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WHY BAPTISE INFANTS?

By Richard Sherratt

Article 27 of our Articles of Religion states that “The baptism of young children is in any wise to be retained in the Church as most agreeable with the institution of Christ.” Because of this there will be times, I am sure, that we shall be asked by someone to give an account of this and explain why, as Christians, we baptize infants. I am convinced that in responding we ought to found our position squarely upon the eternal covenant of God.

The Covenant of God

It is a glorious truth indeed that our God is a covenant God. In Genesis 17:7 God declares of himself “I will establish My covenant”. This gracious covenant that God establishes is founded in eternity and realised within history. It was made with Christ and with all the elect in him and is a relation of the most blessed communion and intimate friendship between the triune God and his chosen people in Christ Jesus (Revelation 3:20; 21:3). It is this unconditional covenant, this relation of friendship, that God establishes and he does so with believers and their children. Hence God declares in Genesis 17:7 that “I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you”.

From the Old Testament we find that God has established his covenant with believers and their seed or, as Dutch Reformed theologian Herman Hoeksema puts it, ‘in the line of continued generations’ and therefore infants are included in the covenant of God. This is found in Genesis 17:7 where it says “I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations”. As we look back into the Old Testament we find God’s covenant being realized in an unbroken line from Adam to Christ through Seth, Noah, Shem, Abraham, Israel, Judah and David¹. This continues in the New Testament hence St. Peter declares in Acts 2:39 that “the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, as many as the Lord our God shall call.” Notice the parallel between the covenant formula of “to you and your descendants after you” in the Old Testament and “to you and to your children” in the New Testament.

The Covenant Sign

Whilst God has established his covenant he has also instituted a sign and seal of this covenant so that those with whom the covenant is established are marked out as being in a covenant relation with him. These signs of the covenant have two parts as our Catechism teaches. Firstly an “outward and visible sign” and secondly “an inward and spiritual grace” signified thereby. Under the old dispensation the sign and seal of the covenant was circumcision and so when God established his covenant with Abraham and his seed he commanded “Every male child among you shall be circumcised” (Genesis 17: 10). This sign of circumcision, we are taught in Romans 4:11, was “a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while still uncircumcised” i.e. that God justifies through faith alone. But if we look through the Scriptures we find circumcision signified much more than just this. It symbolised regeneration, repentance and sanctification (Leviticus 26:40, 41; Deuteronomy 10:16; Jeremiah 4:4). Circumcision was also a sign of God’s covenant to be the God of believers and their seed therefore we read “it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and you.” The covenant sign of circumcision signified a spiritual grace and was properly a sacrament.

However Christ has taken away all bloody ordinances and circumcision has been fulfilled in baptism hence under the new dispensation baptism has replaced circumcision as the covenantal sign and seal. There is a direct parallel between circumcision and baptism. Titus 3:5 and 1 Peter 3:21 teach that baptism signifies regeneration and cleansing. Romans 6:4 teaches that it symbolises

sanctification and Galatians 3:27-29 teaches that baptism signifies our being in the covenant of God. Furthermore Colossians 2:11-13 offers clear proof that circumcision and baptism are essentially the same in meaning.

This is taught in both the Belgic Confession of 1561 and the Heidelberg Catechism of 1563. The Belgic Confession states that

We believe and confess that Jesus Christ, who is the end of the law, has by His shed blood put an end to every other shedding of blood that one could or would make as an expiation or satisfaction for sins. He has abolished circumcision, which involved blood, and has instituted in its place the sacrament of baptism. By baptism we are received into the Church of God and set apart from all other peoples and false religions, to be entirely committed to Him whose mark and emblem we bear. This serves as a testimony to us that He will be our God and gracious Father for ever... Because baptism has the same meaning for our children as circumcision had for the people of Israel, Paul calls baptism the circumcision of Christ².

The Heidelberg Catechism asks “Should infants, too, be baptized?” replying:

Yes. Infants as well as adults belong to God's covenant and congregation... Therefore, by baptism, as sign of the covenant, they must be grafted into the Christian church and distinguished from the children of unbelievers. This was done in the old covenant by circumcision, in place of which baptism was instituted in the new covenant³.

Here we find it taught explicitly that baptism and circumcision have the same meaning and we can safely conclude that the sign and seal of the covenant has changed from circumcision to baptism.

A Covenant People and a Covenant Sign

That God has established a covenant has been shown above as has his institution of a sign of that covenant. God has *commanded* that those with whom he has established his covenant are marked with the covenant sign. This can be seen in Genesis 17:7-11 “I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you... Every male child among you shall be circumcised... and it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and you.” Because God establishes his covenant with believers and their seed so believers and their seed ought to be marked out by the covenant sign. Therefore the argument that we maintain is that because infants are included in the covenant of God and baptism is the sign of the covenant, baptism should be administered to infants.

The Church of England and the Covenantal Argument

The question must now be asked as to how this covenantal position fits in with the teaching of the Church of England.

I showed previously that the covenant sign of circumcision signified a spiritual grace and as such was a sacrament. This is taught in the homilies saying “And so was circumcision a Sacrament, which preached unto the outward senses the inward cutting away of the foreskin of the heart, and sealed and made sure in the hearts of the Circumcised the promise of GOD touching the promised seed that they looked for.”⁴

Archbishop Cranmer linked baptism with circumcision arguing, “the baptism of infants is proved by the plain scriptures. First, by the figure of the old law, which was circumcision. Infants in the old law were circumcised; ergo, in the new law they ought to be baptized. Again: infants pertain to God, as it is said to Abraham, “I will be thy God, and the God of thy seed after thee.”⁵ Notice here that Cranmer parallels baptism with circumcision and then argues along covenantal lines from Genesis 17.

Our liturgy and Articles teach that through baptism infants become members of the visible covenant community. In the baptismal liturgy the minister urges the congregation to pray unto God that the infant that is to be baptized will be “received into Christ’s holy Church” and after baptism the minister declares “We receive this Child into the congregation of Christ’s flock” and that the infant has been “grafted into the body of Christ's Church”.

We see here that the covenantal case for infant baptism is consistent with the teaching of the Church of England.

A Final Word

I began by asking how we should respond to someone asking why we should baptise infants. My answer has been that we show them that infants are included in the covenant and baptism is the sign of the covenant and therefore it should be administered to infants. In closing there are three brief points I wish to make:

We baptize infants not because they have faith or because we presume them to be regenerate but rather because of the promise of God to believers that he will be their God and the God of their children (Deuteronomy 30:6; Isaiah 59:20, 21; Jeremiah 32:37-40)

Whilst God has established his covenant with believers and their seed the covenant is truly made with believers and their elect seed only as St. Paul teaches in Romans 9:6.

Baptism does not justify rather it acts as a visible word testifying of justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. It reminds us that we are, as our Catechism teaches, “by nature born in sin, and the children of wrath” and that it is only by the sovereign grace of God that we are saved.

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Endnotes:

¹Hoeksema, H. (1997) Believer and their Seed, Reformed Free Publishing Association, pages 85-99

² Belgic Confession, Article 34.

³ Heidelberg Catechism, Question 74.

⁴ That Common Prayers and Sacraments ought to be ministered in a known tongue

⁵ Cox, J. (1846) Miscellaneous Writings and Letters of Thomas Cranmer, Regent College Publishing pp.60