

COVENANT RENEWAL

Genesis 1:26-28

Matthew 28:18-20

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HOUSEHOLD BAPTISMS

Dominion is family by family. When we cross the waters of baptism, we don't cross alone. Our children are to be brought with us. The task of dominion is too difficult for one person, or even one couple. The whole family is included by God, and infant baptism is one of the first steps of Biblical dominion.

Why? Dominion is presented in Scripture as a **covenantal** task; in fact the subtitle to my book,

is dominion by covenant. Using the structure of the covenant, it meets the five-fold requirement.

First, dominion should reflect a transcendent purpose; it should be in the name of God and not man; it should be for His Glory. Second, Biblical dominion can only come through the mediatorial work of Jesus Christ: hierarchy; He is the One who brings the world to be submitted to the Father (1 Corinthians 15:24-28). Third, dominion is the promised effect of ethical obedience (Joshua 1): ethics. Fourth, dominion is begun when believers and their children ratify the covenant by sacred oath. Fifth, dominion is transferred to believers and their children through covenantal adoption: succession; infant baptism is a witness, among other things, to the parents that their children are 'given to God and then given back to them to be disciplined. The transfer from one generation to another is technically not by blood.

Thus, infant baptism is extremely important to the matter of dominion. At one level, if our children are not included, then we are severely hindered in doing what God has called us to do. It's the "I'll go it alone syndrome," where each generation ends up "re-inventing the wheel." And I don't think anyone would argue against these points. But, at a more theological level, some would vehemently object to infant baptism.

So, let us concentrate on an aspect of covenant theology. Let us focus on the Biblical and theological basis for infant baptism. Jesus, the Book of Acts, and the Apostle Paul present a united front. They all teach a household structure of the covenant.

The Household Structure in Acts

The Book of Acts records baptisms of entire households. In fact, Luke tells us that the first step of obedience after conversion is normally the subjection of our household to the Gospel by **Holy** baptism! Without any explanation, he describes the baptism of whole families. The language is direct and straightforward regarding two of these situations.

And a certain woman named Lydia, from the city Thyatira, a seller of purple fabrics, a worshipper of God, was listening; and the Lord opened her heart respond to the things spoken by Paul. And when she and her household had been baptized, she urged us saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay" (Acts 16:14-15).

The household is baptized on the basis of Lydia's faith. Notice that she says to Paul after being baptized, "If you have judged me to be faithful." The responsibility for the Apostolic Word coming to her house is on the parent's shoulders.

The same chapter in Acts contains another dramatic household baptism. Paul and Silas had ended up in prison for casting demons out of a young girl, who was being used for an **occultic** business. The same night an earthquake hit. The prison doors fell down and the jailer panicked. He thought all the prisoners had escaped. His solution was to commit suicide. Just before he fell on his own sword, however, Paul stopped him. The man fell to his knees and entered the following conversation.

He (Philippians Jailer) said, "What must I do to be saved?" And they said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you shall be saved, you and your household." And they spoke the word of the Lord to him together with all who were in his house. And he took them that very hour of the night and washed their wounds, and immediately he was baptized, he and all his house. And he brought them into his house and set food before them, and rejoiced greatly, having believed in God with his whole household (Acts 16:30-34).

Clearly the Philippians jailer's household was baptized. On the basis of his faith, and his faith alone, the entire household, including slaves and family members, were claimed by God. But someone might say, "Does not the expression, 'having believed with his whole household,' indicate that the rest of the household was old enough to exercise faith?"

Definitely not. The original Greek text does not read this way. "Having believed" is a singular participle in the original text. A singular participle normally requires a singular subject. Who is the subject of the sentence? The Philippians jailer. The Greek text makes it quite certain that only the jailer believed.

But this language also implies that the rest of the household was considered a household of "faith," when only the head of the household is actually said to have believed. How can this kind of baptism be? Luke doesn't explain for us. Almost out of nowhere, he records household baptisms in the middle of the book, and expects his readers to understand why households were being baptized.

In Lydia's case, she was the believing head of the household. In the jailer's situation, he was a man. Whether the believing head of the household was male or female, the principle seems to be that the rest of the family is entitled to baptism on the basis of the head of the household's faith. Luke, however, makes no attempt to explain such a principle. He presumes it. The concept is so obvious in his mind that no explanation is provided. Where did it come from?

God made a special promise to Abraham. He promised that the Seed (Singular) would come through him (Galatians 3). It is Jesus Christ. But the Seed creates many nations and kings. Abraham becomes the father of all of them (Romans 4:10).

When God speaks to Abraham about the promise, He makes it quite extensive. God says to Abraham, “I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you” (Gen. 17:7).

Peter stands up at Pentecost and says, “For the promise is for you and your children, and all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God shall call to Himself” (Acts 2:39). What “promise” is Peter talking about? The similarity between (almost identical language) Genesis 17 and Acts 2 ties Peter’s comment to the Abrahamic promise.

Most importantly, he extends special promise to the “children” of believers. One would expect this. Peter is talking to Jews. For centuries, the sign of the covenant had been applied to the children of believers. Now Peter applies it to Christian families. The extension of the kingdom by family units continues into the New Covenant. The covenantal sign in the Old Covenant had been circumcision. And, if you had been a Jewish parent, you would have wondered about the place of your children in the New Covenant. Peter clarifies that the covenantal sign changes to baptism.

Even so, let’s not lose sight of why children of unbelievers are included in the covenant. They are born in sin (Ps. 51). They are not morally good or even neutral. They are accountable to God from the moment of conception. There is no magic line of demarcation called the “age of accountability.” The Bible teaches no such thing. The doctrine of original sin teaches that all men are born in sin because of the sin of Adam (Rom. 5:11). Augustine is right. He argues that infant baptism turns on the issue of original sin. The child of a believer is born in sin, and to be considered lost until it comes under the sign of redemption, baptism.

Believing Parents are required to bring their children for baptism, however, because they are claimed by God. They are told by Peter and other passages of Scripture in the Bible that God lays hold of the entire family, not just individuals in it. When they walk to the baptismal font, they give their family to God. They allow their children to be taken from their arms and baptized in the name of the Triune God; strictly speaking, the child is not exclusively theirs any more. The parents begin what they will have to do all of their lives. They have to let go of the child and give it to the Lord.

Historically, the child receives his “Christian” name at baptism. He already has his last name, but he becomes a new person. Then, the child is given back to the parents alive and **covenantally** reborn. It is actually an adopted child of God, and so, all children are to be adopted. Human blood is not the basis of salvation, nor is it the sole basis of the new relationship that a baptized child sustains with his parents. Indeed, the entire family has been changed from a unit of individuals, who are only united by natural birth, into a family in the fullest sense of the word. It has a new union in Christ, who transcends all of their struggles.

Thus, the Book of Acts is straightforward about who was included in the covenant. It builds on the Old Testament concept of a (nuclear) family structure, extending it into the new. But what about Jesus? Did He advocate a household structure?

The Household Structure of the Great Commission

Jesus also taught that the world should be Christian-

ized family by family. He says, “Go therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:19). Baptism precedes dominion. Jesus does more than tell us “what,” He provides a “how to.” Take special note of the words “nations” and “them.”

The personal pronoun “them” in the original Greek differs in gender from its antecedent “nations.” In Greek grammar there could be a number of possible explanations. But normally, a pronoun agrees with its antecedent, the word it refers back to, in gender. Why the difference? “Them” refers to a plural social group, as opposed to the individual, but it must be a unit smaller than “nation” to reflect the discrepancy in gender. On the basis of the pattern in Acts, “them” points to family units. In other words, the nations are to be disciplined family by family.

Failure to take note of this discrepancy can lead to two very serious evangelistic errors. It certainly has in the past. Charlemagne, for example, failed to take note of this grammatical, but terribly important point, and baptized whole nations, as such, into the faith. Christ says to go forth and baptize the “nations,” so that is precisely what he did. But this approach is not found in the Bible. The Book of Acts provides examples of “individuals” being baptized, and examples of “households” being baptized, but no example of whole “nations.”

The historic non-infant-baptizing movements have erred on the other side. Whereas Charlemagne baptized “nations,” they reduce the Great Commission to individuals. It is as though they completely gloss over the fact that Christ says “nations” are to be baptized. And once again, their practice does not match the methodology of the New Testament Church. The Apostles baptized “households,” so where is this practice among those who take a very “individualistic” approach to evangelism?

Both positions fail to do justice to the language of Christ. It seems the spread of the Gospel is both singular and plural. Only the household unit fits both? Several observations confirm a “household” interpretation of Matthew 28:19.

First, the immediate context. The baptismal formula—“In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit”—describes a similar unit to which they are united. They are baptized into the “name” (one) of the “Father, Son and Holy Spirit” (many). The Trinity is similar to the family in that it is singular and plural. It is the heavenly “family.” The basic unit in creation, the family (not the individual), analogically resembles the Godhead. Remember, God made male and female together to image Him (Genesis 1:26); the family images God. The baptism of families is therefore the perfect work of re-creation.

Second, the numbering systems of Old and New Testaments should also be considered. The nation of Israel was numbered (Num. 3:15) and rebuilt by family units (Num. 3:3; 7:6ff.). Moses heard the families of Israel weeping via the “man in the door of his tent” (Num. 11:10). So, Israel was numbered by families and the head of the household, usually the man, represented the family.

It appears that this type of system carries over into the New Testament. Conversions are numbered by households. Luke says, “The number of men (husbands) was about five thousand” (Acts 4:4). The word “men” really ought to be translated “husband” because the Greek word (**aner**) is usually translated this way. This gender fits the pattern in the Great Commission. The personal pronoun “them” is masculine. It would seem, by the way, that if Jesus were referring to the Church in general, instead of a household structure within, a feminine pronoun would have been used. The words for Church are normally feminine since the Church is the Bride of God.

Does the numbering system of the early Church mean that only “husbands” or “men” were converted? No. The Apostles numbered by households. The men were cited because they were usually the head. Sometimes, as in the case of Lydia, a woman was numbered as a household. In either case, we see a household system of numbering.

Third, the broader context. The cultural mandate to subdue the earth was given to the family, not just a husband/wife team, and certainly not just the individual. The first family was supposed to have children that would join them (Gen. 1:26-28). Does this household pattern change?

No. Every time a household is mentioned in the New Testament it is a baptized unit in the Church. There are “in the Acts and the Epistles the record of only ten separate instances of baptism. In two of these, viz., of the eunuch and Paul, Acts 8:38;9:18, there were no families to be baptized. In the case of the three thousand on the day of Pentecost, the people of Samaria, and the disciples of John at Ephesus, crowds were baptized on the very spot on which they professed to believe. Of the remaining five instances, it is expressly said they were baptized, viz., the household of Lydia of Thyatira, of the jailer of Philippi, of Stephanus, and Crispus (Acts 16:15, 32-33; 18:18;1Cor. 1:16). The remaining instance of Cornelius also implies that his household was baptized. Thus the apostles, in every case, without a single exception, baptized believers on the spot, and whenever they had families, they also baptized their households, as such.”¹

It is apparent that the Great Commission has a household structure. The “nations” are to be discipled family by family. The institutional Church is only as strong as the family units inside. Evangelism is most effective when it reaches the whole family and not just the parents or children. And, baptism should be no broader or narrower in scope. If families can be in the faith, then families should be baptized.

So, Luke mentions household conversions because of an underlying principle. It was taught throughout the Bible, and Jesus placed the expansion of the Church under it. What is the principle? It is that the “nations” will be baptized family by family.

Household Structure in Pauline Literature

If we are right in our interpretation of the Great Commission, we should expect to see such a concept in the rest of New Testament. Indeed we can. We can observe it in Pauline literature. The Apostle Paul applies the household structure of salvation to some unusual situations in the Corinthian Church.

He says, “For the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her believing husband; for otherwise your children are unclean, but now they are holy” (1 Cor.7:14).

This passage specifies that children of believers have a unique relationship to the covenant. But we have to be careful. It says nothing about baptism, per se, it only implies the idea that the household is a sphere of salvation. The unbeliever is “sanctified” by the believer, and the children of believers are “holy” by virtue of their relationship to believing parents. Our English translations fail to convey the fact that the same Greek word is used for “sanctified” and “holy” (hagiazō). So, the believer creates a zone of sanctification for those around him.

Those who believe in infant baptism like to use this passage to argue that the child is “holy” in some **covenantal** sense. That is, a child is born in sin. It is not naturally “holy” so it could only be pronounced “holy” through ritual of holiness, baptism.

Those who don't believe in infant baptism have resisted this interpretation, and point to certain complications that arise. For instance, if “holy” means sanctification by water baptism, then the same Greek word in reference to the unbeliever implies that he, too, should be baptized. In the case of adult unbelievers in the home, such as slaves, they would be baptized on the basis of the faith of the believer, while still professing to be unbelievers.

A difficult problem is created. The Church would then consist of professing unbelievers. And, these unbelievers would immediately have to be excommunicated. Denial of Christ cannot not be permitted. The Church is supposed to be a community of the “faithful.”

So, non-paedobaptists are not usually persuaded to believe in infant baptism on the basis of 1 Corinthians 7:14. But one is still left with some difficult questions. In what sense is the unbeliever “sanctified” by the believer? In what sense can the child of an unbeliever be “holy?” Non-paedobaptists have not been able to propose a viable answer.

Paul K. Jewett, professor of systematic theology at Fuller Theological Seminary, argues that “sanctify” means “legitimize.”² In other words, the relationship between unbeliever and believer, child and believing parent, is made “legitimate” through the faithful spouse or parent. His proof is derived from the **Mishnah**.

But this explanation is far from satisfying to one committed to the Bible. Jewett is not able to supply any Biblical texts, and even admits that the Mishnah was written after the Bible. Since there is no Biblical material to deal with, we are left to point out the logical absurdity of Jewett's position.

According to his view, Paul argues that the unbeliever and believer should remain married because the fact that one of them is a Christian “legitimizes” their marriage. This interpretation implies that non-Christian marriages are illegitimate! Following on this, Jewett argues that the children are made “legitimate” through this marriage. Marital separation would mean the children become bastards. Such exegesis strains the strictest views of divorce and remarriage. But the real problem is that there is no Biblical rationale for such a view,

One other obvious problem. The Bible text does not say the relationship between believer and unbeliever, child and parent, is made legitimate. It says the person is sanctified or made holy. So, although standard paedobaptist interpretations are usually unconvincing, non-paedobaptist exegesis is far worse. This dilemma is no reason for converting to paedobaptism, but it does indicate the total inability of a hyper individualistic hermeneutic to come to grips with the spherical nature of the covenant.

The problem for the paedobaptist is that whatever he says about one category, he has to say about the other. If the child is considered baptized because it is “holy,” then the unbeliever has to be considered under the sign of the covenant because the text says he is “sanctified.” Clearly, we have the same Greek word in both cases.

But does this fact mean it implies the same in each situation? It has the same denotation both times, but has it the same connotation? If the implications of sanctification are different for the unbelieving spouse and the child of a believer, there must be contextual evidence.

We have such evidence in the qualifying phrase, “otherwise unclean.” The child is “clean” and “holy.” But the “unbeliever” is “unclean.” This observation may seem

to confuse matters even more. I think it opens us to consider any place in the Bible where someone is considered “sanctified,” yet “unclean.”

The problem concerns the use of the same word to refer to two different types of sanctification. And, the problem is further complicated by the fact that the sanctification of the child makes him clean, whereas no reference is made to the effects of the sanctification of the adult.

I believe that the stranger in the land concept resolves these problems. The stranger in the land was someone who was generally set apart (sanctified) because he lived in Israel under the law of God and the Sabbath system of festivals. He did not actually convert to Judaism. Biblical religion is not coercive. It allows for unbelief in national and social contexts. A man did not have to believe. He only had to be willing to abide by the law of God in a general, outward sense.

This general kind of sanctification is carried over to the New Testament. Paul says to Timothy, “For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected, if it is received with gratitude: for it is sanctified by means of the Word of God and prayer” (1 Tim. 4:4-5). Like the Old Testament, the application of the Bible has a general sanctifying effect on anything.

It is in this sense that the unbeliever, married to a believer, is sanctified, yet not clean. He lives in the sphere of faith. He is the stranger in the home of the believer. As long as he lives in this context, and abides by the law of God in a general way, he participates in some of the blessings of God: extra love and concern in the heart of the believer, exposure to the kingdom of God, etc.

The child of a believer is in a very different category. He receives a special status, being declared “holy”; the English text says, “clean.” So the sanctification referred to is not general but special, and there is only one way a child could be called such.

The Apostle Paul says, “He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and the renewing of the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5). The “regeneration” to which Paul refers is covenantal, meaning it places one in the visible covenant. It is not the regeneration which systematic theology calls the effectual call. The child could only be considered clean on the basis of some **covenantal** action. He is not clean by birth and he is not clean by virtue of some contrived “age of accountability.” Thus, we have excellent Biblical warrant for assuming that the “holiness” of the child is the ritual cleansing of baptism (Heb. 9:10).

Paul argues like Luke. A sphere of salvation is established when an adult is converted. His family is claimed. The unbelieving spouse receives special benefits. And, the child is especially claimed by God. In other words, the “promise” extends to him.

Objection: Children Cannot Exercise Faith

It is often objected that infants cannot exercise faith. And if they cannot exercise faith, then how can they be accountable? One day the disciples were keeping little children away from Jesus. Jesus’s comments are quite illuminating.

And they were bringing even their babies to Him so that He might touch them, but when the disciples saw it, they began rebuking them. But Jesus called for them, saying, “Permit the children to come unto to Me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it at all” (Lk. 18:15-17).

Notice that the text says “babies” were being brought to Jesus.³ They were passive. But when Jesus speaks, He says the children are not being permitted to come. His description is active. So, being “brought” to Jesus is the same as “coming.” How can this be?

Salvation is a sovereign act of God. Both parent and child are brought to Jesus. When they are brought, the act is considered to be active participation on their part. The children were “brought,” but Biblically speaking, they “came” just as an adult is brought by God through Sovereign Grace. Babies and parents both have to be brought to Jesus by God’s power.

I can illustrate. Little children and babies have to be forced to obey their parents. A little child that wants to run out into the traffic is forced to stay in the yard. Is the child’s “decision” not to run into the street valid? Is it recognized by all? Does anyone think to say, “We will disregard what the child has decided to do, because he did not make the decision on his own?” I think the answers to these questions are obvious. There are certain circumstances when one is “brought” to a decision, and that decision is recognized by all, even when no verbal commitment is made!

On the other hand, the child’s and adult’s relationships to God are not the same. When a child is brought he has come. When a parent comes, he has been brought! Yet, both have a valid relationship to Jesus according to his situation: a child is brought and a parent comes. Jesus does not place adult demands on children. And so, it is wrong to place the same requirements of expression of faith on both. A child expresses his faith through the faith of the parents. A parent takes more responsibility and he expresses his own faith. Both are valid expressions because both are **covenantal** ways of making known one’s faith. Both are part of the household that is claimed by God!

³ Some have tried to argue that this passage has nothing to do with baptism. The word is not even mentioned True. But the passage does lay down a basic principle of how people come to Jesus Also, Oscar Cullmann points out that even though the word “baptize” is not found in the text, baptismal language is used. Specific language that he classifies as part of the New Testament baptismal formula is found. The word (koluo) translated “hinder” (Lk. 18:16) appears in many baptismal passages (Acts 8:36; 10:47; 11:17; Matt. 3:13). See in (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1950), pp. 71-80.