

BAPTISM

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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Chapter 1: How God Relates to His People	2
Chapter 2: Old Testament Covenants	5
Chapter 3: The New Covenant	12
Chapter 4: The Covenant Signs	15
Chapter 5: Common Questions	19
Conclusion	21
Resources	22

Introduction

If the topic of church membership is related to the most infamous sermon I've preached while here at Gateway Church (see the booklet *Membership* for more on that), baptism is related to the *longest* teaching I've done in one sitting while here at Gateway. It was a two hour, thirteen minute, and forty-one second time of teaching and Q&A (and yes, this took place during the peak of my "long hair" era as your pastor. And if you don't know what that means, you're better off than those who do.)

The good news is that this booklet will be a significantly more brief overview of baptism, but much of this booklet will be taken from that teaching. So, if the longer version interests you, search for *The Sacrament of Baptism* on our website and you should be able to find it.

I have two goals for this booklet. First, I want us to look at how God relates to his people in both the Old and New Testaments. And secondly, I want to address some of the common questions we get asked about baptism.

Chapter 1

How God Relates to His People

How does God relate to his people? Believe it or not, perhaps the most significant disagreement among American Christians takes place in answering this question. Why's that? Because our answer reveals how we view the relationship between the Old and New Testaments, meaning is there more continuity or discontinuity between the Old and the New?

All Christians agree there's both continuity and discontinuity. What I'm talking about is which do you believe defines the relationship between the Old and New. Is there more continuity or discontinuity in how God relates to his people? And it's important to understand what your view is, because this will determine your view of baptism, along with many other non-essential doctrines that Christians disagree about. So let's look at each of these views.

View number one is this: The Old Testament is precisely that...old. It's outdated or obsolete. In this view the New Testament is brand new, which means according to this view the Old and New Testaments have more discontinuity than continuity.

The Old Testament is still the inspired Word of God, but it reached its expiration date when Jesus came. So anything in the Old Testament is at best helpful in a historical sense, but has no impact on Christians today because we're New Testament only people.

This is a fairly popular view among American Christians. It's a reason why so many Christians in our country neglect reading and studying the Old Testament. And for those who do read it, it explains why they're not quite sure how the Old Testament applies to them today.

Many who hold this view are quick to read a psalm when they need to be comforted. Some who hold this view may quote verses like, "For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope."¹ Yet there are many who hold this view who wouldn't quote from Jeremiah like that, or even the Psalms.

But this is view number one, where the Old Testament is old. It's helpful in a historical sense, but has no impact on Christians today because we're New Testament only people. Which means that the way God relates to us has more discontinuity than continuity when compared to the way he related to the people of the Old Testament.

Now hear me: Many Bible believing, God loving, gonna be in Heaven Christians — and pastors — whom I respect and have learned a great deal from, hold this view.

View number two is this: The New Testament is a continuation of the Old. This view sees the Old and New Testaments as telling one story. The Old set the foundation that the New is built on. The Old looks forward to the New. The New looks back to the Old. This view believes that there's more in common, that there's more continuity between the Old and New Testaments, than discontinuity.

And central to this view, that there's continuity between the Old and the New in how God relates to his people, is that

¹ Jeremiah 29:11 (ESV)

God's relationship to his people has always been, and continues to be, covenantal in nature. And this is the view I hold.

But what does it mean for God's relationship with his people to be covenantal in nature?

Let's first define the word covenant. "*A biblical covenant is a binding relationship of eternal consequence in which God promises to bless and his people promise to obey.*"

So there's a promise of blessing by God and a promise of obedience by the people. No obedience — no blessing. And notice that we should be thinking eternally, both for the promises and the consequences.

Both views that I've described for you believe there are covenants in the Bible. But where the difference between the two views is seen most clearly is in how they understand what's known as the New Covenant. But before we get to the New Covenant, let's briefly look at the covenants that come before it.

Chapter 2

Old Testament Covenants

The first covenant in the Bible is called the covenant of creation or the covenant of works. It's found in Genesis chapter two.

Genesis 2:15–17 ESV

*The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, “**You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil **you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.****”*

Notice there's an obedience required on the part of the man, “work and keep the garden and don't eat from one tree,” as well as a promise from God, “if you eat from the tree you will die,” which implies a blessing, “if you obey me and don't eat from the tree, you will live.” But spoiler alert, they eat from the tree. Adam and Eve break the covenant.

Let's pause for a question, which we'll ask ourselves numerous times today. Does this covenant apply to us? Meaning, do we experience the results of this covenant being broken? Yes. Adam's breaking of the covenant has affected all of us. Even though we're not Adam, this covenant has continuity with us and our relationship with God today.

Covenant of Grace

Which leads us to the covenant of redemption also known as the covenant of grace. This is an eternal covenant between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit where together they agree to accomplish our salvation. Technically, this is the first covenant because it was made in eternity past, but it's the second covenant found in the Bible. We find it in Genesis chapter three where, in speaking to the serpent and the woman, God says...

Genesis 3:15 ESV

15 I will put enmity (or hostility — there will be war —) between you (the serpent) and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he (this future descendant of the woman...) shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel."

This covenant is fulfilled on the cross when Jesus is crucified. God's enemy, the Serpent, also known as Satan, saw Jesus on the cross and thought he'd won the war. But as the nail went through Jesus' feet, as the serpent struck his heel, the nail went through Jesus' feet and straight through the head of the snake as it went into the wood of the cross. The seed, the promised descendant of the woman, defeated the snake.

Here's our question again: Does this covenant apply to us? Yes! This is our hope, right? That the offspring of the woman, Jesus, has crushed the head of the snake on the cross and did so on our behalf.

Noahic Covenant

The next covenant we find in the Bible is God's covenant with Noah. After Adam and Eve's sin, the wickedness of mankind multiplied resulting in God's judgment through the flood. This

covenant is found in Genesis chapter nine when after the flood, God put a rainbow in the sky and promised to never again judge his creation in this way.

Here's our question again: Does this covenant apply to us? Anyone worried about God destroying the world again with a flood? No. Why? Because of his promise to Noah, right?

Anyone get amped up because the rainbow, a sign of God's promise to his people, has been hijacked by another group? You do. Why? Because the rainbow is personal, right? It's not just a promise to Noah. The rainbow's a sign of God's promise to his people, including us today, isn't it?

Abrahamic Covenant

Next we have God's covenant with Abraham. This covenant is found in Genesis chapters twelve, fifteen, and seventeen. Abraham's story begins with God calling him out of a foreign land, and promising that He will make Abraham into the father of many nations.

But there's a problem. Abraham's old and doesn't have any children! So the covenant picks up again a few chapters later with God repeating his promise to Abraham. And it's here where we find the words...

Genesis 15:6 ESV

6 And he (Abraham) believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness.

God makes a promise to Abraham that, though he's crazy old and childless, he will be the father of many nations. And Abraham believed God. The covenant continues a few chapters later.

Genesis 17:1–14 ESV

*1 When Abram (that's his name when we first meet him, but God's about to change his name...when he) was ninety-nine years old the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless, 2 that I may make my **covenant** between me and you, and may multiply you greatly." 3 Then Abram fell on his face. And God said to him, 4 "Behold, my **covenant** is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. 5 No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. 6 I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you. 7 And I will establish my **covenant** between me and you and **your offspring** after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your **offspring** after you. 8 And I will give to you and to your **offspring** after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and **I will be their God.**" 9 And God said to Abraham, "As for you, you shall keep my **covenant**, you and your **offspring** after you throughout their generations. 10 This is my **covenant**, which you shall keep, between me and you and your **offspring** after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. 11 You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the **covenant** between me and you. 12 He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised. Every male throughout your generations, whether born in your house or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring, 13 both he who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money, shall*

*surely be circumcised. So shall my **covenant** be in your flesh an **everlasting covenant**. 14 Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my **covenant**."*

Let's ask our question again: Does this covenant apply to us today? Yes. Why? Because "Father Abraham had many sons, and many sons had Father Abraham." If you know it, sing along with me — "I am one of them and so are you. So let's all praise the Lord!" That's an old Sunday School song for those who didn't grow up in the church.

But there's more truth to that children's song than you may realize. Think about it. What right do we have to sing these words if this covenant doesn't apply to us in some way? But how do we know it applies to us? Because of the verse, "He believed the Lord and it was counted to him as righteousness" and its importance to the authors of the New Testament.

Mosaic Covenant

Fast forward a few hundred years and we come to the Mosaic covenant, which is found in Exodus chapters twenty through twenty-five, and is repeated in the book of Deuteronomy. The Mosaic covenant builds on the previous ones but gives detail as to how God's people are to be holy and set apart, thus all of the laws and ceremonies and celebrations that are found in the books of Exodus and Leviticus. And the point of it all is that God's people are to be "a holy kingdom, in distinction from the offspring of the serpent," which echoes the language of the covenant from Genesis chapter three.

And notice that this covenant comes after God had rescued his people out of slavery in Egypt. They were enslaved

and their rescue, their salvation, comes first. and then God gives them the law. God rescues first, then he gives instructions on how to obey. Obedience is always a result of salvation. Obedience is never a way to earn salvation.

Something to pay attention to is how in Galatians Paul tells us that the Mosaic covenant, which introduced God's law, and the Abrahamic covenant, which introduced God's promise, are not in opposition to each other. The law of the Mosaic covenant doesn't invalidate God's promise to Abraham. Paul infers that the promise continues as the covenants build on each other. For the multiple covenants are all building towards the fulfillment of the one promise.

This is why I suggest as you wrestle with the continuity and discontinuity of the Old and the New, you look at what the New Testament says about the covenants.

Davidic Covenant

The next covenant is the Davidic covenant. It's found in 2 Samuel chapter seven. In this covenant with David, God makes it clear that the king of Israel stands as a representative for all of God's people. In this covenant the king is called both to obey God and to lead the people in obeying God. And though earthly king after king will fail to do this, in this covenant God promises that one day a King will come from the line of David, and he will do what no other earthly king was able to do before him. For this future King will perfectly fulfill all of the obligations, not only for himself as king, but for his people as he obeys God as their representative.

And, I hope it's obvious, but Jesus is the King being described. He's the fulfillment of God's promise to David. In fact, the New Testament seems to be screaming at us that Jesus, being the fulfillment of God's promise, is the fulfillment of all of

the covenants. I say this because the New Testament begins with the words...

Matthew 1:1 ESV

*1 The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of **David**, the son of **Abraham**.*

In the first verse of the New Testament, Matthew connects the genealogy of Jesus through God's covenants with David and Abraham.

Chapter 3

The New Covenant

And now we arrive at the New Covenant, where the two views of the Old and New part ways. Let's see if the New Covenant is new in the sense of a completely new start, with no connection to the previous covenants. That would be view number one, the discontinuity dominant view. Or is New Covenant a continuation of, or the next step in God's relationship with his people? This is view number two, the continuity dominant view.

Jeremiah 31:31–34 ESV

*31 "Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a **new covenant** with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, 32 not like the **covenant** that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my **covenant** that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. 33 For this is the **covenant** that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. 34 And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."*

Notice how Jeremiah emphasizes the covenantal relationship between God and his people. That God is a promise-making, but more importantly, a promise-keeping God. God had made covenant promises to his people and here in this New Covenant, a new promise is made. But don't miss that Jeremiah mentions the previous covenants.

At this point some additional background will be helpful. The people of God are about to be sent into exile. They're about to get kicked out of the Promised Land because of their covenant unfaithfulness. But God, because he's always faithful to his people, even when we're faithless, gives them a new promise. God's people will return to the land.

But there's even more to this promise. For in this New Covenant God promises to do something to the hearts of his people. God's law will be written on their hearts, meaning God's law will be in them.

In the Exodus story, God's law was written on stone tablets. In this New Covenant the law will be written on the hearts of God's people, leading to the culmination of this covenant, which is also found in the previous covenants when God says that he will be their God and they will be his people. So here's the picture.

- In the midst of king Nebuchadnezzar conquering Judah and destroying the city of Jerusalem.
- In the midst of God's judgment coming upon the people because they've abandoned him to worship false gods.
- At the peak of their unfaithfulness, God demonstrates that he is always faithful.
- And he gives a new promise to his people.

“A day is coming,” says the Lord. “When a New Covenant will be established. And I will be your God and you will be my people.”

And this New Covenant, I would like to suggest, is a continuation of the previous covenants found in the Bible. That it's not brand new in the sense of not being connected to the others, but is new in the sense that it's the next step of God's faithfulness to his people.

To prove this, I want to look at two aspects of the covenants that demonstrate their continuity, which will get us to baptism, I promise. There are many other aspects that we could look at to prove their continuity, but we only have time for two today.

Chapter 4

The Covenant Signs

One way the covenants demonstrate continuity is that they each have a sign. And not only does each covenant have a sign, it's important to notice what the sign is signaling. To Noah, the sign is a rainbow.

Genesis 9:13 ESV

*13 I have set my **bow** in the cloud, and it shall be a **sign of the covenant between me and the earth.***

The rainbow is the sign that God will be faithful to his promise, “never again will I destroy the earth by a flood.”

To Abraham, the sign is circumcision.

Genesis 17:11 ESV

*11 You shall be **circumcised** in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a **sign of the covenant between me and you.***

Circumcision is the sign that God will be faithful to his promise, “Abraham, you will be the father of many nations.”

To Moses, the Passover Meal was established prior to the covenant. The Passover Meal is a sign that God will be faithful to his promise, “My judgment will pass over the homes whose doorposts are covered by the blood of the lamb.”

To David there's no obvious sign, though the kingship and crown and throne imagery point to Jesus our King. Overall, the kingship is a sign that God will be faithful to his promise, "My promised King will come."

And with the New Covenant, the sign is baptism. And baptism is the sign that God will be faithful to his promise, "Whoever believes in my Son will be saved."

There's continuity: Each of the covenants has a sign pointing to God's faithfulness, not to us or our faithfulness. The signs point to God's faithfulness, that he always keeps his promises to his people.

Who Covenant Signs Are For

A second way the covenants demonstrate continuity is in who the covenant signs are for.

In Noah's story, who was called righteous? Noah was. But who was saved in the ark? Noah and his family. Who received the sign of God's covenant promise of the rainbow in the sky? Noah, his family, and all of creation, including us. Though the covenant was made with Noah, though he was righteous, the sign of God's promised faithfulness was given to others in addition to Noah.

In Abraham's story, even though the covenant was between God and Abraham, who received the sign of circumcision as the sign of God's promise? Abraham, his two sons, Ishmael and Isaac, and his entire family, for all of his male descendants would receive the sign. Though the covenant was with Abraham, all of his male descendants were recipients of the sign of God's promised faithfulness.

The same continues with Moses, and the promise God made to David, and even with the New Covenant. Which leads us to Peter, a Jewish man who believed in Jesus.

After Peter preached his first sermon about Jesus, the crowd asked him, "...Brothers, what shall we do?"²

Acts 2:38–41 ESV

*38 And Peter said to them, "Repent and **be baptized every one of you** in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. 39 **For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off**, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself." 40 And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, "Save yourselves from this crooked generation." 41 So those who received his word were **baptized**, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.*

Imagine what these Jewish people had just heard in Peter's sermon about Jesus. They'd heard that God's promise, that the Seed of the woman would come and defeat the serpent, had come. And that the Promised One, who would come and save God's people from eternally drowning in the flood of their sins, had come. And that the Promised One, who would perfectly fulfill the Law on the behalf of God's people, had come. That the One who would be a Saving King had come. Peter's audience had just heard that all of God's covenant promises had been fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

And Peter said to them, "For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself."³ And those who received Peter's word about Jesus were baptized, for baptism is the sign of the new covenant; a sign of God's promised faithfulness to his people. For

² Acts 2:37 (ESV)

³ Acts 2:39 (ESV)

baptism reminds us that God always saves those who believe in his Son.

Chapter 5

Common Questions

Why do we baptize babies and young children before they believe?

Because of the continuity between the covenants. Meaning, we practice infant baptism because all of the previous covenants included signs that were given not only based on the faith of the individual, like Abraham or Noah, but also to the children of those individuals, Isaac, Ishamel, Noah's family, and so on. And nowhere in the New Covenant, nor in the New Testament, do we see a change in this expectation of who's to receive the sign.

Are baptized children automatically saved?

Of course not! We don't believe that baptism saves anyone. Jesus does. And truth be told, there's no guarantee that individuals baptized as believers are actually saved. Many people baptized as believers have walked away from Jesus, which is rightfully sobering.

Why does Gateway normally require that those being baptized become members, and the parents of children being baptized to be members⁴?

⁴ There are occasional exceptions to this requirement. If you would like to discuss your specific situation with an elder, please call the church office.

First, know that those who are new to the Christian faith generally have no issue with our connection between baptism and membership. It's folks who come to us from different church backgrounds who usually object. Instead of a lengthy answer here, I'd encourage you to go read our *Membership* booklet about the benefits of membership and the commitment Gateway's members make to those who are baptized in our church, and I think you'll see why we believe baptism and membership should have greater connection to one another.

Can I be re-baptized?

Here's our stance: If you were baptized in a Bible believing church, we won't baptize you again. Why? Because your first baptism did exactly what it was supposed to do: It pointed to God's faithfulness to his people and the promise that he always saves those who believe in his Son. And when baptism is about God's faithfulness, and not our decision to follow Jesus, we find no need to be re-baptized.

Now, if you've been thinking about getting baptized again, and if you're not sure if your first baptism was in a Bible believing church, call the church office and someone will follow up with you to help sort through your situation.

Conclusion

The bottom line is, no matter where you land on infant baptism or connecting baptism and membership together, I hope we all agree that baptism as the sign of the new covenant does what the signs of the previous covenants did. That baptism points to God's covenant promise to his people: That he is always faithful to save those who turn to his Son in faith. And may every baptism you witness going forward remind you, and stir in you, abundant joy as it signals to you, "My God is always faithful. He always saves those who believe in his son, just as he keeps all of his promises to his people."

Resources

Books on Baptism

- *Children of the Promise: The Biblical Case for Infant Baptism* by Robert Booth
- *To a Thousand Generations: Infant Baptism — Covenant Mercy for the People of God* by Doug Wilson
- *Baptism* by Francis Schaeffer
- *Christian Baptism* by John Murray
- *Why do we Baptize Infants?* by Bryan Chapell
- *Jesus Loves the Little Children: Why we Baptize Children* by Daniel Hyde
- *Baptism: Answers to Common Questions* by Guy Richard
- *Infant Baptism and the Silence of the New Testament* by Bryan Holstrom
- *Word, Water, and Spirit* by J.V. Fesko
- *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries* by Joachim Jeremiah
- *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* by Everett Ferguson
- *It Takes a Church to Baptize* by Scot McKnight
- *A Christian's Pocket Guide to Baptism: The Water that Unites* by Robert Letham
- *Meaning and Mode of Baptism* by Jay Adams
- *Christian Baptism: The Sign and Seal of God's Covenant Promise* by Bruce McDowell
- *Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism* by Gregg Strawbridge (editor)

- *Worship: Reformed According to Scripture* by Hughes Oliphant Old
- *The Shaping of the Reformed Baptismal Rite in the Sixteenth Century* by Hughes Oliphant Old
- *Understanding Four Views on Baptism* by Paul Engle (editor)
- *Infant Baptism and the Covenant of Grace* by Paul Jewett (believers baptism only view)
- *Did the Early Church Baptize Infants?* by Kurt Aland (believers baptism only view)
- *Believer's Baptism: Sing of the New Covenant in Christ* by Schreiner and Wright (editors) (believers baptism only view)



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