

Paedo-Baptism:

A succinct apologetic of the Reformed position

By David DeBoor Canfield

In order to understand the paedo-baptist position, it is necessary to go back to the creation week. On day six, God created man, male and female, in His own image. Virtually concomitant with the creation of man, came the first command of God to His supreme creation: “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth...” It is easy to miss the full import of this command, which one must remember was given before the Fall. In man’s state of innocence, giving physical birth was equivalent to giving spiritual birth. That is, the physical act of creating a fleshly human being was identical with the creation of a spiritual being who would be an addition to God’s eternal family. Thus, the command was essentially for Adam and Eve to populate the earth with the family of God. Note that God could have simply created at once as many human beings as He desired, without any necessity of a procreative process. But likely because He wished to demonstrate something about His relationship with His Son, He gave us the entity of the family and the concept of fatherhood.

After the Fall, the physical act of reproduction was no longer necessarily coincident with the generation of a new member of the family of God. All human beings were still constituted with souls—souls that, short of God’s grace, were in rebellion against Him, and consequently severed from His familial relationship. Eventually, God saw fit to call out from the mass of humanity a special people, not because they were more numerous than other people, but because the Lord, in setting His love upon them, kept the oath that He swore to their fathers (Deut. 7:7-8). To mark this people as His own, God gave them the sign of circumcision: All males were to be circumcised at the age of 8 days. As they grew older, they would see and comprehend through this mark that they were a people set apart by God. This sign was given in conjunction with the covenant (Gen. 15, 17). As was typical of covenants of the day, the covenant with Abraham was tripartite in nature, with designations of the suzerain (God) and the vassal (Abraham and his descendents), and the stipulations of the terms of the covenant. It included a promise of blessing for its keeping, as well as penalties for its infraction. Circumcision, then, was given to God’s people as a reminder in perpetuity of their covenantal relationship to Him.

It was not enough, however, that the men of Israel bore the sign of circumcision in their flesh (and on the very organ of physical procreation, at that). The fathers of each family were commanded not to allow their sons merely to remain content in their circumcised state, but to actively teach their sons the truths about God. These truths included His nature (as one God with clearly-defined attributes) and His acts, as recorded in Deuteronomy 6:20-22: “When your son asks you in time to come, ‘What is the meaning of the testimonies and the statutes and the rules that the Lord our God has commanded you?’ Then you shall say to your son, ‘We were Pharaoh’s slaves in Egypt. And the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. And the Lord showed signs and wonders, great and grievous, against Egypt and against Pharaoh and all his household, before our eyes.’” Clearly, the mental capacity of the child had to be developed to the point that he could understand how he was expected to embrace by faith the actions of God in this deliverance (*by faith*, because he would not have experienced the deliverance first hand). The fathers were, further, to instruct their sons to love God with all their

heart, soul and strength. It was through this instruction that as the children grew up, they could achieve *true*, rather than merely *symbolic*, status as members of God's covenant family (in contemporary Judaism, the ritual of Bar Mitzvah—son of the commandment—is given to each young man to mark his transition into obligation under the Law of God). This is done even today to demonstrate that Jewish boys cannot merely look to their circumcised condition to save them. The mark of circumcision, in itself, was not enough: indeed, certain other ancient peoples were also circumcised. This fact explains why Moses gave an explicit command for the people to circumcise their hearts—a command that could be obeyed only by one old enough to understand that God demanded His people's hearts and not only their foreskins (Deut. 10:16; see also Jer. 4:4.) Therefore, the child's outward circumcision, engraved upon him shortly after birth, was later to be followed by an inward one, that of his personal *faith in God*.

In numerous places, Scripture depicts an outward sign as representing (but not necessarily mandating) an inward reality (Ps. 51:16-17; Joel 2:13; Mt. 7:21-23; James 2:14, etc.) That the external is not necessarily accompanied by the internal is clear in the New Testament as Jesus accused many who bore the physical sign of circumcision of lacking its spiritual equivalent. Jesus stated that these were "of [their] father, the Devil." The prophet Ezekiel, emphasized that neither the sins nor the virtues of (circumcised) fathers were communicated to their (circumcised) sons (Ezek. 18, especially vss. 19-20). Each member of the covenant community was responsible before God for his own faith and actions. Paul makes the same point in Romans 4:12 wherein he refers to those "who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised." Except for the relatively rare adult converts from paganism, the two parts (*circumcised* and *walk in the footsteps of faith*) of Paul's statement would never have occurred in temporal juxtaposition in Jewish practice. Now the credo-baptist might argue from this verse that Abraham's faith *preceded* his circumcision, a fact which is clear from Genesis 15:6 and the whole of Romans, chapter 4. However, it must be remembered that for every spiritual descendant of Abraham, the mark of the covenant *normally* preceded the possession of faith. *Normally*, because there was, and always will be, conversion to the faith by pagan adults. These converts were always distinguished by the Jews from those born into the household of faith, and the concept of the household of faith continues explicitly in the New Testament (Gal. 6:10).

In the New Testament period, the mark of circumcision was superseded by that of baptism. This was done originally by Jesus, who commanded his disciples to go to all nations to make disciples and baptize them in the Trinitarian name. Baptism as a rite was not unknown by that time to the Jews, but was reserved for Gentile converts to Judaism (thus the resentment of John by the Pharisees when he called upon them to repent and be baptized: He was, in effect, telling them that despite their circumcised status, they were not members of the covenantal community). Paul is very clear that baptism superseded the rite of circumcision in the new covenant. In Colossians 2:11-12, he writes, "In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God." John Chrysostom, undoubtedly the greatest preacher of the 4th century, commented on this passage: "Circumcision is no longer performed with a knife,

Paul says, but in Christ Himself; for no human hand circumcises... but the Spirit. The Spirit circumcises the whole man, not simply a part... when and where? In baptism. And what Paul calls circumcision, he again calls burial... but it is not burial only: for notice what he says, 'Wherein you were also raised with him, through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead'" (Homilies on Colossians, 6). Other patristic evidence shows that baptism was inextricably linked with circumcision in the thinking of the Fathers.

One might ask why God should have replaced the one sign with the other. Circumcision was a sign of cutting. It involved shedding of blood, the symbol that pointed the Israelites to the coming Messiah and His atoning work. Blood also had to be shed regularly in the slaughter of animals by priests to atone for the sins of the people. Because of their temporary efficacy, such sacrifices had to be made repeatedly. With the once-for-all sacrifice by Jesus on the cross, wherein He shed His own precious blood for His people, the requirement of the shedding of blood was finally and definitely ended. At this point, a superseding of the sign of cutting was appropriate, and God gave us the sign of water, the quintessential substance of washing, to portray the spiritual washing of the believer's heart by the Holy Spirit.

We must also note Paul's affirmation of the continuation of the Abrahamic covenant to the New Testament Church. In Galatians 3:29, he writes, "If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise." The promise [i.e. covenant] never has been rescinded for those who are, by faith, Abraham's offspring. Only the mark of the covenant was changed. Paul spends a large part of Galatians developing the premise that circumcision, the sign of the old covenant, is no longer necessary for Christians because of the faith in Christ that makes them part of the new covenant. Their membership in the new is signified by their burial with Him in baptism. They have undergone the circumcision "made without hands" by the Holy Spirit, as seen above in Colossians. Paul also describes this inward circumcision in Romans 2:28-29.

At this juncture, it is crucial to get into the mindset of the first Christians, all of whom were Jews. These converts would very naturally have understood the transition from the practice of circumcision to that of baptism. As Jews, they would have naturally applied their customs and thinking concerning the previous rites to the new ones. Thus, it is unthinkable that these Jewish Christians would not have continued to administer the covenantal rite to their infant children, just as they would have continued to teach their children the necessity of a saving faith confirming their baptism, i.e., their membership in the covenantal family. These children were required to come to faith after such time as they could understand what Christ had done for them in their sinful estate, and how by faith they might appropriate the benefit of this work. Without such faith, their baptism would be of no more benefit to them than was Ishmael's circumcision (Gen. 17: 26) to him. With this understanding, it is quite clear that no explicit command to baptize children was necessary for the New Testament Church; these Jewish Christians would very naturally have continued their practices from the old covenant, both in worship and in the administration of the sacraments. If indeed the apostles had wished to effect a change in the mindset of these Jewish Christians, they certainly would have been compelled to state explicitly that baptism, contrary to circumcision, was proper only for adults.

This is not to state that internal evidence is lacking in the New Testament concerning the baptism of infants. There are four occasions in which household baptism is mentioned, *viz.*, Acts 16:15 (the household of Lydia), Acts 16:33 (the household of the Philippian jailer), Acts 10:48 (the household of Cornelius, the first Gentile convert) and I Cor. 1:16, wherein Paul states that he baptized the household of Stephanus. Credo-baptists rightly point out that in none of these are infants and children too young to have an understanding of true faith specifically mentioned. On the other hand, our credo-baptist brothers miss several important factors. First of all, the term *household* in the New Testament era meant something quite beyond what we in 21st-century America might ascribe to it. Households in those days would have included members not only of the immediate family (parents and children, more numerous in the days before reliable birth control), but also cousins and other relatives. The household would also have included even some, such as servants and their children, who were unrelated by blood to the head of the family. Consequently, the number of people in a household in those days was significantly larger than that in our American families, the average size of which is currently barely more than three persons. It is highly improbable, then, that not even one of these four households would have had children who had not yet attained an age of reason.

Secondly, our credo-baptist brothers miss the fact that the use of the term *household* would have been very unlikely if the term had been meant to include only those who could believe as *individuals*. Consider that today in a Baptist church, when several members of the same family are baptized in the same service, they are *never* baptized in a household baptism, but as separate individuals, in separate baptisms. This is because in credo-baptist thought, baptism is viewed *only* as a public statement by the individual of his personal faith in Christ. Such a view vitiates the concept of a new-born child being a member of the household of faith. It also obscures the fact that baptism, administered through the application of water and accompanying words by the minister as God's representative, is a statement by God to and about the recipient of the sacrament. Nowhere in Scripture do we find baptism portrayed as a mere testimony of any person receiving it, although Scripture is clear that faith, whether that of the person receiving baptism, or the head of his household, is required as a pre-condition, just as it was for the rite of circumcision.

Finally, our brothers also fail to see the fact that the audience to whom Luke was directly writing his account would have *understood the term "household" to include small children and infants*, even if the four named households had had none. Few of Luke's or Paul's original readers would have known the exact makeup of the four households named in Scripture. They would have therefore looked to the makeup of *their own households* for their application of these verses. Virtually all of these households would have included (at least at some point in their tenure as such) infants and young children. Here we must face the concept of the plenary inspiration of Scripture, by which we understand that not only its concepts and phrases, but its very words—individual words—have been "breathed out" by the Spirit of God. Thus, we need to ask why God would have inspired the use of the word *household* by Luke and Paul, if it were not His divine intention for us to assume that infants and children of all ages were to be baptized? We dare not assume that the use of this term was happenstance on God's part.

Rather than reducing the number of people who should receive the mark signifying membership in the covenantal family, the apostles actually expanded it. With the view that there was now “neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28), baptism was administered to women and infant girls, who had previously not been recipients of circumcision. As the Church expanded into the Gentile community, the apostles would have taught about the rites of the Jewish community. Their teaching would have included the proper forms of worship (certainly not a part of the pagan culture), and the proper administration of the sacraments. All of these teachings would certainly have been given in the context of the truths about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus as the Messiah, and the necessity of faith in Him.

That the apostolic practice of paedobaptism is not specifically mentioned in the writings of the Church Fathers (there are plenty of indirect references) until about a hundred years after the last apostle was gone is easily explained by the fact that many doctrinal heresies were threatening the Church during this time, and these of necessity engaged the attention of the early Church Fathers. However, when infant baptism is eventually mentioned as a practice of the Church, one must ask why there is a complete lack of debate if this had been a doctrine new to the Church at that time. After all, one need look only at the (sometimes minor) doctrines that did generate considerable heat in the early Church. It is inconceivable that a *theologicum novum* of such profound import would have suddenly come into existence without considerable debate in the writings of the Fathers. The most logical inference to draw here is simply that infant baptism was indeed the apostolic practice, and that it had been carried over from the practice of infant circumcision by the Jews for 2000 years prior to the advent of Christ. Only beginning in the 3rd century, in the treatise on baptism by Tertullian does one find evidence of a reluctance to baptize children. This objection undoubtedly grew out of Tertullian’s heterodox views that led him into Montanist heresy, with its extreme views on separation from the world, and its denial of the total corruption and sinfulness of human nature. Gradually since that time, but mostly in the years after the rise of the Anabaptists in the 16th century, Christians have become more and more divided on the issue of to whom and when baptism was to be administered, but it is clear to any objective observer that those in the first few centuries of the early Church were unified in their paedobaptistic practice. For proof of this we need only look to the Second Council of Carthage, which in 253 condemned the practice of withholding baptism from infants until the 8th day after their birth, a practice obviously carried over from the Jewish practice of circumcising on the 8th day. We must assume that this early council was but affirming the universal practice of the then-undivided and apostolic Church. For a good summary of the evidence of paedobaptistic practice in the early Church, the reader is referred to *Infant Baptism in Early Church History* by Dennis Kastens at https://www.issuesetcarchive.org/issues_site/resource/journals/kastens.htm.