

REFORMED BAPTIST COVENANT THEOLOGY AND BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

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This material was presented by the authors¹ to students of Westminster Seminary California during a lunch hour on campus in response to their inquiries about how Reformed Baptists view covenant theology. Given the time constraints of a one-hour presentation, the focus of the material was on areas of positive argument for the credobaptist position where it differs from paedobaptism. Key points of covenant theology are absent from this presentation, not because they do not form a part of Reformed Baptist covenant theology, but because there is no disagreement between our position and that of the paedobaptists. For example, there is no discussion of the covenant of works, fully affirmed by the London Baptist and Westminster confessions, and there is no discussion of the definition of a covenant since we agree with the basic definition formulated by Meredith G. Kline: a commitment with divine sanctions between a lord and a servant. Other arguments and significant points were omitted for the sake of time, such as the relation between kingdom and covenant or exegetical discussions of specific key passages around which this dialogue normally revolves. What follows are foundational assertions arguing for a Reformed Baptist view of covenant theology and biblical theology, applied specifically to credobaptism.

Foundations of Reformed Baptist Covenant Theology

1. The Covenant of Redemption informs and unites all of redemptive history.

The *Pactum Salutis* establishes the redemption of the elect through Christ's incarnation, life, death, resurrection, and ascension as that which is the driving purpose of history. God's decree is that from fallen humanity, the Son, empowered by the Spirit, should redeem a specific number of his own people to be granted to him as a reward for the completion of his work on their behalf.

2. The New Covenant is the final and full accomplishment of the Covenant of Redemption in history.

Where do we see the accomplishment of the redemption of the elect in history through the incarnation and death of Christ? It is in the New Covenant, made in the blood of Christ.² What is it that Christ claims that he has come to do? He claims that he has come to redeem those whom the Father has given to him.³ His purpose is to accomplish the *Pactum Salutis* in time and history. The New Covenant goes no further than the *Pactum Salutis*, not only because Christ specifically said that his mission was purely to redeem the elect, but also because the New Covenant is made in Christ's blood, redeeming blood

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² Cf. Heb. 7:20-22.

³ Cf. Jn. 6:38-40; 10:14-16, 26-28; 17:6-11, 17-21.

whose salvific benefits have never been and will never be applied to any but the elect. This means that the parties of the New Covenant are no other than God and Christ, and the elect in Him.

Although the *Pactum Salutis* has been finally and fully accomplished in history through Christ's work, what remains is entrance into the consummated blessings and rewards of Christ's kingdom. That will not occur until every last elect person for whom Christ died has been gathered in by Christ himself through the preaching of the gospel to all nations.

3. The Covenant of Grace is the in-breaking of the Covenant of Redemption into history through the progressive revelation and retro-active application of the New Covenant.

Bavinck says, "The covenant of grace was not first established in time, but has its foundation in eternity, is grounded in the pact of salvation, and is in the first place a covenant among the three persons of the divine being itself."⁴

Vos says:

The covenant of redemption is the pattern for the covenant of grace. However, it is more than that. It is also the effective cause for carrying out the latter. As far as its offer and application are concerned, the covenant of grace lies enclosed in the counsel of peace, so that with respect to the latter it appears completely as a gift, as a covenantal benefit.⁵

There is one uniting and driving force in redemptive history, and that is the Covenant of Redemption. Although it is not accomplished in history until Christ comes, we see the gathering in of the elect who believe in Christ from the fall onward. Where we see that in-gathering of the elect who believe in the gospel as it is revealed progressively in types and shadows, there we see the retro-active New Covenant, and that is the Covenant of Grace. What has been required of all men at all times in all places is to believe the gospel however it has been revealed in a particular moment of redemptive history.⁶ Because the Covenant of Grace is the retro-active New Covenant, ultimately being founded in the Covenant of Redemption, its parties are the same as the New Covenant, God, Christ, and the elect in him.

Vos says:

In other words, the bond that links the Old and New Covenants together is not a purely evolutionary one, inasmuch as the one has grown out of the other; it is, if we may so call it, a transcendental bond: the New Covenant in its preexistent, heavenly state reaches back and stretches its wings over the Old, and the Old Testament people of God were one with us in religious dignity and privilege; they were, to speak in a Pauline figure, sons of the Jerusalem above, which is the mother of all.⁷

Bavinck says:

⁴ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Vol. III* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 405.

⁵ Geerhardus Vos, *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001), 252.

⁶ Cf. Heb. 4:2; Gal. 3:8-9; 1 Pet. 1:10-11; Eph. 3:4-6, 8-12.

⁷ Vos, 199.

This pact of salvation, however, further forms the link between the eternal work of God toward salvation and what he does to that end in time. The covenant of grace revealed in time does not hang in the air but rests on an eternal, unchanging foundation. It is firmly grounded in the counsel and covenant of the triune God and is the application and execution of it that infallibly follows...It is a false perception that God first made his covenant with Adam and Noah, with Abraham and Israel, and only finally with Christ; the covenant of grace was ready-made from all eternity in the pact of salvation of the three persons and was realized by Christ from the moment the fall occurred...For though God communicates his revelation successively and historically makes it progressively richer and fuller, and humankind therefore advances in the knowledge, possession, and enjoyment of that revelation, God is and remains the same....Although Christ completed his work on earth only in the midst of history and although the Holy Spirit was not poured out till the day of Pentecost, God nevertheless was able, already in the days of the Old Testament, to fully distribute the benefits to be acquired and applied by the Son and the Spirit. Old Testament believers were saved in no other way than we. There is one faith, one Mediator, one way of salvation, and one covenant of grace.⁸

4. The Old Covenant is theocratic Israel, defined by the Abrahamic, conditioned by the Mosaic, and focused by the Davidic covenants. The Old Covenant, and thus each of these three covenants, differs from the New Covenant not merely in administration, but also in substance.

The Abrahamic covenant, called the Covenant of Circumcision by Stephen in Acts 7:8, promised Abraham three things primarily. It promised him a land, a people, and a kingship. In other words, Abraham's physical descendants would inherit the land and grow into an innumerable people ruled by their own kings. This was called the Covenant of Circumcision because circumcision was the sign of these blessings and separated Abraham's offspring from the rest of the world as the heirs of these promises.⁹

Abraham was the federal head of this covenant because the promises were made to him and to his physical seed. All those who were of Abraham, or in Abraham we might say, were heirs of the national promises. This defined the membership of the covenant.

One of the most distinctive features of this covenant was that God immutably promised to bring about these blessings apart from any merit on Abraham's part, and for that reason the Covenant of Circumcision can rightly be called *a* covenant of grace. But can it rightly be called an administration of *the* Covenant of Grace? If the Covenant of Grace is the accomplishing of the Covenant of Redemption in history, the retro-active application of the New Covenant, then what do national promises have to do with Christ's redeeming and gathering of the elect? It must be noted that although all the Abrahamic promises typologically reveal the New Covenant, in their substance and essence they are distinct from it. Abraham knew that Canaan was not heaven.

The Mosaic Covenant was added and attached to the Abrahamic Covenant in such a way that it conditioned the enjoyment of the Abrahamic blessings. God immutably promised Abraham that the covenant blessings would be realized. The extent to which

⁸ Bavinck, 215-16.

⁹ This is not to say that circumcision had no further significance, but that the national promises were its primary referent.

those blessings would be enjoyed, however, depended upon the obedience of the people of Israel. To put it simply, in the Abrahamic, God promised Abraham a land, nation, and kingship, and in the Mosaic God conditioned the enjoyment of those promises. The Mosaic covenant controlled tenure in the land, the boundaries of the nation, and the regulation of the kingship. These conditions were strong enough that although God would inevitably realize the promises, they could be lost through disobedience. That the Mosaic Covenant conditions the Abrahamic is evident not only by virtue of the fact that its obedience is directly tied to the enjoyment of the Abrahamic promises, but also by virtue of the fact that it was made specifically with the Abrahamic people.

That the Mosaic Covenant is not one in essence and substance with the Covenant of Grace is further recognized by the fact that, as Hebrews tells us, the sacrifices had no power to remove sin. “The law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities” (Heb. 10:1). Hebrews 8:5 calls the Mosaic system a “copy and shadow of the heavenly things.” Paul, speaking in Colossians of Mosaic rites such as new moons, festivals, and Sabbaths, says that “These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.” Using the same question that was applied to the Abrahamic, is the conditioning of national promises by law the accomplishing of the redemption of the elect in history? No, the Mosaic Covenant is separate from the Covenant of Grace in its essence. However, every single element of the Mosaic economy typologically revealed and set before the eyes of the Jews the Covenant of Grace wherein true righteousness, true forgiveness of sins, and true holiness could be found. Since tenure in the land was what was in view in the Mosaic law, offenses against that covenant could be addressed within that covenant and sacrificial system. But concerning true spiritual realities, concerning offenses committed against a Holy God, the sacrifices could do nothing but point ahead to that one true sacrifice, Jesus Christ.

Even until today, many have wrestled with how it could be that the Covenant of Grace was being administered by a strict works principle. This difficulty is simply and rightly avoided when one recognizes that the Mosaic Covenant is not an administration of *the* Covenant of Grace, but rather typologically reveals it in its law and worship. The Mosaic Covenant is then free to be affirmed as a graciously administered works principle, controlling the extent to which the Abrahamic blessings are enjoyed. “The one who does them shall live by them” (Gal. 3:12).

The Mosaic Covenant lacked a federal head until the kingship was established. The Abrahamic people as a whole were judged on different levels, sometimes the individual, sometimes the family, sometimes the tribe, sometimes the nation. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes, and there was no king in Israel.

The Davidic Covenant brings all of the Abrahamic promises to consummation and focuses the Mosaic Covenant into one person. It was under the line of David, specifically Solomon, that at last the nation of Israel reached the fulfillment of being the Abrahamic people ruling all of the Abrahamic land, under Abrahamic, specifically Judean, kings. The biblical authors are careful to record when these promises are fulfilled (Josh. 21:43-45 and I Kings 4:20). Under David and his line, the national people of Abraham enjoyed the blessings and benefits of the promised-land to the extent to which the Davidic king obeyed the Mosaic law. This is the concern of the records of the kings. They did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, or they did what was evil. Israel was blessed or cursed accordingly.

Because the Mosaic Covenant controls both the Abrahamic and the Davidic Covenants, it is the primary referent of the New Testament when speaking about the Old Covenant. However, the Mosaic Covenant cannot be divided or disconnected from the Abrahamic and Davidic Covenants, and thus all three combine to form the Old Covenant, in every aspect typological of the Covenant of Grace, yet in every aspect different in substance from the Covenant of Grace.

5. The Old Covenant is related to the New Covenant historically and typologically.

Is the Old Covenant entirely unrelated to the Covenant of Grace? Have we utterly divested the Old Covenant of its theological richness and significance? No, we are merely making careful distinctions. There is historical and typological unity between the Old and the New. There is historical unity in that Abraham was also promised that the nations would be blessed through him. Israel was designated the mother of the Messiah, the guardian of the gospel in its shadowy forms. The birth of Christ was a fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant.¹⁰ Israel's disobedience to the law of Moses could not prevent this immutable promise of God from coming to pass. There is typological unity in that every single part of the Old Covenant, that is, every single part of the Abrahamic, Mosaic, and Davidic Covenants, typologically revealed the New Covenant, whether through what was lacking or what was being commended. This allows us to affirm heartily every single aspect of a redemptive-historical hermeneutic and approach to preaching. Christ is everywhere, the gospel is everywhere, the Covenant of Grace is everywhere, because it is God's driving and uniting purpose to gather the elect in history. But Abraham's people in Canaan are not the gospel, nor is it the Covenant of Grace. They reveal it, they progress history towards it, those who looked past the types to the reality participated in it, but the type is not the anti-type. The New Covenant *fulfills* the Old; it does not *replace* the Old.

Therefore, the Abrahamic, Mosaic, and Davidic Covenants were national, temporary, and typological covenants that placed Israel in an external relationship with God and in which the New Covenant was revealed through types and shadows. On the one hand they are, in their substance and essence, distinct from the Covenant of Grace, and on the other hand they are related to it through rich typology and historical progression.

Kline says:

When Paul, in Romans 9-11, defends God's covenantal faithfulness in the face of Israel's fall, he bases his case on the identification of the promised seed as the individual election, a remnant-fullness of Jews and Gentiles, spiritual children of Abraham, all like him justified by faith. The apostle finds within the Lord's revelation of the promises to Abraham explicit warrant for distinguishing this spiritual seed of Abraham from the physical offspring. What is remarkable is how he bypasses the more literal first level significance of Abraham's seed and takes for granted the second, spiritual level of meaning as *the* meaning of the promise.¹¹

What are these two levels? They are the physical offspring and the spiritual offspring of Abraham, the first being a "provisional and prototypal" people, and the other being a

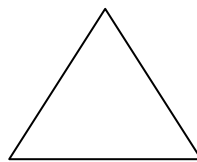
¹⁰ Cf. Lk. 1:55,73.

¹¹ Meredith G. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue Genesis Foundations for a Covenantal Worldview* (Overland Park, KS: Two Ages Press, 2000), 335, emphasis his. Kline makes the same point with regard to Gal. 3:16.

“messianic and eternal” people.¹² Where do they come from? The two circles of the internal and external distinction are the result of two different covenants. As was shown by Vos previously, the paradigm for the Covenant of Grace is not the Abrahamic Covenant, but the Covenant of Redemption. We are not arguing that the unregenerate have never been or can never be in a covenantal relationship with God. Rather, we are arguing that the Covenant of Grace has always been an internal covenantal relationship with God through Christ while the national covenants were an external covenantal relationship with God through Abraham. In Galatians 4, Paul distinguishes between two covenants, Jerusalem above and Jerusalem below, contrasting them as being born according to the flesh and according to the Spirit. One is clearly a physical covenant, the other is clearly spiritual. Paul is contrasting the difference between Old Covenant Israel and New Covenant Israel. The difference is the Spirit and the Flesh, the external and the internal, and they are *two different covenants*. Furthermore, Paul’s distinction is not purely between the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants, because as Kline has pointed out, when Paul speaks of the Abrahamic promises he is deliberately ignoring the national Abrahamic promises and looking at the messianic promises. We are asserting that those messianic promises point to the Messianic Covenant, that is the New Covenant, the Covenant of Grace, and that as such they point to a covenant distinct from the Covenant of Circumcision with Abraham and his natural offspring. This means that not only has that typical, external covenantal relationship been abrogated and passed away, but also that the messianic and eternal relationship was always active, embedded within that external covenant. The internal and external circles, visible in the Old Testament, are not the result of two levels of covenantal membership, but are the result of two different covenants, the Covenant of Circumcision and the Covenant of Grace.

With the triangular shape of typology in mind, using the type (Abrahamic, Old Covenant Israel) to shape the anti-type (Covenant of Grace, New Covenant Israel), not only reverses the progress of redemptive history, but also fails to understand the New Covenant antitype as it is founded in the arch-type (The Covenant of Redemption).

Covenant of Redemption (Arch-type)



Old Covenant (Type) New Covenant (Anti-type)

6. To be in a covenant, you must be united to the federal head of that covenant. Federal headship is immediate in every covenant.

Coxe says:

This is also worthy to be noted by us: that when God has made covenants, in which either mankind in general or some elect number of men in particular have been involved, it has

¹² Kline, *Kingdom Prologue*, 334.

pleased him first to transact with some public person, head, or representative for all others that should be involved in them.¹³

He adds:

The right of the remotest generation was as much derived from Abraham and the covenant made with him, as was that of his immediate seed, and did not at all depend on the faithfulness of their immediate parents. Thus, the immediate seed of those Israelites that fell in the wilderness under the displeasure of God were made to inherit the land of Canaan by virtue of this covenant with Abraham. They never could have enjoyed it by virtue of their immediate parent's steadfastness in the covenant.¹⁴

Because covenant membership and covenant blessings depend on the federal head, immediately, every member of every covenant, according to the terms of a given covenant, is entitled to every blessing or curse incurred by the federal head. Every human being stands on equal ground in the Covenant of Works because they are Adam's offspring, no matter how far removed. Each human being is directly and immediately federally united to Adam. We are in Adam, not because of our parents, but because of our direct federal relation to Adam. The same principle applies with Christ as federal head of the Covenant of Grace.

7. Jesus Christ has been and always will be the federal head of the Covenant of Grace/New Covenant. To be federally united to him you must be 1. promised to him outside of time in the Covenant of Redemption and 2. brought into union with him in time by the Holy Spirit.

The Son was the one elected by the Father to win the redemption of the elect. All of this is accomplished in the New Covenant, which is the historical climax of the Covenant of Grace. To be in the Covenant of Grace/New Covenant, you must be united to Christ, its federal head.¹⁵

Since the Covenant of Grace is the retro-active application of the New Covenant, if we posit that Christ is the mediator of the Covenant of Grace, we can only understand the terms of his role as mediator, and our relation to him as such, through the way that he is presented in the New Covenant. That Christ is the mediator of the Covenant of Grace, the New Covenant, no Reformed theologian denies. Thus, in line with New Testament doctrine, the only way to be under Christ's federal headship is to be united to him by the Holy Spirit. This union finds its roots outside of time as we are chosen in Christ in the Covenant of Redemption and is applied to the elect in time by the Spirit, begun in effectual calling and consummated in the faith of the believer. Apart from saving faith there can be no union with Christ, because the Spirit does not indwell any except the elect, those who have been justified by faith.¹⁶ Christ is the one and only federal head of the Covenant of Grace, the New Covenant. Federal headship is never mediate, thus none

¹³ Nehemiah Coxe, "A Discourse of the Covenants," in *Covenant Theology: From Adam to Christ* (Palmdale, CA: Reformed Baptist Academic Press, 2005), 39.

¹⁴ Coxe, 97.

¹⁵ Cf. WLC 57-59.

¹⁶ Cf. Acts 2:38, Eph. 1:13.

can enter the Covenant other than those who are directly or immediately under his federal headship by the Holy Spirit.¹⁷

Vos says, “However narrowly or widely the boundary of the covenant of grace be drawn, in any case it involves a relationship with Christ, whether external or internal, by which it is tied to the covenant of redemption.”¹⁸ He adds:

One is first united to Christ, the Mediator of the covenant, by a mystical union, which finds its conscious recognition in faith. By this union with Christ all that is in Christ is simultaneously given. Faith embraces all this too; it not only grasps the instantaneous justification, but lays hold of Christ as Prophet, Priest, and King, as his rich and full Messiah.¹⁹

Bavinck says:

On the Christian position there can be no doubt that all the benefits of grace have been completely and solely acquired by Christ; hence, they are included in his person and lie prepared for his church in him...And since these benefits are all covenant benefits, were acquired in the way of the covenant, and are distributed in the same covenantal way, *there is no participation in those benefits except by communion with the person of Christ, who acquired and applies them as the mediator of the covenant.*²⁰

Fairbairn says:

Here, precisely as in the rending of the veil for the ceremonials of Judaism, the exclusive bond for the people was broken at the center: Christ’s very mother and brothers were to have no precedence over others, nor any distinctive position in His kingdom; spiritual relations alone should prevail there, and the one bond of connection with it for all alike, was to be the believing reception of the gospel and obedience to it...So far, therefore, as regards Israel’s typical character, their removed and isolated position is plainly at an end: all tribes and nations are on a footing as to the kingdom of God - members and fellow-citizens if they are believers in Christ, aliens if they are not.²¹

Fairbairn adds, “And wherever there is found a soul linked in vital union with Christ, there also are found the essential characteristics of Abraham’s seed, and title to Abraham’s inheritance.”²²

Rom. 8:9 “Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.”

Rom. 10:11-13 “For the Scripture says, “Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame.” 12 For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for *the same Lord is Lord of all,*²³ bestowing his riches on all who call on him. 13 For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.””

¹⁷ Cf. WLC 65-69.

¹⁸ Vos, 252.

¹⁹ Vos, 256.

²⁰ Bavinck, 591, emphasis added.

²¹ Patrick Fairbairn, *The Interpretation of Prophecy* (London: The Banner of Truth, 1964), 261-62.

²² Fairbairn, 270.

²³ All italics in Scripture verses are added for emphasis.

1 Cor. 12:11-13 “All these are empowered by *one and the same Spirit*, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.¹² For just as *the body is one* and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, *so it is with Christ*.¹³ For *in one Spirit* we were all baptized *into one body*--Jews or Greeks, slaves or free--and all were made to drink of *one Spirit*.”

Gal. 3:26-28 “For *in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith*.²⁷ For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for *you are all one in Christ Jesus*.”

Eph. 1:22-23 “And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church,²³ which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.”²⁴

Eph. 4:4-6 “*There is one body and one Spirit*--just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call--⁵ *one Lord, one faith, one baptism,* ⁶ *one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.*”

The Covenant of Grace is so called because its blessings are freely given to its members. Those blessings are free because they have been won solely by Christ's obedience in fulfillment of his commission in the Covenant of Redemption. Thus understood, the Covenant of Grace arises in history in contradistinction to the Covenant of Works. That covenant having been broken, all mankind is born immediately federally united to Adam, under the curse of the law. When man is liberated from this condemnation, his liberation comes through the propitiatory satisfaction of Christ on his behalf and the gracious imputation of Christ's righteousness to his account, appropriated by faith. In other words, as Genesis 3 shows, the Covenant of Grace is the solution to the curses of the Covenant of Works.

The fact that we see this redemption promised and typified from the fall onward has led reformed theologians to see God's grace extending into history prior to the incarnation and death of Christ. Where God's grace extended into the past, it came by way of covenant, wherein Christ's blood of the New Covenant was retroactively applied to those who believed in the promise, and that retroactivity of the New Covenant was and remains distinct from the Old Covenant. Thus, Christ's people have always been those who were promised to him by the Father, and it is those people for whom he spilled his blood.

Scripture teaches that Christ brings his own to himself through the work of the Spirit, and that he dwells in his own by the Spirit. Therefore, without the Spirit, none belong to Christ. If you belong to Christ, you are in the Covenant of Grace. If you do not belong to Christ, you are in the Covenant of Works. You cannot be in both.²⁵ If it is possible to be born into the Covenant of Grace through the mediated federal headship of a parent, then, unless regeneration is presumed, one is both in Adam and in Christ at the same time. However, this is impossible. One man sinned and brought death to all mankind; another obeyed and brought life to his people. You are either in Adam or in Christ.

²⁴ Cf. Eph. 5:23, Col. 1:18.

²⁵ Cf. Rom. 7:4-6.

To bring this to a conclusion, a right understanding of the membership of the Covenant of Grace is founded on the Covenant of Redemption and the New Covenant. Those who are in the Covenant of Grace are those who were promised to the Son by the Father in the Covenant of Redemption, won by the Son's life, death, and resurrection, and sealed by the Holy Spirit, uniting them to their federal head, Jesus Christ. Laying claim to Christ and his benefits is a serious matter, and as scripture shows, only those who have saving faith can truly make that claim. There is no external federal relation to Jesus Christ. In terms of membership or qualification, there are no distinctions in the body of Christ, that is, the church. All are sons of God through faith, under one head, indwelt by one Spirit. "Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him" (Rom. 8:9). In spite of the false professions, unbelief, and lies of apostates, God knows his own, Christ knows his sheep, and the Spirit of adoption knows the children of God.²⁶ The covenant people of God are "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession" (1Pet 2:9). The glorious New Covenant does not look to the Old for its pattern and people but stands on the eternal foundation of the Covenant of Redemption and comes to the elect as a Covenant of Grace, purchased, mediated, and eternally kept by "our great God and savior Jesus Christ who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people" (Titus 2:14).

The Biblical Theological Basis for Credobaptism

1. Redemptive history moves forward progressively giving rise to new revelation.

Geerhardus Vos famously argued that we must view revelation as a progressive unfolding coinciding with the progressive unfolding of redemptive history itself. In other words, this progressive unfolding of redemptive history gives rise to new revelation. One of the primary applications of that point is that we must look at the various parts of Scripture in the specific context of their period of redemptive history. Thus the New Testament believer must be careful about how the Old Testament is read and even how the Gospels are read since they refer to a redemptive historical era prior to the one in which we now live.

2. The different epochs of redemptive history are governed by their own covenantal canons.

Meredith Kline continued this idea by relating it more specifically to covenant documents. He argued that the Old Testament itself made up the covenant document of the Old Covenant. Likewise, the New Testament is the covenant document of the New Covenant. Kline says:

The Old and New Testaments, which respectively define and establish these two structures, will be clearly seen as two separate and distinct architectural models for the house of God in two quite separate and distinct stages of its history. The distinctiveness of the two community organizations brings out the individual integrity of the two Testaments which serve as community rules for the two orders. The Old and New

²⁶ Cf. 2 Tim. 2:19, Jn. 10:27, Matt. 7:15-23, Rom. 8:16.

Testaments are two discrete covenant polities, and since biblical canon is covenantal polity-canon, they are two discrete canons in series.²⁷

Kline draws out some of the implications of this idea.

The old covenant is not the new covenant. The form of government appointed in the old covenant is not the community polity for the church of the new covenant, its ritual legislation is not a directory for the church's cultic practice.²⁸

Kline is not saying that the Old Testament is of no use for New Testament Christians. Instead, he is saying that as a defining covenant document that includes all of the pertinent sanctions and stipulations for the covenant, the New Covenant people of God must look to the New Testament and not the Old Testament.²⁹

As we will mention in a moment, this has obvious implications for baptism. Baptism is the sign of the New Covenant. It is not a sign of the Old Covenant. To understand the correct administration of the sign of the New Covenant, we must look to its own covenant document: the New Testament.

3. Positive law elements of different covenant-canons are restricted to their particular covenant-canons.

Richard Muller defines natural/moral law in this way: "the universal moral law either impressed by God upon the mind of all people or immediately discerned by the reason in its encounter with the order of nature."³⁰ Moral law endures throughout all of the covenants, but positive laws do not. A positive law may be generally defined as "something that is dependent on direct revelation for its obligation."³¹ In other words, without some form of special revelation, we would not know of these positive laws and we would not be required to obey them. For example, the civil and ceremonial laws of the Old Testament are positive laws. There was no requirement placed on other nations to follow the same civil laws as Israel. These are not laws that are morally binding on all people in all places at all times. They are binding only for a particular people and for a particular time. This is because they are positive laws.³²

²⁷ Meredith G. Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1997), 98-99.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 99.

²⁹ Michael Horton says essentially the same thing, "The new covenant is constituted by its own canon...the New Testament...It has its own stipulations (both doctrines and commands) and sanctions (life and death)." Cf. *The Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 153. He goes on to say, "There can be no covenant without a canon or canon without a covenant. In fact, the covenant *is* the canon and vice versa," (155, emphasis his).

³⁰ Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 174.

³¹ From IRBS PT 600 lecture by James M. Renihan.

³² This can be seen in the Sabbath command. The 4th commandment has both a moral and positive aspect to it. This was affirmed by the Synod of Dordt in their resolutions regarding the Sabbath:

1. "In the fourth Commandment of the divine law, part was ceremonial, part is moral."

2. "The rest of the seventh day after creation was ceremonial and its rigid observation peculiarly prescribed to the Jewish people."

When it comes to positive laws we should not assume they are in effect unless rescinded. Positive laws, instead, end with the termination of the covenant in which they were given. Positive laws are given in a particular redemptive historical setting and in a particular covenant document. Positive laws only apply to the covenantal context in which they are given. This is why we no longer are obligated to follow the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament.³³

4. In order to understand a particular covenantal-canon's stipulations and sanctions we can only look to that particular covenant.

It follows that if different covenants have their own covenant canons and those covenant canons contain positive laws, then we should only look to those particular covenant-canon documents to understand their corresponding sanctions and stipulations. As Kline says, "The treaty canon that governs the church of the new covenant as a formal community is the New Testament alone."³⁴

This point has the potential to be misunderstood. It does not say that the Old Testament has no bearing on the New Testament. We certainly do not want to suggest that. The Old and New Testaments do have a very intimate connection, but it is one of promise and fulfillment. Nevertheless, while there is unity between the Old and New Testaments, the fact remains that they are separate and distinct periods of redemptive history with separate and distinct covenant-canons. For this reason, when we want to understand the particular requirements of a particular covenant, we must look at that covenant's particular covenant document.

Patrick Fairbairn said:

It is implied that the revelations by prophecy, respecting the gospel age and its realities, were necessarily defective as to clearness and precision, and are not capable of bearing so exact an interpretation, or yielding so explicit a meaning, in respect to the affairs of Christ's kingdom, as is conveyed by the writings of the New Testament. But such, precisely, is the result that was to be expected, from the place and calling of the Old Testament prophets...There cannot be a surer canon of interpretation, than that *everything which affects the constitution and destiny of the New Testament Church has its clearest determination in New Testament Scripture.*³⁵

3. "Moral in fact, because the fixed and enduring day of the worship of God is appointed, for as much rest as is necessary for the worship of God and holy meditation of him." (translation by R. Scott Clark, <http://clark.wscal.edu/dortsabbath.php>).

These theologians at the Synod of Dort affirmed that the observance of a Sabbath rest, a one day in seven ceasing from all work and worshipping God was required by moral law. However, they also affirmed that the particular day upon which God is to be worshipped is a matter of positive (or ceremonial) law. In the Old Testament it was the seventh day of the week, but in the New Testament it is the first day of the week.

³³ Col. 2:16-17, Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. ¹⁷ These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.

³⁴ Kline, *Structure*, 100.

³⁵ Fairbairn, 157-58, emphasis his.

To summarize so far, our understanding of redemptive history as articulated by men such as Vos, Owen, and Ridderbos, tells us that the redemptive historical context in which Scripture is written *must* be taken into account when understanding that passage of Scripture. Kline and others have combined this with the idea of covenant and canon, showing that the Old Testament and New Testament are separate covenantal documents governing separate covenants. When understanding essential elements of a particular covenant, we must look to that covenant's own document to properly understand those essential covenantal elements.

5. Circumcision is a positive law from the Old Covenant canon and thus applies only to that covenant except insofar as it acts as a type.

Circumcision must be a positive law since it is neither commanded in the New Testament nor was it commanded prior to Abraham.³⁶

6. Baptism is a New Covenant ordinance established by Christ through positive law. Our understanding for the carrying out of this requirement, therefore, is restricted to the covenantal-canon under which it was given.

Baptism is a positive law since it is not commanded in the Old Testament. The London Baptist Confession 28.1 says "Baptism and the Lord's Supper are ordinances of positive and sovereign institution, appointed by the Lord Jesus, the only Lawgiver, to be continued in His church to the end of the world."

We should remind ourselves here that baptism is a key component of the covenant. As one of the two sacraments of the New Covenant, it is not a minor point. It is precisely the type of thing for which you would want to look to the New Covenant document. The New Covenant document, the New Testament, ought to dictate how its own sacraments are administered.³⁷

Furthermore, the regulative principle of worship necessitates that we look only to the explicitly prescribed way of administering baptism. The London Baptist Confession of Faith (22.1), in almost identical language to the Westminster Confession of Faith (21.1) articulates this principle, "The acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshipped according to...any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scriptures." Since the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper are elements of worship, they too must fall under this criteria of the regulative principle. The administration of baptism must be limited by God's own revealed will according to the way prescribed in Scripture.³⁸ Since the baptism of infants is not prescribed in Scripture, it ought not to be done.

Compare this to what B. B. Warfield said:

³⁶ Cf. Gal. 5:6; Acts 7:8; 1 Cor. 7:19; Rom. 2:25-27.

³⁷ This is the same principle as is exercised with the Lord's Supper. While we acknowledge a typological connection between Passover and the Lord's Supper, our understanding of the observance of the Lord's Supper comes from the New Testament, not from the Old Testament observance of Passover.

³⁸ Cf. Fred A. Malone, *The Baptism of Disciples Alone*, (Cape Coral, FL: Founders Press, 2003), xv.

It is true that there is no expressed command to baptize infants in the New Testament, no express record of the baptism of infants, and no passages so stringently implying it that we must infer from them that infants were baptized. If such warrant as this were necessary to justify the usage we should have to leave it incompletely justified. But the lack of this express warrant is something so far short of forbidding the rite; and if the continuity of the Church through all ages can be made good, the warrant for infant baptism is not to be sought in the New Testament but in the Old Testament when the church was instituted, and nothing short of an actual forbidding of it in the New Testament would warrant our omitting it now.³⁹

While we certainly disagree with Warfield's conclusions that infant baptism may still be justified, we appreciate his admission that the New Testament itself does not adequately justify the practice of infant baptism. Warfield admits that it is necessary to rely on the teaching of the Old Testament to arrive at the practice of infant baptism. However, as we have shown, the nature of redemptive history as well as the covenantal character of the New and Old Testament canons show that we need to look to the New Testament canon to understand this practice.

7. Proper weight must be given to the newness of the New Covenant.

Speaking of the Old and New Covenants, Kline says:

They are of course, indissolubly bound to one another in organic spiritual-historic relationship. They both unfold the same principle of redemptive grace, moving forward to a common eternal goal in the city of God. The blessings of old and new orders derive from the very same works of satisfaction accomplished by the Christ of God, and where spiritual life is found in either order it is attributable to the creative action of the one and selfsame Spirit of Christ. According to the divine design the old is *provisional* and *preparatory* for the new, and by divine predisclosure the new is prophetically anticipated in the old. External event and institution in the old order were divinely fashioned to afford a systematic representation of the realities of the coming new order, so producing a type-antitype correlativity between the two covenants in which their unity is instructively articulated.⁴⁰

When dealing with types we must acknowledge a basic and fundamental unity, yet not such as to ignore the typological and thus different character of the type. The Old Testament covenants do indeed reveal the New Covenant, but in a progressive, typological way. The New Covenant is further revealed by various steps throughout the Old Testament era, first in the *protevangelium*, and then throughout all of the Old Testament covenants. Just as the gospel was revealed step by step, so also is the New Covenant because it is in essence the gospel.

This is basically what the London Baptist Confession of 1689 says in 7.3, "This covenant is revealed in the gospel; first of all to Adam in the promise of salvation by the

³⁹ B. B Warfield, *Studies in Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 399-400.

⁴⁰ Kline, *Structure*, 98, emphasis added.

seed of the woman, and afterwards by farther steps, until the full discovery thereof was completed in the New Testament.”

This is also not far from what Vos said:

The successive stages of God’s redemptive and revealing work in the pre-Christian era are measured by successive covenants, each introducing new forces and principles and each imparting to the ensuing period a distinctive character of its own. Thus the covenant-idea is an eminently historical idea, most intimately associated with the gradual unfolding of God’s self-disclosure to His people.⁴¹

So, there is a basic unity which begins at the fall, well before Abraham ever appeared on the scene, as the various covenants in the Old Testament progressively and typologically reveal the New Covenant which is made when Christ’s blood is shed on the cross. But because the Old Testament covenants are types of the New Covenant, we must recognize the discontinuity that also exists between them. This explains the language of Jer. 31 or Joel 2:28-29:

²⁸And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. ²⁹Even on the male and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit.⁴²

Proper weight must be given to the *newness* of the *New Covenant* by seeing it as something that has not yet come about from the perspective of the Old Testament. This is not merely a scale in which the New Covenant is “more of the same.” It is not merely quantitatively different from the Old Covenant. It is something qualitatively different. There will be things that are true in the New Covenant that are not true when any Old Testament author writes. Similarly, there are things that will no longer be true in the New Covenant that are true in the Old Covenant.

When the Old Testament speaks of the New Covenant, it speaks of it as something future and as something truly different from what is currently in place. The language of both Joel and Jeremiah clearly indicates that things will be different in this future New Covenant from how they were in their day.

Again, Vos says this very well, “The revelation of the New Covenant is not only better comparatively speaking; it is final and eternal because delivered in a Son, than whom God could send no higher revealer.”⁴³ The most essential differences between the New Covenant and all the Old Covenants, is that the New Covenant is made and sealed in the blood of Christ and it is revealed in Christ (Heb. 9:15-16). For this reason, the New Covenant is different in substance from all the Old Testament covenants.

⁴¹ Vos, 192.

⁴² Jer. 31:33-34 ³³“But 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. ³⁴And 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.”

⁴³ Vos, 194.

As Vos goes on to say, the New Covenant is necessarily connected to the new age, the consummation. With the inauguration of the New Covenant, the New Age breaks forth into this current age. Vos says, “The New Covenant, then, coincides with the age to come; it brings the good things to come; it is incorporated into the eschatological scheme of thought.”⁴⁴ If the New Covenant truly coincides with the New Age, we should not look back at the Old Covenants to understand this New Covenant. Instead we should look forward to the consummation. True, we live in the “not yet.” But it is just as true that we live in the “already.” For these reasons, we must conclude that theologies that rely too heavily on the Old Covenants for their description and articulation of the New Covenant demonstrate an under-realized eschatology. They do not give enough weight to the “already.”

Thus the discipline of biblical theology, the study of redemptive history, and the nature of revelation teach us that we ought to treat the New Covenant as different in substance from the Old Testament covenants.

8. Furthermore, the New Testament treatment of the Old Testament Scripture as mystery, shadows, and types indicates that the New Testament must be the lens through which we view the Old Testament and not vice versa.

Any Reformed theologian speaking of hermeneutics will agree that the New Testament is the lens through which we must interpret the Old Testament. Usually the famous saying attributed to Augustine is quoted, “The New is in the Old concealed; the Old is in the New revealed.” So trying to understand the anti-type by looking at the type causes difficulties. It is difficult to know which aspects of the type are carried over into the anti-type and which aspects are to be cast aside.

The New Testament affirms the difficulty of understanding the Old Testament types. Paul has a well developed theology of mystery.⁴⁵

Col. 1:26-27 ²⁶ the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. ²⁷ To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

Eph. 1:9-10 making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ ¹⁰ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

2 Tim. 1:9-10 because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, ¹⁰ and which now has been manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Ibid., 195.

⁴⁵ Cf. Herman Ridderbos *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 44-49.

⁴⁶ Cf. Tit. 1:2-3 ² in hope of eternal life, which God, who never lies, promised before the ages began ³ and at the proper time manifested in his word through the preaching with which I have been entrusted by the command of God our Savior.

Ridderbos points out that this mystery now revealed has both “a noetic and a historical connotation.”⁴⁷ So, there is both a greater understanding and new revelation (especially in the form of new redemptive historical events). If we follow Warfield in looking at the Old Testament as our basis for how we administer baptism, we violate this fundamental principle of hermeneutics.

9. Promise and Fulfillment

For our last point we want to notice a couple of the elements of promise and fulfillment, of type and anti-type, that we find in the Old and New Testaments.

Ridderbos says:

God’s people are those for whom Christ sheds his blood of the covenant. They share in the remission of sins brought about by him and in the unbreakable communion with God in the new covenant that he has made possible...The rejection of Israel as God’s people does not annihilate the idea of covenant, but imparts to it a *new*, or at least a *more definite content*. The particular character of grace and of communion with God is fully maintained. But the circle in which it is granted and where God’s people are found, is no longer that of the empirical Israel, but it is that of those who are given remission of sins in Christ’s death, and whose hearts have been renewed by the Holy Spirit.⁴⁸

The point Ridderbos wants to make here is that a fundamental change has taken place from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant. The people of God in the Old Testament was made up of an empirical people. Ridderbos explicitly speaks of a “new formation of God’s people.”⁴⁹ He recognizes that there is something very different about the people of God in the New Covenant from the people of God in the Old Covenant. The people of God in the New Covenant are characterized by faith, by remission of sins, and by regeneration.

Ridderbos says:

The special relation between God and Israel as his people is one of the foundations of the gospel...At the same time we have noticed a transition in this basic idea, in the sense that, by the side of and in the place of empirical Israel, those who believe the gospel are considered as the flock of the Lord, the seed of Abraham, and the children of the kingdom.⁵⁰

Fairbairn says it this way:

The seed of Israel, as an elect people, placed under covenant with God, represented the company of an elect church, redeemed from the curse of sin, that they might live forever in the favour and blessing of Heaven: and when the redemption came, the representation passed into reality.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Ibid., 46.

⁴⁸ Herman Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom* (Philadelphia: P&R, 1976), 202, emphasis added.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 351.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 351-51.

⁵¹ Fairbairn, 267.

Ridderbos continues his argument by saying “This result is of the greatest importance for the question under discussion. For this rejection of Israel and this new formation of God’s people is not simply something of the eschatological future, but has already begun to be realized with the coming of Jesus.”⁵² He goes on to say:

The *ekklesia* in all this is the people who in this great drama have been placed on the side of God in Christ by virtue of the divine election and covenant. They have been given the divine promise, have been brought to manifestation and gathered together by the preaching of the gospel, and will inherit the redemption of the kingdom now and in the great future...So there is no question of *basileia* and *ekklesia* as being identical.⁵³

Let’s pull together some of these strands. In the Old Testament, the Old Covenant was a type and shadow of the fullness to come. That fullness was shrouded in mystery and types waiting for its revelation in Christ. With the coming of Christ we now have that fullness. The external, typological elements of the Old Covenant are cast off. The mystery and shadows are gone. With the New Covenant comes the in-breaking of the eschatological age in its “already-not yet” form. The Old Covenant people were naturally generated and marked by circumcision of the flesh. The New Covenant people are Spiritually generated, thus circumcised in heart, the antitype of circumcision. Thus, baptism should only be administered to those who are Spiritually born into the covenant. The only way prescribed in Scripture to evaluate if someone is in the covenant is by a profession of faith. Upon profession of faith baptism is administered. This is precisely the pattern we see in the New Testament: baptism follows a profession of faith.⁵⁴

This fits exactly with our understanding of covenant theology. All of those who are in the covenant have Christ as their federal head. The only way to be “in Christ” is to have the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:9), and those who have the Spirit are those who have faith. All of this is rooted and grounded in the great Covenant of Redemption, the *Pactum Salutis*, where the Father covenanted with the Son to give him an elect people. Thus baptism as a sign of the covenant is administered only to those who make a profession of faith. It is an effectual means of grace for those who receive it in faith. Apart from faith it does nothing.

Conclusion

In closing we want to consider a quotation from Charles Hodge.

The difficulty on this subject is that baptism from its very nature involves a profession of faith; it is the way in which by the ordinance of Christ, He is to be confessed before men; but infants are incapable of making such confession; therefore they are not the proper subjects of baptism. Or, to state the matter in another form: the sacraments belong to the members of the Church; but the Church is the company of believers; infants cannot exercise faith, therefore they are not members of the Church, and consequently ought not

⁵² Ridderbos, *Coming of the Kingdom*, 352.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 354-55.

⁵⁴ Louis Berkhof says that the New Testament “points to faith as a prerequisite for baptism,” *Systematic Theology* (East Peoria, IL: Versa Press Inc., 2005), 637. Cf. Acts 2:41; 10:44-48; 18:8.

to be baptized. In order to justify the baptism of infants, we must attain and authenticate such an idea of Church as that it shall include the children of believing parents.⁵⁵

Hodge recognizes that the doctrine of baptism itself excludes the idea of baptizing infants, and so he resorts to defining the church in such a way that it may allow for this practice. However, as we have shown, the movement of redemptive history, the full revelation in Christ, the in-breaking of the eschatological age, the regulative principle, the nature of covenant, the nature of positive law, and the basic principles of biblical hermeneutics all show that this move by Hodge simply cannot be made. Instead we must recognize the newness of the New Covenant in its fulfillment of the types and shadows of the Old Testament as well as in its connection to the consummation.

⁵⁵ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 546-47.