

“Why I Am a Paedobaptist”:

An account of how I came to embrace covenant theology and the baptism of infants.

by Nathan Trice

I grew up under the combined influence of staunchly Presbyterian and paedobaptistic parents, and, that of a staunchly Baptist (Reformed Baptist) and anti-paedobaptistic pastor. During my college and seminary days, in particular, the task of understanding the differences between the two fundamentally different understandings of covenant theology, and of the biblical evidence for each, became of paramount importance to me. It became my conviction that the most fundamental difference between these two traditions within Reformed theology lay not in their views of the sacraments, nor in their views of the Church, but in their respective views of the covenant of grace (from which views they derive their views of the sacraments and the church). More particularly, it lay in the respective views held concerning the measure of continuity between the old and the new covenants in Scripture.

Fundamental to the Baptist perspective is the conviction that while the old covenant was made with the national, ethnic entity of Israel (all the natural descendents of Abraham), the new covenant is made only with those whom the Spirit of God regenerates (only the spiritual descendents of Abraham). Thus, for Baptists, while the old covenant community quite properly included all of the children of God's people, since by its nature it included many individuals who were never regenerated, the new covenant community should only include those individuals who give mature evidence of being regenerated, and therefore elect. In my understanding, the most *fundamental* Baptist objection to infant baptism and infant membership in the church is *not*, then, the absence of any New Testament proof text for it, but it is the conviction that the new covenant is made only with the regenerate, and therefore the conviction that the church should give baptism and admit to membership only to those that it can reasonably conclude are truly regenerate (and thus, elect). Thus, not only should infants not be baptized, but children should wait until their later years to make profession of faith, so as to increase the likelihood of the elders' success in verifying their regenerate condition. There is discontinuity between the old and new covenant, then, for Baptists, in that while many were truly members of the *old* covenant who were not elect and never regenerate, there are none who are truly members of the *new* covenant who are not elect or regenerate. While Baptists admit that they do unknowingly administer baptism to those not truly regenerate and elect, they assert that such are not *truly* members of the covenant, and are only members of the *visible* covenant community or church. This understanding of the new covenant being made only with the regenerate or elect is confirmed for them by the abundance of baptisms in the New Testament of adults who are capable of making a mature profession of faith and displaying the marks of conversion, along with the lack of any explicit reference to infants being baptized. In fact, Baptists contend that the common New Testament formula of “repent, believe, and be baptized” proves that baptism is only for those who have been regenerated and converted, and that thus the membership in the church or new covenant community which baptism represents is only for the regenerated and converted.

The Baptist argument can be made quite compellingly, and I wrestled with it for some time, particularly during my seminary years. Shortly after graduating from seminary, and while an intern at Franklin Square OPC, I took it upon myself to listen to and virtually transcribe in notes a 30-part lecture series by Pastor Greg Nichols of Trinity Baptist Church (where Pastor Al Martin serves), in which he seeks to give a biblical refutation of the paedobaptist position. It was my conviction that as a prerequisite to any further pursuit of the ministry, I needed squarely to face the covenant theology of my Baptist brethren.

My exposure to and interaction with the covenant theology of my Reformed Baptist brethren was an invaluable exercise for me in my eventual progression toward a deeply held Presbyterian and paedobaptistic view of the covenant, in that it forced me to defend the practice of infant baptism from a deeper covenantal framework, rather than what I regard as the more popular but shallow proof-texting arguments. It is my conviction that both Baptists and paedobaptists often argue their positions according to surface issues, rather than the fundamental issues. Popular (usually non-Reformed) Baptist arguments often run something like this:

Baptism is a New Testament ordinance.

There are no explicit requirements or instances of infant baptism in the NT.

Therefore: We should not baptize infants.

While this line of argument convinces many, I believe that it is a rather shallow argument, and is not even the best argument that could be advanced for this position. On the other hand, many paedobaptists, in my view, are content to argue for their own position along lines that are virtually as shallow. Such popular arguments run something like this:

The Old Testament ordinance of circumcision was applied to infants.

The New Testament ordinance of baptism replaces circumcision.

Therefore: We should baptize infants.

While I happen to believe that these premises are true, and that this conclusion is valid, and while this argument seems to be convincing for many, I myself don't find it to be a particularly persuasive line of argument as one who is aware of some of the deeper issues of covenant theology. Most Reformed Baptists will acknowledge that baptism replaces circumcision, and that there is a measure of correlation between the two. They will acknowledge that both are signs of the covenant, and that both serve to admit members into the covenant community. However, they will deny that baptism should be applied to infants because they believe that there is a fundamental difference between the nature of the old and the new covenant community. Therefore, the most fundamental question in the debate is, in my judgment, the question of "*With whom is the covenant of grace made?*" or, even more particularly, "*With whom is the new covenant made?*" This, I believe both perceptive Baptists and paedobaptists will agree, is the crux of the issue. Whereas Baptists are convinced that the new covenant is made *only with believers*, paedobaptists assert that the new covenant as well as the old covenant is made *with believers and their children*.

For myself, if I could have been convinced that the new covenant is in fact only made with believers, then I would have conceded that adult baptism should be preferred to infant baptism. However, I eventually became convinced that the biblical evidence reveals that the covenant of grace, both old and new, is made with believers and their children, and my convictions

concerning paedobaptism and the covenant of grace became deeply entrenched. A biblical refutation of the Baptist thesis that the new covenant is made only with believers, in my judgment, could proceed along the following lines of argument:

1. If the new covenant is one made only with believers, then we would expect that it would be announced, inaugurated, and perpetuated as excluding the children of believers, when in fact the opposite is found in Scripture:

a) The new covenant is announced as one that includes our children:

Isaiah 59: 20-21; Jeremiah 32: 36ff; Ezekiel 37: 24-27

b) The new covenant is inaugurated as one that includes our children:

Matthew 19:14; Acts 2:38-39

c) The new covenant is perpetuated as one that includes our children:

1 Corinthians 7:14; Ephesians 6:1-4; examples of household baptisms

2. If the new covenant is one made only with believers, then we would expect that it would be spoken of as unconditional and unbreakable, when in fact the opposite is found in Scripture. The new covenant is conditioned on persevering faith and obedience, and may be broken by unbelief and disobedience:

John 15: 1-8; Romans 11:17-24; 1 Corinthians 9:24-10:1; 2 Corinthians 11:1-4;

Colossians 1:21-23; Hebrews 3-4; Hebrews 10:4-39; 2 Peter 2: 17-22

In God's providence, I was helped in the formation of these convictions particularly during my studies at Westminster Theological Seminary. In particular, I can identify at least four formative influences on me during that time.

In the first place, Professor Sinclair Ferguson, in a course on the sacraments, convinced me that both blessings *and* curses, promises *and* warnings, covenant keeping *and* covenant breaking, are inherent to the covenant of grace in both old and new dispensations. The necessary implication of this is that the covenant includes, therefore, both those who are elect or regenerate, and those who are not. Those members of the covenant that are elect and whom the Spirit regenerates are given grace to keep the covenant by ongoing repentance and faith, and thereby receive the promised blessings. Those members of the covenant that are not elect and are never regenerated become covenant breakers, and thereby receive the curses warned of, with the eventual result of being cut off from the covenant. The conclusion that Ferguson's material required, and that was particularly helpful to me, was that God's covenant of grace is not made only with the elect, but in God's sovereign plan is *really and truly* made with men who were not elect as well. With due sobriety, I realized that both God's purposes of election and reprobation were served within the covenant community, though the former has the priority in the heart of God (he "takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked"). In other words, being in a covenant relationship with God is *not* necessarily to be in a saving relationship with God; rather, the covenant relationship with God is the means by which God brings his elect into a saving relationship with himself, as well as the means by which he seals to reprobate covenant members their just deserts. In the case of infant baptism, then, Ferguson taught that the child of believing parents was to receive the sign of the covenant, not on the basis of a hope that he *might* be a member of the covenant if he proved to be one of God's elect. Rather, baptism was to be administered based upon the certainty that he *was* fully a member of the covenant, whether elect or not, and subject to both the covenant blessings or curses, according to his response to the covenant. The sign of baptism, Ferguson said, is the objective word of God made visible, and in that sign God was *not* saying to

the recipient, “*If you will repent and believe, then I will make my covenant with you,*” but rather, “*I have made a covenant with you, therefore, repent and believe.*” In his remarks on how Christian parents should view their baptized children, he taught that they should all be viewed as *members of the covenant*, with the sign of baptism which they received being the life-long summons to them to keep that covenant with God by faith and repentance. In the case of those children who receive the sign of the covenant, yet turn from the Lord, they are not judged as “never truly members of the covenant,” but as members of the covenant who have broken covenant with God.

A second influence on me was Professor Richard Gaffin, in a course on “The Theology of Hebrews,” in which this understanding of the covenant was further reinforced for me, particularly in his material on the issue of apostasy in the book of Hebrews. The problem that he set out to address was the formidable question of how, if those who are redeemed by Christ’s blood cannot ever lose their salvation, as Reformed theology teaches, the writer of this epistle can say things like:

It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace. Land that drinks in the rain often falling on it and that produces a crop useful to those for whom it is farmed receives the blessing of God. But land that produces thorns and thistles is worthless and is in danger of being cursed. In the end it will be burned. - Hebrew 6: 4-8. (See also 10:26-31 and 12:15-17,25)

Gaffin’s compelling conclusion is that the writer of Hebrews is describing the experience of genuine members of the covenant of grace who are nonetheless not truly regenerated, converted, or even elect, and yet who “in some sense enjoy a genuine experience of the benefits of the covenant,” or, as he puts it elsewhere, “gospel blessings.” Gaffin asserts that the covenant concept is vitally important in understanding these texts, as well as other New Testament passages like 1 Corinthians 10: 1-13 and 1 John 2:19. The New Testament writers, in speaking of the reality of apostasy, do not teach that the benefits of a *saving* relationship with God can be lost. However, they do teach that there are profound spiritual blessings of a covenant relationship with God which *can* be lost by members of the covenant who are not elect. Thus, Gaffin describes those who eventually apostatize as those who “are within the covenant community,” though by failing to persevere within that covenant, they are eventually put out of that covenant community. The distinction which I saw Gaffin to be making between the number of the elect and the covenant community is evident in the following miscellaneous notes which I made during his lectures:

Covenant and election must not be identified... The former is the structure and historical arrangement by which the latter is administered... Though we cannot separate election and the covenant, they are not to be equated either. There are more people in covenant with God than are elect.

These principles further reinforced in my mind the reality that the new covenant, contrary to Baptist thinking, is *not* made *only* with those who are truly converted, but, just as with the old covenant, it is made with all those who make profession of faith in Christ *and with their children*. This allowed me to see not only that the sign of the covenant could rightly be administered to children long before they gave evidence of regeneration, but also convinced me

that those who received the sign of the covenant rightly administered were to be recognized fully as members of the covenant until such a time as they apostatized from it. Furthermore, Gaffin's insights enabled me to see that even those members of the covenant community whose professions of faith are false, and who are not of God's elect, are nonetheless true members of the covenant, though destined to be cut off from the covenant by God in judgment.

A third influence came from Professor Peter Lillback, in a course on "Origins of Covenant Theology," where he demonstrated that what I was learning about the covenant from Ferguson and Gaffin was largely expounded by Calvin in his writings on the subject. Particularly helpful was Lillback's evidence for Calvin's view of the covenant of grace as a conditional covenant. Since Calvin's day, there has been an ongoing debate among theologians as to whether the covenant of grace should be seen as conditional or unconditional. Those who equate the covenant with election tend to see it as an unconditional covenant; i.e., that the covenant promises are made only to the elect in Christ, and are made apart from any conditions. Lillback sought to show that Calvin recognized a distinction between election and the covenant, and that the covenant promises are made conditioned on faith and repentance. Proponents of this view argue that God makes conditional promises therefore to *all* members of the covenant (along with conditional warnings), and that in the case of elect members of the covenant, God gives the grace to fulfill the conditions and thereby receive what is promised. Lillback demonstrated that Calvin, in his response to the Anabaptists, affirmed the reality of covenant breaking, not only by members of the old covenant, but by members of the new covenant as well. This conception of the covenant of grace (old and new testament) as including both those elect and reprobate factored heavily in Calvin's defense of infant baptism against those who argued that it should only be given to those showing evidence of regeneration. In Calvin's view, the children of believers were properly the recipients of the sign of the covenant because they were in fact truly members of the covenant until such a time as they were broken off from it through apostasy.

A fourth influence upon my thinking came through research of my own, as part of a project for Dr. Lillback's class, into a significant debate between two Dutch theologians and their respective denominations concerning the nature of the covenant. Research into the issues which divided the founders of the Protestant Reformed Church and the Canadian Reformed Church early last century resulted in a paper which I entitled "The Covenant of Grace in the Contrasting Views of Herman Hoeksema and Klaas Schilder." In my study, I came to the conclusion that Herman Hoeksema represented the most blatant form of the error which my professors were teaching against: that of equating election with the covenant. For Hoeksema, only the elect of God are ever in a covenant relationship with him, whether in the old or new dispensation. Though the sign of the covenant, he admitted, was applied to those who were not elect by God's own design, it was in their case only an "empty sign," signifying no real covenant relationship at all. In Hoeksema's view, a covenant relationship with God was the same as a saving relationship, and carried all the unconditionality and permanence of God's sovereign election. Schilder's critique of Hoeksema, however, though deficient in some ways, seemed to me to be quite devastating when he pointed out that Hoeksema's view left him unable to account for the reality of covenant breaking or apostasy, and the presence of covenant curses in both old and new testaments; and left him without any objective basis for identifying members of the covenant and the covenant community, despite the objective sign of the covenant in baptism. Without developing fully my

observations as contained in that paper, my working formulation of the biblical concept of the covenant was expressed in my conclusion in the following way:

[The covenant of grace is] *a genuine display of God's grace to believers and their children; one in which both the elect and the reprobate are offered the benefits of the covenant upon condition of obedience, and in which all covenant keepers are brought into saving relationship with God by saving grace while all covenant breakers are ultimately held more accountable for the covenantal grace spurned.*

Having identified some of the formative influences upon my understanding of covenant theology, I will try now to summarize as best I can the major aspects of my view.

Summary of my views of the covenant

1. I believe that the covenant of grace is God's gracious overture to sinful men whereby through his providential means he brings them into a relationship with himself consisting of profound privileges and profound responsibilities. To those in covenant relationship with himself, God makes promises of temporal and eternal blessings, upon the condition of faith and obedience. Also to those in covenant relationship with himself, God issues warnings of temporal and eternal judgments, upon the failure to believe and obey. The elect members of the covenant are given grace by God to fulfill the conditions of the covenant, and thereby to remain in the covenant as covenant keepers. The non-elect members of the covenant, however, not receiving the grace of God to keep covenant, become covenant breakers, and are eventually cut off from the covenant, both by action of the Church through the exercise of the keys of the kingdom, and by God himself as he prunes away the branches that bear no fruit. As indicated in the picture Jesus gives in John 15, I believe that both fruitful and unfruitful members of the covenant are *covenantally united* to Christ: they are all branches that are "in Him." However, not all who are covenantally united to Christ are savingly united to him, and therefore some are spoken of as pruned off. There is a real, objective covenant relationship with Christ, however, even by those who prove to be non-elect. I therefore see the covenant relationship as a means to an end, not an end in itself; that is, the *covenant* relationship is the means to the end of a *saving* relationship. I find it helpful to distinguish between saving grace, common grace, and "covenant grace," believing that the latter is what is spoken of in Hebrews 6, et. al. as being enjoyed by *all* members of the covenant, even those who eventually apostatize.

2. I believe that the Church is the community of those in covenant with God, consisting of believers and their children. I do not regard the children of believers to be any less in covenant with God than their parents, and therefore, I do not regard them to be in any way less really members of the church than their parents. This does not mean that I believe that a child member of the church should be given all the privileges that are due to an adult member of the church, just as I do not believe that a child member of a household should not be given all the privileges of an adult member. Privileges such as participating in corporate worship, partaking of the Lord's Supper, electing officers, teaching Sunday School, standing for office, and others, should only be given in accordance with the demonstrated capacity for them. Notwithstanding this, however, I believe that covenant children should be viewed and treated as full members of the church, apart from any further process of "initiation" or "preparation for membership" than they have already received as those born in a covenant home and the recipients of the sign of baptism.

From their infancy and by virtue of their baptism, they should be viewed as “belonging to the church,” and separate from “the rest of the world” (Westminster Confession 27:1) just as really as any other adult member of the church. Consequently, they should be charitably regarded and treated as Christians, as saints, as learning and growing disciples of Christ in the same way as every other member of the church, *until evidence in their life should demonstrate otherwise*. The blessings for covenant faithfulness as well as the warnings against covenant unfaithfulness should be earnestly preached and inculcated in both the children and the adult members of the covenant in the same way, lest any be guilty of the presumption of Old Testament Israel that membership in the covenant community itself, apart from faithful covenant keeping, can make one right before God. And covenant children (especially the young adults of the church) should be just as liable to the censure and discipline of the church as any adult member, including the censure of excommunication, or being cut off from membership in the covenant, for serious and unrepentant sin.

3. In saying these things, I do not subscribe to the view known of as “presumptive regeneration.” This view is a minority view within the Reformed community (though advanced by some giants in our tradition) which argues that baptism is given to covenant children *on the basis of the presumption that they are already regenerate*. Inherent in this view is the thinking that baptism is only *rightly given* to those who are regenerate, but that in light of God’s covenant promises, children of Christian parents may be presumed to be regenerate from birth, and thereby worthy recipients of the sign of the covenant. My critique of this view, and what is, I believe, the greater Reformed consensus, is that baptism is *never* given on the basis of regeneration, either that *presumed* in infants or *perceived* in adults, but rather, it is given on the objective, biblical criteria either of a credible profession of faith or birth to professing Christian parents. To presume that our covenant children are regenerate from birth is indeed unfounded, for some appear to be regenerated much later, and others are obviously never regenerated at all. Furthermore, if the covenant is in fact made with both the elect and non-elect, as I have asserted, then the presumption that our children are regenerate is an entirely unnecessary one for the administration of baptism to infants. The sign of the covenant may be *rightly administered* even to an “Esau,” without any presumption of the present or future condition of the heart, if the objective biblical requirements for the sign are present.

4. Having said this, however, I also recognize that to those of a more Baptist mind, the consistent Reformed and Presbyterian view of the children of the covenant will almost inevitably appear to be rooted in “presumption regeneration.” It is presumption, Baptists would say, to view our infant children as full members of the covenant and to treat them as Christians before they are able to give testimony to the fruit of conversion. I, however, would assert that it is no presumption, but an objective God-ordained reality that our children are members of the covenant, and it is this clear, covenantal framework that leads us to treat them, not as little pagans or nonChristians, but as Christians, until such a time as they are removed from the church by discipline. Presumption is a word that usually carries the sense of “unwarranted assumptions,” and in this sense I am opposed to all presumption by or about any member of the church. However, the real error of presumption, in my view, comes not in viewing children as Christians by virtue of their baptism, but of continuing to view them as Christians in the face of evidence in their life to the contrary. Of course, this is the identical error to be avoided in connection with adult Christians. However, if presumption is understood in the sense of a

“charitable regard in the absence of contradictory evidence,” then in this sense I can say that *I presume as much about the children of the church as I do about the adult members*. I, like the apostle Paul in his letters, would address and regard the children as well as their parents as “saints,” as those set apart from the world, and in covenant relationship to God. Likewise, when signs of serious covenant unfaithfulness are manifest in the life, *I presume as little about the children of the church as I do about the adult members*. In the preaching of the Word, for example, I believe that I am responsible to treat the entire congregation as God’s people, without any underlying note of suspicion about their true standing before God. In tension with that, however, I believe that I am to preach against all sin (even heart sins) that, if unrepented of, constitute covenant breaking, and reveal an unregenerate heart within covenant members. I see the Scripture itself making no distinction between the adult and child members of the covenant in this regard, and I would not therefore make one. All members of the covenant community are to be treated with a “charitable regard in the absence of contradictory evidence,” yet none are to be regarded with “unwarranted assumptions” about their spiritual condition in light of their day to day lives.

5. Despite my conviction that in God’s inscrutable wisdom there are reprobate sons and daughters born and raised in covenant homes, who are themselves members of the covenant and to be treated as such until duly cut off from the covenant, I believe fervently that a strong hope for regenerate faithful covenant children can be gained from the promises of God, which are ordinarily connected to the faithful fulfillment of covenant nurture. Though perhaps some have overstated the connection between parental faithfulness and faithful children, I am convinced that the Church at large has primarily *understated* it. I believe that the biblical teaching is that faithful Christian parenting is normally blessed by God with faithful, covenant-keeping children. The more painful corresponding teaching of Scripture is that unfaithful, covenant-breaking children are normally a reflection of unfaithful parenting. Though there may be exceptions to these rules, I believe that even the Reformed community is in danger of overlooking the reality and implications of the rule as a rule. While this brings great hope for Christian parents, even a confident expectation that their covenant children will grow up as godly men and women, it also raises the stakes of responsibility as they shepherd their souls in the home. Some have called this the neglected doctrine of “covenant succession,” which I believe should remain a hallmark of the Presbyterian community.