

The Polemics of Anabaptism: Antipaedobaptism from the Reformation Period Onward

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As I sit composing and editing this essay, I hear horse-drawn buggies of the descendants of those early protestors of infant baptism, in Lancaster County, PA.¹

The Baptism Waters Divided: Some Early Historical Considerations

Reformation sacramentology is a sad study, filled with testimonies of bitter polemics, schism, division, and even execution. One may catch a glimpse of the pain, seeing Zwingli at Marburg, or a drowning protestor in Zurich, or a banished “sacramentarian” in the Paletinate. The same holy waters of baptism, intended to bring union to God and His people, continue to be a cause for ecclesiastical divisions.

The proper recipients of baptism at this point seems to be a perennial discussion of Reformed dogmatics. It is a question historically juxtaposed between ecclesiology and soteriology, between the magistracy and the ministry. In popular conceptions today it is often relegated squarely to non-essential status, but early in the Protestant movement the question became a matter of supreme importance. Most notably, when the followers of the Swiss Ulrich Zwingli forged a “radical reformation.” Many paid for their theological convictions with their lives.²

However ambivalent Zwingli was on infant baptism in the years preceding 1524, when the question came to a head, Zwingli stood against the Anabaptists.³ Although Zwingli had been somewhat successful in many efforts of reformation, the group that became known as Anabaptists proposed deeper changes, cutting the umbilical cord to civil society. “They discarded infant baptism, rejected all state ordinances affecting the Church, opposed the collection of tithes, and denied that the Church was properly composed of all members of the community.”⁴ Zwingli sought to persuade representatives of what we now call the Anabaptist movement in meetings held on January 10 and 17, 1525. Even so, Hubmaier, Grebel and Manz, who represented the Anabaptists in the those conferences, did not abandon their position. Civil action to suppress all Anabaptist teaching followed. But in defiance of this suppression, the monumental action took place at Zollikon on February 7, 1525: Grebel re-baptized Blaurock and later Blaurock baptized others. George Hunston Williams refers to this as the “final act, rebaptism and rupture with magisterial Protestantism.”⁵ Their act was an act of political action, as much as religious conviction. After further conferences and more magisterial attempts to persuade, including imprisonment, in November of the same year, finally the extreme sanction was imposed: death by drowning.⁶ It is ironic that martyrdom is an almost infallible means of dissemination and conversion.⁷

To what extent the well-known “Swiss” Anabaptists, Hubmaier, Blaurock, Grebel, and Manz, were revolutionary in their approach is debatable.⁸ McNeill notes, “There was a strong fanatical strain in the movement, though this was not prominent in Zurich.”⁹ However, Grebel had been

influenced by the violent leader of the peasants' revolt, Thomas Müntzer (1490-1525). Grebel writes to Müntzer, in a letter of September 5, 1524, "On the matter of baptism thy book pleases us well, and we desire to be further instructed by thee."¹⁰ The letter goes on to speak of infant baptism as "a senseless, blasphemous abomination, contrary to all Scripture . . ."¹¹

F. Nigel Lee, in *Anabaptists and Their Stepchildren*, with copious citations argues the thesis that Anabaptists emerged from medieval Romanist influences, especial the Petrobusians and were *mostly* communistic and revolutionary.¹² Lee's work is framed as a response to Leonard Verduin's, *The Reformers and Their Stepchildren*.¹³ Lee cites evidence that the revolutionary Thomas Müntzer preached the abandonment of infant baptism after being in the circle of Zwickau prophets [1521] (Nicholas Storch, Thomas Drechsel, and Marcus Stuebner) and that the Swiss Anabaptists were of a similar mind as Müntzer.¹⁴ It may be that the Anabaptist rejection of infant baptism was being spread as early as 1522, certainly the documentary evidence points to a time prior to 1524.¹⁵ As cited in the letter to Müntzer, he was connected to the Swiss Anabaptists, like Grebel, Castelberg, Mantz, Ockenfuss, Pur, Aberli, and "other brethren of thine in Christ. . ."¹⁶ In the second letter or "Postscript," Grebel adds the names of Pannicellus, Hujuff, "thy countryman of Halle, thy brethren, and seven new young *Müntzers* against Luther . . ." [emphasis added]¹⁷ Lee characterizes the major thrust of the Anabaptists as revolutionary and communistic, citing examples of a proto-communistic ideology throughout the movement. So far from being pacifistic new-testament-only-biblicists, they refer to themselves as "*Müntzers* against Luther."¹⁸

Despite documented revolutionary tendencies within the total Anabaptist movement, the distinctive convictions of the more pacifist contingent were articulated in the seven articles of the Schleithem Confession. This confession, also known as the Brüderliche Vereinigung or the Schleithem Brotherly Union Confession, was written under the leadership of Michael Sattler of Stauffen, Germany. The articles were ratified on February 24, 1527, during an assembly of Anabaptists in the northern Swiss village of Schleithem. This Confession is an important primary source for early Anabaptists. In sympathetic literature, the qualification is often made that this Confession is not a complete confession of faith, embodying a full system to which its adherents ascribe. Rather, it focuses on the distinctives of the movement. Early, these articles were used in the polemics. Zwingli translated these articles into Latin in order to refute them and Calvin used a non-extant French translation of the Seven Articles in his refutation of Anabaptism published in 1544.¹⁹ The very first article refers to infant baptism as excluded, calling it the greatest and first abomination of the pope.²⁰

As with Grebel before, there is a great vehemence toward the practice infant baptism, being labeled "the highest and chief abomination of the pope." The proof offered in this article is "the foundation and testimony of the Apostles," citing six passages which illustrate or command baptism. Here we see the germ of the antipaedobaptist polemic, it is three-fold: 1) infant baptism is not explicitly warranted by the New Testament; 2) "believers' baptism" is apostolic; 3) infant baptism is an abomination of the papacy.

Baptismal Waters and Membership Charters

Of course, by the focus on the rejection of "infant baptism" in this survey of Anabaptist

development, one need not overlook the other inter-related matter with which the Anabaptists were concerned. The Anabaptists fundamentally worked toward a reconstitution of the membership of the church. This is evident in the Schleitheim Confession. Verduin even points to evidence that—

in some instances at least, the Anabaptism of the sixteenth century did not in its earliest manifestations assail infant baptism as such but rather the ‘christening’ of the fallen Church. We read that in the earliest days of Anabaptism in the Wassenberg area, infant baptism was not as such repudiated; what was repudiated was the ‘christening’ ritual.... We see then that rebaptism did not necessarily go hand in hand with a rejection of paedobaptism. It is said that Michael Sattler, one of the first to lose his life for the cause of Restitutionism, was at the first rather kindly disposed toward infant baptism.²¹

Verduin argues persuasively that the more primary issue in Anabaptist development was the rejection of a “Constantinian” approach to church membership in view of a voluntarism and separatism in church constitution. That is, a state-political constitution of the church, versus a constitution based on voluntary participation. According to the Anabaptists, when one pulls out the thread of infant baptism, the seam of church–state Christianity is unraveled.

It may be observed here that in respect to this part of the Anabaptist vision, they have been largely successful. Their vision of radical separation or even isolation of church and state, reconstituted by pure voluntary membership in the church is unhesitatingly accepted by the evangelical world, especially so in the United States.²² This may even be so in many ostensibly Reformed paedobaptist churches. On the other hand, the full flowering of Reformation Calvinism urged a “godly commonwealth” consisting of a “free church” and a “free state,” but equally under God and His law. Calvinism applied a separation of the power of the sword and the keys of the kingdom. This is all easier said than done, as subsequent history shows.²³ Unrealized as it may be, today, Calvinism’s conception of church/state relations is an alternative to Anabaptist isolation, and it is distinct from Romanist church domination of state or Erastian state domination of church.²⁴

Through the influence of the Anabaptists and later English and American Baptists, the Protestant world has been persistently divided by Anabaptist polemics. Williams comments are interesting here. He distinguishes between the English (Calvinistic) Baptists and the prior Anabaptists, noting that the Baptists never abandoned an interest in the State and were “thus able to participate directly in the formation of our modern open, responsible democracy in a way which was never vouch-safed to the still more heroic and ethically resolute Anabaptists of sixteenth-century Germany.”²⁵

The Waters Defined

Let us define the issue sharply. The question of this debate, historically and theologically, is not “believer’s baptism,” *per se*, but the propriety of the baptism of confessing Christian’s infants or their young children, incapable of professing the faith. Of course, all parties agree about the necessity of prior professing for adult converts to the faith. The *Larger Catechism*, Question 166,

for example says,

“Unto whom is baptism to be administered? A. Baptism is not to be administered to any that are out of the visible church, and so strangers from the covenant of promise, till they profess their faith in Christ, and obedience to him, but infants descended from parents, either both or but one of them professing faith in Christ, and obedient to him, are, in that respect, within the covenant, and to be baptized.”

So at issue is what is to be done with the children of Christians, not adult converts. Or to put it another way, the Anabaptist practice is not of “believers’ baptism” but of antipaedobaptism— or *exclusive* believers’ baptism.

To make way in this dispute, one must open the book of hermeneutics. It is without contention that one’s view of the question of baptism recipients is inextricably connected to the interpretive procedures and assumptions one brings to the text. One’s interpretive assumptions wield the most exegetical force when there is less than an explicit Biblical statement addressing the relevant dispute. Of course, in Scripture, there is no explicit statement about the “infant baptism” of a Christian’s child. Let me hasten to add, however, neither is there an explicit case of a Christian’s child who grows up and is baptized as a professing believer. Both sides of the argument lack an explicit basis for what to do with the children of Christians. A failure to recognize this as the *status questionis* will result in many explosive splashes between the battle ships, but all to no avail.

The polemic regarding the explicit basis for infant baptism was acknowledged early in the debate. As Zwingli retorted to the Anabaptists, “Your argument runs as follows: We do not find that the apostles baptized infants: therefore we ought not to baptize them.”²⁶ The Anabaptist argument on these grounds may be appropriately labeled, “the explicit warrant objection.” Essentially, without explicit warrant for infant baptism, it is illegitimate. The standard logical move of Zwingli and many who followed him in the magisterial Protestants was to respond with a rather cogent *reductio ad absurdum*. Namely, showing the incoherence of rejecting a belief/practice merely from its lack of explicit mention in the Bible. Originally, Zwingli pointed out the incoherence of the position that Acts 19 contains a rebaptism by Paul of those followers of John the Baptist who had been initially baptized by Apollos. Zwingli does the *reductio* by arguing that the Scripture does not tell us explicitly that Apollos baptized, so, following the explicit warrant principle, Apollos didn’t baptize. Thus, Zwingli demonstrated the incoherency of the Anabaptist explicit warrant objection. Calvin, Ursinus, and Witsius followed with other examples, such as the lack of the explicit warrant for women to receive communion. This line of argument was principally articulated in the very earliest days of the debate between Zwingli and the Anabaptists.

Separating the Waters: Categorizing Antipaedobaptists

Beginning with the historic Anabaptists of the sixteenth century, many other streams of antipaedobaptists have emerged. Mike Renihan, in his Oxford dissertation on John Tombes, has provided helpful categories for the various pools of antipaedobaptists —

- a. Anabaptists - The primal sixteenth century continental movement, considered above.
- b. Baptists - Those flowing from the English puritan context, of two distinct types: General (Arminian) Baptists and Particular (Calvinistic) Baptists.²⁷
- c. Abaptists - Quakers and others sects who denied the necessity of any baptism.
- d. Anglican Antipaedobaptists - John Tombes (1603-1676) represents this small contingent of those who argued against the validity of infant baptism, while remaining in the established church (until the Great Ejection of puritan ministers in 1662).²⁸

While the designation “antipaedobaptism” may at first glance seem offensive, it is truly the best overarching term for the polemical streams of those denying infant baptism. Following Renihan, I will use it, precisely because there is no dispute about the validity of “believer baptism,” *per se* – the post-confession baptism of adult converts or those mature enough to make such faith-confessions. On the propriety of post-confession baptism of new converts, all of Christendom agrees (except the fringe Abaptists, of course). There is unity on believer baptism after all! There is no dispute as to the propriety of the post-confession baptisms of the men of Israel (Acts 2), the eunuch (Acts 8), the adult men and women and Simon the heretic in Samaria (Acts 8), Saul (Acts 9), Cornelius (Acts 10), Lydia and the Jailer (Acts 16), Crispus (Acts 18, 1Cor 1:14), the twelve disciples in Ephesus (Acts 19), Gaius (1Co 1:14), and Stephanas (1Co 1:16). Our matter of controversy is what is to be done with the children and households of such followers of our Covenant Lord.

As I consider the barometer of antipaedobaptist polemics, I believe that it might be helpful to organize the polemical waves in three distinct tides: **1) Anabaptist polemics proper, 2) Puritan Baptist polemics developed, and 3) New Covenant Baptist polemics triumphant.** Basically, 1) Anabaptist polemics proper entail two basic arguments, the explicit warrant objection and the papacy genetic fallacy argument (infant baptism is an abomination of the pope). 2) The Puritan Baptist polemic development was a program especially inspired by the puritan separatists, empowered by a more radical conception of the constituents of the church, and armed with selected New Testament concepts, such as that baptism is, allegedly, immersion into the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ (Rom 6:3-4, per Baptist reading). This was creedalized in the Baptist Confessions of 1644 and then the Confession of 1689.²⁹ It might be noted here that this is in contrast to the Anabaptists proper who did not immerse, but administered the water by pouring. 3) New Covenant Baptist polemics triumphant has especially come of age in this century. The expansion of Calvinistic theology has crossed denomination lines, but especially within Baptist circles. Their essential theological framework builds upon the standard covenant theology developed through Zwingli, Bullinger, Calvin, Witsius, Owen, and the Westminster Confession, to the position wherein their conception of the new covenant membership is made up of exclusively regenerate individuals, hence only these are to receive the ordinance which signifies membership — baptism. Their arguments provide mature conceptions of the explicit warrant objection, balanced historical treatments of the development of antipaedobaptism, and a kind of covenant theology support of the antipaedobaptist view. Namely, they hold that all in the new covenant are regenerate and the church’s membership and practice of baptism and communion is to reflect that.

Where Do the Covenant Waters Lead?

Getting beyond a mere explicit warrant objection to infant baptism, in applying the distinctive hermeneutic of the Reformed redemptive-historical covenant theology, perhaps more could be accomplished than an undefined appeal to Scripturalism. At first glance, one might say that this too is a hopeless cul-de-sac of polemics, since those within the redemptive-historical covenant theology family are preeminently paedobaptist in the first place. While that may be true historically or even quantitatively, the substantive advance of antipaedobaptist polemics are now made by Baptists who appeal to Reformed principles of hermeneutics and theological method to support their case. There has arisen a vital movement of Calvinistic Baptists who disdain a “New Testament-only,” dispensational approach and explicitly appeal to covenant theology. These Baptist interpreters advocate a “Baptist covenant theology.” Reformed Baptists have come to terms with lack of substance in shallow New Testament-only appeals.

For example, in British Baptist, David Kingdon’s often quoted classic defense, *Children of Abraham*, he defends the Baptist position as a Calvinistic, covenantal theologian.

A great deal of Baptist apologetic, so it seems to me, has failed to come to terms with the indubitable fact that the covenant of grace, although it exhibits diversity of administration in the time of promise and in the time of fulfilment, is none-the-less one covenant . . . Baptists will never seriously disturb Reformed Paedobaptists until they see this. The divisive, atomistic approach of so much of the contemporary Baptist apologetic is about as effective at this point as a shotgun against a Sherman tank.³⁰

And Southern Baptist Founder’s Conference pioneer, Fred Malone writes, “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.”³¹ In another widely distributed booklet, Reformed Baptist, Richard C. Barcellos writes, “Historically, Covenant Theology has been the parent of infant baptism. This essay assumes that a proper understanding of the progressive nature of the biblical covenants, and the replacement of the Old Covenant by the New Covenant, seriously challenges historic Covenant Theology, and yet does not demand Dispensationalism or Antinomianism... it will be argued that a consistent adherence to Covenant Theology refutes infant baptism and upholds, even demands believers' baptism within the covenantal structure of the Bible.”³²

In a widely cited text, the late professor Paul King Jewett, in *Infant Baptism and the Covenant of Grace* writes,

The theological conception sometimes called covenant theology which undergirds the Paedobaptist argument at this point, is too grand, too challenging, too persistent to be ignored with impunity. The dogmatician who slights it despises his own reputation. That is perhaps to concede that the Baptists as a whole have not been outstanding theologians; the stream of their rebuttal has run so thin at this juncture that only the hollow eyes of predisposition could fail to see its inadequacy and judge the counter arguments superior.³³

Within this movement, all appeals lead to Jewett, who is certainly a most eloquent spokesman for their legion. As Reformed Baptist, Greg Welty says, “In my readings on the subject of baptism, Paul K. Jewett’s, *Infant Baptism and the Covenant of Grace* was a revolutionary treatment of the subject.”³⁴ His baptism defense is certainly one of the most highly rated of this century. A succinct version of his arguments may be found in defending the Baptist position in the Zondervan Encyclopedia along side of John Murray’s infant baptism article.³⁵ He argues as follows:

With the advent of Messiah — the promised seed *par excellence* — and the Pentecostal effusion of the Spirit, the salvation contained in the promise to Israel was brought nigh. No longer was it a hope on the distant horizon but rather an accomplished fact in history. Then — and for our discussion, the THEN is of capital significance — the temporal, earthly, typical elements of the old dispensation were dropped from the great house of salvation as scaffolding from the finished edifice. It is our contention that the Paedobaptist, in framing their argument from circumcision, have failed to keep this significant historical development in clear focus. Proceeding from the basically correct postulate that baptism stands in the place of circumcision, they have urged this analogy to a distortion. They have so far pressed the *unity* of the covenant as to suppress the *diversity* of its administration. They have, to be specific, Christianized the Old Testament and Judaized the New.³⁶

In unfolding his erudite treatise, Jewett charges the Reformed paedobaptist position “with an error in biblical theology.” Jewett urged that the paedobaptist argument “involves the fundamental error of failing to recognize the historical character of revelation.”³⁷ He refers to the standard covenantal view that infant baptism is justified on the same grounds as infant circumcision, saying, “this argument involves the fundamental error of failing to recognize the historical character of revelation.”³⁸ As Welty says, “. . . his [Jewett’s] basic identification of the problem as one of biblical theology was quite insightful. Avoiding a blatantly dispensational approach, he applies the Reformed emphasis on unity and progress in redemptive history to the sacraments themselves, thus beating the paedobaptists at their own game of continuity and discontinuity.”³⁹

The Waters of Irony

When one remembers that covenant theology was formally Christened by Zwingli in response to the Anabaptists, it is an interesting thesis, that had Zwingli, Bullinger, and Calvin been more consistent in their covenant theology, they would have become Anabaptists. What they considered to have been the most biblically robust reply to Anabaptism, had the scales of Constantinian prejudism been removed, would have put them on the Damascus road to antipaedobaptism. This claim is also a very interesting claim since the most ubiquitous arguments for Protestant infant baptism appeal precisely to the very same theological and hermeneutical foundation: covenant theology! Consider the most popular presentations or the weightiest systematic works, in the Reformation tradition, infant baptism rests upon covenant theology. Remove covenant theology and at once infant baptism is in the air with no foundation.

So, this thesis deserves some attention. There has been much exegetical, theological, and historical water under the baptismal bridge since these issues were first voiced. The proponents on

both sides have sharpened their polemical tools. Let us consider briefly the persuasive spokesman, Jewett, in articulating the best contemporary case for the antipaedobaptist cause.

Jewett argues that the paedobaptist reads Old Testament circumcision in purely spiritual terms, following the New Testament descriptions of baptism and heart circumcision, failing to see any of the temporal elements of it. On the other hand, to the paedobaptist, New Testament baptism is seen as almost purely objective and external (like the external administration of circumcision). Jewett charges the paedobaptist position with a significant hermeneutical error, flowing from an error in biblical theology. The paedobaptist emphasizes “the inward and spiritual blessings sealed by baptism as the key to the interpretation of the Old Testament rite of circumcision” and which interprets “circumcision exclusively in terms of baptism.”⁴⁰ Jewett is very interested in maintaining a biblical theology of circumcision which takes the Old Testament as formative and only then permits the New Testament material to speak. So, while recognizing an essential unity between circumcision and baptism, he avoids the full import of the paedobaptist position on circumcision by recognizing the earthly, physical dimensions of the covenant with Abraham, along with those typological of the New Testament era (children of Abraham by faith). “To put it in still a third way, paedobaptists rightly stress the unity of redemptive history, while wrongly ignoring the *movement* of that redemptive history. Thus their error is fundamentally one of *biblical theology*, of understanding the *progressive unfolding* of God's redemptive purposes *in history*.”⁴¹

Jewett defends his contention with a high degree of scholarship and considerable rhetorical power and polemical prowess. He demonstrates a meticulous knowledge of the Reformation debate and the diverse sacramental views of the entire Church. The teeth of his argument against the paedobaptist covenantal view is that circumcision was different than baptism precisely in its lack of any spiritual criterion for reception. The physical and/or household connection was all that was needed in order to grant the propriety of receiving this sign and no spiritual qualification was necessary to receive circumcision, even for the adult proselytes.⁴² Jewett argues that this is not true for baptism and that the singular criterion is spiritual.

In this all too brief summary of the polemic of Jewett a significant thesis arises for the student of Reformed dogmatics: does a fully developed biblical theology utilizing a covenantal hermeneutic yield a Baptist sacramentology and thus preclude infant baptism?

The Old Testament Spirituality of Circumcision

Let us begin the test of paedobaptist's covenant theology with the criterion of reception for circumcision. According to Jewett, et al, the physical and/or household connection was all that was needed in order to grant the propriety of receiving this sign. No spiritual qualification was necessary to receive circumcision, even for adult proselytes. But (allegedly) this is not true for baptism. For Jewett, the convincing proof of this is the circumcision of Abraham's adult household members, as well as Ishmael (Gen 17), and the sons of Keturah (Gen 25). In the former case, Jewett argues, these adults were not required to have any kind of spiritual confession. In the latter case, these “children of Abraham” did not even receive “the covenant,” much less were they spiritually qualified.

Must these admittedly unique cases, Ishmael and the sons of Keturah, work to disprove the thesis that circumcision is the sacramental equivalent of baptism? Do these prove that this sign of covenant is illegitimately placed on covenant members' children? Well, on the one hand, these cases might be taken to show that these individuals lacked the criterion of the Israelite covenant membership— hence circumcision differs from baptism (as Jewett argues, these are part of the scaffolding). But on the other hand could these not be taken to mean precisely the opposite, that such candidates possessed the true *spiritual criterion* of (supra ethnic-Israel's) covenant of grace membership? Could these not be foundational planks in the great house, unseen yet supportive? After all our Lord teaches that many from East and West will sit at the table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Mat 8:11).

Let us consider carefully: if circumcision had a two-fold meaning, signifying both “the temporal, earthly, typical elements of the old dispensation”⁴³ because of Abrahamic physical descent and it was “a symbol of renewal and cleansing of heart”⁴⁴ because of Abrahamic spiritual descent — why must we presume that Ishmael and the sons of Keturah signify merely the former and not the latter? Could it not be that the circumcision of Abraham's physical, but non-Israelite offspring, Ishmael and the sons of Keturah, *signified the spiritual, not physical covenant blessings*? I believe a good case can be made for this.

1) It might be observed, first, that those who glibly speak of circumcision being a “national sign,” are simply mistaken because Ishmael received the sign, yet was not, obviously, in the *nation* of Israel (Gen. 17:20-25). **2)** But that circumcision, in a biblical theology from Genesis, has as its intention a primarily spiritual significance can be shown from this: in the “covenant of circumcision” (Acts 7:8) that which is said to be explicitly signified is that Jehovah is “to be God to you and to your descendants after you” (Gen. 17:7). This is manifestly spiritual in nature. **3)** Also, the command of circumcision is given, “And you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin; and it shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you” (17:10). That circumcision is a sign “between Me and you” is likewise manifestly spiritual, not temporal or earthly. If anyone doubts this, we have the later apostolic teaching which is perfectly explicit: Abraham “received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised” (Rom. 4:11). **4)** But to make the case specifically, Ishmael was circumcised on the very same day as Abraham: “In the very same day Abraham was circumcised, and Ishmael his son” (Gen 17:26). It would be strikingly inconsistent if the very same ritual act, administered the very same day was “a seal of the righteousness of the faith” for Abraham, but for teenage Ishmael (age 13) it was a mere sign of being a physical, albeit virtually bastardly, descendant of Abraham; thus signifying only the alleged earthly aspects of the covenant (which was after all through Isaac[?]). Contrary to the polemic of Jewett and many other Baptists, on close examination, there is nothing in the text of the Bible to indicate that Ishmael did not share in Abraham's faith. But even if he did not have the reality signified (as many of those “believers” baptized today do not), this did not change the express declaration that circumcision was the Abrahamic seal of the righteousness of faith. Of course, Ishmael was not the miracle seed of promise, but this is not to say that he was eternally lost.⁴⁵ The lesson to Abraham in making Isaac the child of promise was faith in a God who is able to give life to the dead (womb) (Heb. 11:12) and even raise a dead heir (Heb. 11:19). **5) 5)** Regarding the sons of Keturah (Gen 25:4), we are not told expressly that they were circumcised. But if we do not deny the validity of logical inferences (as many seem to do

with regard to baptism), it may be validly deduced from Genesis 17. Since Abraham obeyed God (Gen 18:19), and since they were born into Abraham's house, they were circumcised. We are not told of the spiritual state of any of Keturah's children.⁴⁶ However, we are told what Abraham did with them, spiritually: "For I have chosen him [Abraham], in order that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice; in order that the LORD may bring upon Abraham what He has spoken about him" (Gen 18:19). And since the Lord brought about His promises to Abraham, we can be sure that our father Abraham did indeed command "his children [including the sons of Keturah] and his household [including those "unspiritually qualified" adults]" "to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice." If "doing righteousness and justice" are dependent on one's "circumcised heart" or the "righteousness of faith" or "justification by faith"—Abraham surely taught all who were under his headship these truths, since he is the father of the faithful.

6) Finally, since this was a sign and seal of the righteousness of faith to Abraham, and he himself administered this seal of the righteousness of faith to many of his own children, it is all the more certain that these circumcisions represented to Abraham what was spiritually significant and well as covenantally promised. I agree with Calvin in refutation of the Anabaptists, "For what will they bring forward to impugn infant baptism that may not be turned back against circumcision?"⁴⁷

Apostolic Era Carnality in New Covenant Signs

The sharp sword of the covenantal Baptist polemic slices two ways—it lops off the previous covenant administration's spirituality and covenantal faithfulness for signs of covenant, whilst with the back swing it filets any carnality from the new covenant sign-receivers. If it can be demonstrated that the new covenant signs are intentionally given by Jesus and the Apostles to those that were carnal, unregenerate, or reprobate, etc., then it appears that a self-consistent biblical theology, does not comport with the view of Jewett, et al.

I believe this polemic is most directly stated, in reference to infant baptism, in this way: Only regenerate people are "in the new covenant" and are thus, properly to receive the signs of the covenant.⁴⁸ In the baptism debate, this works out to the view that since every child of a believing parent is not regenerate, it is improper to give the sign of the covenant to the children of believers until they credibly give evidence of faith, namely showing forth their regeneration publicly. Specifically, however, if it can be proven that there are people under new covenant obligations (i.e., "in the covenant") who become apostates, then the claim that "all in the new covenant are regenerate," will be demonstrated to be false. If this is false, then so is the sacramentology which is grounded on membership in the exclusively invisible/regenerate church.

Several passages teach that there are people *set apart* in the new covenant (without the full blessings of salvation), who yet fall away. Thus, there are unregenerate new covenant members. For example, Hebrews 10:29-30:

How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the **blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified**, and has insulted the Spirit of grace? 30 For we know Him who said, "VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY." And again, "THE LORD WILL JUDGE

HIS PEOPLE.” 31 It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

Would we not find the most poignant biblical theology soil in the fertile mind of the writer of Hebrews? Yes, since he was thinking and arguing in the exact terms of the relationship of old covenant administrations versus new covenant administration. For example, only ten verses before the above passage, the writer cites the preeminent new covenant passage (Jer 31:33f). The writer argues that some individuals who have been “sanctified” [*hagiazō*, set apart or “consecrated”] in “His people” [the visible people of God] may commit apostasy.⁴⁹ Of course, these individuals were not regenerate. In the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the term *hagiazō* often referred to the *consecration* of the visible people of God (Exo. 19:10, 14, in the LXX; cf. Heb. 9:13-20). The imagery of Hebrews 10:29 is drawn directly from this ceremonial typology. Those who have been consecrated by the blood of the covenant in the visible church (Heb. 9:19-20) may “have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away” (Heb. 6:4-6). They did not “lose their salvation”—but they did become *covenant breakers*. To do this they must have been visible *covenant members*. Hebrews frequently draws the direct comparison of those who “shrink back to destruction” (Heb. 10:39), who “come short of the grace of God” (Heb. 12:15), who are “like Esau” (Heb. 12:16-17), who “neglect so great a salvation” (Heb. 2:3), who “have tasted of the heavenly gift” “and then have fallen away” (Heb. 6:4-6), who “harden [their] hearts” and “fall through following the same example of disobedience” (Heb. 4:7, 11), and who “throw away [their] confidence” (Heb. 10:35)—are, to put it in terms of covenant theology, *new covenant breakers*.

Jesus says it in this way with the vine/branch covenant metaphor, “Every branch *in Me* that does not bear fruit, He takes away. . . . If anyone does not abide *in Me*, he is thrown away as a branch, and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned” (Joh 15:2, 6). Those in view here are unregenerate covenant members, who turn out to be covenant breakers.

The apostolic teaching about the historical unfolding of the covenant expressly indicates that those in covenant with God can be “broken off.” Surely regenerate people (if all in the new covenant are regenerate) cannot be “broken off.” Paul teaches that in God’s covenantal dealings “some of the branches were broken off, and you [Gentiles], being a wild olive, were grafted in among them and became partakers with them of the rich root of the olive tree Do not be conceited, but fear; for if God did not spare the natural branches, *neither will He spare you*” (Rom 11:15-21). Or as Peter says, “For it is time for judgment to begin with the household of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God?” (1Pet 4:17). These assertions are quite meaningless if all in the covenant will not be “broken off” or judged.

Asserting that only regenerate people are “in the new covenant” really amounts to saying that the older covenant administrations were with the *visible people of God*, but the new covenant is only with the *invisible people of God*. It is true that the fulfillment of the new covenant is seen only in regenerate people who walk by faith (something also true in the previous covenant administrations, by the way⁵⁰). However, it does not follow that the new covenant administration is only to the *invisible people of God* (only the regenerate).

Specifically to our task, remember that covenants have signs, such as circumcision and baptism, among others. We find that baptism was given to one, Simon. In fact, when Jesus inaugurated the covenant with these words, “Drink from it, all of you; for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins”—Judas, called a *disciple*, drank of that cup and became the *arch covenant breaker* (Mat 26:27b-28). It follows necessarily, does it not, that those who validly partake of such visible signs of the new covenant are *visible members of the new covenant*? It is simply not factual or, I suppose, possible, that covenant components, such as signs and seals and laws and offices and discipline, etc. be only given to the elect.

A thumbnail sketch along these lines would reveal that there are many passages which teach that the New Covenant has stipulations for judgment (Mat. 16:19, 1 Cor. 11:29-30, 34, Heb. 10:30-31, 1 Pet. 4:17), hence it cannot be exclusively to the elect.⁵¹ There are many passages which teach that the kingdom (in its new covenant manifestation) includes regenerate and unregenerate (Mat. 8:12, 13:24-31, 41, 47-50, 21:43, 25:1-13, Luk.13:28, Rev 11:15). And what ought, to open the flood gates toward covenantal infant baptism, is the Biblically demonstrable fact that virtually every prophecy and exposition of the New Covenant *expressly* includes the children of believers in the New Covenants (Dt. 30:6, Jer 30:9, 30:18-22, 31:1, 31:17, 31:33-37, 32:15-18, 32:37-40, 33:22-26, Zech. 10:6-9, Joel 2:1-29, Is. 44:3, 59:20-21, Mal. 4:5-6, Lk. 1:17, 2:49-50, Acts 2:39, Acts 3:25, 13:32-33, Rom. 4:13-17). Most New Covenant Baptist polemics discuss the *locus classicus* of the New Covenant, Jeremiah 31:31-34. However, none that I know of heretofore, include or even make reference to verses 31:35-37! These emphatically include the *offspring of Israel* in the New Covenant promise:

Thus says the LORD, Who gives the sun for light by day, And the fixed order of the moon and the stars for light by night, Who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar; The LORD of hosts is His name: 36 “If this fixed order departs From before Me,” declares the LORD, “ Then the offspring of Israel also shall cease From being a nation before Me forever. “ 37 Thus says the LORD, “If the heavens above can be measured, And the foundations of the earth searched out below, Then I will also cast off all the offspring of Israel For all that they have done,” declares the LORD.

We have God’s own promise of the inclusion of “the offspring of Israel” in the covenant. This prophetic word is at least as good as the minor child’s “profession” of faith, as to their inclusion in His visible people. And visible signs are to be given to visible members of His covenant community, as has ever been done until our friends the Anabaptist arose. Hence, they are fit for the sacrament by their explicit inclusion in the new covenant, by their explicit inclusion in the kingdom (Mat 18), by the explicit inclusion in the church (Eph. 6, Col. 3), by the household baptismal pattern (of nine individuals we can name as baptized in the NT, five have their households baptized, two do not have households, one is Simon, the other is Gaius), and by the fact the covenant promises extend to a thousand generations — pretty inclusive of the years before and after 1525.

Closing Polemic

As sketched above, I believe it is demonstrable that the polemics of Anabaptism fail in showing that paedobaptism is an error in biblical theology when specifically tested by the spirituality hypothesis. Reformational paedobaptism based, theologically upon covenant theology, when more fully considered rests upon a strong case in precise terms of a developmental biblical theology. Abraham is the father of many nations and the covenant promises extended to him and his seed are to be received by all the families of the nations. Children are to be included visible covenant signs by right of covenant membership, first granted to Abraham and there has been no revocation.

While it has been acknowledged the place of Christian's children in baptism (on both sides of the river) cannot be drawn from explicit Scriptural testimony, the paedobaptist's case appears compelling from the *explicit inclusion* of Christian children in the new covenant promises (Dt. 30:6, Jer. 31:36-37), from their *explicit inclusion* in the church (Eph. 6:1-4, 1 Cor. 7:14), and from their *explicit inclusion* the kingdom (Mt. 19:14, Mk. 10:14, Lk. 18:16). *Ergo*, we can close the argument from truly necessary inferences — drawing upon the continuity of the covenant people and the continuity of covenant purposes and even drawing upon explicit practice of covenant household baptisms.

As Warfield said, “The question of the Subjects of Baptism is one of that class of problems the solution of which hangs upon a previous question. According as is our doctrine of the Church, so will be our doctrine of the Subjects of Baptism.”⁵²

1. I serve as pastor of All Saints' Presbyterian Church, Lancaster, PA - come and visit!
2. George H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962).
3. G. W. Bromiley, “Introduction” to Zwingli's “Of Baptism,” *Zwingli and Bullinger*, ed. G. W. Bromiley (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1953), 119.
4. John T. McNeill, *The History and Character of Calvinism*, (New York: Oxford, 1967), 41.
5. Introduction to “Letters to Thomas Muntzer: Grebel” in *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers*, ed. George H. Williams and Angel M. Mergal, (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1967), 72.
6. G. W. Bromiley, “Introduction” to Zwingli's “Of Baptism,” *Zwingli and Bullinger*, ed. G. W. Bromiley (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1953), 120.
7. Williams writes telling words in the introduction to the “Martyrdom of Michael Sattler,” that the document is “illustrative of the martyr theology which *sustained the whole Anabaptist movement*,” 137 (emphasis mine).
8. It should be noted that “Anabaptist” covers a great deal of theological and historical territory. Williams categorizes Anabaptists in three main groups: evangelical, revolutionary, and rationalist, 31.

9. John T. McNeill, *The History and Character of Calvinism*, (New York: Oxford, 1967), 41.
10. "Letters to Thomas Muntzer: Grebel" in *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers*, ed. George H. Williams and Angel M. Mergal, (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1967), 80.
11. "Letters to Thomas Muntzer: Grebel," 81.
12. (Dallas: Commonwealth Publications, 1992).
13. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961).
14. Williams calls this "the old Protestant thesis," 27.
15. Cf. The Letter of Gebel to Munzter
16. These are all signatories on the "Letter to Thomas Muntzer," 82-83.
17. "Postscript," 85.
18. Cf. Williams and Mergal.
19. See *Confessions and Catechisms of the Reformation*, Mark Noll, Ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991) for a very informative introduction and discussion.
20. This text is selected from John Howard Yoder's version prepared for *The Legacy of Michael Sattler* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1973).
21. *The Reformers and Their Stepchildren* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 196-197. Apparently Schattler's views changed by 1527, as is evident by his Confession that infant baptism is the highest and chief abomination of the pope.
22. Excluding, of course, those revolutionary Anabaptists, especially the Munsterites, who were seeking to create a charismatic, polygamous commonwealth, see Williams, 23.
23. *John Calvin: His Influence in the Western World*, ed., W. Stanford Reid (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), especially p. 66 and the contribution of J. D. Douglas, "Calvin's Contribution to Scotland" and George M. Marsden's contribution on "America's 'Christian' Origins: Puritan New England as a Case Study."
24. In our day, it has been the Reconstructionists, Rousas J. Rushdoony, et al, who have been the most voluminous spokesmen of this view. Seen in the best light, they have been urging renewed Calvinism. However, they are popularly misconstrued as proponents for an Ecclesiocracy.
25. Williams, "Introduction," 25.
26. Zwingli, "Of Baptism," *Zwingli and Bullinger*, ed. G. W. Bromiley (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1953), 147.

27. Renihan cites Barry White to explain differences between the General and Particular, “Both groups shared a very similar position on many aspects of the doctrine of the church. For example, they both believed that the visible church of Christian was composed of gathered congregations of believing men and women and they both believed in and practised (at least from 1642) believer’s baptism by immersion. Nevertheless, they consistently organise separately, differed in their view of inter-congregational relationships and the ministry and, on the whole flourished in different parts of the country” p. 22.

28. *Antipaedobaptism in the Thought of John Tombes: An Untold Story from Puritan England* (Auburn, MA: B & R Press, 2001), p. 21. Renihan cites these three reasons from a response to Tombes’ *Exercitation* by the puritan John Gere.

29. Which is a mere revision of the Westminster Confession, by the way.

30. (Carey Publications),

31. *A String of Pearls Unstrung: A Theological Journey into Believers' Baptism* (Cape Coral, FL: Founders Press, 1998), 1.

32. *Paedoism or Credoism? A Reformed Baptist Argument for Believers' Baptism Based on Covenant Theology* (Fullerton, CA: Reformed Baptist Publications, 1997), 1.

33. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 20.

34. *A Critical Evaluation of Paedobaptism*, (Fullerton, CA: Reformed Baptist Publications, 1996), 1.

35. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan 1977)

36. Jewett, 91.

37. Jewett, 8.

38. Jewett, 8.

39. Welty, 2.

40. Jewett, 97.

41. Welty, 2.

42. Jewett, 98.

43. Jewett, 91.

44. Jewett, 86.

45. Please let no one try to prove that Ishmael was lost because of Galatians 4. Paul tells us, “This is *allegorically* (al l hgorew) speaking: for these women are two covenants, one proceeding from Mount Sinai bearing children who are to be slaves; she is Hagar” (4:24). The point of the apostle in Galatians is to illustrate the anathema-ungospel of the Judaizers who were requiring the circumcision of the Gentile converts (and not just their adults). This circumcision also meant (unbiblically) to these heretics that they merited their standing of justification before God.

46. Again, it is also a very interesting role that Midianites (Midian was one of the sons of Keturah), played in the history of the Jews, with both Joseph and Jethro, “the priest of Midian” (Moses’ father-in-law).

47. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, (4:16:9, McNeil/Battles ed., Philadelphia: Westminster), p. 1331.

48. The phrase “in the covenant” or “in the new covenant” is, strictly speaking, not found in the Bible. But, I do not object to using the phrase, so long as it is defined. Here, and in the terms of this argument it means essentially, “included in the contract,” or “covenanted with” or “under the stipulations of the covenant.”

49. I am aware that a minority of interpreters take the implied “he” in “the blood of the covenant by which *he* was sanctified (*hagiasthe*, [3rd person, ‘he’])” as referring to Christ. My brief response is that (a) the grammar certainly does not necessitate that. (b) Such a view seems to be an *ad hoc* response to the theological difficulties of a baptistic Calvinism which are alleviated in the general Reformed view of the covenant with its internal and legal dimensions. (c) Nevertheless, the point above still stands apart from this question, since this apostate is part of “His people” (10:30).

50. I could marshal many texts to support this, but it will suffice to point out the entire chapter of Hebrews 11.

51. For more, see my appendix, “The New Covenant” in *Infant Baptism: Does the Bible Teach It?* (Fort Myers, FL: WordMp3.com, 2000).

52. “The Polemics of Infant Baptism” *The Works IX*, p. 389 Baker, Grand Rapids 1991 [1932].