

INFANT BAPTISM, THE NEW MAN, AND THE NEW CREATION:

*A Response to Stephen J. Wellum's
"Baptism and the Relationship Between the Covenants"
in Believer's Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ
by Bill Smith¹*

Being a conservative Presbyterian pastor in Louisville, KY, occasionally I have the opportunity to speak with students of the local Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (SBTS). For those who may not know, since the early nineteen nineties, SBTS has gone through a radical transformation (for the good in my estimation). I grew up in a Southern Baptist church, graduated from two Southern Baptist institutions,² and was a Southern Baptist pastor. I was well-aware of the situation at SBTS before the present president, Dr. Albert Mohler, came to his current position. SBTS had a reputation for being extremely liberal theologically. When Dr. Mohler arrived, he encouraged and directed the Seminary to return to its founding principles. These founding principles were strongly Calvinistic. Since Dr. Mohler's arrival, SBTS is now characterized as being conservative and Calvinistic.

These moorings of the Seminary create a bond between them and conservative Presbyterians. We both claim similar roots and have much in common. But when students begin to read Reformed writers, they see that a great majority of them, beginning with John Calvin, hold to the practice of infant baptism, or paedobaptism. This provokes many questions; questions they generally want to ask someone who holds the position. Several students have sent me emails, contacted me by phone, and/or have attended our church trying to work through all of the issues related to this question of baptizing infants. On more than one occasion, Dr. Stephen Wellum's essay has been called into service to defend a rejection of infant baptism or to say, "How would you answer these arguments?" It was not until recently that I read the essay, so I didn't know exactly how I would answer his arguments. In the process of coming to the conviction that infants ought to be counted as a part of God's people who receive the mark of that covenant inclusion—baptism—I worked through many arguments pro and con on both sides of the issue. I must say from the outset that Wellum's essay is one of the best arguments against paedobaptism that I have read. But I am not persuaded to return to my old convictions. There are some fatal biblical flaws to his position in his reasoning from the Scriptures. I agree with Wellum's basic philosophy and test of a hermeneutic: "The true test for anyone's theology is this: Does it do justice to *all* the biblical data?" (153, emphasis original) I also agree that, "In truth, the baptismal question is a major test-case for one's entire theological system since it tells much about how one puts the entire canon together." (160) The way Wellum and other credo-baptist-only brothers "put the canon together," in my opinion, simply does not "do justice to *all* the biblical data." Though I don't claim to know all the answers to many perplexing questions

¹I would like to thank Mark Franklin, Troy Sutherland, and Rich Lusk for reviewing this response. Their suggestions were very helpful.

²I hold degrees from Louisiana College, Pineville, LA (1990) and MidAmerica Baptist Theological Seminary, Cordova, TN (1993). MABTS is not an official Southern Baptist seminary (i.e., supported by the Cooperative Program). Its principal founder, Dr. B. Gray Allison, formed it to provide conservative Southern Baptist ministers. The founding of the seminary itself was in response to the liberalism that had crept into the Southern Baptist institutions. Some say it is the unofficial seventh Southern Baptist seminary.

of Scripture, I believe the storyline of Scripture is better understood when the children of at least one believing parent are recognized members of the people of God, the church.

Points of Relative Agreement

While Wellum and I disagree on the major thesis of his essay, we agree on several issues. Some of these agreements are obvious between two Bible-believing Christians and some may be surprising to Wellum as well as many of my own paedobaptist brothers. First, I share Wellum's concern about the text of Scripture and faithfulness to the text. Wellum is concerned that we not use theological constructs to distort the meaning of the text. That is, our theological categories may become arbitrary grids through which we make difficult texts pass no matter how they contort the text itself. The use of "the covenant of grace" among paedobaptists, as Wellum notes, may be one of those grids.

If we are not careful, however, the notion of *the* 'covenant of grace' may be misleading, because Scripture does not speak of only one covenant with different administrations. Rather, Scripture speaks in terms of a *plurality* of covenants (e.g., Gal 4:24; Eph 2:12; Heb 8:7-13), which are all part of the progressive revelation of the one plan of God that ultimately is fulfilled in the new covenant. In reality, the 'covenant of grace' is a comprehensive *theological category*, not a biblical one. (126, emphasis original)

He goes on to recognize that it might be helpful to use such categories, but we must always be careful that it does not distort Scripture. There is a danger that this category might be used to "flatten out and downplay the significant amount of progression between the biblical covenants, which then leads us to ignore specific covenant discontinuities across redemptive-history, then it is unhelpful, misleading, and illegitimate." (126-7)

I agree. There is a danger of doing what Wellum warns us against. All exegetes come to the text with basic constructs about how various texts fit together. No one is free from presuppositions. But those presuppositions must always be subject to the Scriptures so that when texts do not fit within our theological categories or we are straining them to make them fit, it is our presuppositional theological constructs that must give way.

Wellum is right to criticize those who equate the "covenant of grace" solely with the Abrahamic covenant, stripped down to its spiritual aspects alone. This assessment, if correct, would be problematic. As Wellum points out,

Generally speaking, covenant theology tends to equate the 'covenant of grace' (an overarching theological category) with the Abrahamic covenant (a specific historical covenant which includes within it national, typological, and spiritual aspects). Covenant theology does this by reducing the national (physical) and typological aspects of the Abrahamic covenant to the *spiritual* aspects, which then becomes the grid by which all other biblical covenants are viewed, specifically the new covenant. (109, emphasis original)

I am not certain if many paedobaptists understand the covenant of grace this way. Most would

understand the Abrahamic covenant as a particular administration of the one covenant of grace.³ He goes on to say that paedobaptists limit and reduce Old Testament circumcision to “its *spiritual* significance alone.” (121, emphasis original) If true this would also be problematic. In many of the arguments that I heard in my journey toward becoming a paedobaptist, this was the case. It may have been a point of emphasis rather than rejection of the other meanings of circumcision. But I agree that the meaning of circumcision is much broader and has many implications that go beyond personal salvation.⁴ The covenant with Abraham embodied in circumcision certainly involved much more than an individual’s change of heart. This covenant includes the promise that Abraham would be heir of a very *physical* world (Rom 4.13). Therefore, it cannot be limited invisible realities in the sense of what goes on in the human heart, even when we come to its fulfillment in the New Covenant (NC).

Moreover, Wellum and I also agree that circumcision and baptism are not total equivalents. I have some caveats here with which Wellum would most likely disagree. But I agree with him in principle. The most common argument for infant baptism in Reformed history, beginning with John Calvin himself,⁵ is that infants were circumcised in the Old Covenant (OC) and, because there are greater privileges in the NC and the inclusion of children is not revoked, then we ought to baptize children into the church. While I agree with the conclusion, I’m not certain that we have always taken the best approach to this question at this point. Credo-baptist-only adherents consistently point out the incongruities between circumcision and baptism. I believe that circumcision has some correlation to baptism. Paul indicates this in Colossians 2.11-12. But, as I will discuss below, circumcision should be understood as a genus of the species of baptism. Therefore, circumcision gives us an aspect of the meaning of baptism, but it should not be equated one-to-one with baptism. Wellum asks and answers, “Does circumcision signify the exact same spiritual realities as baptism? My answer is no” (154). I agree.

I also agree that the redemptive-historical approach to the question of infant baptism is the right way to answer the question. Wellum and I obviously understand this differently, but I agree with him in principle when he says, “We believe that the storyline of Scripture moves clearly from Creation to Fall, from Abraham to David, and finally to Christ” (126). This is a fundamental and, therefore, vital hermeneutical key. Understanding God’s creation intention and how that plan relates to his redemption is crucial in understanding whether or not infants ought to be counted as members of God’s people.

There is one last point of appreciation and relative agreement that needs to be mentioned. Wellum and I agree to a great extent on the importance and meaning of baptism. Wellum goes to

³ Cf. e.g. *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (WCF) 7.3, 5. Cf. also O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), 62.

⁴ Personal salvation in some sense is what I am taking Wellum to mean when he speaks of “spiritual.” I will discuss this more below. The meaning of circumcision reaches far beyond any one person’s personal relationship with God. For some of my views on the meaning of circumcision see my paper *Timing Is Everything: A Note on the Relationship of Circumcision and ἔργων νόμου*, available at <http://www.communitypca.org/wp-content/uploads/2007/12/relationship-of-circumcision-to-ergon-nomou.pdf>.

⁵ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 4.16.10-16. Cf. also *The Heidelberg Catechism*, Q. 74.

great lengths to explain his view of baptism as not being a mere symbol (149ff.). He clearly states “that in the NT baptism is so closely linked with the gospel itself that it is not enough to say that baptism is merely a symbol. Instead, in the words of Beasley-Murray, it is also a ‘divine-human event’” (152). Though we might disagree on some of the qualifications, it seems that we both understand that God does not institute meaningless activities for his people. With that I am in hearty agreement.

Crucial Question

In order to get to the heart of the question of our disagreement, a question must be asked about the way we understand certain terminology and concepts. Throughout his essay, Wellum uses the word “spiritual” quite often; and does so without definition. I am not completely certain how he is using that word, but there are some hints scattered throughout the essay that give me some clues that we might have some misunderstandings at this point which would lead to a whole host of disagreements elsewhere. If Wellum is using “spiritual” as opposed to “physical,” then I am in disagreement. One section of the essay appears to do just this. “Under the previous covenants, the genealogical principle, that is, the relationship between the covenant mediator and his seed was *physical* (e.g., Adam, Noah, Abraham, David). But now, in Christ, under his mediation, the relationship between Christ and his seed is no longer physical but *spiritual*, which entails that the covenant sign must only be applied to those who in fact are the *spiritual* seed of Abraham” (136-7, emphasis original). Earlier, in a text already quoted, he criticizes paedobaptists of reducing “national (physical) and typological aspects of the Abrahamic covenant to the *spiritual* aspects...” (109, emphasis original).

In common Christian parlance “spiritual” is often associated with aspects of our life that are invisible or deny any outward, physical means relating to our spiritual lives. “Spiritual” is pitted against physical creation as physical creation. That is, if it is physical that means it cannot be spiritual. This lends itself to the understanding that the physical is only here somehow to “house” the spiritual. The physical may also serve the purpose of being a mere pointer to or type of the spiritual. Or maybe it is understood that there is a spiritual track and a physical track that run parallel but never really intersect. Wellum intimates this type of understanding when, speaking about new creation, he says, “In this important sense, Abraham and his family constitute another Adam, a calling into existence of something new *parallel to the original creation*, but in this case a ‘new creation’ (Rom 4:17)” (130, emphasis added). These tracks may be parallel, but they are separate. Seen in this light God’s intention for creation as creation (real, material, creation with all of its very human relationships in families, visible churches, and history itself) is downplayed to the point of practical irrelevance. In my understanding, “spiritual” is in no way pitted against the physical; whether material flesh-and-blood, family relationships, etc. The resurrection of Christ informs us of the way we ought to understand “spiritual.” Christ’s body and our future resurrection bodies are said by Paul to be “spiritual” (1Cor 15:44-46). No doubt our present bodies must be transformed. But they are transformed as physical bodies.

The relationship between our physical bodies and drawing near to God (*the* spiritual experience) before and after the coming of Christ illuminates the inseparable relationship between the two. During the OC era, any priest who had a physical deformity was disqualified from drawing near to God (cf. Lev 21.16ff.). When Jesus came and went about healing all manner of diseases, most of the diseases he heals have to do with these physical deformities that kept people at a distance from

God. Jesus makes them fit to come into God's presence; qualified priests and sacrifices able to draw near. Jesus' healings were not merely physical but qualified people to draw near to God. It might be argued that this demonstrates the "physicality" of the OC era (of which Jesus' pre-resurrection ministry was a part) with the "spirituality" of the NC era. We no longer must be physically without blemish to draw near to God. That is true in one sense, but it is not true in another. In his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus takes in himself our physical maladies and perfects them in his own resurrection body so that we are able to draw near to God. Matthew indicates this when, quoting Isaiah 53 he says, "He himself took our infirmities and bore our sicknesses" (Matt 8.17). The qualification for physical perfection or glorification has not been remitted but fulfilled in Christ. In Christ we are without physical deformity before God. But being in between the first fruits and the final harvest, our present experience is one in which we remain with our physical imperfections. In order to inherit the final reward, our mortal must put on immortality. Our bodies must be perfected. This is the ultimate "spiritual" experience. It in no way denies our physicality. Indeed, our physical body is inexorable from our spiritually drawing near to God.

The spiritual is that which is of or by the Spirit. It is not the same thing as spirit, which is invisible and non-physical (i.e. like "breath"). Spiritual is that which is empowered by or shaped by the Spirit. The original creation was spiritual in this way in that Spirit of God hovered over the face of the deep and formed and filled the formless and empty world.⁶ The creation which comes under the effects of the curse of sin is re-created by the Spirit so that it might fulfill God's original intentions for it *as creation*. So, for instance, when God promises to Abraham that in him all the families of the earth will be blessed (Gen 12.3), I believe that he is promising that families as families will be brought into a state of blessedness. They will have to go through death and resurrection through the waters of baptism (cf. e.g., Rom 6.1ff.), being transformed as a families. But they will be transformed as families, fulfilling God's intention for the family in creation.⁷ Spiritual, in my understanding, is not, then, the opposite of or to be sharply distinguished from physical or material creation. It is not that which parallels but stands outside of the physical. Rather, spiritual has to do with the Spirit empowering and shaping and transforming a very material creation.⁸ At one point Wellum comes closer to what I understand as being spiritual when he speaks about the church as a spiritual community and then defines that as "born of and empowered by the Spirit in faith union with Christ." (148) Even with this, I don't know if I really understand what he believes is the

⁶Sinclair Ferguson describes the biblical concept of the Spirit when he writes, "Energy rather than immateriality is what is in view... While in the natural order *ruach* may occasionally denote a gentle breeze (as in some translations of Gn. 3:8), the dominant idea in the Old Testament is that of power. The parallelism in Micah 3:8 well illustrates this: 'But as for me, I am filled with *power*, with the *Spirit of the Lord*.' When used of God (around one third of the Old Testament uses), therefore, *ruach* does not connote the idea of divine immateriality (spirit, not matter), although doubtless that is implied in the general biblical perspective. The emphasis is, rather, on his overwhelming energy; indeed one might almost speak about the violence of God." (Sinclair Ferguson, The Holy Spirit (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 17.

⁷More on this below on pp 6-9 under "God's intention and victory in creation."

⁸For a good discussion on πνευματικὸς, spiritual, and how it relates to physical creation, see N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 347-356. See also Ferguson, The Holy Spirit, 252-5. There Ferguson correctly observes that the spiritual body of which Paul speaks in 1 Cor 15 is not opposed to the material body. The spiritual body is that which is imperishable while the natural body is that which is perishable. The spiritual body is, nevertheless, a body that can be handled; a fact I am certain Wellum would affirm but the truth of which needs to be teased out for this present discussion (as well as many others).

relationship between “spiritual” and “physical.” As I will explain later, this gets to the crux of what Jesus is saving and becomes a key hermeneutical issue in the whole question of infant baptism.⁹

Same Story, Different Twist

Instead of answering Wellum tit-for-tat, I would like to tell the story of Scripture from a perspective that, I believe, does more justice to the integrity of the storyline. This is not to say that Wellum and I are telling completely different stories. As alluded to earlier, there are many points of agreement. But there is another perspective to the story that makes infant baptism integral to the story and better accounts for the reading of certain texts. Wellum is correct to observe that the question of infant baptism is not an isolated issue but it “tells much about how one puts the entire canon together” (160). In other words, we can’t disagree *only* on the issue of infant baptism. The issue of infant baptism is woven into the story in a such a way that it presupposes a certain intent and trajectory of the story. Our underlying presuppositions about the nature and purpose of God’s creation and how his plan for that creation is brought to completion are the determining factors of whether or not we will see the necessity of infant baptism.

God’s Intention and Victory in and for Creation especially in relation to the Biological Family¹⁰

What is Jesus saving? Is he simply saving souls *out of* the world, or is he saving the whole cosmos so as to bring God’s original purpose for creation to its culmination? Is God’s intention to make a world parallel to this one? Or is God transforming the world he created and bringing it to its *telos* (i.e., in line with his original plan)? The way these questions are answered determines how the whole corpus of Scripture is read and, consequently, whether or not we will acknowledge our children to be legitimate members of the people of God from their first days. If we believe that the sin introduced into the world through Adam shifted the focus from developing the creation with gardens, cities, cultures, etc. to an enterprise of delivering people out of all of this and onto another plane or a parallel “new” creation which resembles but does not intersect with this creation, then we will answer the question one way. If we believe that God’s original intention to develop this world was not defeated or ultimately derailed by sin, but that through Christ sin was defeated so that the original purpose of creation as creation might be completed, then we will answer the question in a

⁹Wellum quotes paedobaptists Berkhof and Murray who speak of circumcision and the primacy of its spiritual nature over family, racial, or national identities (121). They may be using the word in a similar way as Wellum. Even if I must humbly disagree with stalwarts such as these on this issue, I simply don’t believe that the line between spiritual and physical ought to be drawn that way. As Wellum makes clear, this becomes a problem in the argument of paedobaptists. These other aspects seem to be relativized to the point of irrelevance as circumcision is taken out of its historical context. It is as if circumcision has some ahistorical, metaphysical meaning that doesn’t touch the actual historical situation dealing with where humanity is at this point and Abraham and his seed’s relationship to it. More on this below.

¹⁰For a similar line of argumentation, see *The Sociology of Infant Baptism* in Peter J. Leithart, *The Baptized Body* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2007), 113-136.

different way.¹¹

To begin to answer these questions we must go back to Genesis and clarify our understanding of who man is as defined by God's word of creation. When God created man, he said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness" (Gen 1.26). "So God created man in his own image; in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (Gen 1.27). "Adam" became the name not only for the singular individual man named Adam, but also for the man and woman together. They were together known as "man." Man, created in the image of a Triune God was both an individual and a community, both being equally ultimate.¹² That is, man is not an individual *or* a community. Man is both an individual *and* a community; both one and many. This is fundamental to being created *imago dei*.¹³ As the image of God, God blessed them and told them to be "fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth" (Gen 1.28). Integral to man's fulfilling the responsibility of bearing God's image was his privilege and duty to be fruitful and multiply. From the Garden man was to spread out over all of the earth and develop the creation creating more gardens that would grow into cities. Multiplying would create societies and cultures. These cultures were intended to reflect the image of God as a community.¹⁴ The intention for man in the beginning was, among many other things, to have children who would be brought up to be worshipers of God in the fullest sense. Of course, before sin entered the world there were no hindrances to this mission. If man had not sinned, then children would have been born in the Garden, having access to the Tree of Life. They would have been born without the stain of sin and therefore enjoyed unhindered union and communion with God from before birth.

But things did not work out this way. Sin entered the world bringing death. Man died just as God promised (Gen 2.17). That death involved many aspects. From the grace God showed to man after the fall seen in his declarations to the man and the woman, death involved the loss of

¹¹I am aware that all of us as Calvinists affirm that God has always had one plan. That plan could not be and has not been altered. The question I am seeking to answer is, What is that one plan? Did that one plan include jettisoning what God said the world should be in Gen 1? Or does that one plan include the completion of the creation project? For a good discussion of this the lectures by N. T. Wright, *Creation and New Creation in the New Testament* (Vancouver, BC, Canada: Regent College, 2003) are excellent.

¹²I am aware that not all hold to the "us" in Gen 1.26 as being a reference to God but possibly to God and his angels. I believe it refers to the plurality of the Godhead. It is not fully revealed as of yet in Genesis, but it is revealed from the beginning nonetheless.

¹³There are many works on what it means for man to be created in the image of God. There are works from across the spectrum of tradition. Cf. e.g., Anthony Hoekema, *Created in God's Image* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1986); J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005); John D. Zizioulas, *Being As Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985); Stanley Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001).

¹⁴The fact that the garden is to grow into a garden-city is seen in the whole movement of Scripture from garden in Gen 2 to garden-city in Rev 21-22. For my understanding about the inability to escape culture building, see my article *The Church and Culture*, <http://www.communitypca.org/wp-content/uploads/2008/06/the-church-and-the-culturejune-08.pdf>

fruitfulness in terms of a dead womb of the woman (Gen 3.16)¹⁵ and a dead earth that would not bring forth its fruit to man (Gen 3.17-19). In God's promise to the man and the woman, the effects of sin would be reversed to a certain degree, but they would not be completely eliminated. When God set enmity between the serpent and his seed and the woman and her seed (Gen 3.15), he was bringing man back on his side, as it were. As such, God restored the woman's ability to bear children, but the consequences of sin would be realized in childbirth. The earth would produce fruit for the man, but he would have to fight the thorns and thistles in order to make it fruitful. God promises to reverse the effects of sin through the seed of the woman. Just as Wellum notes in his essay, "He [God] promises that his purposes for creation and the human race will continue through his provision of a Redeemer, the seed of the woman, to reverse the disastrous effects of the Fall" (129). The effects of the fall were very physical. They involved dead wombs, a dead ground, broken relationships, and ultimate physical death. This is not in any way the antithesis of spiritual death. All of these factors and more embody spiritual death because it is the death of man in terms of his being in the image of God. Man as the image of God encompasses his total person, which involves invisible as well as visible aspects. It is as much about his vocation (e.g., fruitfulness, dominion) as it is about his mental contemplations or even his individual heart attitudes. Man as man *is* all of these things. All of these aspects define man's being. Sin brings death to all of these aspects of man. Grace brings restoration and life to all of these aspects of his being. In short, God restores and will bring to completion his original purpose for creation as given in Genesis 1.

This is the context, I believe, in which we are to understand issues such as circumcision and the Abrahamic covenant. This is not merely a jump from creation to Abraham and then to infant baptism. One aspect of the fact that the children of Abraham are included within the people of God as a special people is because through Abraham God is completing his plan for the creation as creation. Among the various things that God is doing, he is affirming the goodness of his creation of the family and its purpose in history. Indeed, it will be in Abraham that all the *families* of the earth will be blessed (Gen 12.3). God's inclusion of children among his people reveals his intention to save his people, redeeming the family structure as he originally structured it.

So then, are the effects of sin and redemption from it only realized at the individual level or does sin affect the one *and* the many? Does God restore the biological family in its created order and intention, or are we simply saved individuals within a "non-spiritual," merely physical family? Is the physical or biological family merely an instrument to bear physical children in hopes that they will become spiritual children one day? Or, even further, does the family of original creation not *truly* exist any longer? Is the family just a convention held over from an age that is past that has no spiritual function; i.e., as it exists? Is there still a place for the procreation of children or should those original mandates be interpreted in terms of begetting spiritual children (e.g., through evangelism)? The question of infant baptism is connected to all of these questions, shaping not only the particular view of the place of our children, but also the nature of our vocation and mission as the people of God.

We are forced into dealing with these questions when we come to NT passages such as

¹⁵This theme is picked up in Genesis and repeated several times. Sarah is barren. Rebekah is barren. Rachel is barren. Each one of these women as new Eves was emblematic of the effects of the fall. They were barren until God in his grace opened their wombs. For this theme of death and resurrection related to childbirth, cf. Rom 4.

Ephesians 5–6 and Colossians 3. In these passages Paul deals with how families and households are to be ordered within the new creation. Significant especially to the Ephesians passage is the fact that in Ephesians 4 Paul speaks of our salvation in terms of being re-created *imago dei*. As such we are to imitate God, not simply in terms of an individual piety that seeks to rise above earthly relationships, but rather, it is precisely in those relationships with one another in which the image of God is manifest in this new creation. These relationships are all contextualized by the church in Ephesians. This is the context in which Paul puts the family and gives the new creation shape of the family. All of the family members mentioned in this section fall under the category of “saints” whom Paul addresses in 1.1. The family as the family is to be ordered within God’s church in such a way so as to reflect the new creation. The biological family, though not the full eschatological realization of God’s plan, is a part of God’s new creation order and is integral within the church for the completion of its mission. This, I believe, is nothing less than the redemption from sin we have through Christ’s blood (Eph 1.7). The place where sin brought death (e.g., to the original creation family) God has brought life.

God’s restoration of creation includes putting the family back together in order for it to complete its purposes until the resurrection on the last day (Mt 22.30). As such God gives promises to our children. He promised Abraham that he would be a God to him and to his seed (Gen 17.7). This certainly emphasizes Isaac and ultimately Christ but is not limited to them. The seed, like man, is both one and many. The particular seeds like Isaac and Jacob enjoyed special privileges and a particular mission, but all of the children born within Israel enjoyed a special relationship with God. Just as God is a God to Abraham, in this same way he will be a God to his children.

Later in the history of God’s people this promise finds a terrible explanation when the people of Judah are sacrificing their children to pagan gods. YHWH God deals with them in this way: “And you took your sons and your daughters, **whom you had borne to me**, and these you sacrificed to them to be devoured. Were your whorings so small a matter that you slaughtered **my children** and delivered them up as an offering by fire to them” (Ezek 16.20-21 emphasis added). These infants were counted as God’s own children. To them he gave promises that if they would honor their parents they would inherit the land (Ex 20.12). These promises are transformed in Christ and now relate to our children and their inheritance of the world (Eph 6.1-3; which again emphasizes the physical world as our spiritual inheritance). All of the promises of God which find their “Yes” and “Amen” in Christ belong to our children according to what Peter preaches on the Day of Pentecost (Ac 2.39). These promises are to them as his people because this was his intention from the beginning. This was the purpose of original creation that was decimated by sin but restored by grace.

While Wellum is correct to warn us of an under-realized eschatology—flattening out Scripture so that we do not see the discontinuities (126-7)—we must also be careful of an over-realized eschatology which understands the church as being in its final, resurrected form in which family structure as we know it will be completely done away with. While the unmarried state is exalted to new heights in the NT, possibly indicating this greater eschatological realization and anticipating that which is to come, the family as family is still presupposed as a spiritual institution within the context of the church. If it is not, why then should we not all adopt vows of celibacy, not be married, have no children, and only seek to evangelize unbelievers? The NT is very clear about the place of the family and its ordering, but in Wellum’s reading of the Scriptures, what is the justification for the biological family within the new creation? If through the resurrection of Christ the regenerate-only church is made absolutely the only family, then there is no place for the biological family as a

spiritual entity. In my estimation that does not make for the best reading of the Bible as a whole or the NT in particular.

Where the sin of Adam abounded in decimating the structure and function of the family in God's creation plan, grace did much more abound. What is lost in Adam is not simply restored but superceded in Christ Jesus' redemption of creation. Should we then think that the family as God created it is not restored and a recipient of even greater grace? Is Adam greater than Christ? If children of believing parents were intended to be members of the people of God before Christ, why would we think that they would be cut off from their believing parents as practical pagans after Christ? God graciously includes our children as members of his people in the church as one aspect of his redemption and bringing to completion his original plan. God's original purpose has not been nor will be defeated by sin.

Christ's Death and Resurrection as the Hermeneutic of History

Wellum criticizes paedobaptists for their tendency to flatten out the covenant progression to the point that the discontinuities are not appreciated as they ought to be. He concedes the fact that there are continuities between the covenants but emphasizes that there are significant discontinuities as well (132). In a rather bold criticism at the end of his discussion on the relationship of the Abrahamic covenant and the new covenant, Wellum concludes:

In other words, in failing to grasp the significant progression in the covenants across redemptive-history, particularly in terms of the relationship between the covenant mediator and his seed, paedobaptists fail to understand correctly how the genealogical principle has changed from Abraham to Christ. Ultimately they do not acknowledge the 'newness' of the new covenant. (137)

This criticism is based, of course, on his own views of how covenants relate. It is not that paedobaptists "do not acknowledge the 'newness' of the new covenant." Many of us see the discontinuities between the covenants and the newness of the new covenant. But with different presuppositions we understand that the lines of discontinuity are drawn in different places and newness looks a little different from our biblical perspective than it does from a credo-baptist-only position. But again, the question is, does our conclusion do justice to *all* of the biblical data?

Answering questions of continuity and discontinuity must take into account all the biblical data. None of us is close to working out the infinite richness of God's Word in these matters, but we must be able to take into account as much of the biblical data as possible and understand how it best fits together; with as few pieces lying to the side as possible. This goes to the question, once again, of our basic hermeneutic of Scripture. Where do we find in Scripture instruction for how we are to view history and creation as a whole (of which history is a part) to learn how God moves history forward, its relationship to the past, and the past's and present's relationship to the future? We could certainly look at events like the creation and fall of man, the flood, Babel, the Exodus, and many other historical events in history that would give us some understanding of how God would have us

view continuities and discontinuities.¹⁶ While approaching it from this way is certainly helpful, there is no way that we can understand any of these matters apart from the climax of the history of the world: the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The death and resurrection of Jesus are not only the culmination and focal point of history (though this complex set of events is the focal point), but it is also paradigmatic for how history, and, thus, the covenants are to be understood in terms of continuity and discontinuity.

In this short response there is not ample space to defend fully this hermeneutical approach, but some points deserve mentioning. In the death and resurrection of Christ, history's purpose (and the purpose of creation as a whole) is fulfilled. Jesus is *the Man*, the second and last Adam, the King of creation, who unites creation with the Godhead, bringing the purpose of creation in history to its preliminary conclusion. Jesus is the firstfruits of what is anticipated, not only for our bodily resurrection (1Cor 15), but also for the entire creation represented and embodied in him (Rom 8.19ff.). The writers of Scripture are careful to point out that Jesus died on the sixth day of the week, the day Adam was given life. Jesus then rests in the grave on the seventh day, bringing the old creation to its Sabbath. These historical events orchestrated by God tell the story that this is the death, not only of the old Adam, but also of all of the old creation as represented in him. History comes to an end, in a real sense, in Christ.¹⁷ And when Jesus rises again on the first day of the week, we must hear the resonance—especially in John's Gospel—of the fact that a new creation, and a new history has begun. Through Christ's death and resurrection the purpose of God from all of eternity to unite all things to himself, things in heaven and things in earth, is accomplished (Eph 1.9-10; cf. also Col 1.15-20). As the climax and focal point of history, and as the one in whom all things are truly *embodied*, creation history finds its hermeneutic in the historical event of the death and resurrection of Jesus. As Jesus spoke to the disciples on the Road to Emmaus, all of the Scriptures, Moses and all of the Prophets, testified of him (Lk 24.13ff.). The Scriptures, with its covenant history, are to be interpreted in terms of the Person of Jesus Christ. He is the hermeneutic of history. His historical, bodily death and resurrection provide us the hermeneutic of Scriptural history,¹⁸ teaching us what continuity and discontinuity are. With this basic hermeneutic and the witness of the rest of Scripture, we can at least begin to put together a picture of how history is to be understood in all of its relationships of past, present, and future.

In the death and resurrection of Jesus we see radical discontinuity but also radical continuity as well. That is, there is a decisive and once-for-all break with the past. The old historical situation is put to death. That historical situation is no more. But all things from the past are not annihilated. While the break is decisive and radical, there remains a connection with the past in the resurrection of the body of Jesus. As Jesus' body embodies creation as its representative (i.e., the second and last

¹⁶For a discussion of the unity and diversity of the covenants (and, thus, history) that deals with particulars in the biblical text, see O. Palmer Robertson, The Christ Of The Covenants (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), 27-63.

¹⁷Paul's statement to the Corinthians that there generation was the one upon whom the "end of the ages" had come (1Cor 10.11) represents this view of time from the perspective of how God wants us to understand history climaxing in Jesus the Messiah.

¹⁸When I speak of Scriptural history, I am not speaking of *heilsgeshichte* in a sense of it being some different type of history than that which is outside of Scripture. I am only speaking of the history as it is recorded in Scripture.

Adam) creation is resurrected with Jesus. The fact that there is not an annihilation of the old creation is seen in the fact that Jesus is not resurrected as an immaterial spirit, leaving his old creation body in the grave. Rather his old creation body is transformed and raised as a new body. It is not the same as the old body. But it *is* the old body transformed. The grave was empty. No body. Jesus reassures his disciples that he is, in fact, not a spirit. He has a body with flesh and bones (Lk 24.36-43). Yet, the wounds from his pre-resurrection body remain with him in his transformed, resurrected body. There is continuity with the past as well as discontinuity.

Using the death and resurrection of Jesus as a hermeneutical grid teaches us to understand that history moves in the same way. Epochs of history truly die. They are no more. But this doesn't mean that there is no relevance for them in the new epoch. Each epoch that dies is raised again transformed bearing a recognizable and striking resemblance to the old epoch but is also totally new. The whole account of the flood of Genesis 6–9 is an historic example of how this works. The old world that has been corrupted by sin is put to death. Throughout the episode recorded in Scripture the themes of the de-creation (which is basically synonymous with death) are prominent. The waters of the original creation of Genesis 1.1-2 that were separated and given their places in relationship to heaven and the land throughout the creation account are returned. The earth once again becomes a place that is “unformed and unfilled.” There is a complete death of the old world. The old epoch died. But in the midst of this is this three-tiered ark with Noah, a new Adam figure, which connects the old world with the new. The world is put to death and made new. But this newness is to be understood as a transformation. The type of Noah and the flood is incomplete in many respects because Noah himself is a type of Christ who is to come. But viewing that story through the hermeneutical lenses of the death and resurrection of Jesus (i.e., the de-creation and re-creation), we understand better how to view continuities and discontinuities.

What does all this have to do with the question of infant baptism? Much in every way! As stated above, God's intention for man in his creation is not something that can be ultimately thwarted. This does not mean that there aren't significant discontinuities within the epochs of history. But these deaths and resurrections that occur throughout history, culminate in Christ, and continue in history until the final resurrection are the means by which God completes his plan for man. The place of the biological family as an aspect of God's kingdom and as a means of God fulfilling his kingdom purposes, while having gone through many deaths and resurrections through the epochs, still has a place in the new creation. It is not that the newness of the new creation is denied. It is that the newness of the new creation *continues to include* the biological family, now defined by Christ.

To play off of the quote at the beginning of this section, it could be said that,

Those who believe in believer's baptism only fail to understand the extent of God's redemption in that they do not acknowledge properly the restoration of the family from its decimation by sin and its continuing purposes in the kingdom. They do not understand that the family, while it has always been relativized by membership in the larger people of God (even under the OC), continues to serve as a spiritual entity and for a spiritual purpose. Ultimately, those who are credo-baptists exclusively do not acknowledge the 'newness' of the NC with relationship to the family.

As mentioned earlier, the instructions given to the families as families, complete with transformed

covenant commands and promises to the children who are considered to be saints (e.g., Eph 6.1-3), indicate that God's intention for the family has died and risen again in Christ. There is no indication that these children are assumed to be of any specific age or have made a public profession of faith. Like the children to whom the original Fifth Commandment was addressed, the requisite for obedience is from birth. Children of believing parents in the new covenant are considered holy (1Cor 7.14) by virtue of having a believing parent. So, while the historical situation has changed dramatically from the nation of Israel being the priestly people of God to the transformed Israel, the Church of the new covenant, being the priestly people of God (1Pt 2.9), the promises to the children of at least one believing parent remain fundamentally the same. They are part of a new spiritual family, a family in Christ that has been transformed and empowered by the Spirit of God to complete the original intent of the family. This seems to me to be the best hermeneutical presupposition with which to approach the text of the NT and make the best sense of it.

Baptism is Baptism

Wellum takes issue with paedobaptists at the point of making baptism equivalent with circumcision. He is correct to observe that this is one of the main lines of arguments used by many in the Presbyterian and Reformed traditions to prove the case that the infant children of believers in the new covenant should be given the sign of the new covenant. With Wellum, I believe that if circumcision is made a strict parallel to baptism or is said to be a replacement for baptism (119), it is a somewhat flimsy argument. Wellum is right to note that circumcision is given within a particular historical covenant—the covenant with Abraham—and finds its place within that temporary historical context.¹⁹ What Wellum says about the lack of evidence in the NT for the strict parallel between the two has some weight.

No doubt, baptism is analogous to circumcision in that it is an initiatory rite, but it is not a mere replacement of it. Nowhere does the NT say that circumcision is now unnecessary because baptism replaced it. That would have been the most logical answer to the Judaizers, if the paedobaptist position was correct. This answer is never given because baptism is a new rite, applied to each person who has repented and believed, who has been born of the Spirit, united to Christ, and has demonstrated that he has entered into the new covenant realities inaugurated by our Lord.” (157)

It would seem that if baptism replaced circumcision one-for-one, this would have been an easy argument to make for the Apostles. They didn't make this argument because, in my estimation, baptism did not replace circumcision in a one-to-one fashion. Baptism was and remains baptism from the old creation world to the new creation in Christ.

¹⁹It is interesting to note that even in the epochal changes before Christ that circumcision, introduced at a particular time in history within the covenant given to Abraham goes through death and resurrection and is part of the Mosaic and Davidic covenants in the future. The Scriptures themselves teach us what remains (continuities) and what is jettisoned (discontinuities) by precept, principle, and/or command. For my views on the purpose of circumcision, especially in relation to the works of the Law in Paul, see my essay *The Relationship of “The Works of the Law” and Circumcision* (<http://www.communitypca.org/wp-content/uploads/2007/12/relationship-of-circumcision-to-ergon-nomou.pdf>). The reader might also consult my essay *The Apocalypse of Faith* (<http://www.communitypca.org/wp-content/uploads/2007/11/the-apocalypse-of-faith.pdf>).

Where I take issue with Wellum is the assertion quoted above that “baptism is a new rite.” That is simply not the case. When John the Baptist, the last of the OC prophets, was in the middle of the Jordan baptizing people, no one came to ask him, “What are you doing? What is this new rite that you have introduced in Israel?” This is because baptism was practiced throughout the history of God’s people. They understood the types of baptism in the flood of Noah’s time and the crossing of the Red Sea (cp. 1Pt 3.20-21; 1Cor 10.1-2). They also had baptismal rites at the Tabernacle and Temple. The great sea/laver in the courtyard of the Tabernacle was used for some of the various baptisms about which the writer of Hebrews speaks.²⁰ Certainly we can be sure that the children who gathered before God for covenant renewal (cf. e.g., Dt 29.10-11; 31.12; Josh 8.35; cf. also Joel 2.16) and were able to participate in the worship feasts of Israel (cf. e.g., Dt 16.11, 14) had to be cleansed from uncleanness. The only way to come before God’s presence was to be washed or baptized. I believe it is safe to assume that the infants who were counted among God’s people were indeed baptized.²¹

The people of God were familiar with the rite of baptism. Baptism has always been baptism and children have been baptized throughout the history of God’s people. Once this is recognized (along with the theme and theology of the redemption of the family as the family), then the circumcision = baptism argument becomes rather irrelevant to the debate. It is helpful because in it we see an aspect of the privileges and responsibilities that our children have from birth: the privilege of being a part of God’s priestly people and a vocation to live out that calling by faith. But arguing from this as a fundamental premise to defend infant baptism is no longer needed.

The clearest example in Scripture of children being included among God’s people and receiving the sign of that status is in the crossing of the Red Sea. In 1Cor 10.1-2 Paul makes it clear that they were all baptized into Moses in the Sea. Since the people of God were “the body of Moses” at that time (Moses being a type of Christ), being baptized into Moses was equivalent to being initiated into the people of God. Israel was now be transformed and incorporated into Moses through the Passover, exodus, and crossing of the Sea. They were moving into a new stage of history and were thus reconstituted into Moses. We know from the historical evidence of the Exodus that even the smallest children were included. Indeed, when Pharaoh offered to let Israel go to worship but refused to let the little ones go with them, he brought upon Egypt the plague of locusts with his rebellion (Ex 10.9-10). *All* of the people of God must leave to go and worship YHWH. *All* included the little ones. So, we can be assured that the little ones left Egypt and passed through the baptismal waters of the Red Sea with all of the people of God. This whole scene is in itself and also typifies a move from the old creation to the new creation through the waters of baptism.²² The people of God are saved through the water (like Noah and his household), and the enemies of God are destroyed by the waters returning to their original position. Just as the people of God moved from one stage

²⁰Cf. Heb 9.10 and context. This may also be the reference to which Paul refers in Titus 3.5 where he speaks about the “laver of regeneration.” When a worshiper came unclean, he could not draw near to God and was thus “dead.” The washing cleansed him and allowed him to draw near to God, which is life.

²¹There is no debate, of course, that they were included among God’s people in Israel. My point is that all the indicators point to the fact that they were baptized in the OC washings/baptisms.

²²For a fuller treatment of biblical typology of baptism, see Jean Danielou, S. J., From Shadows To Reality: Studies in the Biblical Typology of the Fathers. London: Burns and Oates, 1960.

of history to another by being incorporated into Moses, so the people of God moved from one stage of history into another being incorporated into Christ. He is the Mediator, the one in whom the people of God are now constituted. Paul says that baptism into Moses through the Sea is a type of which Christian baptism is the antitype.²³

As a new creation sign, the reason for baptism as *the* new covenant rite of initiation makes perfect sense. The work of Christ is the fulfillment of the types of the Exodus²⁴ as well as all of the de-creation to re-creation themes. He brings in the new creation. When people pass through the waters of baptism, it is signified that they have become a part of that new creation people, the church, the body of Christ (i.e., the physical, visible body that has gone through death and been raised again as a new creation). We are baptized into Christ as the people who passed through the Red Sea were baptized into Moses. When Paul says this to the Corinthians, he is drawing a parallel between these experiences. “Just as the people of God of old were baptized, so you all were baptized.” Since children participated in this baptism, there is no need in the NT to reiterate that children need to participate in baptism. Baptism is not a new rite. It is an ancient rite in which children participated. All of those various baptisms in the OC are now fulfilled in this one NC rite of baptism. Since baptism has always been applied to children, and since the NT nowhere commands us to stop baptizing children, therefore, we should assume that the practice of baptizing the infants of at least one believing parent should continue.

The Violability and Inviolability of the New Covenant: Drawing Contrasts Instead of Parallels

Parallels and Contrasts

One crucial point of disagreement in the debate concerning infant baptism is whether or not the New Covenant can have members who are unregenerate. The question is also posed this way: “Is the New Covenant breakable or unbreakable? Can there be true members of the New Covenant community who will fall away from the faith (i.e., apostatize)?” Wellum doesn’t deny the fact of apostasy, but he says that the actions of apostasy cause us to evaluate the previous status of the apostate. That is, the one who apostatizes was never really “of us” (1Jn 2.19).²⁵ The question of the

²³There is another dimension to this crossing of the Red Sea as a type of Christian baptism that bears mentioning. When the children of Israel left Egypt, they did not go alone. A mixed multitude, who were obviously God-fearers, fled Egypt with them (Ex 12.38). This baptism involved Israelites and Gentiles. This baptism, therefore, typifies the coming Christian baptism more than circumcision ever could.

²⁴Moses and Elijah appear on the Mount of Transfiguration to speak with Jesus about τὴν ἑξοδον, the exodus, “which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem” (Lk 9.31). Paul also speaks of Christ being our Passover who was sacrificed for us (1Cor 5.7). The themes of the Exodus are woven throughout Jesus’ life and ministry as well as throughout the rest of the NT.

²⁵152-3, n. 125. Of course the question then comes, “Apostatize from what?” If he was never “in,” then there was nothing to fall away from. One cannot fall away from a faith he was never in.

The question of apostasy reaches much further than the question of infant baptism. It deals with the nature of the visible church itself and whether or not it is *per se* a spiritual institution. The question brings into its scope what is being said and done in baptism and the Lord’s Supper. This question about the nature of the NC community has far-reaching implications; as much for the credo-baptist-only as well as the paedobaptist.

nature of the church bears upon the question of infant baptism because we know from experience that not all of those who are baptized as infants persevere in the faith. So, were they ever really a member of the NC?

The presupposition upon which Wellum builds his arguments is the fact that the inauguration of the NC brought in an era in which all the members of this covenant would be regenerate, unable to fall away from the faith. The NC membership roll is only made up of the elect. All apostasy passages must be interpreted in that light. Wellum states a fairly common baptistic position when he writes:

Paedobaptist literature commonly asserts that our own experience sadly confirms what the NT says about the possibility of apostasy. This fact demonstrates to paedobaptists that the church must be viewed as a mixed community like Israel of old. Proof is offered from such texts as Matt 13:24-30 (the parable of the wheat and the tares—even though the parable portrays the kingdom of God in the world and not the constitution of the church), the vine imagery of John 15 and Romans 11, and the warning texts of Hebrews (e.g., 6:4-6). *But the nature of the new covenant community makes this interpretation highly unlikely.* We cannot deny Scripture's description of how the new covenant people of God has incredibly changed. Furthermore, the fact of apostasy and the status of the one who commits it are not the same. No one disputes the fact of apostasy in the new covenant age, but the status of those apostates is disputed. Are they 'covenant breakers' (assuming they were once full covenant members), or those who professed faith and identified with the church, but who demonstrate by rejecting the gospel that they were never one with us (see 1 John 2:19)? The NT teaches the latter. Apostasy leads us, sadly, to reevaluate a person's former profession of faith and his covenant status. But this situation is unlike unbelievers in the old covenant who were still viewed as covenant members, even though they were unbelievers.... (152-3, n. 125, emphasis added)

The *sine qua non* for this position is the prophecy found in Jeremiah 31:31-34 concerning the NC. It is certainly not the only passage called into service, but it is one upon which Wellum (as well as others) focus. "... [P]aedobaptists," says Wellum, "fail to do justice to the biblical data, specifically the promise of Jeremiah 31 and its fulfillment in the NT." Though paedobaptists have tried to deal with this passage time and again, in Wellum's estimation their attempts have fallen short exegetically and theologically.²⁶ It is clear to Wellum and the others he quotes that the knowledge of God spoken of in this passage is nothing less than salvific knowledge that is inviolable (143, n. 95). So, the only explicit prophecy of the NC in the OT lays out the case for a completely regenerate NC membership. The teachings of the NT and all of the apostasy passages must be interpreted in this light.

I, of course, have different presuppositions and believe that Jeremiah 31:31-34 as well as other passages do not teach what Wellum and others believe they teach. Our exegetical and theological project is to do justice to *all* the biblical data. I do not believe Wellum's approach

²⁶Wellum interacts primarily with Jeffrey Niell and Richard Pratt in their respective essays found in The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism, ed. Gregg Strawbridge (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 2003).

accomplishes this. Interpreting the text this way imports too much into it without taking adequate account of its context within the history of God's people as well as the context in which the writer of Hebrews specifically places it.

While Jeremiah 31.31-34 holds a prominent place in this discussion, it is not the only relevant text. I will eventually explain my own understanding of this passage, but first we need to start by establishing a common pattern in the NT: the parallels between the NC membership and OC membership. These parallels drawn by the inspired writers of the NT do no damage to the newness of the NC or its ultimate inviolability. As exegetes and theologians we must be careful to draw parallels where the text draws parallels and contrasts where the text draws contrasts. Reversing either one of these will cause us to draw the wrong conclusions about the meaning of the text.

Though there are many parallels drawn in the NT between Israel and the church, a few more explicit parallels have more bearing on our present discussion than others. Paul's first letter to the Corinthian church is important in this regard. In his opening salutations Paul describes the church at Corinth as those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ (1Cor 1.2). They all have been given the grace of God in Christ Jesus and lack no spiritual gifts (1Cor 1.4). These Corinthians are those who are called into the fellowship, the communion, of God's Son, Jesus Christ our Lord (1Cor 1.9). But the Corinthians have serious problems; problems Paul warns them about. In order to warn them Paul draws upon the Scriptural patterns that God established with his people long before the time of the Corinthians. In 1Cor 10 Paul makes the parallels between the church and Israel delivered from Egypt, passing through the sea, and eating and drinking in the wilderness. The passage deserves to be quoted in full:

¹For I want you to know, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea,² and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea,³ and all ate the same spiritual food,⁴ and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ.⁵ Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness.⁶ Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did.⁷ Do not be idolaters as some of them were; as it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play."⁸ We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day.⁹ We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents,¹⁰ nor grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer.¹¹ Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come.¹² Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. (1Cor 10.1-12 ESV)

Paul is warning the Corinthian church that their privileges being in the NC do not preclude punishment. They are indeed the ones "on whom the end of the ages has come." But just as the privileges enjoyed by the people of God of past ages could not lead to presumptions upon his promise, so the Corinthians must not presume upon the grace given to them or else they will receive the same end as those who fell in the wilderness.

It might be said that Paul is giving all church members a "judgment of charity" when he speaks of them like this. But to take Paul's language in this way denies the fundamental parallel in

his writing. He is speaking to members of the people of God just like the people in the former times were members of the people of God. To take it otherwise is to evacuate Paul's language of any substance. Paul recognizes that there were always two types of covenant members: faithful and unfaithful. That does not change their fundamental status. In fact, as we shall see, the severity of punishment for the unfaithful covenant members is increased exponentially because of their privilege.

Even if we grant that Paul as a fallible human could not make judgments concerning the heart and, therefore, had to give judgments of charity, the same thing could not be said for Jesus. In dictating the letters to the seven churches in Asia Minor in Rev 2–3, the possibility of apostasy from a genuine, covenantal relationship with him was stated as a possibility. Jesus did not have to give a judgment of charity because he knew men's hearts.²⁷

The specific parallels Paul is making are between entrance into this covenant community through baptism and participation in communion with Christ. During the days of the Exodus, Moses was the mediator of the covenant. To participate in the covenant the people were baptized into the body of Moses (1Cor 10.1-2). This is an obvious parallel to the Corinthians enjoying the privilege of being baptized into the body of Christ (cp. 1Cor 12.12-13). But they were not only baptized into Moses, they also enjoyed a communion with Christ. They all without distinction ate the same spiritual food and all drank the same spiritual drink. They drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ (1Cor 10.4). This eating and drinking wasn't merely physical. It was spiritual. They participated in spiritual realities which were both types but were also realities of their relationship with God in that time in history. Paul makes it clear that they themselves participated in Christ (at least) through the water that came from the Rock. Yes, they looked forward to a greater fulfillment, but they nevertheless communed with Christ himself. The Corinthians have done the same thing. They eat at the Table of the Lord Jesus Christ, communing with his body and blood (1Cor 10.16-17).

So, what happens to those people who truly have these privileges of membership and yet do not respond in faith but rather commit idolatry? They will fall under the displeasure and punishment of God just like the people who enjoyed those same types of privileges in the past. Paul warns them of the danger they face if they fall into idolatry, which involves eating at the table of demons in the pagan temples (1Cor 10.21). This will provoke the Lord to jealousy over his bride, which, according to the Scriptural allusion in Num 5 will mean that she will be found guilty of adultery and suffer the consequences. The Lord is a husband to the people in the Corinthian church, just as he said he was a husband to the people of Israel who came out of Egypt (Jer 31.32).

What is not said by Paul here is as important as what is said concerning the subject of this debate. Paul does not say, "Because you are now sanctified in Christ and in communion with him in the NC community, you have no worries like they did in the past." Nor does Paul say, "If you fall into idolatry, we must wonder if you ever were really baptized into the body of Christ or had communion with Christ." The point of the parallel is that the privileges they enjoy as members of Christ's NC community makes them more responsible and liable to more severe judgment. We cannot draw a contrast where Paul draws a parallel. The people of God who are members of NC may

²⁷Thanks to Troy Sutherland for suggesting this to me.

be faithful or unfaithful just like the people of God who were delivered from Egypt through the sea and ate and drank spiritual food and drink in the wilderness.

The epistle to the Hebrews continues this theme and, in many ways, the exhortations to perseverance the author gives are built upon the parallels between Israel and the NC people of God. Hebrews was probably written just prior to the destruction of Jerusalem. Jesus gave his disciples instructions of what to watch out for when the day approached for Jerusalem and its Temple to be destroyed.²⁸ The exhortations to perseverance were extremely relevant for the Jewish Christians at the time. They were under great tribulation from the unbelieving Jews, many of them losing everything. The temptation would be to forsake the church and join in with the crowd that crucified Jesus, thus becoming an enemy of Christ.²⁹ They were to resist these temptations to fall back into the OC structures which were growing obsolete and about to fade completely out of existence (Heb 8.13). They were to stand fast with Jesus word because in him God has spoken his final word (Heb 1.1-4). Indeed, they must be identified with Jesus and go with him outside the gates (i.e., of Jerusalem) and bear shame with him (Heb 12.12-13). Turning back to the old structures would be falling away from the faith and would put them in a position to be destroyed with all of those in Jerusalem at that time. This destruction was not just another war in which many Jews lost their lives. This was the wrath of God being poured out on those who rejected Christ and persecuted his bride, the church. Therefore, to identify yourself with these people is to put yourself in the position of being an enemy of Christ and under God's wrath.

In his exhortations to the Jewish Christians to persevere in the faith, the writer of Hebrews draws on patterns and parallels from some of the same places Paul does in 1 Corinthians. Hebrews 3–4 is a prime example of this. The author is dealing with the superiority of Jesus over Moses (and, thus, the whole Mosaic economy). Those to whom he is writing are “holy brothers” (Heb 3.1, 12).³⁰ He goes on to speak about the rest that they are promised in Christ to which they look forward. A passage from Psalm 95 is called into service. The passage speaks about the wilderness generation who were also promised rest but failed to enter that rest because of their unbelief (Heb 3.18, 19). But the fact that the author of Hebrews is exhorting and warning them from the Psalm which speaks about the possibility of not entering into final rest is itself telling. These brothers (Heb 3.12) are not to be like them and foster an unbelieving heart leading them to fall away from the living God. The people of God of old who experienced the great redemption of God from Egypt were the very ones that refused to respond in faith and suffered for it. The exhortations continue in Hebrews 4 about

²⁸Cf. Mt 24; Mk 13; and Lk 21

²⁹This is what I believe the author is referring to in Heb 6.6 when he speaks about crucifying once again the Son of God. They are joining with the Jews who did indeed crucify him.

³⁰I realize that some might take this to be referring to only the “true” members of the church. But if that is the case, then the tension is heightened and not lessened; at least for the Reformed. If he is speaking only to the “church within the church,” then the warnings of apostasy force us to the conclusion that those predestined for life are being warned about falling away. Tom Schreiner and Ardel Caneday’s book The Race Set Before Us: A Biblical Theology of Perseverance and Assurance (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2001) seeks to deal with these apostasy passages as if they were hypothetical for the elect, used to encourage them to faithfulness. They criticize the “hypothetical position,” but substantively they come to the same conclusion. There are many fine points about the book, but I believe their predisposition to seeing only the elect as the true members of the NC church forces them into a position so that they cannot take the warnings of apostasy for NC members seriously enough.

being careful to mix the gospel they have heard with faith so that they will not fail to enter into their final inheritance (i.e., final salvation). They must persevere in the faith in order to enter into that rest (Heb 4.11).³¹

Again, the author is drawing a parallel between the people of God in the OC and the people of God in the NC. These people have been delivered like the people of God of old. They are counted as God's people. But they are in danger of falling away. Covenant members must never presume upon their status. They must always be encouraged to faithfulness.

The next passage in Hebrews that must be discussed is that most famous warning in Heb 6.4-8. The passage is referenced several times in Wellum's essay but it is dismissed as not possibly dealing with NC members because NC members cannot apostatize.³² The privileges experienced by those described in the text are never dealt with. I realize that this might have gone beyond the scope of his essay or his allotment in space, but dealing with this is important if one is discussing the nature of the NC church and the possibility of apostasy. The author speaks about those who have been "enlightened," "tasted the heavenly gift," "shared in the Holy Spirit," and "tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come." These are words that describe someone who has participated in the realities of the NC. The word "tasted" cannot be played off as simply "trying things out and not finding it to one's liking." This same word is used by the same author in Heb 2.9 to speak about Jesus tasting death. Besides, the other descriptions here would speak against it. To what extent they enjoyed these privileges, we do not know. The fact that they enjoyed these privileges seems beyond dispute if we are going to be honest with the text. It will simply not do to pass this off by saying, "Isn't that how an Arminian would handle the passage?" (116). If we don't have a category that can handle someone having these privileges and still be able to fall away as the author warns them against, then our categories need adjusting.

Wellum also alludes to the passage in Heb 10 on several occasions. The language and warnings there make more explicit what I have been arguing. The contrast between old and new covenants does not lie at the possibility of apostasy. The contrast lies at the point of the severity of the punishment for those who do not respond in faith to the promises and privileges granted to them. The author of Hebrews compares the one who was disobedient to Moses' law dying without mercy at the mouth of two or three witnesses. The contrast is then set up at the point of the severity of punishment as the author says, "How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has spurned the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace?" (Heb 10.28-29). The author lists three that will bear witness against the covenant breaker. With greater privilege—which NC members have—comes greater responsibility. With greater responsibility comes greater punishment or reward.

If we only have two categories of people—those predestined for perdition and those

³¹By definition persevering faith is the only type of faith that is saving faith when one remembers that salvation ultimately is realized in the resurrection of the just. Any type of temporary faith is, by definition, not saving faith because it does not receive salvation in its fullest sense. Therefore, to speak about someone like Simon Magus believing (Ac 8.13), the same word may be used as those who have persevering faith, but it is not saving faith. Schreiner and Caneday do a good job in discussing the different aspects of salvation in The Race.

³²See pp. 15-16 for the quote above 152-3, n 125.

predestined for life—and those categories are absolutely distinct with no overlap in experiences and privileges, then this passage (as well as others) either moves us to believe that one can lose his final salvation even though he may be a “true believer,” or we can act as if they have little or no reference to those who have a genuine relationship with God. Is there a way to have a relationship with God in which you experience many of these privileges and blessings without ultimately inheriting full and final salvation? There is one that is consistent throughout the Scriptures. One that affirms without qualm or equivocation the eternal predestination of those who inherit final salvation, a number that can neither be added to or diminished, but does not shrink back from these texts that speak about those who have real, covenant privileges but are not predestined to salvation. That is this covenantal understanding.

Jeremiah 31.31-34

The Hebrews context

Within this context the writer of Hebrews quotes the promise concerning the NC from Jeremiah 31.31-34. He quotes the passage in full in ch. 8 and then in part in ch. 10. Both of these quotations fall within a unified section in Hebrews.³³ The author is once again illustrating the fact of Jesus’ superiority, this time in relation to his priesthood. Christ’s priesthood, which is after the order of Melchizedek, is a better priesthood because he mediates a better covenant enacted on better promises (Heb 8.6). When we hear the word “better” in the text, we are not free to assume what we think might be better and then fill up our theological bucket with all of the good things we just know must be better. Even if we think certain words or phrases are leading us in one direction, we must always be careful to note the context. All of the language must be taken into account without excising words and phrases and making them stand on their own. Both the promises of privilege and punishment must be given careful consideration before we determine the meaning of phrases. The exegete cannot simply take the promises of just the “good stuff” as absolute and then relegate the promises of the punishments as *de facto* hypothetical.³⁴ What makes the promised privileges more certain and more of an unbreakable reality than the promised punishments? Are they not both promises of God within the same text? Do we choose to differentiate based upon something in the text or because we have certain presuppositions we bring to the text that will not allow both sets of promises to have equal weight?

Hebrews 8–10 is the closest thing we have to an explicit NT commentary concerning Jeremiah’s prophecy. The scope of this paper simply will not allow me to get into all the details of the text. But as I present a “big picture” of what I believe the text is saying, I hope the reader will see that this reading makes sense of the text.

The ministry of Christ is being contrasted with the whole of the Mosaic economy, especially as it realized in the Tabernacle and its priestly services. The Tabernacle and priestly work of Christ are superior to the whole of that economy. The contrasts presented by the author of Hebrews involve copies and shadows of heavenly realities versus heavenly realities, repeated sacrifices versus a once-

³³Though people organize the material in Hebrews in various ways, it does appear that Hebrews 8.1–10.18 is at least included within the same section. The section may be larger than this (as I believe it is), but it is not smaller.

³⁴See footnote 28.

for-all-time sacrifice, and lesser sacrifices versus a greater sacrifice. The promise which forms the basis of the exhortation at the end of ch. 10 can be paraphrased as, “Because of all of these realities that are better, let us then draw near” (Heb 10.19-22).

The concept of drawing near is Leviticus language. What we normally call “sacrifices,” Leviticus commonly calls something like “near-bringing.”³⁵ The purpose of the Tabernacle services was for the people to draw near to God. But in the Mosaic economy the only way for the people to draw near to God was through animals, which was at the heart of the Aaronic priesthood. They themselves could not draw near lest they be consumed by God’s fire. But now, because of the blood of Jesus and participating in his flesh, we can draw near.

The contrast that the author sets up is that we can come closer to God than those under the Mosaic system. What only the high priest could do once a year, and what the other could only do through animals at a distance, we can and should do regularly (Heb 10.22-25). In harmony with the Mosaic system, this cannot be done without blood. Those drawing near must be sanctified by blood. So, the author makes clear what is parallel and what is contrasted. What is better is that we no longer must be at a distance from God. Rather we can draw near.

The entire Mosaic economy embodied in the Tabernacle and its priestly services is contrasted with the superiority of Christ and his priestly services, but the contrasts continue as the punishments for breaking the OC are compared to breaking the NC. This is the passage discussed above in Hebrews 10.26ff. The author, steeped in Scriptural language and imagery, speaks about sinning deliberately after receiving knowledge of the truth and there be no sacrifice for sins. What is being spoken of is the contrast between high-handed sins and inadvertent sins or sins of being led astray (Cf. Num 15.30; cp. Heb 9.7). A high-handed sin is one in which a person knows full well what he is doing and does it anyway without repentance. Sins of inadvertency are sins in which a person is led astray or doesn’t know something is wrong. If he later discovers it is wrong, he is to bring to the priest certain animals and make whatever restitution needs to be made (cf. Lev 5.14-19). In the meantime he is liable for his sin, but it is not as bad as high-handed sin. High-handed sin increases liability and punishment. There is no sacrifice that will cover the sin of the impenitent.

One pertinent point for our discussion is that the author is using OC categories to describe sin in the NC. Further validation for this is how he then moves through the warnings. Again, the contrast is *not*, “Under Mosaic economy any person who set aside the law of Moses died without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. But now, since we are in a better covenant, there is no need to worry about that because we don’t live in the OC anymore. You have been sanctified by the blood of the covenant and have no need to worry about being punished at all.” The wording is clear. Even though one may be able to explain “trample under foot the Son of God” and “insulted the Spirit of grace” in terms of an outsider simply rejecting the gospel, there is no way to get around “the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified.” This is the same language used earlier in Heb 10.10 to speak about the first covenant being done away, establishing the second (i.e., the NC), and our participation in that second covenant by being sanctified through the offering of the body

³⁵The word *qorban* is used throughout Leviticus and has the basic meaning of that which is brought near. The worshiper is “drawing near” (*qarab*, hiph) to bring his near-bringing (*qorban*). See Jacob Milgrom, Leviticus 1-16, The Anchor Bible, vol 3 (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 145.

of Jesus Christ once for all. The blood of Jesus *is* the blood of the covenant. That is the blood by which covenant members are sanctified. That is the blood of the covenant that he counts as an unholy thing. And that is one of the witnesses in the NC that will cry out against him for punishment because he did not respond in faith.

The contrast lies in the severity of the punishment for those in the covenant. Those in the NC who set aside the NC law, as it were, will receive a much more severe punishment than those who did the same thing with the Mosaic law. The author then goes on to emphasize this when he speaks about vengeance belongs to the Lord. The Lord will judge *his people* (Heb 10.30). From here he goes on to give them comfort and encouragement, telling them not to throw away their confidence (Heb 10.35) and wants them to join him in the group that does not shrink back and are destroyed (Heb 10.39). The comfort and encouragement do not negate the warnings. The kind of comfort offered would not be needed if the warnings did not pose a real threat.

All of this is to say that the inspired author of Hebrews does not take Jer 31.31-34 as meaning there is no such thing as a “mixed” people of God in the NC. But the text does mean something, and we need to examine it, even if it is brief.

The “near” fulfillment of Jeremiah 31.31-34

Before jumping into the NC established in Christ, we must give some attention to how this covenant of which Jeremiah speaks has both a “near” and “far” fulfillment. Jeremiah is unmistakably dealing with Israel and Judah (Jer 31.31). Certainly this is ultimately fulfilled in Christ and his church (as all of the prophecies, types, and shadows are). But that doesn’t mean this prophecy had no realization before its ultimate fulfillment. The near fulfillment of Jeremiah’s prophecy is the time after Cyrus issued his decree for the Jews to return home and build the Temple. This is a much neglected piece of history in the dealings with God and his people in the progression of covenants, but it is one that needs to be recognized more.³⁶ Commenting on Jer 30.7-8, Calvin says, “He [Jeremiah] indeed speaks of the return of the people to their own country, and this ought to be allowed, though Christians have been too rigid in this respect; for passing by the whole intermediate time between the return of the people and the coming of Christ, they have too violently turned the prophecies to spiritual redemption.”³⁷ Jeremiah says at the beginning of these prophecies in 30.1 that this is a prophecy of bringing Israel and Judah back into their land. This he did under during the Medo-Persian empire.

This is important to the debate because, first, this would deal with Israel and Judah before Christ. The language would then certainly apply to children as well as adults as we are all agreed that children most certainly were members of the covenant before the time of Christ. Second, this also means that the covenant was in some sense broken. The Jews did come back into the land according to the prophecies of Jeremiah. But afterward, at the time of Christ, they broke this covenant by rejecting Christ. As a result, the kingdom is taken away from them and given to others bearing its

³⁶For a brief introduction to this period and its relationship to the covenants throughout history, see James B. Jordan, Through New Eyes: Developing a Biblical View of the World (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1999), 241-56.

³⁷John Calvin, Calvin’s Commentaries, vol. 10 (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003), 149.

fruits (cf. Mt 21.33-46).

In the discussion about this passage, there are some assumptions about YHWH's statement concerning "the covenant which they broke" and its relation to the NC that will be established. YHWH promises to make a covenant unlike the covenant he made with their fathers. Then he says that this was a covenant which they broke. This is simply a statement of fact about the historical reality of what happened in the past. "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 which they broke," does not necessitate understanding that the NC will be unbreakable by particular individuals within the covenant. This is not a statement about what is new about the new covenant. Indeed, in the context of its near fulfillment *and* the context of Hebrews, this seems highly improbable.

We all agree that this covenant was ultimately fulfilled and established in Christ and his people. Hebrews makes that clear. But what are we supposed to understand about the newness of the NC? The contrast in Jeremiah begins in v. 33. He says first that he will put his law within them, and he will write it on their hearts. How is this different from the OC? Does not Deut 6.6 command that the law to love YHWH their God be on their hearts? This can't be a contrast between "heartless" religion and "religion of the heart." To put it in more theological terms, it cannot be the contrast between no regeneration in the OC and regeneration in the NC.³⁸

If we take into account the context in which the author of Hebrews places his treatment of this passage, there is an indication that this is indicating a movement from shadows to substance, type to antitype, in terms of the Tabernacle and the priestly services. He is dealing with the larger structures of the Mosaic economy embodied in the Tabernacle contrasted with what occurs in Christ. Where was the Law within Israel? It was on stone in a box hidden behind a veil. The contrast with the NC is that it will no longer be in stone, at a distance, behind a veil in the Tabernacle. Instead, it will be in fleshy hearts. Ezekiel's prophecy alludes to this as well. In Ezekiel 36.26 YHWH speaks about taking out of them a heart of stone and replacing it with a heart of flesh. It must stand as at least a possibility that one of the references here could be the contrast between the Law written on stone tablets and the incarnation of the Word. The nature of the NC people will be different because they will be a "house/Tabernacle of flesh." This provides a real contrast in the structures of the old and new covenants whereas the Law written on individual hearts does not. This is "the new and living way that [Jesus] opened upon for us through the veil, that is, through his flesh" (Heb 10.20). The old Tabernacle structure and system will be fulfilled and the old structures will pass away.

"The all shall know me"

This new development will lead to what is said in v. 34: "No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, 'Know YHWH,' for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them..." It is argued by Wellum that this indicates that everyone in the NC will have salvific knowledge of YHWH so that no one will be able to fall away. "It is clear from the context that the knowledge spoken of here is a salvific knowledge" (143, n. 95). With this unproven statement (though he quotes some commentators who agree), there are many assumptions brought to the text. First, because he is arguing against the inclusion of infants within the NC people,

³⁸Wellum agrees with this as he indicates on p. 141.

it is assumed that infants can't "know" God in a saving way. This is a common assumption of many ... even many paedobaptists. In contrast, Scripture teaches that infants can know God in a saving way. Ps 22.9-10, for example, speaks of infants trusting God while still at their mother's breasts. Ps 71.6 indicates that the Psalmist leaned upon YHWH from before his birth. This is the inspired song book given to the church in Israel for every member to learn and sing. Even more to the point of this debate, we, the NC church, are commanded to sing those Psalms as well (Cf. Eph 5.19; Col 3.16)! John the Baptist knew his Lord while both were *in utero*. We cannot assume that salvific knowledge automatically excludes infants. In fact, the Scriptures seem to point us in the opposite direction.³⁹

The next assumption is that "know" means salvific knowledge; a knowledge of God which means that the person will persevere in the faith and inherit full and final salvation. Though it may be a common assumption by some or even many commentators, biblical evidence gives us reason to believe that it could be taken differently. Bible scholars are well aware that the "know" word families in both Hebrew and Greek are used in various ways throughout Scripture. It must stand as a possibility, therefore, that it can be used in a way that doesn't speak of no-possibility-of-falling-away knowledge.

The differences in "knowing" the Lord can be illustrated easily in Scripture. Moses, a man who obviously knows God in a salvific way, prays in Exodus 33.12-13 that he may *know* him and find grace in his sight. This is echoed in the NT when Paul, a who was met by Jesus and converted in a most dramatic fashion, tells the church at Philippi that he longs to *know* Jesus (Phil 3.10). Are these men praying to be converted? Are they praying for a saving knowledge of God that will secure them so that they will never fall away from the faith? Should someone have told Paul, "You are in the NC. You already know the Lord."? No. The majority of Bible scholars recognize that the knowledge of which both Moses and Paul speak is something different than a conversion experience. Rather, they are both speaking of a deepening of their understanding of their Lord.

Knowledge of God can also be spoken of in a technical sense concerning prophets. Samuel is an example of this. When Samuel was a young boy in the Tabernacle, he heard the voice of YHWH speaking to him, but he did not recognize it. The Scriptures describe Samuel's state in this way: "Now Samuel did not yet *know* YHWH, and the word of YHWH had not yet been revealed to him" (1Sam 3.7). W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison explain that, "In this line, to 'know' God is to be the recipient of his prophetic and revelatory word (cf. Num 12.6)."⁴⁰ While certainly related to saving knowledge, knowledge of God is spoken of in a very different sense.

Jeremiah speaks about knowledge of YHWH in 22.16. There he relates the words of YHWH himself and says, "He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. Is not this to know me? declares YHWH." To "know YHWH" is to judge in favor of the oppressed; to be righteous in judgment.

The apostle Peter also refers to a knowledge of the Lord concerning people who have been

³⁹For a full discussion of the subject of infant faith, see Rich Lusk, Paedofaith: A Primer on the Mystery of Infant Salvation and a Handbook for Covenant Parents (Monroe, LA: Athanasius Press, 2005).

⁴⁰W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr., A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Gospel According to Saint Matthew, vol. 2 (New York: T & T Clark International, 2006), 286.

delivered in some sense but are not ultimately saved. In 2Pet 2.20 we read, “For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world through the *knowledge* of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first.” Peter says without qualification that these people have escaped the defilements of the world *through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ*. They know the Lord in some sense. But echoing the same sentiments as the author of Hebrews, these people enjoy privileges that they ultimately reject and so their last state is worse than their first. Peter seems to believe that it is possible to know the Lord Jesus Christ—which would be a knowledge of the Lord in the NC—but that knowledge not be a fully saving knowledge.

In his argument against Jeffrey Niell’s interpretation of “knowing” the Lord as being priestly knowledge mediated to the people, Wellum simply quotes Richard Pratt and refers to other paedobaptists who take the same line that he does. I don’t believe Niell’s argument should be dismissed so easily. It seems that to take the prophecy of all people in the NC knowing the Lord in a way that precludes any possibility of apostasy just doesn’t do justice to all of the biblical data. This at least opens the door to Niell’s interpretation; an interpretation that does more justice to the setting of this prophecy in the epistle to the Hebrews.

As mentioned above, the author of Hebrews is concerned to contrast the old structures of the Tabernacle and its priestly service with the heavenly realities now realized in Christ and his priestly service. One problem in the Mosaic economy was that the people were unable to draw near except through animals and through the mediation of priests who were able to draw closer to God. In fact, the priests were guardians of the knowledge of God. Mal 2.7 makes this clear: “For the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and people should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts.” In the NC these concentric circles of nearness and distance have all been obliterated. These old structures of mediation have passed away. So, within that context, knowledge of God as being unmediated by priests (or anything else that relates to their ministry) makes good sense of the progress of redemptive history. The knowledge of the Lord, then, need not mean apostasy-proof saving knowledge. In fact, the evidence of the text in its various iterations in Scripture speak *against* this interpretation.

The argument for a fully regenerate membership in the NC is based upon this knowledge of the Lord being an apostasy-proof saving knowledge and the fact that YHWH proclaims that “they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest” (Jer 31.34). This is obviously taken to mean that every single individual without distinction that is a member of this covenant will have this saving knowledge. But there are flaws in this approach. Jeremiah uses this phrase “from the least to the greatest” several times in his prophecy. For example, in Jer 6.13 we read,

- (A) For from the least to the greatest of them,
- (B) everyone is greedy for unjust gain;
- (A’) and from prophet to priest,
- (B’) everyone deals falsely.

The structure of the text points to the parallels between the least and the greatest and the prophet and the priest as well as the nature of their sinful actions. Jeremiah is not saying that every single individual within Israel or even every single priest and prophet is acting this way. If that were the case, Jeremiah himself would be included! The phrase is used to speak about classes of people

within Israel. This qualifies the word “all.”⁴¹ Even if we were to take Wellum’s position that this knowledge of the Lord is apostasy-proof knowledge, it cannot be assumed that every single individual in the NC has that knowledge. The way Jeremiah uses this phrase throughout his prophecy speaks against it.

“For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.”

The last promise given for the NC in contrast with the Mosaic covenant concerns the forgiveness of iniquities. Hebrews comments directly on this part of the prophecy saying that this relates to the repeated sacrifices. “... [T]hen he adds, ‘I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more.’ Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin.” This statement adds credence to the fact that what the prophecy is dealing with is the dramatic change in the worship of God’s people (i.e., the “drawing near”). Generally, the concept of forgiveness of iniquity is understood. But further emphasis and explanation is found in the last phrase speaking about God remembering sins no more. We know that God is omniscient so that there is nothing that God doesn’t know. Remembrance here doesn’t have to do with cognitive recollection of facts. This is a reference to the nature of the sacrificial system in the Tabernacle. The offerings (i.e., the near-bringsings) had the nature of being “memorials” before God. These memorials were primarily for God to see and secondarily for the people to see. Memorials are covenant signs of one sort or another which God sees, remembers his covenant, and acts in accordance with his covenant promises.

There are many examples of these memorials in Scripture. In Genesis 9.16 God promises to put his bow in the clouds as a sign of the covenant. He does so first and foremost so that he may look upon it and remember his everlasting covenant. The blood on the door posts in Egypt serve this function. It is when YHWH sees the blood, the token or sign, that he will pass over the house in mercy (Ex 12.13). In Leviticus the Tribute (or “grain”) offering (Lev 2.2, 9, 16; cf. also 6.15), a particular sin offering (Lev 5.12), and the “showbread” (Lev 24.7) are memorials. The jealousy test in Numbers 5 is a memorial (Num 5.15). Aaron goes before YHWH into the Holy of Holies with the ephod which has the jewels representing the children of Israel which are also memorials (Ex 28.12, 29; 39.7). When we come to the NT, the alms and prayers of Cornelius go up before the Lord as a memorial (Ac 10.4). When Jesus says at the institution of the Lord’s Supper, “Do this in remembrance of me,” it can be argued convincingly that he is in line with all of this and the Supper itself could be understood as a memorial.⁴²

When we read the phrase, “and their sin I will remember no more,” covenant memorials should come to mind. God is the one remembering. What were the memorials that were offered up on a daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly basis? All of these different offerings which dealt with the sins of the people. They were consistent reminders that sin had not been dealt with once-and-for-all-time. But once Jesus comes and offers up his perfect sacrifice, those bloody memorials that could never take away sin finally come to an end. The structure and shape of the whole

⁴¹For other contexts in which this phrase is used, see Jer 8.10; 42.1, 8; 44.12.

⁴²For a good introduction to the idea of covenant memorials, see Joachim Jeremias, The Eucharistic Words of Jesus (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 237-55.

system has changed. That is where the author of Hebrews sets the contrast, not in the possibility or impossibility of apostasy.

Summary

The prophecy found in Jeremiah 31.31-34 is not, by any means, insurmountable for the paedobaptist. In fact, those who hold to the inability of the NC being made up of a “mixed” group have more problems than do those who believe that both the regenerate and unregenerate can be true members of the NC. The explanation of the prophecy in the book of Hebrews makes it highly improbable that the prophecy is dealing with whether or not individuals may break the covenant. Jeremiah 31.31-34 was ultimately fulfilled in Christ. Radical transformation of all of the structure of the OC has taken place. Whereas knowledge of YHWH was mediated through priests and animals in the OC because the people were kept at a distance, the NC will mean access to God through Christ so that each of us in the NC may draw as near as the other. This will mean greater responsibility for the members of the NC that is attended with greater blessing and greater curse depending on the faith of the worshiper. The whole old system of bloody memorials which could never take away sin will be fulfilled and thus rendered obsolete so that it passes away (Heb 8.13).

Negatively, the passage doesn’t rule out the possibility of apostasy. The nature of the NC is radically different, but by parallel examples and explicit warnings throughout the NT, it is clear that this aspect has not changed. Therefore, this text in no way excludes children from membership in the NC community, even if we were to capitulate and say that children are incapable of saving knowledge of God in Christ; a point I am in no wise willing to concede.

The “Explicit References” fallacy

There is yet one more area that needs to be addressed before closing out this response: the explicit reference fallacy. It is quite common for credo-baptists-only to tell paedobaptists that there are not explicit commands or references to infant baptism in the NT. Wellum makes the point clear: “It does not seem to bother them that in the NT there is no express command to baptize infants and no record of any clear case of infant baptism.” (97) And again in another place, “In other words, even given the NT pattern of baptism (repentance, faith, and baptism) and the lack of any specific NT command to baptize infants, the paedobaptist believes that the covenant provides the biblical grounds to practice infant baptism in the church.” (117) He also references several paedobaptists who acknowledge this fact (97, n. 1). I argued earlier that there was no need to repeat a command that was already given. Children were baptized in the OC. There was no need to repeat the command. This is not a start-from-scratch new rite. It is a rite that is transformed in Christ.

Nevertheless, if we were to concede the point and say that we need explicit commands or practices in the NT to validate particular fulfillments, prohibitions, or positive commands, then we would find ourselves in great trouble at many points in our practices. For example, there is no explicit command or even an example of women participating in the Lord’s Supper. That must be drawn from a good and necessary inference based on the fact that they are members of God’s people. But if we use Wellum’s “explicit reference” hermeneutic, then we have no basis for

allowing women to participate at the Table.

Where also is the explicit command that prohibits practices such as bestiality in the NT? It is not there. Is it now lawful since we are not explicitly prohibited from its practice? May it never be! This law and others like it must be understood as teaching us in the NC era even if they are not explicitly repeated.

Wellum himself falls into his own hermeneutical trap. A couple of times in his essay Wellum speaks about how Genesis 3.15 is fulfilled in Christ.⁴³ But there is no explicit reference in the NT saying that Christ is the seed whose heel is bruised and who bruises the serpent's head. I agree with Wellum that this promise is indeed fulfilled in Christ. But I believe it because there are allusions, themes, and good and necessary inference to lead me to that fact, not because there is an explicit reference.

When we hear of household baptisms, the apostles addressing the children in the church just as they were addressed at Mt. Sinai (Eph 6.1-3), children being included among the saints in churches (Eph 1.1 & 6.1), and many other allusions, we should understand the Scripture is leading us to continue the practice of including children of at least one believing parent as true covenant members. God is their God. They are his people. As such they should continue to receive baptism, the sign of New Covenant in Christ.

Conclusion

In the end, I believe Wellum's arguments against paedobaptism fail to do justice to all of the biblical evidence. The manner in which he puts the text of Scripture together with regards to the recipients of baptism falls short in seeing God's original plan for creation as creation coming to its completion. God instituted the family as his image-bearers *as the family*. In Christ he redeemed image-bearing entity and will ultimately bring it to its consummation. Children born to Christian parents are not cut off from them by being "not my people." Rather, they are considered the people of God and are to be recognized by the church as such.

Wellum's argument also does not recognize Christian baptism as a fulfillment of all the previous baptisms in which children were most certainly included. Children participated in the baptisms associated with the Tabernacle and Temple and were able to draw near as much as any other lay Israelite could draw near. Children were included in the crossing of the Red Sea, which Paul understands as a type of Christian baptism. Children have always been baptized. Now that all of these baptisms have their fulfillment in Christ, and nowhere are we commanded to stop baptizing children, it stands to reason that our children should continue to receive the sign of the new creation that was typified in all of these former baptisms and is now fulfilled in Christ Jesus, realized centrally in his church.

The Scriptures use terminology that reflect both a real relationship with God in Christ and the real possibility of apostasy from Christ. The way Wellum deals with these apostasy passages simply does not do justice to the plain reading of those texts. There are a few texts that

⁴³Cf. 129, 131.

superficially seem to speak of the impossibility of apostasy of NC members, but when they are considered in their own contexts and in the context of the whole of Scripture, Wellum's interpretations once again fall short. There are faithful and unfaithful covenant members. Those who are unfaithful have greater responsibility than non-covenant members and will, consequently, receive greater punishment for their unfaithfulness.

Wellum asserts that there is no explicit reference to infant baptism in the NT. Consequently, there is no warrant for baptizing infants in the NC. To say that sends us down an exegetical road that we do not want to travel. If we cannot draw from the whole of Scripture on matters relating to our practices without the explicit reference in the NT as Wellum and others would like to define them, then we find ourselves in many theological quandaries.

In his conclusion, Wellum is concerned with where paedobaptism might lead us in the life of the church. Wellum opines:

To get baptism wrong is not a minor issue. It not only misconstrues our Lord's command and instruction to the church, it also leads to a misunderstanding of elements of the gospel, particularly in regard to the beneficiaries of the new covenant and the nature of the church. It may even lead, if we are not careful, to a downplaying of the need to call our children to repentance and faith. (161)

Wellum sees the potential dangers that many of us see as paedobaptists. There are churches and parents who don't take baptism seriously. They see it as an end instead of a beginning of a life in which a child is to be called constantly to trust in the Lord who sanctified him and called him his own. Presumption is always a danger.

The objections to paedobaptism on the basis of the dangers of presumption are not solved by taking a credo-baptist-only position. Where might the credo-baptist-only position lead? What are its potential dangers? There is the possibility that people will be constantly doubting their membership in God's family. This could potentially turn them constantly inward, not looking to the promises of God and what he says about them, but looking to their own experience as what saves them. "Was it enough? Did I really believe before I was baptized?" (I speak as one who has been through the waters twice.) There is also the opposite danger of people presuming that because they have been through the waters and said a prayer that they are eternally secure. Every position has its dangers of presumption. While the dangers are healthy to point out, a position must not be rejected based on potential dangers of the position or where it *may* lead.

Many have fallen into the presumptuous trap and not taken the baptisms of their infants seriously enough. But is there a potential that paedobaptism could lead to something positive? Absolutely. Paedobaptism, when rightly taught, points the child away from trust in himself to Christ alone from the time of his birth. God has made a sovereign choice to put this child in a family to whom he has given promises. This child, from his birth, belongs to God and he is to trust what God says about him instead of resting everything on his particular experience (which may fluctuate with their ever-changing bodies). Speaking as a parent, it is also quite helpful and encouraging to lead and discipline children on the basis of their baptisms. They have an identity which they need not doubt. This brings both joy and proper fear. When a parent instructs according to all the stipulations of the covenant—both promise and warning—he may encourage

his child to trust Christ alone always and never turn from him. The child can be taught of the grace of God that has been with him in a special way since before birth. When parents and churches are faithful in teaching this, our children are taught to trust and not to doubt God's promises. They are taught to live lives of faith.

Again, benefits or pit-falls are not the reason to accept or reject a position. If paedobaptism is to be accepted, it must be accepted based upon the teaching of Scripture. I believe that the inclusion of children does better justice to all of the biblical data than does the credo-baptist-only position. May God help his church as we continue to wrestle through these issues together for the sake of his great name and the advancement of his kingdom.