

Is Paedobaptism Biblical?

by D. Matthew Brown

It seems that a clarification is necessary on the ordinance of baptism, on its application and on its significance. Credobaptism (the baptism of believers) has come under attack even from those who call themselves Baptists, expressly John Piper, who have forsaken the teachings of Christ and the Apostles concerning the nature of Baptism, exchanging the clear biblical doctrine for a doctrine that is reformed and wrong. The clear teaching of the Bible is that there is one legitimate baptism--baptism by immersion that immediately follows faith in Christ and repentance from sin. If the Bible is so clear on the mode and timing of baptism, why then is there so much disagreement on the particulars of baptism? Since there are disagreements now arising even from within the Baptist denomination, it would be beneficial for all Christians to take a fairly exhaustive look at the ordinance of baptism. My objective will therefore be to acknowledge and to evaluate the reformed teachings and arguments on paedobaptism (the baptism of infants) and to place them beside what Scripture teaches concerning baptism. To spare those who have some familiarity on the subject, traditional arguments for credobaptism will be found later in the document and more pertinent arguments will be addressed first.

1. Continuity of the covenants does not demand paedobaptism.

When one speaks of there being continuity between the covenants of the Bible, he is not saying, unless he is ignorant about what he is speaking, that there is continuity between every covenant in the Bible and that every covenant is therefore a restatement of the covenant of promise originally given to Abraham. This is most evident in the book of Hebrews where there are clear distinctions drawn between the Old Covenant (i.e. the Mosaic Law) and the New Covenant—the promise first given to Abraham now fulfilled in Christ. Therefore any doctrines that claim to have their basis in Covenant Theology must give heed to the discontinuous nature between the Covenant of Promise (i.e. Covenant of Grace, Abrahamic Covenant, Davidic Covenant, etc.) and the Old Covenant, and rightly distinguish, as the author of Hebrews puts it, what is shadow and what is reality.

The doctrine of paedobaptism therefore rests solely on the grounds that circumcision was an ordinance of the New Covenant that was then replaced by baptism after the life of Christ. It is assumed that since the sign of circumcision was given to Abraham prior to the giving of the Mosaic Law that circumcision was not an institution of the Mosaic Law, and circumcision was therefore an institution of the New Covenant. But is this necessarily the case? It is interesting to note that every time circumcision is mentioned in the New Testament it is tied directly with the Mosaic Law. Moreover, Christ said himself, "Moses gave you circumcision . . . and you circumcise a man on the Sabbath . . . so that the

law of Moses may not be broken" (John 7:22,23). Paul then later says, "If you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law" (Galatians 5:2,3). Regardless of the time of the giving of the ordinance of circumcision, circumcision was unwaveringly bound to the Mosaic Law by the New Testament writers. Even more, Paul gives us the very reason for Abraham's circumcision, saying that Abraham received the sign of circumcision *after* his faith had been counted to him as righteousness so that he would be the father of all who believed that were not circumcised (cf. Romans 4:11).

Therefore if circumcision requires the keeping of the whole law, and paedobaptism is the post-Christ equivalent of circumcision, then paedobaptism demands the keeping of the whole law. Paedobaptism then is not a doctrine to be handled lightly, for if paedobaptism is tantamount to circumcision then "Christ will be of no advantage to you."

How then should circumcision be viewed today? Being that circumcision falls under the Mosaic Law, circumcision therefore acts as the rest of the institutions of the Old Covenant, namely in their "casting of shadows" to realities of the New Covenant. Just as the Mosaic tabernacle pointed to the heavenly tabernacle, and the Levitical priesthood pointed to the priesthood of Christ, so too does circumcision point to a greater reality—that reality not being baptism by water. It should be noted that all the institutions of the Old Covenant pointed to something greater, that is the temporal pointed to the eternal. Therefore temporal circumcision cannot point to temporal baptism. To what then does circumcision of the flesh point? Circumcision of the flesh points to circumcision of the heart. The clearest statement of this is by the Apostle Paul: "For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God (Romans 2:28,29). In a passage in Deuteronomy that sounds remarkably similar to the statement of the New Covenant in Jeremiah 31, Moses writes, "And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live" (Deut. 30:6). It can therefore then be said that as circumcision of the flesh is tantamount to a binding to the Mosaic Law, that circumcision of the heart is tantamount to the law being written on the heart.

2. Early Church history does not give support to paedobaptism.

If circumcision is so intertwined with baptism, as paedobaptists argue, then any discussion or debate on circumcision in the early Church should not be taken lightly. The first church council ever to be convened is written about in the pages of the Acts of the Apostles and deals expressly with the ordinance of circumcision. In the fifteenth chapter of Acts, it is said that men came down from Judea teaching that the Gentiles must be circumcised in order to be saved. A church council was then convened to address this issue, and from there Peter said:

And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to [the Gentiles], by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith. Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will (Acts 15:8-11).

Note what Peter's argument is. Peter argues that the Gentiles had no need for circumcision because, one, the Holy Spirit had been given to them and cleansed their hearts by faith apart from circumcision and, two, giving circumcision to the Gentiles would place on them the unbearable yoke of the Law. No where in his argument does Peter say that circumcision is unnecessary because the ordinance of baptism has been given to replace circumcision. It can therefore be assumed that these men from Judea were requiring that the Gentiles be both circumcised and baptized.

Moving to extrabiblical Church history, paedobaptism was never recognized as an institution before Augustine came to grips with the Doctrine of Original Sin sometime before 430 A.D.. To state the doctrine simply, according to Romans 5, all people have Adam as their father and federal head, and therefore when Adam sinned, every human sinned. Augustine, coming to grips with the fact that every person who had ever lived or will live had the sin of Adam imputed to them, believed that infants were condemned in the sight of God and would be punished eternally in hell if they were to die as infants without faith. To remedy this, Augustine proposed that baptizing infants would remove from them the guilt of original sin and would thereby secure their salvation. Though the doctrine sounds nice, it is however absolutely unbiblical and declares that salvation is not by grace alone through faith alone and through the work of Christ alone.

3. Paedobaptism is never mentioned in the Bible.

It is remarkable that such an important ordinance such as paedobaptism would not be found one time in the whole of Scripture. It takes a great deal of assuming to even remotely find paedobaptism to be a possibility in the New Testament. The greatest of these assumptions is the household baptisms in the book of Acts. One must assume, for paedobaptism to be found in any of these household baptisms, that, one, there were infants in the household, and, two, that some members of the household were baptized apart from faith in Christ. Not only are these assumptions shaky because they are assumptions, they are also dangerous in that they rip the ordinance of baptism away from those who have faith and repent, which explicitly happens in every other instance of baptism. These assumptions are however easily refuted in two instances. First, the household baptism of the jailor in Acts 16 ends with the statement, "[the jailor] was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—*he and his whole family*" (Acts 16:34, emphasis mine). The second instance is found two chapters later when "Crispus, the synagogue ruler, and his entire household *believed* in the Lord; and [then] many of the Corinthians who heard him *believed*

and were baptized" (Acts 18:8). So then, in spite of the fact that whole households were baptized, the whole household was baptized because they all believed in the Lord.

4. Texts that are cited as support for paedobaptism are taken grossly out of context.

Looking at the Christian Reformed Church's statement on baptism, there is one text that is often used by paedobaptists, and is found in the CRC's statement, that is, one, misquoted, and, two, taken clearly out of context. That text is Acts 2:39, which says, "The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, all whom the Lord our God will call." This is how CRC quoted the same verse in their statement, "The promise is for you and your children and for . . . all whom the Lord our God will call." This text in its context says that the promise (i.e. the gift of the Holy Spirit) is for you (the Jews), for your children (future Jews), and for those who are far off (Gentiles). The text does not say that the Holy Spirit will be given to all Jews, to all their children, and to all the Gentiles, but it says rather that "there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him" (Romans 10:12). What then does the paedobaptist do to this text? They rip it out of its context, remove "for all who are far off," and misinterpret it as meaning that the promise of baptism is for the Christian and their children. They do not give heed to the verses that directly precede it, that say, "Now when they heard this (i.e. the Gospel) they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, 'Brothers, what shall we do?' And Peter said to them, '*Repent and [then] be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit*'" (Acts 2:37,38). Even paedobaptists' proof texts cannot escape the intertwining of faith and repentance with baptism.

My conclusion therefore is that paedobaptism is interjected into Scripture to give unnecessary support to orthodox and reformed positions that should have been abolished centuries ago. Paedobaptism is not a harmless doctrine that permits the wetting of infants, but it is a dangerous one, tying itself to the circumcision of the Old Covenant, therefore binding a child to a Law that no person can bear and thereby belittling the work of Christ and salvation by grace alone through faith alone. Regardless of one's upbringing or of the theologians that one esteems, the doctrine of credobaptism should never capitulated to accommodate those who are misguided or those who have crassly and knowingly twisted Scripture to accommodate their customs.