth but not in the present administration of things. Nor do any seriously believe in servant baptism.

It must be understood that just because there was an intermixture of physical and spiritual elements in the Abrahamic

Covenant, it does not follow by implication that the same elements apply to the New Covenant. We all know that one became a member of the Abrahamic Covenant by physical circumcision, but God also called Abraham's seed to spiritually circumcise their hearts as well (Deut. 10:16). That the New Covenant emphasizes a spiritual circumcision does not automatically imply that there must be physical members in the New Covenant without such a heart. As Pastor Walter Chantry of Grace Baptist Church, Carlisle, Pennsylvania, has well said, "In the Old Covenant, all that was spiritual was identified with an outward nation. In the New Covenant, all that is outward is identified with a spiritual nation."⁸ Therefore, those who apply the Abrahamic inclusion of physical children to the New Covenant as a basis for the infant baptism of the Christian's children must also honestly deal with the "forever" implications of Canaan, circumcision, and household adult membership in the New Covenant as well. There is too much inconsistency here to make a valid argument.

Therefore, the main question for me is: how does the Scripture apply the Old Testament promises which are given to Abraham and his "offspring" to the New Covenant fulfillment in the Christian and the church? Continuing, for the moment, to assume that baptism is the New Covenant counterpart of circumcision, let us define from Scripture the essence of the New Covenant and who exactly are the "offspring" of Abraham who should receive the New Covenant sign and blessings.

THE NEW COVENANT DESCRIBED

One of the key passages that must be considered in defining the meaning of the New Covenant is Jeremiah 31. In vv. 27–30, God declares that after the prophesied captivity each man will bear the responsibility for his own spiritual condition before God in a new way. Continuing this change of emphasis to individual responsibility in vv. 31–34, God defines a new basis for covenant membership and blessing in the New Covenant which is different from the basis for membership and blessing in the Old Covenant. In contrasting the Old and New Covenants, God's definition of the difference is that of heart renewal in each and every member of the New Covenant.

Initially, to become a participant in the Abrahamic Covenant and its continuation at Sinai, one simply had to be born into the physical descent of Abraham. Physical membership in this covenant was signified by circumcision, but one was cut off from the salvation of the covenant if he did not circumcise his heart as well (Deut. 10:16). However, it is important to note that many whose hearts were never circumcised continued to participate in visible Israel. Yet they were not visibly cut off from God's covenant people. Thus, the doctrine of the faithful remnant within physical Israel arose in the prophets (Jer. 23:1–6; 31:7). This remnant would come to fruition and fulfillment during the reign of "a Branch of righteousness" from David's line. It is this faithful remnant which is raised up in the days of the New Covenant (Jer. 31:7, 32–34).

Participation in the New Covenant, which is “not like” the Old Covenant, is defined as experiencing the reality of heart-religion in each and every member (Jer. 31:33–34). The New Covenant does not just introduce new blessings. Rather, all New Covenant members actually have the Law written on their hearts (“I will put My law within them, and I will write it on their hearts”), receive the forgiveness of sins (“I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more”), and know the Lord (“for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord”).

This definition says nothing of participation in the New Covenant blessings by physical descent alone. Rather, the participants whom Jeremiah describes are the true “Israel” (Gal. 6:16). They are “the children of the promise,” a faithful remnant according to God’s “election of grace” (Rom. 9:6–8) in which every true member knows the Lord. This New Covenant in which God writes His Law on the heart of each one in the covenant is also defined in Ezekiel 36:24–28 as the time when God puts His Spirit within and gives a new heart that will be careful to observe His ordinances. This promise of the Spirit is also spoken to the whole house of Israel, indicating that this new heart will be evident in the nation as a whole. In fact, Galatians 3:14, 29 defines the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham in the New Covenant as the gift of the Spirit to all his “offspring,” i.e., Jewish and Gentile believers (Rom. 4; see also the explanation of the promise in Acts 2:39 below).

Paedobaptist theologian, Herman Ridderbos, believes that Jesus’ teaching on the kingdom of God and its born

again members is “determined by the idea of the covenant.” Jesus’ reference to the New Covenant of Jeremiah 31 at the Last Supper affirms this understanding. Thus, the idea of God’s people takes on a more restricted meaning in the New Covenant:

God’s people are those for whom Christ sheds his blood of the covenant. They share in the remission of sins brought about by him and in the unbreakable communion with God in the new covenant that he has made possible . . . In the light of the whole gospel they are the people who have accepted the preaching of the gospel in faith and conversion. It is they, *and no one else* (italics mine), who receive the salvation of the kingdom. They are “Israel,” “God’s people,” and it is to them that all the promises of the covenant apply.⁹

Therefore, based upon Jeremiah 31:31–34 and its description of regeneration in the New Covenant participants, and in light of Christ’s definition of the entrance requirements to the kingdom (John 3:5–6) and church (Matt. 16:16–18), I cannot say that children of believers are “in” the New Covenant or church or kingdom or “God’s people” until they show, by outward confession, evidence of regeneration.

It has been objected that perhaps Jeremiah 31:34 is an eschatological reference because of the stated lack of need for anyone to teach his neighbor and brother. Therefore, the argument goes, this describes the church triumphant. Do we not need to teach each other in the New Covenant? Of course! But in addressing Israel, God is referring to neighbors and brothers in the New Covenant Israel! There is no

need to evangelize the participants in the New Covenant because they all know the Lord! Of course we teach each other to observe all that Christ commanded us (Matt. 28:18–20). But there is no need to teach those in the New Covenant to “know the Lord” because they already know Him, having been taught by God Himself (John 6:44–45; 1 John 2:27; 1 Thess. 4:9). For this reason, the “least to the greatest” of those in the New Covenant are greater than John the Baptist, who was regenerated in the womb (Matt. 11:11). Therefore, I am not willing to concede that a believer’s child is automatically in the New Covenant and is thereby greater than John the Baptist, until he/she shows evidence of regeneration by a profession of faith in Christ. Even if our Sovereign God were to regenerate children of believers in the womb, they should not be considered “in” the New Covenant until they show the evidence of regeneration by repentance and faith. This is the uniform command and example of the New Testament, and it precedes New Covenant baptism.

THE NEW COVENANT SACRIFICE

To say that all physical infants of believers are “in” the New Covenant as the infants of Abraham were “in” the Abrahamic and Sinaitic Covenants violates the doctrine of particular redemption. Hebrews 9 reminds us that God’s covenant requires mediation through blood. The Passover Lamb brought physical deliverance for all Israel because all ate it. The Annual Atonement (Lev. 16) was offered on behalf of the whole assembly, all Israel. Of course, these

sacrifices could not cleanse the conscience, but their design was for the covenant people of God in the Old Testament. If Christ's sacrifice is offered up only for His elect people as the "New Covenant in My blood" (Luke 22:20; Mark 14:24), how can the unregenerate children of believers be said to be "in" the New Covenant, church, and kingdom without an effectual Mediator? They cannot. Indeed, Hebrews 9:15 defines Christ as an effectual Mediator of the New Covenant to insure that "those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance." Can one be said to be "in" the New Covenant or church without a Mediator? Not on the basis of the concept of the church in the New Testament. Though all would agree that false professors were addressed as members of the church for which Christ's effectual blood was shed, yet they were so addressed on the basis of their profession, not on the basis of their parents' faith. Even then, they were to be put out of the church if their profession proved spurious by their life. Yet there was some outward evidence to designate them "in" the church. But there is no clear basis for saying infants of believers are "in" the church unless we are also willing to say that they are "in" the "church of God which He obtained with His own blood" (Acts 20:28). No, if an infant is said to be "in" the New Covenant administration of the one covenant of grace and "in" the church without effectual mediation, severe violence is done to the biblical truth that "Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her" (Eph. 5:25) Can an unregenerate infant be called "in" the church by Christ's effectual mediation and never receive salvation? Absolutely

not. Therefore, violence is done to the doctrine of particular redemption.

The covenant of grace requires the blood of an effectual Mediator. Christ is the Circumcision and Isaac of the Abrahamic Covenant. Christ is the Paschal Lamb and Annual Atonement for its continuation through Sinai. And Christ is the sole Mediator of the New Covenant fulfillment as the effectual sacrifice for all those considered “in” the New Covenant, Christ’s redeemed church. These redeemed ones – and only these – are the New Covenant participants.

THE SEED OF ABRAHAM

This brings us to the next question: exactly who are the “offspring” of the Abrahamic Covenant who should receive the New Covenant counterpart of circumcision? In Romans 4, where Abraham is called “the father of us all,” we find that God has fulfilled His promise to him to become the father of many nations by defining his “offspring” as those who are “of the faith of Abraham” (v. 16). Whether they are uncircumcised or circumcised, his “offspring” are those who “walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised” (vv. 11–12). There is no mention of the physical descendants of believers as included in the New Covenant fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant; rather, it is only those who actually have obtained “the righteousness of faith” by receiving Jesus Christ (cf. John 1:12–13).

In Galatians 3, Paul clearly indicates that physical descent and circumcision have no necessary relationship to the

fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant in the New Covenant. The promises of the Abrahamic Covenant were made to Abraham and to his one “offspring,” named Christ (3:16). Therefore, the New Covenant fulfillment of the promise to make Abraham the father of many nations is through Christ – his fulfilled “offspring” – and all who have faith in Him. The actual definition of the Abrahamic “offspring” is “those who are of faith” (vv. 7, 9). If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s “offspring,” “heirs according to promise” (v. 29). The only definition of the “offspring” of Abraham in the New Covenant is Christ and His “offspring” who have experienced the reality of saving faith, i.e., the Abrahamic promise of the Spirit (vv. 14, 29).

Who is the “offspring” of Christ to whom belong the promises of the Abrahamic Covenant? It is those who belong to Christ (Gal. 3:29) and those alone, revealed by their faith. The only ones who have a claim to the inheritance of God are the children of God by the Spirit’s regeneration (Rom.8:9, 14–17; John 1:12–14). Therefore, no one is considered an inheritor of the Abrahamic promises until by faith he becomes a “offspring” of Abraham through Christ, who is the literal fulfillment of Abraham’s “offspring.” And we “belong to Christ” only through the faith that evidences regeneration (Gal. 3:22, 29).

Also, if we continue to assume that baptism is the counterpart of circumcision, we are faced with the problem of verse 27 where all (without distinction between infants and adults) who were baptized into Christ have clothed

themselves with Christ. It is only prejudice that keeps one from defining this in terms of water baptism.¹⁰ Paul is alluding to their experience of union with Christ, symbolized by their confirming experience of water baptism. No one would claim that all the participants in the Old Covenant circumcision experienced the reality of saving faith. Nor would anyone claim that all who receive disciples' baptism have saving faith. Yet the New Covenant fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise is an "offspring" consisting of all who are "of faith," who receive the Abrahamic promise of the Spirit, and who confess their faith through baptism as the outward sign.

The Abrahamic Covenant was entered by circumcision; the New Covenant is entered by faith in Christ. Only Abraham's New Covenant "offspring" of faith should receive the New Covenant sign of baptism.

Now, you may be thinking, Does this really say anything that actually prohibits the giving of the covenant sign of baptism to the children of Abraham's New Covenant "offspring"? Before I answer that question, let us first examine the Scriptures to determine the significance of circumcision in relation to the New Covenant.