

# Covenant Baptism

How does God relate to His people? By what *means* does He relate to us? When we relate to one another we do it through words, sounds, gestures, actions, texts, emails and so on. How does God relate to His people? Though, this article is about baptism, I want to take our first step forward by taking a step back to get the bigger picture, the biblical context in which we must understand baptism. Our understanding of baptism is informed both by our understanding of how God relates to us and our understanding of the nature of the church.

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## God truly relates to us through external forms.

Again, when we relate to people we do so through certain external *forms*: words, gestures, emails, etc. God too, *truly*, though not always and necessarily *savingly*, relates to us through external forms. God related to Israel through the tabernacle. In fact, it was called the tent of *meeting* (Ex 27:21)). He met with Moses and the high priests “from above the mercy seat,” and “from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the testimony” he spoke with them (Ex 25:22; cf. 30:6; Lv 16:2; Nu 17:4). He met with all Israel at the entrance of the tabernacle, before the bronze altar (Ex 29:42–43). It was there, through the tabernacle, that God met with His people, and there that God caused His name to dwell so that He was in their midst.

When God became incarnate in Jesus, He continued to dwell in the midst of His people as Immanuel (Mt 1:21–23). And Jesus, as God in the flesh, continued to relate to people (Jn 1:14). He met with people, talked with people, ate with people, debated with people, healed people and forgave people. Even after His resurrection, Jesus continued to relate through physical means (i.e. external forms). On the road to Emmaus Jesus explained the Scriptures to His disciples, and afterward revealed Himself in the breaking of bread (Lk 24:30–32, 35). In Jesus, God truly related to men—truly, though not always and necessarily savingly.

Relation through outward forms must be distinguished from internal heart change. So, for example, someone could come to the temple and genuinely meet with God, but not be transformed in heart by that experience (Aaron’s two sons are an extreme example; cf. Lv 10:1–3). Many people saw and spoke with Jesus, but not all were transformed by that experience. In fact, many were hardened by it, hated Him, and sought to put Him to death. Again, God’s Word (Scripture) is God’s Word *objectively*, but when one hears it, they must subjectively receive it in order for that encounter with God in His Word to be saving.

God truly relates to us through forms. But, the form is not a replacement for the relationship— at the same time, neither can the relationship be had apart from the form. Coming to the tabernacle did not necessarily mean saving intimacy with God. But saving intimacy with God was had through the tabernacle. Interaction with Jesus in His earthly life did not necessarily

mean saving intimacy with God. But saving intimacy with God was had through Jesus. Reading or hearing Scripture does not necessarily mean saving intimacy with God. But saving intimacy with God is found through Scripture. So, while the form is not a replacement for relationship, relationship can be had no other way but through the form.

Word, Sacrament, prayer, and the church are the outward forms through which God relates to His people today. God relates to us through forms. He doesn't relate to us apart from forms and the forms themselves are not the relationship. Rather, it is through these means that saving intimacy with God is found.

(Again, this isn't really saying anything different than that God relates to us as other people relate to us. We relate through words, shared meals, signatures (think official documents), etc. We don't relate to one another "immediately" mind to mind or soul to soul, but in and through the physical world in which we live. God does the same.)

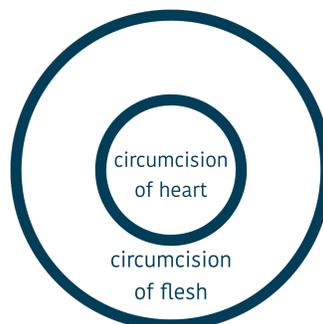
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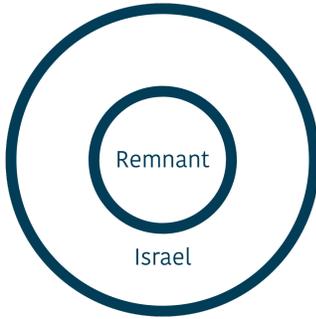
### The visible and invisible church are distinct; but not to be separated.

A second thing we have to see is that the visible and invisible church are distinct, though not to be separated. A true Jew is not a Jew outwardly, but a Jew inwardly, Paul says (Ro 2:28–29). Which is to say, there was a visible aspect to the Jewish church, comprised of those where were Jews outwardly, the nation of Israel. But there was also an invisible aspect to the Jewish church, comprised of those who were Jews inwardly, as Paul suggests. There was a circumcision of the flesh, and a circumcision of the heart (Dt 30:6; Je 4:4). This should not be understood as two distinct groups, like this:



But one inside the other, like this:





This is the idea of the remnant in Scripture. Many Israelites had turned away from Yahweh in the days of Elijah. But God had 7,000 within Israel who had not yet bowed the knee to Baal (1 Ki 19:18). Paul specifically calls this a remnant in Ro 11:5. That is, there are some who *remained* faithful (hence *remnant*), despite the majority that had rejected the true God. In the same place, Paul talks about the elect within Israel (Ro 11:7). This is an important passage because it shows that while Israel was an elect *nation*, within that

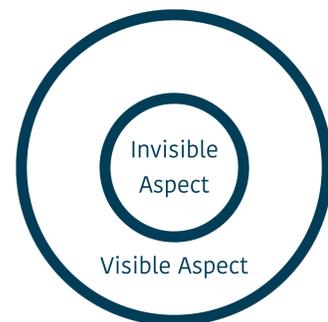
nation there were elect (and non-elect) *individuals*.

The same is necessarily true today. Because God relates to us by outward forms—scripture, baptism, the church—some will have the outward form without having the inward reality. All of Israel was circumcised in the flesh. Not all Israel was circumcised of heart (Je 6:10; 9:26; Ac 7:51). Simon Magus was baptized (Ac 8:13). Nevertheless, his heart was not right with God, but he remained “in the gall of bitterness” and “the bond of iniquity” (Ac 8:21–23). While not *okay*, this situation is recognized as *common* in Scripture. Hence, those who have the outward form are called to seek the inward reality (Dt 10:16; 30:6; Je 4:4; Ac 8:22).

We must recognize, though, that there was benefit in being a Jew outwardly! The chief benefit Paul sees is that the Jews are those who have been entrusted with the oracles of God (Ro 3:1–2). God had given them His word. They had the covenants of promise (Eph 2:12). Of course, they had the temple, the sacrifices, and the kingdom as well. We must not diminish these external, temporal blessings, all of which were intended to lead them toward eternal ones (Ro 2:4).

The case is no different now that God has reconstituted His people around the Messiah. There are temporary blessings given to all members of the covenant community. In fact, the writer of Hebrews compares membership in the church to being enlightened, tasting the heavenly gift, sharing in the Holy Spirit, tasting the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come (Heb 6:4–5). Those who enjoy membership in the church hear the word of God, by Spirit-empowered teaching understand more than most, enjoy the blessing of the Spirit in the community and may even be given spiritual gifts for the building up of the body (Mt 7:22; Php 1:15–18). These are blessings given to them that ought to lead them from the external form to the reality of intimacy with God.

God provides for and cares for His church. And yet, He calls people not simply to be church members, partakers of the covenant promises, but to receive those promises by faith. And so, though the outward and visible church sometimes is, it ought not to be separated from the invisible; the church which has the outward



sign is called to seek the inward grace through that sign (Dt 10:16; 30:6; Je 4:4; Ac 8:22).

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## Basics of Baptism

Baptism is God's public sign of receiving people into His community, the church (1 Co 12:13). It is the initiation rite into a life of discipleship (Mt 28:18–20). In baptism there is a sign, cleansing by water (see Mt 3:11; 1 Co 10:1–2; 1 Pt 3:20–21),<sup>1</sup> and a thing signified, salvation in its many aspects (for example, see Jn 3:5; Ac 2:38; Ga 3:26–27; Tt 3:5).

There are at least two ways we get baptism wrong. The first is to see baptism as a kind of magic, to think that the act of baptism itself causes the miracle of spiritual re-birth or that the act of baptism *itself* “saves.” This is to *confuse* the sign and the thing signified. The second way of getting baptism wrong is to see it as mere testimony, to see baptism as the individual christian's testimony of his or her faith in Jesus. This is to *separate* the sign and the thing signified. In the first, God is seen as acting miraculously to regenerate and unite the individual to Christ. In the other, a man or woman is acting to testify to his or her faith.

A better way to understand baptism is as a sign of God's covenant promise. God's covenant is his legally binding, and intimate relationship with His people. We tend to think of relationships as either legal or intimate. Employer-employee relationships, politician-citizen relationships, business-customer relationship are legal. Friendships and romantic relationships are intimate. But the more intimate a relationship gets, the more important that it is legally regulated. The relationships in life that are the most intimate, are also often the most regulated. So, marriage, the most intimate of relationships is also highly structured. It is the legal and binding nature of it that makes the intimacy possible, safe, and secure (when working properly). God's relationship to His people is both legally structured and intimate, both ordered and familiar.

In God's covenant relationship with his people, God promises to draw His people near, and calls His people to live by faith. In Baptism, God is acting to testify to his promises (cf. Ge 9:11–17; 15; 17:11; Heb 6:13–18 as other examples of God's testifying, oath-taking, promise-ensuring acts). By analogy think of a signature or a wedding ring. They are both symbols of an oath or a promise. They are both symbols—but, they aren't *mere* symbols. In the giving of a wedding ring and in the signing of a legal document, *something does happen*. There is a

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<sup>1</sup> My goal here is not to argue about the manner of baptism, whether sprinkling, pouring, or immersion. The New Testament does not determine the manner. It is true that those baptized often “went down into the water,” but so did the one doing the baptism (Acts 8:38–39). So, going down into the water only tells us that they stood in a stream. It doesn't tell us what happened once they got there. The Didache, a very early Christian document, though not inspired and therefore not authoritative, is instructive about early Christian baptism. It prescribes baptism like this, “pour out water three times upon the head into the name of Father and Son and Holy Spirit” (Didache, chapter 7). The preference there is to do that “in flowing water,” (which again, could just mean that the baptizer and the baptized stand in flowing water. But these early Christians did not find this *necessary*, only preferable.

relationship, we might say, between the sign and the thing signified. Signing a document is not magical, but neither is it an empty gesture. Giving a wedding ring is not magical, but neither is it mere sentiment. These actions *mean* something because they *do* something. Your signature “seals” your promise. The exchange of rings in the right setting, accompanied by the right words, actually marries you. By these actions, signing a document, giving a ring, receiving baptism, something very real is happening.

So, what is happening in baptism? First, baptism publicly admits one into the visible church, the covenant community of God’s people, the people of promise (1 Col 12:13). Baptism as a sign of the covenant, is the visible sign of the covenant people and marks one off as a member of that people, as a wedding ring marks one off as married.

Second, baptism signifies and seals (this language comes from Ro 4:11–12). Often times with the wedding ring, people not only see it as marking one off as married, but will go on to say that because it is a circle, and circles are unbroken, so the marriage relationship should be unbroken, or some such thing. Baptism too, not only signifies *that* there is a relationship, but it says something about that relationship as well.

Baptism as a sign of the promises visibly proclaims those promises (as the word audibly proclaims them). First, baptism pictures the waters of judgment passing over me in Christ (Ro 6:3). God says in Isaiah, “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you” (Isa 43:2). Baptism symbolizes the fact that in Christ we are brought through the waters of judgment, like Noah through the flood, like the Israelites through the red sea which then came down in judgment upon the heads of the Egyptian army (cf. 1 Pt 3:20–21; 1 Co 10:2). Second, baptism signifies that my sins have been washed away (Ac 22:16) and I am forgiven (Ac 2:38). In Ezekiel God promises, “I will sprinkle clean water on you and you will be clean” (Ezk 36:25). Putting these together, we find that baptism shows us that Jesus was overwhelmed by the flood of God’s wrath in the cross (what Jesus calls his baptism in Luke 12:50), that we might be washed with the gentle waters of baptism for (or, as a *sign of*) the forgiveness of our sins (cf. Col 2:11–12).

Baptism is not only a sign, but also a seal. As a seal of those promises, like a signature or a wedding ring, baptism visibly assures me (as the Word audibly assures me) that these promises are really mine, that I can believe them and receive what has been promised by faith. Baptism is God’s signature, God’s wedding ring. By receiving this sign, you are receiving God’s promise —all of His promises! Now, God’s promises are, from one perspective, conditional: “*Believe* in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved” (Ac 16:31). Receiving baptism on its own will not save you—that’s the magical view—any more than merely hearing the gospel saves you *apart from Spirit-wrought faith*. Receiving baptism does not assume the existence of faith, neither does it remove the obligation to put our faith in Jesus, rather it affirms that obligation, because

it affirms God's promise to save you *as you trust in Him*. Again, "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved, you and your household."

Again, the analogy with marriage is helpful. The wedding ceremony guarantees a marriage. But it does not guarantee a happy marriage. In fact, the wedding ceremony initiates, but does not consummate the marriage at all. For that there is the wedding night. The ceremony is the legal, the wedding night is the intimate. The one consummates the other. In the same way, baptism is the ceremonial and legal. It initiates. It brings people into a real (covenant) relationship with the living God that opens the door to intimacy. But it does not consummate the relationship. There is still the wedding night, that is, there is still faith that consummates what baptism initiates.

But notice, in marriage neither the wedding ceremony nor the wedding night stands alone (or, at least, it shouldn't). And neither makes the other irrelevant. They are both distinct and necessary aspects of married life. The same is true here. Baptism and faith do not stand alone, neither does either make the other irrelevant. They are both distinct and necessary aspects of our communion with our Father.

One more note on "efficacy" (i.e. the power and work) of baptism might be helpful. Baptism has the same kind of efficacy as the Word of God (See Jer 23:29; Ro 1:16; Heb 4:12). That is, it is effectual, not *apart from*, but *through* faith (1 Th 1:4–5; 2:13). Baptism is the means God uses to make us new, not apart from Spirit-wrought faith, but through it. Both baptism and the gospel are said to be the causes of regeneration (Jn 3:5; Tt 3:5; Jas 1:18; 1 Pt 1:23–25). But that is never apart from, but through Spirit-wrought faith. The Word does not save us apart from Spirit-wrought faith, but through it. You would never say to someone who heard the Gospel, but did not believe it that they *are* saved. But, you might say, *the Gospel is the power of God unto salvation!* And that is true. It *is* the power of God. But God does not save us through the Word *apart from* Spirit-wrought faith, but *through* it. The same is true with baptism. Baptism is (one of) God's means of grace. Baptism is the legal/covenantal means, the Gospel message is the invitational, the Spirit the effectual, and Spirit-wrought faith, then, is the consummation of the whole.

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## God works covenantally through households.

If this is what baptism *does*. Who, then, ought to be baptized. Let's go back and pause on that last phrase in Ac 16:31, "you and your household." God consistently relates to us not merely as individuals, but as households. This is particularly true with respect to the *external form* (discussed above). Though God works in individual heart transformation on a one-on-one basis, even this, more often than not, follows God's promises to households (Je 31:31–40 (note the "house of Israel" language in this promise of the new covenant); 2 Ti 1:5; 3:15).

This was God's M.O. throughout the Old Testament and into the New. This is obvious with Noah and his three sons (Ge 6:9, 18), Abraham and the promises to him and his seed (Ge 13:15–16), Moses and Israel and the promises to the nation as a whole (children too were brought out of Egypt (Ex 19:4–6) and were baptized into Moses through the Red Sea (1 Co 10:2)), and God's promises to David, which included his children (especially one in particular!; 2 Sa 7:12–16). Sometimes this way of relating did not lead to blessing, but to curse. Remember Achan and his family (Jos 7:1, 4–5, 20–21, 25–26)?

This way of relating to households did not end with the advent of the New Covenant. God's promises are still to you and your children and all who are far off (Ac 2:38–39). Notice that there are three categories, not just two. Children are not “you,” but neither are they “all who are far off.”

And so, throughout Acts, there are baptisms, not just of individuals, but of *households*. Whether there were children in those particular households is irrelevant. Why? The point in Acts is that not just individuals, but *households* were baptized. What would have comprised a household in New Testament times? Look at the context throughout redemptive history. It is a whole family living under one roof, including a husband and wife, children, and even servants (Ge 17:7–14). The reformed argument concerning baptism is not for infant baptism (as it is sometimes wrongly characterized), but for *household* baptisms. And there is ample NT examples of household baptisms. As God dealt with Noah's house, not just Noah, and Abraham's house, not just Abraham, and the whole “house of Israel,” so God continues to deal with household's today according to the book of Acts (Ac 2:38–39; 11:14; 16:15, 31, 34; 18:8).

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### Children of believers are covenantally holy.

Again, Acts 2 says the promises are to you and your children. Children are not “all who are far off.” In fact, 1 Co 7:14 says that children of believers are *holy*, therefore including them among the covenant people (i.e. the saints, or *holy ones*). They have their own unique place in God's economy, that is, in God's household. Children of believers are holy according to Paul. This doesn't mean that they have undergone regeneration or the new birth. It means that God has set them apart, that God sees them as uniquely His, along with all others who have joined themselves to his people. This doesn't relieve them of the obligation to repent and believe, but rather emphasizes it as was mentioned above.

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### Children of believers are covenantally disciplined.

Additionally, children of believers have covenant responsibilities. Paul treats children as members of the covenant by applying to them the covenant promises and commands in Eph 6.

Paul calls children of believers to act as responsible members of the covenant family and gives covenant promises to encourage them to that end. He says in Eph 6:1–3: “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. ‘Honor your father and mother’ (this is the first commandment with a promise), ‘that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land.’” In applying Old Testament covenant promises to the children of believers, Paul is treating them as members of the covenant community, having both the responsibilities (*obey*) and the blessings (*that it may go well with you*) of such membership.

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## Summary: Baptism is a covenant sign & seal.

Baptism is the rite of entrance into the covenant community (Ge 17:7, 10 (with Gal 3:14); Ex 12:48; 1 Co 12:13; Gal 3:27–28). It is an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace, a seal of the covenant promises of God to His people (Mt 3:11; 26:27–28; Jn 3:5; Ro 6:3–4; Tt 3:5). Baptism is like a wedding ring, which outwardly signifies an otherwise invisible relationship (you can’t see “marriage”) and seals that marriage through the wedding ceremony. While a wedding ring seals a real, objective relationship, it does not guarantee a happy marriage. Baptism is to be applied to all who are members of the covenant community (again, Ge 17:7–14; 1 Co 12:13) in the hopes that the thing signified will also be applied by the Spirit in His timing (Ge 17:10; Dt 10:16; 30:6; Tt 3:5).

## A Brief Illustration

It is the announcement of God’s love for us in Christ that saves us. The Holy Spirit uses this announcement, the gospel, to renew our hearts and unite us to Christ by faith. Baptism is God’s affirmation of His acceptance of us. It is God’s embrace. But that embrace must be received and the Holy Spirit may well use it to renew our hearts and unite us to Christ by faith, something it certainly signifies and seals.

A simple analogy may help. Picture an angry, upset, stubborn child and his loving, patient parent (not me, but a genuinely patient parent). Picture the parent embracing the child. The parent is conveying grace. Grace is truly being conveyed by the parent. But, imagine the child stands there, stiff armed, unmoved, scowl-faced. While the parent is conveying grace, the child is not receiving it. Now, imagine the same scenario: scowling child, bear-hugging parent. This time, imagine that as the parent begins to embrace the child, the child’s countenance changes, his body relaxes, and he melts in the arms of his father. The conveyed grace has done its work.

I think this is actually a very close analogy to what happens in Baptism, in fact, it is almost not an analogy at all, but a description. Baptism is God’s embrace of us in Christ, His wedding ring that engages us, embraces us as His own. Baptism is the conveying of grace, real, unmerited grace. Remember, grace is not a substance, but God’s favor, His acceptance. When God says,

I've taken you as my own, that is acceptance conveyed. It doesn't matter whether we are eight days, eight weeks, eight years or eighty years. Baptism conveys the same grace. We may refuse to receive it, stone-faced and stiff-armed. Or we may welcome it. Or, baptism itself, by the work of the Spirit may melt our hearts.

Baptism conveys grace. But that grace requires our reception of it by faith. Just as the preaching of the gospel is a communication of the grace of God, but people have to *believe* the gospel when they hear it in order for it to do its work in their lives. Grace is conveyed in word and sacrament. Grace is received by faith.

How does the Lord's Supper differ from baptism? Consider the above illustration again. A parent might hug their scowling child and say, when you are ready, you may join us for cake. The child may choose to remain in his room, scowl-faced. Or, the child might melt at the parent's grace and come and join the family as a sign of his reception of the grace conveyed. Thus, baptism is God's embrace and so a sign of our welcome and entrance. The Lord's Supper is the sign and seal of fellowship and so a sign and seal of faith-union and the resulting ongoing communion.