

**Ad Hoc Sacraments Committee**  
**Supporting Documentation for the Session Regarding Motion on Covenant Baptism**  
**October 10, 2000**

From the time of Abraham until the time of the Lord Jesus Christ's ministry on the earth, God had established that He works redemption through the basic family structure. Circumcision was the clear sign and seal of that covenant God established on behalf of Himself and Abraham, along with his descendants. When God commanded Abraham to circumcise infants, He was communicating to him that his entire household was under a covenant relationship with God. How do we know that circumcision was not only for infants? There are two situations that stand out quite clearly: Abraham himself, and his 13-year old son Ishmael (Gen. 17:23-25). Upon receiving God's command regarding circumcision, Abraham immediately circumcised his son Ishmael on the same day that he was circumcised, including all males born in his house (17:26, 27). From that time on, one was identified as being of God's chosen people by the mark of circumcision. It denoted that he had a special place in the family of God, the nation Israel. Even Gentiles were allowed into the covenant if they received the sign of circumcision. The key is that as one received the sign of circumcision, so did his entire household, including the children of all ages. Infant circumcision was established to ensure that all newborn males born into a covenant family were also circumcised. But those who were not circumcised are cut off from God's people, and are covenant breakers (17:14).

As a reformed body, we believe that the Covenant of Grace unfolds throughout scripture through the historic, progressive and organic revelation of God's Word. This implies that there is unity and harmony between the Old and New Testaments. This means that the signs and seals (baptism and the Lord's Supper) in the New Testament are not signs and seals of separate covenants established in the New, rather they are replacements of the signs and seals of the Covenant of Grace already established, namely, circumcision and the Passover. One thing is very clear. To whom the sign and seal of baptism as it replaces circumcision has not changed. It is afforded to all those who believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and to their household. In Acts 2:38-39, Peter addressed the multitude after they were pierced to the heart from his sermon, "Repent and let each one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God shall call to Himself."

Now the Greek word for "children" is *teknoij* (*teknois*), which in the plural tends to lean more towards the meaning of "descendants" or "posterity." It is clear that Peter did not exclude older children from "promise." This can be supported by the many household baptisms recorded in the Bible (Acts 10:2, 44, 48, 16:14, 15, 31-34, 18:8, 1 Cor. 1:14, 16). In any of these cases, there was no specific exclusion of older children or explicit mention of infants. There was no distinction made. In his comment on Acts 10:2, 44, 48, O. Palmer Robertson states, "At the point of baptism, the household [of Cornelius] is not explicitly mentioned, but the implication is clear. A gentile household, including rambunctious teenage children (assuming some may have been present) is sealed in the possession of the promise of the new covenant. As in Israel of old, the

covenant is made with the entire house.”<sup>1</sup> By his statement, Robertson concluded that even teenagers are part of the covenant and are afforded the rite of Baptism.

There are basically two ways one would usually come to baptism in today’s reformed Presbyterian church: (1) as an infant child of believing parents (similar to the child of Abraham receiving circumcision) and (2) as a professing believer who was never baptized as a child (similar to the Gentile coming into the covenant as part of the nation Israel). But what about the children of believers who are not infants? Are they excluded from the covenant? According to the Scripture, they should not. Yet many reformed churches today practice a quasi-form of “believers baptism” where children who are “old enough” to make their own profession are not to receive paedobaptism, rather they are to receive believer’s baptism upon their profession of faith. For 2000 years prior to Peter’s Pentecost sermon, children had been *in* the covenant, having received the sign of the covenant (circumcision). Are the children except for the infants to be put out of the covenant now? Having begun the Day of Pentecost with their children included in God’s covenant promises, are they who believed Peter’s sermons to end the day with their children outside the promises of the covenant? The answer is obviously no. Yet that is exactly what many reformed churches practice today.

There are also many adult believers who come into membership of the church but do not choose to have their children baptized. But what if we were to instruct them properly on what baptism truly means and as a result they are convinced that their children are truly to be included in the covenant and therefore must be baptized? What if those children were 8 or 12 years old? Do we baptize them? According to the Scripture, we should baptize them if the parents present their children to the church for baptism. Baptism is not administered because the child believes, rather baptism is administered because the child is a covenant child, and God has commanded that covenant children receive the sign of the covenant. God requires that covenant children be baptized and for no other reason. Otherwise, the children are truly cut off as the Gentiles were cut off from the nation Israel.

How does the church handle baptism of older children? Here are some recommendations:

1. If the parents are also making a profession of faith and have never been baptized, a true household baptism is in order for the entire family, regardless of age. The elders should sit down with the new believers and explain the import of baptism for both them and their children. If there is resistance on any of the children’s part, then baptism is not to be administered to those who willingly resist. The children, likewise, should be interviewed, if old enough, to determine their faith. If there is an intelligent and credible profession, then the child should be recommended to attend either the communicant’s class or the Inquirer’s class, depending on age or current Session policy, if not done so already. This decision should have no bearing on his/her baptism, since he/she is a covenant child. The further training is to ensure that they have sufficient understanding to discern the body and blood of our Lord in order to be admitted to the Lord’s Table. Their baptism already signifies that they are members of the church, though not communing members.

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<sup>1</sup> O. Palmer Robertson, *Covenants: God’s way with His People*, (Philadelphia: Great Commission Publications, 1978) 64.

2. If believing parents who are members approach the church about having their children baptized who are past the infant stage, the church should accommodate their request by first interviewing the children to indicate their faith. If there is a profession of faith, then the children should attend either the communicant's class or the Inquirer's class depending on their age or current Session policy, be admitted to the Lord's Table and be baptized during the same service. If there is not a sufficient profession of faith, then the children should be presented for baptism as long as there is no willing resistance to the baptism itself.