

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, ² during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³ And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁴ As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. ⁵ Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall become straight, and the rough places shall become level ways, ⁶ and all flesh shall see the salvation of God." ⁷ He said therefore to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸ Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. ⁹ Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." ¹⁰ And the crowds asked him, "What then shall we do?" ¹¹ And he answered them, "Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise." ¹² Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?" ¹³ And he said to them, "Collect no more than you are authorized to do." ¹⁴ Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages." ¹⁵ As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ, ¹⁶ John answered them all, saying, "I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. ¹⁷ His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." ¹⁸ So with many other exhortations he preached good news to the people. ¹⁹ But Herod the tetrarch, who had been reproved by him for Herodias, his brother's wife, and for all the evil things that Herod had done, ²⁰ added this to them all, that he locked up John in prison.

Introduction

In our study of John's baptism in the wilderness (Lk. 3.1-20), we concluded that he formed a new Israel from old Israel for the Messiah against the Day of Judgment. He thus anticipated the church of the Messiah for the time between His comings. Membership in the new covenant people of God, the new children of Abraham, which is the church, is constituted by repentance-baptism not by birth. Therefore, children growing up in the church from birth are not, *per their birth to Christian parentage*, members of the new covenant community. God does not constitute the new Israel as He did the old. Now he constitutes the church by His efficacious call, and He extends His call by means of the gospel summons to enter into the covenant community by repentance through the door of baptism.

This brings up tensions regarding how to view children of the church, specifically, children growing up in the church from infancy. Are they little heathens, who now, in the time of greater grace (in the time of gracious expansion), have been put out of the covenant community in some kind of contraction of grace? Some would rather consider them little Christians claiming they are covenant children by birth to Christian parents. Of course, people on both sides of this discussion recognize that we do not know that they are little heathens or little Christians. That is, neither Baptists nor Paedobaptists can see into the hearts of their little ones, both know that electing grace cuts across the family, and both know of godly parents who have endured the heart rending rebellion of their children against the gospel on which they were raised from the cradle.

A sticky point in this discussion is the idea that children of the church are "outside" the church in some way. This is based on the inference from John's baptism to the identification of "children of the covenant." If correct, this identification belongs only to people (young or old) who enter the visible church through the door of repentance-baptism. Because this appears to involve lesser grace than what we had in the OT and because, to many perhaps, this is an uncomfortable teaching, many reformed Christians feel that this interpretation is totally

unscriptural and unacceptable. In reply to that sentiment, we will give some perspectives on, and some applications of, John's baptism in relation to "covenant" children under the title for part three here on Lk 3.1-20: John's Baptism, the New Israel, and "Covenant" Children. Part one was exposition of the text in general, part two was exposition with emphasis on the history redemption, and part three is exposition with emphasis on systematic theology in practice.

1A. Perspectives on John's baptism in relation to "covenant" children

The word covenant is within quotes because there is some ambiguity as to what this term means. However, there are some legitimate ways it may be used *if we give charity its due!*

1) First, on John's baptism relative to covenant children: this is not a Baptist interpretation but it is baptistic

That is, it does not entail the following Baptist practices (often the case in Baptist circles): immersion only, crisis revivalist evangelism of children, and rejection of the validity of infant baptism (cf. the March 28, 2008, ETS study: "Accepting baptisms different from our own: Baptist theology that grants validity to infant baptism"). The view we are presenting is baptistic because it concludes that infant baptism, though valid, is not required or necessary.

2) This is not a Paedobaptist interpretation but it is paedobaptistic

In substantial ways, it is a paedobaptistic interpretation. Most Paedobaptists oppose paedocommunion. Thus, the children are outside the privilege of table fellowship until they add to their baptism a credible confession of faith. These children are not fully members of the covenant community; they are covenant children who are not communicant members of the new covenant people of God. This fact lessens the difference between the opposing positions and that ought to soften how each views the other as unscriptural and unacceptable. That is, there is some room to use "covenant children" for children growing up in the church, although they are "outside" the church in the particular respect of not partaking of communion. Nevertheless, they have covenant nurture, even at the table by observation and instruction in gospel of the new covenant. Thus, John's baptism points to this aspect of Paedobaptistic interpretation.

3) This is a historical-redemptive interpretation that aims at being irenic

If this interpretation of the text is sound, then the following comments have merit. John prepares the new covenant people for the Messiah against the Day of Judgment. Therefore, he paved the way for the new Israel, the church that Jesus Messiah is building in the time between, the time John could not see given his prophetic perspective. The new Israel is entered by repentance-baptism that includes commitment to a repentant life. The new covenant people of God, the church, is not constituted by birth to Abraham but is constituted by repentance-baptism. Jesus took John's repentance-baptism and handed it to the apostles for the founding of the church on the Day of Pentecost. Hence, the line to draw from Luke 3.1-20 to Acts 2.38-40 in Luke-Acts.

What do we do with the fact that Christians read John's baptism differently? John, Jesus, and the apostles do not tell us what to do about contrary views (and their practices) that cannot both be true. Therefore, at the least, charity ought to govern how churches relate to one another regarding the place of children in the church, especially in light of the fact that the teaching of the NT on children is sparse, that much depends on extensive (sometimes complicated) lines of inference, the sacraments are external signs, and the sacraments are signs of Christian unity!

When Paedobaptists look at children in a baptistic context, they ought to emphasize the fact of the reality of covenant nurture saying this: "from our vantage point, they may lack this or that, but the children have covenant nurture, even if they are in some respects outside the visible church." From a baptistic perspective, the unbaptized may be outside in terms of administration

and good order (in this sense, they are not members of the church and they are not partakers at the table), but what ought to be emphasized is the fact that the children are recipients of covenant nurture and in that most important sense, they can be spoken of as covenant children. By this way of defining covenant children, we move away from ambiguity to clarity. This point is what they (the Baptists) will consider first when they look over at paedobaptistic practice (and vice versa for Paedobaptists). In charity, those holding to Paedocommunion can emphasize covenant nurture in their view of those that differ with them on communion and baptism. This is irenic.

4) This is a historical-redemptive interpretation that stresses national universalism

It seems helpful to stress the fact that no child of a believing family is excluded from the new covenant because the gospel of the new covenant is for all families of the earth. Therefore, although those who have not entered the new covenant church through the door of repentance-baptism are outside the church, they are not outside of Christ's kingdom or, consequently, outside of the covenant. All are in the covenant as covenant breakers and must repent and be baptized to enter the new Israel. Thus, *a fortiori*, if all have the promises and gospel offer, then the children of believers have the promises and gospel offer all the more. They are surrounded by the gospel that is embodied in the lives of their parents who nurture them in the Lord. Jesus is our children's Lord; they are in His kingdom. Parents are to present their children to the Lord for His blessing.

Furthermore, we know that God works with people in history in terms of what they are as parents, company owners, scholars, and artists. When he saves a sinner, the gospel shines in all the relationships that sinner has in history. Since God saves sinners in this way that includes the special bond of the family, then we can expect His blessing on our children, even though we know that His sword cuts across family ties. We always have hope for our children and for the families of the earth in general because our hope is in God, in His mercy, and in His faithfulness generation after generation. Because He uses the means of gospel proclamation and nurture to save sinners, then we entrust those we love into His care as we spread the good news near (to our families) and afar (to all families of the earth). Our hope is not in a formula or in a guarantee regarding our loved ones; our hope is in the faithful Lord of the covenant, Jesus Christ the risen Savior.

2A. Applications of John's baptism in relation to "covenant" children

We will make application by asking three questions.

1B. What is the status of little ones born to Christian parents?

1) It is helpful to begin with the fall in Adam and therefore to think of them as fallen image bearers of God; note, they are His image bearers, though marred and fallen, and they need restoration in the image of God.

2) Christ is their Lord. Jesus is universal Sabbath king and covenant Lord; He is their Lord because He is Lord of all families and persons on earth (everyone is in His kingdom, Mat 13.38). No one makes Him his or her Lord. Therefore, we call our children (as little ones, teens, and adults) to *acknowledge* Jesus as their Lord by faith confessed in baptism. In this way, we call them to become the children of Abraham by faith, to become covenant members of the church.

3) The gospel promise, the overture of grace of the new covenant, belongs to them. The gospel, the covenant promise, is for them in its proclamation to all families of the earth (to all men, women, and children). In calling them to become children of Abraham by faith, we call them to baptism to appropriate the new covenant gospel that comes to them in the free offer.

4) The gospel of God's love is for them and to them in the gifts of the sunshine and the rain. In the context of God's invitation to fellowship that He gives in creation (Ps 19.1-6), we call

the little ones to confess, “God made all things, God made me, and all things,” to receive the comfort of His love in the Scriptures (Ps 19.7-14), and to claim the Lord as “my rock and redeemer” (Ps 19.14).

2B. Can we teach the little ones in the cradle to sing, “Jesus loves me this I know”?

Yes, we can, and should, because nurture at home and within the covenant community displays His love for them. Moreover, He loves all people by sending the benefits of the rain and sunshine. His word in creation calls all people to fellowship with Him. Furthermore, we can teach them to sing, “He loves me, *this I know*” by calling them to faith (believe and you have eternal life): “You can say, ‘I know the Lord and His special saving love for me’ by entrusting yourself to Him.” The last verse of “Jesus loves me” makes the call of the gospel clear: “If I love Him, when I die He will take me home on high.”

3B. Can we train our children to pray to their Father in heaven?

If they are fallen in Adam, and if we do not take the promise to Abraham and his offspring as a promise to Christian parents and their children (with specific covenantal significance for that relationship that causes us to call them Christians and children of God), then how can we teach them to pray to “our” Father and “their” Father in heaven (to “my Father”)? Must we wait until the little ones make a profession of faith in Christ before we teach them to pray to their God and Father?

The fact is that though they are covenant breakers in Adam, they are in the kingdom of Christ, the covenant Lord of all. Moreover, the promise of the new covenant gospel belongs to them in the universal offer. Furthermore, they have a place under the nurture and care of God’s covenant people, the household of faith. These things ground a “yes” to teaching little ones to pray to their Father in heaven.

If we emphasize that God is the Father in heaven, then He is the only Father and He is the Father of the entire earth and of all people. All people are His children, but in the fall, all are His children in rebellion against His fatherhood and against their sonship. They are all prodigals who waste their father’s goods. God is their alienated Father. Therefore, when we teach little ones to pray to God in heaven by saying “our Father” or “my Father,” we are teaching them to say and acknowledge the truth. We are calling them to acknowledge God as Father, to own Him as their Father. We are calling them to submit to the Father to become His celebrated redeemed and reclaimed prodigals. Therefore, we always include in our teaching of the little ones that when they address God as Father, they come unworthy in themselves and we thus teach them to pray, “Father, I am unworthy to be your son” (as Lk 15 teaches). There is also a warning to give: “God is your Father, but if you do not acknowledge Him and submit your all to Him, then you stand in rebellion against your Father (on His lap, slapping Him in the face), and that will lead to punishment, to a mess that is worse than the mess in the far country.” Critically, we teach them to pray in Jesus name; we teach them that Jesus is “Jacob’s ladder” who brings young and old to God. We teach them that Jesus is the way to the Father, the only way, and the Father welcomes all who come in Jesus’ name.

Concluding remarks

The first question, even before discussing infant baptism, is the question of the status of little ones growing up in the churches. A critical fork in the road on this point is the fact that they are fallen image bearers of God in need of restoration in that image, they are rebellious children of God, they are prodigals who need to return to their Father and say, “I am not worthy to be your child.” It is important to decide the basis on which we count these little ones to be little

Christians, and the acknowledgement of unworthiness seems to be a central plank in that basis. That is the central point of repentance-baptism for the time of John and thereby for the time of the church.

In this light, we can say without fear of contradiction that godly nurture at home and church is far more important than the questions of infant baptism and the validity of baptism; these questions are surely subordinate. Therefore, parents ought to strive for the ideal of a healthy diet on the doctrines of grace and the promises of the new covenant for themselves as teachers to their children in the warp and woof of the home and church. Those who love their children should consider this ideal carefully. To illustrate: if circumstances indicate that that could only be accomplished in a church that has a practice of baptism different from the believing parents (in either direction), then Christian parents should opt for a reformed diet of expository preaching in order to be diligent and make the best use of God appointed means of grace. This is a matter of milieu; it is critical for healthy spiritual growth in the lives of believers and their children. This is the path of expectation and promise for God's blessing. It is a great sin against our children to neglect the best possible use of means that we can find. Neglect carries with it the threat of real, troubling, and sometimes painful consequences. There is no formula here, God is gracious to sinful parents, and He holds children responsible for their own sins. Nonetheless, you cannot expect God's blessing on you and your children if you fail to exercise due diligence. On the other hand, you can expect His blessing on you and your children when you diligently take up the means of grace that God has appointed for life in the church.

May we fall down before the majesty of the great God and our Father with continual acknowledgment of our sins, and joyful thanksgiving for the forgiveness of our sins; may the Holy Spirit instill in our hearts a true and deep thankfulness for the gospel of baptism, and may He teach us to grow in our use of the means of grace, to the honor of Jesus Christ our risen Lord; to the triune God be all glory now and forever, amen.