

**COMMENTARY ON
R. SCOTT CLARK'S COVENANTALISM 21)**

8:22. *Scripture requires the baptism of adult converts who have not been previously baptized.*

This is very misleading and does not represent Scripture at all. To begin with, it is *Christ himself who commands all believers to be baptized*, and the Church to baptize them. Then, the Bible says nothing of “adult converts.” This ill-described category is the Covenantalist’s foil for believers. The Bible says nothing about the age of a believer. It only distinguishes between believers and unbelievers, noting that *all believers* should (as Baptists habitually put it) “obey the Lord in the waters of baptism.” The category of “adults” who have not been previously baptized merely reflects the idea that people in covenantalist churches are likely to have been “done” as babies. The Covenantalist then appeals to Augustine’s battle with the Donatists to complain that “You can’t be baptized more than once.” The Baptist agrees; infant baptism is not a Christian baptism in the first place. It is a human invention.

23. *Scripture teaches the baptism of covenant children.*

Well, Yes and No. Believers are “covenant children,” and so they clearly should be baptized, but logically no non-believer is included in the category of “believers.” Scripture certainly does not teach that the physical offspring of believers should be baptized, and excludes it by the *total absence* of any command or example, and by its insistence that *believers* should be baptized as an act of *obedience*. No twisting of texts can derive infant baptism from any verse of Scripture, by “necessary consequence” or otherwise. It needs to be stated flatly that no non-believer should be admitted to a local church. But admitting a non-believer to a local church is not the same thing as admitting an unbeliever to the New Covenant. Only God can admit a person to the New Covenant, and he only admits the regenerate elect. No doubt unbelievers are accepted on a “credible profession of faith” to local churches of baptistic and paedobaptistic types, but that is not admission to the New Covenant, which (according to Jeremiah) is only by regeneration. Scripture does *not* teach the baptism of non-believing babies, as many honest Presbyterians have admitted. The practice is a tradition only, derived from the sacramentalism of the Romanists, and then justified since Zwingli by the “one covenant of grace” theory.

24. *We do not baptize covenant children on the presumption of their regeneration, but on the basis of the divine command and promises attached to baptism.*

But there is *no* such “divine command” stated or implied in the Bible, and no “promises” about believers’ children are “attached to baptism” in the New Testament text. Not even once.

This preposterous claim (#24) underscores the dilemma of people committed to extra-biblical doctrinal confessions from the distant past (whether Trent, Westminster *or* 1689) claiming to believe in *sola Scriptura* (*contra* Trent) and then demanding that New Covenant thinkers bow to the “Reformed tradition” of covenant theology. I realize that any local church should have an unambiguous doctrinal basis, but why should it conform in every detail to the WC or 1689 rather than Vatican I? The principle is exactly the same, and all historic confessions without exception are *culturally and historically conditioned by the situations in which they have arisen*. Unlike the supposedly infallible declarations of Pius IX, they are not “irreformable,” and they sometimes need to be “recast” as John Murray once put it. NCT insists that we take *sola Scriptura* seriously, so we are returning to the Bible to base our position on the classic Protestant principle of “exegesis first, tradition second.” The abstract constructs of traditional Covenantalism cannot be exegeted from the text, but the covenants in Scripture can.

25. *Every objection made against covenant (infant) baptism which can be made against covenant (infant) circumcision as practiced under Abraham the father of the New Covenant believers is for that reason invalid.*

This is the kind of bizarre assertion that exposes the Presbyterian's total failure to understand the Baptist position for what it is. There are *NO* objections that can be made against Abrahamic infant or adult circumcision, because *it was commanded by the Lord* and repeated in the Mosaic Covenant. It was not optional, rejection of it placed a person outside of the covenant, and *it did not require faith* in the recipient. It was the sign of participation in a *National Covenant of physical descendants*, whatever additional spiritual truths it might (and did) point to and symbolize, and however many of them were believers or not. When the Mosaic system (the Constitution of a *Nation*) was abolished and replaced by the New Covenant, circumcision was chosen by the Judaizers and therefore by Paul as the *key issue* separating those who thought that parts of the Law were binding on Christians, from those who understood what grace was, and that OC Law had been wholly replaced by NC Ethics.

The bottom line here is that circumcision was *commanded* under an abolished covenant, while infant baptism is not commanded under the New Covenant. Here's an analogy for the Covenantalist to chew on; if rejection of the command of circumcision placed one outside the "covenant of grace" under the previous administration, then the Paedobaptist's refusal of the command of believers' baptism on the ground that he was "done" as a baby also places him outside the covenant of grace.

26. *Just as the old sign and seal of covenant initiation (circumcision) could only be observed once, so the new sign and seal of covenant initiation (baptism) can only be observed once.*

This is obviously false because infant baptism is not Christian baptism. The *biblical* rite only has meaning as an act of *obedience*. Furthermore, baptism is not essential for salvation, and Paul *contrasts* it with the Gospel in 1 Cor 1:17. In Mark 16:16, belief is the condition of salvation, and it is assumed that a believer wants to obey Christ in baptism, but it is not added that people who are not baptized are not saved. It follows from Jeremiah 31:33-34, that because all in the New Covenant know the Lord (all in the New Covenant being regenerate, are believers in no need of evangelization), they would naturally (*i.e.*, according to their new nature), obey the Messenger of the Covenant and be baptized. By "good and necessary consequence," it follows that nobody who is not a believer should be baptized because they are not in the New Covenant. I can't imagine what Jeremiah could have said to make this any clearer. Any number of traditional covenantalist writers have said that the New Covenant is made with the Elect in Christ, not with a physical, national descent, like the Mosaic Covenant was. Calvinistic Baptists and all New Covenant people I know agree. NCT did not invent this notion.

27. *In distinction from Baptism, the Supper is the sign and seal of covenant renewal.*

Clark wants to distinguish between "initiation" and "renewal." One could also reflect here on the difference between justification as an initial righteousness, and sanctification as a developing righteousness, since the term "righteousness" sometimes refers in the NT to the obedience of sanctification. Justification is the gift of a (forensic) righteous standing with God, while sanctification is a growing Christ-likeness as noted in Romans 6:12-18, 8:29, Gal 5:16-25, Eph 1:4-5, 2:8-10, 4:20-24, 2 Pet 1:2-11, *etc.*, *etc.* Describing the Supper as a time of "covenant renewal" is a helpful idea, and suggests some good preaching themes for the celebration. Of course, we would then be celebrating the gracious provisions of the *New Covenant*, not an abstracted "covenant of grace" that contains unbelievers as well. NCT preachers might consider this theme of "covenant renewal."