

Major Covenantal Baptist Book - An Overview and Review by Chris Good -

Malone, Fred (2008) *The Baptism of Disciples Alone: a covenantal argument for credobaptism versus paedobaptism*. 2nd ed. Cape Coral, FL: Founders Press. 319p.

Overall Strengths

This is the first major Covenantal Baptist book since the late 1970s, so is a very welcome contribution in light of the regular material that 'pours' from paedobaptist presses in support of infant baptism. Malone's work is a substantial improvement on previous Covenantal Baptist titles. Among its many strengths are:

- *Comprehensive covenantal approach.*
The areas of agreement and disagreement with paedobaptists on the nature and application of the Covenant of Grace are clearly presented and contrasted. In doing so the simplistic but all-to-common stereotype that being Baptist requires one to be Dispensational and Arminian is thoroughly undermined.
- *Terms defined clearly.*
Lack of clear definition has been a failing in some of the earlier works (see [reviews](#) below). Malone ably shows that a divine covenant is essentially a promissory oath of God. The Covenant of Grace is made in eternity between God (triune) and His elect in Christ, but administered progressively through the historical Biblical covenants (Noachic, Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic and New). Following other recognised Reformed writers, Malone argues that the precise nature and membership of each of these distinct covenants needs to be determined by exegesis in the context of the relevant passages.
- *Strong pastoral and practical emphases.*
The practical consequences of the two theologies are often overlooked in the debate. At stake is far more than just baptism, but ones understanding of and approach to the nature and practice of: the visible church; the Great Commission; church discipline; Christian parenting; regulative principle; etc. Baptists are challenged to take the truth seriously and not unduly downplay the issue for the sake of acceptance by paedobaptist brethren. Baptists are also encouraged to seek the reformation and recovery of Reformed truths among Baptist churches.
- *Consistent hermeneutical issues made explicit.*
Too often in works on this issue, underlying hermeneutical issues are assumed by each side, which leads to a situation of 'talking past each other'. Malone makes these explicit and shows that paedobaptists can only sustain their position through hermeneutic inconsistency.
- *Complements and extends earlier works (see [below](#)).*
In the above ways, Malone's work builds upon the Covenantal Baptist works, while avoiding their weaknesses. The result is a comprehensive approach to the issue. He has set a new standard in presenting the Reformed Baptist position – one that paedobaptists will ignore at their own risk.

This review is based on the 2nd edition which has significantly more detailed interaction throughout with paedobaptist writers and arguments. Most notable are two new appendices (see E and F below) that interact with recent authors and trends.

Overall Areas for Improvement

There is always room for improvements and the further refining of the arguments. Malone however has certainly provided a major asset for Baptists and should be given full credit for that. A few additional suggestions for any further edition:

- *Diagrams.*
For a visual person like myself, I find that diagrams can very helpfully illustrate ideas – like the relation of the historical biblical covenants with the Covenant of Grace. This would greatly aid the verbal description of the Covenantal Baptist position that Malone gives. (Some examples are given in the [appendix](#) below.)
- *More linkages with systematic theology*
Extending arguments based on systematic theology (for example: showing how paedobaptism implicitly or explicitly contradicts TULIP by including the physical seed of believers in the unbreakable New Covenant; demonstrating the consistency of the Baptist view of the church with the Reformation Solas; showing that infant baptism violates the Reformed dictum: 'where there is no faith there is no sacrament', etc.) Malone does this with the Regulative Principle, but more could be done to show that the Baptist position is more consistent with other historic Reformed emphases – hence to be Baptist is simply to be 'thoroughly Reformed'.

Chapter Summaries & Critiques

- *Preface - Ernest C Reisinger*
A warm recommendation from the (now) late Ernest Reisinger, himself from a Presbyterian background and a key figure in the revival of Reformed theology among Baptists in the United States.
- *Introduction*
The author's concern about the Baptist ignorance and the loss of trainee pastors and members from the work of reforming or planting Baptist churches is stated as the motivation for the book. This is followed by a brief 15 point summary statement of the Reformed Baptist position.

Section I – Preliminary Principles: Hermeneutics, Authority and Baptism

- *Chapter 1 – No Straw Men: John Murray's Case for Infant Baptism*
This would perhaps have been better placed as an Appendix (as with the reviews of Pierre Marcel's *The Biblical Doctrine of Infant Baptism* and Strawbridge's *Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*). The reason for this is that paedobaptists disagree significantly among themselves on many points, hence it is difficult to find a 'typical' example that is widely accepted. In Murray's case he is aberrant in that he concedes more than most on the meaning and efficacy of baptism, queries the distinction between the visible and invisible church and the existence of the Covenant of Works. Also this chapter somewhat distracts from the focus of this section, as well as pre-empting some of the later argument.
- *Chapter 2 – Biblical Principles of Interpretation and Infant Baptism*
This chapter is in itself an excellent summary and defence of Reformed Baptist hermeneutics that shows that it is consistent with agreed principles of Scriptural interpretation. Paedobaptism contravenes New Testament priority in Old Testament interpretation – a flaw it shares with errors like Theonomy, Dispensationalism, the normative principle of worship, paedocommunion (and the 'New Perspective'/'Federal Vision' on justification – see Appendix F). All views allow for continuity and discontinuity between the OT and NT. The only way to determine the correct balance is to allow the NT to illustrate OT application. This chapter in itself is worth giving people to show why we are Reformed and Baptist!

Section II – The String of Pearls: Covenant Theology, the New Covenant, and Baptism

[An earlier version of this is published in print as *A String of Pearls Unstrung: a theological journey into believers' baptism* (Cape Coral, FL: Founders Press, 1997) and exists online at: <http://www.founders.org/library/malone1/string.html>]

- *Chapter 3 – The Covenant Theology of the Bible (Part 1): Paedobaptist Versus Baptist Views*
Areas of agreement in Baptist and paedobaptist covenant theologies are acknowledged before moving on to the disagreements. Malone ably shows that a divine covenant is essentially a promissory oath of God. Attempts to broaden this definition and bring in

elements such as infant inclusion, conditional curses and blessings, etc assumes what needs to be proved and cannot be supported by exegesis for all covenants. The Covenant of Grace is made in eternity between God (triune) and His elect in Christ, but administered progressively through the historical Biblical covenants (Noachic, Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic and New). Following Reformed writers like John Owen, Herman Ridderbos, O Palmer Robertson and others, Malone argues that the precise nature and membership of each of these distinct covenants needs to be determined by exegesis in the context of the relevant passages. Hence the key issue is one of whether there is infant inclusion on the basis of physical birth in the New Covenant.

- *Chapter 4 – The Covenant Theology of the Bible (Part 2):*

- *New Covenant Fulfilment and Infant Baptism*

This is the key chapter in the book. Malone moves to a thorough examination of the nature of the New Covenant and concludes that it is unbreakable, as God promises to write the law on the hearts of its members and forgive their sins – so that *all* will savingly know him. The New Covenant is superior to the old ‘covenants of the promise’ in precisely the fact that it brings the promised blessings to *all* of its members and so is unbreakable (unlike the former covenants). This unbreakableness means that there cannot be any non-regenerate people (such as unconverted covenant children) in the New Covenant, which is made only with the True Israel of the spiritual reborn children of Abraham. Only those who can credibly profess membership in this Covenant should receive its signs. (This then, is the Biblically consistent basis of both believer Baptism and believer Communion.) Indeed Christ’s mediatorship as head of the Covenant ensures that all in Christ’s Covenant shall live. Malone then defends this position against paedobaptist attempts to put the New Covenant’s full fulfilment into the future age after Christ’s return in an attempt to allow for unregenerate child membership now. Malone shows that all of the New Covenant promises (universal saving knowledge of God, forgiveness of sins and law written on hearts) are applied unequivocally by Scripture to the present (for example see: Hebrews 8:7-13; 9:15; 10:12-18; 12:22-24; 1 Corinthians 11:23; 2 Corinthians 3; etc.). Paedobaptists will often also attempt to deny the unbreakableness of the New Covenant by reference to the New Testament apostasy passages. Malone shows that such apostates are not truly saved or members of the New Covenant as they do not have its fruit – namely perseverance in faith. Malone makes use of 1 John 2:19 and other passages to show that apostates ‘never were one of us’ – and hence never were in the Covenant – so there is no covenant breaking. For Reformed Baptists, God has *never* broken his promise to save – but he has only ever promised to save the spiritual children of Abraham and the Promise (Romans 9:6-8). Hence the Baptist position is the most consistent with Reformed teaching on God’s sovereign grace in salvation.

- *Chapter 5 - The Relationship Between Circumcision and Baptism*

Linked to infant inclusion in the covenant is the argument that as such were circumcised, so now the physical children of believers should be baptised. Malone has undermined this argument by refuting infant inclusion in the New Covenant. Circumcision of the physical seed after birth into physical Israel has given way to baptism after spiritual rebirth into the spiritual Israel of faith. The relationship is typological rather than direct. Even the proof texts linking circumcision and baptism link them via inward heart circumcision (eg: Colossians 2:11-12) through faith – further supporting this type-antitype relationship. Circumcision looked forward to heart circumcision – baptism back to its fulfilment in the life of the believer. Circumcision sealed Abraham’s faith (not the covenant) and those who like him had faith. But it was also the sign of the typical promises (of land, prosperity, etc.) conditionally promised to the physical seed, hence why the sign was given to them as well. As the latter are now fulfilled in ‘The Seed’ Christ – and His children – the spiritual seed of Abraham of faith – only these are to be baptised. (Galatians 3:7,16,26-29)

- *Chapter 6 – Household Baptisms, “the Oikos” formula, and Infant Baptism*

The argument from household solidarity also proves too much as it would endorse the baptism of adults (slaves, teenagers, etc) without profession of faith (as was the case for circumcision). Neither can Jewish proselyte baptism of children of converts be a model – for infants born *after* conversion were *not* baptised as they were assumed to be holy and born in the covenant. Malone also shows that the household baptisms in scripture are fully consistent with believing households, and so cannot be used to support infant baptism.

Indeed, the clearest record regarding the subjects of a household baptism explicitly states that household faith was the basis (Acts 18:8).

- *Chapter 7 – Answering the Infant Baptism Proof-Texts*

Deals with the common objections regarding children of the promise (Acts 2:38-39), holy children (1 Corinthians 7:12-16) and the church in the wilderness analogy (1 Corinthians 10:1-14). In each case, a careful study of the context excludes the idea of infant inclusion. The promise in Acts 2 is of the gift of the Holy Spirit given to all “whom God shall call” from the categories Peter mentions. Consistent with this, only those who respond in faith & repentance are baptised (v41). The holiness of the children in 1 Corinthians & relates to the holiness/sanctification of the unbelieving partner. If their holiness-without-faith does not entitle them to baptism – neither does the children’s holiness (which is derived from the *unbelieving* partner. Most probably holiness of the marriage covenant is in view – for further support see <http://www.eng.auburn.edu/~sjreeves/personal/1cor.html>). Paul was obviously not a paedobaptist – as few paedobaptists would argue that an *unbelieving* spouse is covenantally ‘sanctified’ and therefore to be baptised). Finally one should not allow an analogical application to override explicit statements about baptism. (If one wants to argue the sprinkling of infants from the passage - then one can equally argue for the baptism of slaves, livestock and goods. In fact the analogy of baptism into Moses by passing through the Red Sea is fully consistent with the going in and coming out of the waters of baptism by immersion.) The passage is not dealing with the subjects of baptism but warning professing believers not to reject the gospel as did the unbelieving Israelites.

- *Chapter 8 - Jesus' Attitude Toward Children*

Jesus’ blessing of the children is often taken as a proof for infant baptism, the implication being to withhold infant baptism is to withhold children from Christ and His kingdom. However in these passages Jesus does not baptise but blesses the children. Also, the disciples reaction in trying to keep them away shows he was not in the habit of baptising children. Jesus had the perfect opportunity to institute infant baptism – but he did not. The most that these passages can be used to endorse is a public thanksgiving or blessing for infants.

- *Chapter 9 - The Disjunction of John's and Jesus' Baptism with Christian Baptism*

Everyone recognises that John’s (& Jesus’ – John 3:22-23 & 4:1!) baptism was a baptism of repentance (Acts 13:24; 19:4). Many paedobaptists try to separate John’s baptism from Christian baptism to avoid the obvious implication of repentance. Baptists argue that the continuity that the Jews understood was not between circumcision and baptism, but between John’s baptism of the repentant remnant of Israel and Jesus’ Christian baptism of the same spiritual children of Abraham (with the added meanings of union with Christ and the Triune name). John’s baptism is the model for Christian baptism – not circumcision or the extrabiblical Jewish practice of proselyte baptism. [Malone does not really exploit this argument strongly enough. An excellent presentation of this argument by David Kingdon is online at: <http://wwwFOUNDERS.org/FJ50/article2.html>]. The presence of John’s baptism of repentance seriously weakens the paedobaptist argument from the silence of the New Testament for infant baptism, as it provides a ready explanation as to why infants are not mentioned, namely because Jesus’ Christian baptism is a baptism of repentance like John’s.

- *Chapter 10 – The Weight of Precept, the Argument of Silence, and the Regulative Principle of Worship*

A key plank in the paedobaptist apologetic is that the silence of the New Testament on infant baptism implies acceptance. Malone shows that this ‘normative principle’ is rejected elsewhere by most paedobaptists (for example, with regard to paedocommunion where the New Testament command to examine oneself overrides Old Testament inclusion of children in the Passover). On such grounds, infant baptism threatens to violate the Regulative Principle of Worship because the only positive ‘New Testament sacrament’ of baptism that is actually “ordained [by command & practice] by Jesus Christ” (to use the language of the *Westminster Confession* – 28:1) is the immersion of believing/repentant disciples.

- *Chapter 11 – The Argument of Expanded Blessings to “Covenant Children”*

Paedobaptists disagree considerably among themselves as to the effect and meaning of infant baptism. Malone shows that it is by necessity much more than a ‘wet dedication’ (as it denies later a Biblical baptism upon profession of faith). For most paedobaptists it is a sign that God ‘normally’ saves down family lines, while others go as far as presumptive regeneration. Covenantal Baptists fully recognise and encourage the rich blessings children

of Christian parents have (such as Christian instruction, example, prayer and nurture) yet such privileges are not given as the basis of New Covenant membership (and hence baptism) in Scripture. Most paedobaptists are inconsistent in not following the expanded blessing argument for child inclusion in the Lord's Supper.

- *Chapter 12 – The Testimony of Tradition and the Historical Argument of Silence*
Often the silence of infant baptism until Tertullian's opposition is taken as implicit endorsement of the practice (as if Tertullian were the first to oppose the practice, when he is in fact the first to mention it at all – in chapter 18 of [On Baptism](#) c AD180). Malone shows that the statements of the earliest Fathers on baptism universally reflect the baptism of disciples alone. As with the New Testament, this universal positive testimony for the baptism of disciples alone is ignored and overridden by paedobaptists in their attempt to make the silence speak in favour of infant baptism.
- *Chapter 13 – What Difference Does it Make?*
Malone responds to the objection that as baptism does not save, disagreement over its subjects doesn't really matter. He points out that baptism of disciples is tied directly to the Great Commission and evangelism – hardly merely 'secondary' matters. Other implications of the baptism of disciples alone include: the priority of the local church over denominationalism; necessity and consistency of church discipline and the purity of local churches; consistent adherence to the regulative principle; etc. No minister should be without a clear stance on these issues.
- *Chapter 14 – Postlude: A Final Appeal to Build Baptist Churches*
Malone gives a much needed call for Baptists to be willing to support the reformation or planting of Baptist churches, enduring hardship if necessary, that these truths may be upheld for our children and future generations. In doing so he challenges the many Baptists in paedobaptist churches as to whether they are standing faithfully if there is opportunity to support a Baptist work.
- *Appendix A - Spurgeon on Baptism*
Available online at: <http://www.gracesermons.com/robbeeee/spurgbaptism.html>
- *Appendix B – The Proper Mode of Biblical Baptism*
An excellent concise defence of immersion as the biblical mode. The poor exegesis of some recent paedobaptist authors (John Murray and Duane Spencer) is exposed and shown to be inadequate.
- *Appendix C – Book Review of "The Biblical Doctrine of Infant Baptism" [by Pierre Marcel]*
A version of this has been published as a review in the *Founders Journal*, Issue 35 (Winter 1999): <http://www.founders.org/FJ35/reviews.html>
- *Appendix D – Appendix to the "1689 London Baptist Confession"*
Available online at: <http://www.ccel.org/creeds/bcf/bcfapdx.htm>
- *Appendix E – Book Review of A Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*
This appendix is a welcome addition as it offers an extensive response to the only contemporary paedobaptist book that significantly interacts with a Covenantal/Reformed Baptist (as opposed to a general Baptist) position. Unfortunately the first edition was published at the same time as this book – so this new appendix is a welcome opportunity for some interaction with it. Malone offers an extensive summary and critique of the various chapters, pointing out areas of agreement and disagreement. The most significant disagreement is over the nature of the New Covenant – surprisingly found between two of the paedobaptist authors of the chapters in the book that take contradictory positions (one arguing the New Covenant is unbreakable but largely future [Pratt], the other that it is breakable and largely fulfilled now [Niel]). Also the chapter on church history concedes the early church was Baptist! All this seriously weakens the case for covenantal infant baptism.
- *Appendix F – Extreme Covenantalism*
Spurgeon often intimated that paedobaptism offered a path back to Popery. Malone also highlights the dangers of the incipient sacramentalism inherent in paedobaptism. 'Federal Vision' theologies of justification use a form of hyper-covenantalism to redefine justification in terms of external covenant membership, undermining personal justification by faith alone. Such a view originates from the idea that one can be a 'Christian' and 'a member of the church' by right of physical birth - showing the potential danger of paedobaptism if its principles are extended to other areas of theology. Only a Reformed Baptist view of the Covenant offers a consistently Evangelical baptismal theology – that 'only where there is faith there is there a sacrament'. Only it provides a consistent covenantal doctrine

justification. The over drawn unity and OT priority of hypercovenantalism is behind the persistence of such hypercovenantal errors (as Federal Vision, Theonomy, paedocommunion, exclusive Psalmody, etc.) within paedobaptist circles.

Conclusions

Malone's work raises the level of this long ongoing debate to a new plane. The challenge for the paedobaptist is that their own Covenant theology is being turned against them and shown to be more consistent with a Baptist position – and that to be 'thoroughly Reformed' is to be Baptist. If paedobaptists continue to generally ignore the strongest Baptist position in their works – it will be at their peril. It is hoped that this work will also stimulate a continued revival and recovery of covenant theology and its application in Baptist circles, so we may provide a clearer witness to a confused Church and world.

Other Recent Covenantal/Reformed Baptist titles:

- Conner, Alan (2007) *Covenant Children: Physical or Spiritual?* Owensboro, KY: Reformed Baptist Academic Press. 122p.
This book focuses on the core issue of who are the seed of the various covenants and how they relate. Conner shows that Christ is the ultimate fulfilment of the Seed of Abraham promises and that we become co-seeds through union with Him by faith (Gal 3:7,26,29). This is confirmed from relevant OT prophetic passages as well as the New Testament. Significant exegetical support is surveyed to support this and common paedobaptist misreadings are corrected. The main weaknesses of the book are the lack of any explicit interaction with paedobaptist writers (though presumably this is to aid readability?) and the absence of any indexes.
- Waymeyer, Matt (2008) *A Biblical Critique of Infant Baptism*. The Woodlands, TX: Kress Christian Publications. 145p.
As intimated by its title, this book provides a detailed exegetical critique of paedobaptism. The strengths of this book are its wide-ranging interaction with paedobaptist authors both contemporary and historical. The author, although not a Reformed Baptist, draws heavily from Reformed Baptist writers in establishing his exegesis. Paedobaptist arguments are ably shown to be without adequate exegetical support and fail to do justice to changes resulting from the progress of redemptive history. Extensive footnotes add detail while maintaining readability in the text. A comprehensive list of references and scripture index is provided.
- Waldron, Samuel; with Barcellos, Richard (2004) *A Reformed Baptist Manifesto: the New Covenant Constitution of the Church*. Palmdale, CA: Reformed Baptist Academic Press. 113p.
This book demonstrates how the only Reformed Baptist view can account for a consistent exegesis of the New Covenant of Jeremiah 31:31-34 and its New Testament applications. The fact that the New Covenant is fully applied to the church even though made with "the house of Israel and Judah" refutes the Dispensational denial that the Church is the true Israel of faith. The fact that it promises to write the Law on hearts (instead of tablets of stone – cf 2 Corinthians 3:3) undermines all forms of Antinomianism that would set the Law up against Grace. The fact that the New Covenant of which Christ is mediator is not made with all but only those upon whom the Law is sovereignly written undermines the conditional-on-faith universal atonement view of Arminianism. Finally the fact the new covenant is unbreakable and made only with the regenerate who have their sins forgiven and know the Lord refutes Paedobaptist claims that non-elect infants can be in and break the New Covenant. Those giving credible evidence of being in it should be given its signs.

- Welty, Greg (2001) *A Critical Evaluation of Paedobaptism*. Fullerton, CA: Reformed Baptist Publications. [Available online at: <http://wwwFOUNDERS.org/library/welty.html>] One of the better shorter works in print. Welty begins his case with an exegesis of the nature and membership of the New Covenant in Jeremiah 31 and other key texts, before going on to critique the general paedobaptist arguments.

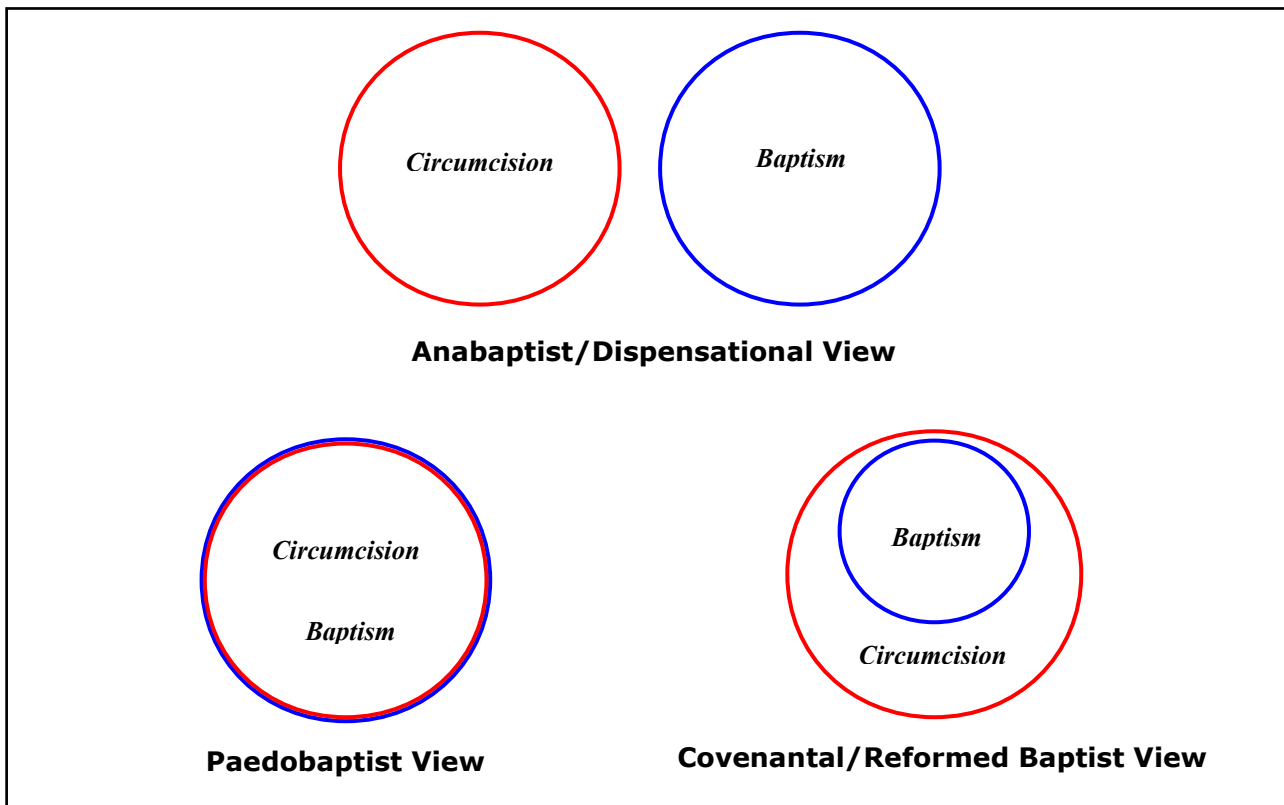
Titles recommended by Malone in his book:

- Jewett, Paul K (1978) *Infant Baptism and the Covenant of Grace*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. 254p.
A comprehensive and scholarly polemic against infant baptism. Evidence from church history, relevant scriptural passages, Covenant Theology and inconsistencies among paedobaptists are marshalled together to refute the practice. The great weakness of the book is that after having so comprehensively refuted paedobaptism, only a few inadequate pages are devoted to outlining a Covenantal Baptist alternative.
- Kingdon, David (1973) *Children of Abraham*. Sussex: Carey Press. 105p.
One of the first books advocating a Covenantal Baptist position by a contemporary Reformed Baptist. A good first attempt to express the issues. Provides a basic outline of the covenantal Baptist position over against covenantal paedobaptism. Weaknesses of the book include its failure to clearly establish a definition of the Covenant of Grace over against the historical divine covenants leading to confusion for some. Not enough is made of the nature of the New Covenant or paedobaptist inconsistencies (eg: paedocommunion, etc.) or the practical implications of the differing positions.
- Watson, T E (1962) *Should Babies be Baptised?* [1962 title: *Baptism Not for Infants*] London: Grace Publications [1995 reprint]. 125p.
A readable and somewhat cheeky book that uses paedobaptists against themselves – almost all quotations in the book are from them. In doing so the inconsistencies and contradictions in the position are exposed. The Reformed Baptist position is by this approach shown to be within the realm of interpretation conceded by many paedobaptists. The book would greatly benefit from a new edition bringing in contemporary authors who have in fact provided many more examples that could be used.

For other online resources on disciple only baptism see:

http://www.rbc.org.nz/links.htm#Theol_Bap

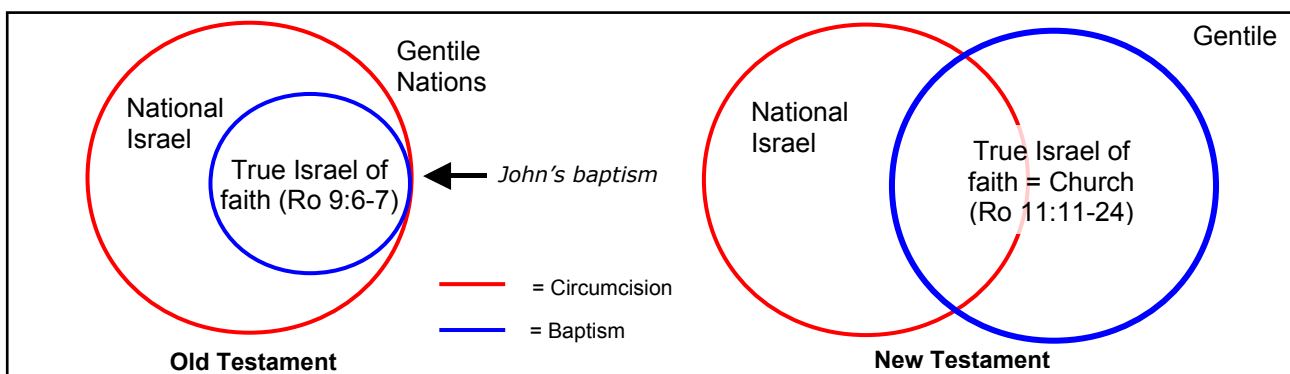
Appendix Diagrams Illustrating the Covenantal Baptist View



©Jewett, Paul K (1978) *Infant Baptism and the Covenant of Grace*. Page 239.

- The **Anabaptist/Dispensational View** emphasizes diversity to the point where circumcision is merely a physical national Old Testament sign while baptism is a sign of separate New Testament inward regeneration.
- The **Paedobaptist View** emphasises continuity to the point where baptism and circumcision are largely identical, both with physical and spiritual significance.
- The **Covenantal Baptist View** sees a typological relationship where baptism signifies inward heart circumcision of the true remnant/Israel of faith (whom John the Baptist came baptising on repentance) – whereas in the OT, circumcision pointed to this but also to other physical, typical and temporal promises given to the physical seed in anticipation of Christ.

- Covenantal/Reformed Baptist View of the Church & Israel -



Adapted from a paedobaptist author:

© Mathison, Keith A (1995) *Dispensationalism: Rightly Dividing the People of God*. Pages 39-41

This shows that the Reformed Baptist view is consistent with Covenant Theology, and often articulated as such by paedobaptists themselves when not writing on the issue of baptism.

