

## Covenant Baptism

People of God, today we rejoice with the Fjeld's at the baptism of Elin and Anja. Although we have many infant and child baptisms here, some may still wonder why we are committed to this practice.

And the simple answer is, the covenant.

What is the covenant? As I get older, I am becoming a man who appreciates simplicity more and more. So while there are longer more extended definitions of the Covenant, I want to keep this as simple as possible.

The covenant is God's promise to be our God and the God of our children, and that we would be God's people.

We see this covenant promise first given to Abraham in Gen 17., when the Lord said, *"<sup>7</sup>And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you."*

So the covenant that God made with Abraham was that he as going to be the God of Abraham and his children, and his children's children in their generations. God repeats this promise a bunch of times throughout the Bible. In Ex. 6:7 God tells Moses to tell the Israelites who are in slavery to Pharaoh that YHWH is coming to redeem them. And he says, *"I will take you as my people, and I will be your God."*

Right away we see in the OT that God promises to deal savingly, not just with individuals, but with families. When God first came to Abram in Gen. 12, God said that he would make Abram a great nation and that in him all the families of the earth would be blessed.

God deals savingly with families, not just individuals. God is dedicated to saving and blessing families and incorporating those families into the larger body of the People of God. Whether that was Old Covenant Israel, or the New Covenant Church, it is still the same.

So, why do we baptize the children of Christians? Because the bible teaches that the children of Christians are members of God's Covenant. God has promised to be our God and the God of our children, and that we would be his people.

And this is not just the Old Covenant. This is the New Covenant as well. Jer. 32 looks forward to the New Covenant and says this:

*<sup>38</sup>They shall be My people, and I will be their God; <sup>39</sup>then I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear Me forever, for the good of them and their children after them. <sup>40</sup>And I will make an everlasting covenant with them, that I will not turn away from doing them good; but I will put My fear in their hearts so that they will not depart from Me.*

The Promises of the New Covenant are also found in Ezekiel 37:24-28:

*<sup>24</sup>“My servant David shall be king over them, and they shall all have one shepherd. They shall walk in my rules and be careful to obey my statutes. <sup>25</sup>They shall dwell in the land that I gave to my servant Jacob, where your fathers lived. They and their children and their children's children shall dwell there forever, and David my servant shall be their prince forever. <sup>26</sup>I will make a covenant of peace with them\*. It shall be an everlasting covenant with them. And I will set them in their land and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary in their midst forevermore. <sup>27</sup>My dwelling place shall be with them, and I will be their*

God, and they shall be my people. <sup>28</sup> *Then the nations will know that I am the LORD who sanctifies Israel, when my sanctuary is in their midst forevermore.*”

This promise of God dwelling in their midst forever and God being their God and us His people is fulfilled in the Church, in the New Jerusalem. Rev. 21:3 - *And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, “Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God.*

Now to whom was the promise made? Originally, it was Abraham’s physical offspring, the people of Israel and their children, and their children’s children. Now in the New Covenant, it is given to all those who have the faith of Abraham, along with their children, and their children’s children.

All of these promises that were originally given in the Covenant to Abraham are reiterated, fulfilled, and expanded in the New Covenant to Christians, whether Jew or Gentile, including their children.

Isaiah 59:21 even promises that the children would receive God’s Spirit.

“As for Me, says the LORD, “*This is my covenant with them: My Spirit who is upon you, and my words which I have put in your mouth, shall not depart from your mouth, nor from the mouth of your **offspring**, nor from the mouth of your **offspring’s offspring**,”* says the LORD, “*from this time forth and forevermore.*”

This promise that God would give His Spirit to the children is actually the fulfillment of the original promise God made to

Abraham when he said, *“in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”*

For Paul says in Gal. 3 - *“in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.”* The blessing of Abraham is the Holy Spirit, who is given to all the families of the earth.

This helps us make sense, then, of what happened on the day of Pentecost. When the Apostle Peter preached the first sermon of the New Covenant, the people were cut to the heart and asked what they should do.

*<sup>38</sup>Then Peter said to them, “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. <sup>39</sup>For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call.”*

That phrase, *“to you and to your children”* is not a throw away phrase. That has been God’s promise to Abraham from the very beginning. The promise is *“I will be your God, and I will be the God of your children, and you all will be my people.”*

Now some say that the mere mention of repentance here in Acts 2 disqualifies children from being recipients of baptism, for we are told that children cannot repent.

But what did these children do that they needed to repent of? The adults are the ones who participated in Jesus’ crucifixion, and the adults are the ones who said, His blood be upon us and upon our children.

So in order to get the guilt of Jesus' blood off of them and off of their children, they all needed to be cleansed in the waters of baptism. Even if the children themselves were not technically guilty of crucifying Jesus, their father's were. And the guilt of the father's was enough to stain their families.

And since God deals with families, and not just individuals, it would make perfect sense, according to God's covenantal dealings in the past, and his prophetic promises that he was going to include children in the promise of forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Now I think that it simply would have been incomprehensible for any Jew in the first century to hear of God's covenant and it not include their children. Especially considering the covenant promises were given to the children. If the children were now somehow excluded from the covenant, I think there would have been a whole lot of discussion about that in the New Covenant letters.

If God no longer dealt with families, but now said that children of believers were excluded from the covenant upon the basis of a new theological truth that people need to come before God on their own as individuals, apart from their families, then you might think there would be a whole lot of ink spilled over that issue. But the New Testament is completely silent on such an idea.

In fact, what the NT shows us is that the central debate was over whether or not the Gentiles had to submit to circumcision to be saved. And we would not be thinking correctly if we thought only of adult Gentiles in these discussions. For circumcision was

meant to be performed on male children at 8 days old, and for every male in the household. So the debate about circumcision had to include in it what to do with the children and with all those males who were in the household. Do we circumcise them, or not? And the Apostle's answer was, No. There is no longer a need to circumcise? Why?

Because the promises that circumcision pointed to, were fulfilled. And now there is no need to submit to this old covenant sacrament, which looked forward to the work of Christ. We now partake of the sacrament which signifies the completed work of Christ, and the New Creation.

In fact, Paul's Jewish opponents were complaining about this very point, that Paul was telling Jews that they didn't have to circumcise their children anymore. As Acts 20:21 says:

*they have been informed about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, saying that they ought not to circumcise their children nor to walk according to the customs.*

So then, if children of Jews and Gentiles were not to receive circumcision, then what were we to do with them? How do we mark out our children as being recipients of God's covenant promises? How do we recognize the ancient promises of God that he is the God of our children, and they are his people?

Well, Scriptural logic would tell us to baptize them, since the promise of forgiveness of sins and reception of the Spirit is the New Covenant fulfillment of the old promise to Abraham where God promised to be the God of our children.

How else are God's covenant promises going to be confirmed to a child of a believer in the New Covenant? If not circumcision, it must be baptism.

Now the Book of Acts is a selective history. We follow the progress of the Gospel as it goes forth from Jerusalem, to Judea, to Samaria, the Ends of the Earth.

The first people to be baptized were of course 3,000 men in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost in Acts. Now I don't know if we can look at this case and decidedly conclude that we should baptize children of believers based upon their baptisms. For one, I actually think it likely that some of their families were in Jerusalem with them there since it was the Feast of Pentecost, and also Peter told them that the promise was for them and their children. I can't prove that their children were there and were baptized, but it makes sense to me.

As the Gospel goes out to Samaria, both men and women were baptized in Acts 8, along with Simon the Magician, who ended up being a false convert. Certainly he is a less than ideal candidate for the view that only those who have been truly regenerated are to be baptized, since he turned out to be an unbeliever and an apostate.

The Ethiopian Eunuch was also baptized in Acts 8. But I don't think we should try to establish whether we should baptize the children of believers based upon the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch. Since he was a eunuch - he couldn't have children.

Nor do I think we should try to establish what she should do with children of believers based upon Paul's baptism in Acts 9, for he was single.

There were also 12 disciples of John who were baptized in Acts 19, but it doesn't say anything about them having households.

But what we do find is that when the gospel is recorded as coming to people who have families and households, we find that everyone in the household was baptized.

Cornelius' household was baptized in Acts 10.

Lydia and her household were baptized in Acts 16.

The Philippians Jailer and his household were baptized in Acts 16.

Crispus and his household were baptized in Acts 18 (cf, 1 Cor. 1:14).

And Paul also said he baptized Stephanas and his household in 1 Cor. 1:16.

Now what is my point. That Acts is a selective history, going forth from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. And in that very selective data Luke makes the point that of all the baptism recorded, half were household baptisms.

Peter said to the Philippian Jailer when he asked, "what must I do to be saved?" *Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household.* <sup>32</sup> *Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house.* <sup>33</sup> *And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their stripes. And immediately he and all his family were baptized.*

Covenant membership has always and ever included "you and your children." And the content of the covenant has always and ever been, "I will be God to you and to your children." This is the

way God deals with us. We should not think therefore that God's multigenerational promises are no longer valid, and that God only ever deals with us as individuals. God promises to be your God and the God of your children.

And this should also give you an appreciation for God's grace in the life of your ancestors. For it is very likely that the covenantal reason you believe in Jesus Christ this day is precisely because your parents, or grand parents, or great great great great grand parents believed in Christ. I know that my fifth great grand Father, Rev. Hugh Henry Shields was an Irish Presbyterian Minister.

And I firmly believe that I am a recipient of the grace of God because in his baptism God promised that he would be the God of his children's children in their generation. And that worked its way all the way down to me. And the same could very well be true for many of you as well.

God doesn't start new with every single person. Sure, he sometimes does. Of course. Peter does say the promise is to you, and your children, and *to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call.*"

But not every person who believes is an island cut off from the rest of the people of God, or isolated from Christian family. For those who are of the faith of Abraham, God's promise that he is your God, and the God of you children, and your children's children is for you to believe.

SO, in conclusion, I would like to simply read Heidelberg Catechism Q. 74

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

A. Yes. Infants as well as adults belong to God's covenant and congregation.[1] Through Christ's blood the redemption from sin and the Holy Spirit, who works faith, are promised to them no less than to adults.[2] Therefore, by baptism, as sign of the covenant, they must be grafted into the Christian church and distinguished from the children of unbelievers.[3] This was done in the old covenant by circumcision,[4] in place of which baptism was instituted in the new covenant.[5]

Amen.