

The Recipients of Baptism:

Particularly should the children of believing parents be baptized before they can profess faith in Jesus Christ on their own?

1. The essential continuity between the Old and New Testaments:

Some contend that there is a “*radical discontinuity*” between the Old and New Testaments (dispensationalism). This position would assert that in order for any teaching of the Old Testament to be valid in the New Testament it must be repeated or explicitly affirmed. The position of “*essential continuity*” (covenantal theology) assumes the validity of Old Testament principles unless there is some explicit denial or revocation set forth in the New Testament. (For example: ceremonial laws and sacrifice) When there is a *major point of discontinuity*, as in the discontinuing of the sacrificial system, there is usually a body of teaching found in the New Testament, explaining the rationale for it. For example, Acts 15 and the Book of Galatians explain the rationale for the revocation of the necessity of circumcision, and the Book of Hebrews explains the rationale for the revocation of the sacrificial system, etc.

2. The Biblical Doctrine of Children

The overwhelming evidence of the Old Testament is that the children of believers have always been included in God’s promises to their parents. This principle of inclusions is established in the creation mandate (Genesis 1:26-28) and continues throughout the Old Testament. (Genesis 17, etc.)

3. The Sign of covenantal inclusion in the Old Testament

Beginning with the Abrahamic Covenant (Genesis 12, 13, 15, 17) circumcision was established as the sign of being included in the visible covenant community of God’s people. This sign was to be administered to the male children as well as the adults who were entering into the covenant community from outside of it, for the first time. (See: Genesis 17)

4. What did circumcision mean to the adult?

Romans 4:11 tells us that circumcision took place after Abraham was already justified by faith. It further tells us that the outward circumcision of his foreskin was a sign and seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had received before he was circumcised. Abraham first believed God and was justified and then he was circumcised as an outward sign of the inward work of grace which God had done in his heart (Genesis 15:6). The outward and inward circumcisions are set before us in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. See: Deuteronomy 30:6 and Romans 2:28-29

5. What did circumcision mean to the child?

There is no indication in Scripture that circumcision meant anything different for the child than it did for the adult. The difference was only in the time of its

administration. In the case of the adult (Abraham) who is coming into the covenant community for the first time, the sign of circumcision was administered only after he had given evidence of the inward circumcision of the heart (Genesis 15:6). In the case of the child the sign of circumcision was administered before he was able to give evidence of the inward circumcision of the heart. In the case of the child the sign was administered according to the promise of the covenant that God would be a God unto the child even as He was the God of the adult/parent. In the case of the child the outward sign was administered in the hope of the fulfillment of the promise of the inward work. See: Deuteronomy 30:6
In the Old Testament the administration of the sign to the child did not mean that the inward work was present or that the inward work would infallibly occur. It meant only that the child was born within the covenant community and not outside of it, and therefore exposed to all of the privileges of it. It meant that the child was born into the privileges of membership in the visible covenant community and that the child was in need of the inward work of the Spirit of God in the circumcision of the heart.

6. Did the principle of inclusion change in the New Testament?

There is no indication in the New Testament that this time honored principle of inclusion was altered by our Lord. The clear expectation of the Jews who heard the Gospel preached by Peter in Acts 2 would be that whatever God was doing with them He would also do with their children. In the New Testament the sign of God's work of grace in the heart was changed from circumcision to the more universally applicable sign of baptism. (Colossians 2:11-12) However the principle of application, inclusion, was not changed.

7. What does baptism mean to the child?

It means the same thing that circumcision meant to the child during the administration of the old covenant. It was an outward sign of inclusion in the visible community of God's covenant people and pointed to the need for the child to have a circumcised heart by the Spirit of God. Baptism means the same thing to the child in the administration of the New Covenant. It does not mean that the child is saved. On the contrary it is administered precisely for the purpose of pointing to the need of God's saving grace in the child's heart, without which he cannot be saved.

There is no need in the New Testament for an explicit statement requiring or allowing the baptism of the children of believing parents, i.e. in covenant with God. The burden of proof is on those who contend that God has changed the time honored covenantal principle of inclusion and replaced it with one of exclusion. If the principle of inclusion has been revoked this would be a major point of discontinuity between the Old and New Covenants, and we would expect to find some body of teaching giving the rationale for such a radical change. However, there is no such teaching found in the New Testament.