

## **Let the (Grandchildren) Come to Me?**

### **A Response to Gavin Ortlund's Argument Against Reformed Paedobaptism**

King Solomon's aphorism "there is nothing new under the sun" allows no exceptions—not even credobaptist critiques of Reformed paedobaptism.<sup>1</sup> Objections to infant baptism have ranged from accusations of failure to reform an invalid Roman Catholic practice to assertions of a deficient understanding of covenant theology.<sup>2</sup> However, Gavin Ortlund has recently offered an innovative argument in an effort to expose the logical inconsistency of the Reformed position. In his 2020 journal article "Why Not Grandchildren? An Argument Against Reformed Paedobaptism," Ortlund attempts to show that Reformed covenantal theology as it pertains to paedobaptism is incoherent with contemporary presbyterian practice.<sup>3</sup> Ortlund juxtaposes the administration of circumcision in the Abrahamic covenant with the administration of baptism to babies in Reformed churches, concluding that the two are incongruent despite paedobaptist appeals to continuity.

While his argument appears novel, Ortlund relies on dilapidated and defective credobaptist assumptions about the Abrahamic and New Covenants, the membership of the

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<sup>1</sup> Reformed paedobaptism appeals to continuity with the sacramental administration of the Abrahamic covenant as the basis for the baptism of believers and their children. *The Westminster Confession of Faith* XXVIII.4 encapsulates the Reformed articulation of infant baptism: "Not only those that do actually profess faith in and obedience unto Christ, but also the infants of one, or both, believing parents, are to be baptized."

<sup>2</sup> An example of the former is John MacArthur's argument against paedobaptism in his debate with R. C. Sproul: <https://learn.ligonier.org/series/baptism-debate>. Paul Jewett's *Infant Baptism and the Covenant of Grace* is a prime example of the latter.

<sup>3</sup> I have searched for Reformed counter-arguments to Gavin Ortlund's article but could not find anything published in an academic journal. I have found a couple of blog articles posted in response to "Why Not Grandchildren?", but in my evaluation they did not rise to the challenge of answering Ortlund's objections. I do not recycle or advance any of the counter-arguments I encountered in the blog responses.

covenant community, and the purpose of circumcision and baptism. Ortlund's critique of Reformed paedobaptism is insufficient because it stands upon false premises. He fails to recognize that the Abrahamic covenant constituted a visible community of faith that was marked by the circumcision of its members. Subsequently, he misunderstands that the church in the New Covenant is modeled after the Abrahamic community of faith, with baptism administered as the sign of entry into its visible membership. Contrary to Ortlund's critique, Reformed infant baptism in the church of Christ is in continuity with the circumcision of infants in the Abrahamic covenant, since both are administered on the basis of their inclusion in the covenant community.

## **I. Summary of Ortlund's Argument**

Ortlund's critical claim in "Why Not Grandchildren?" is that Reformed paedobaptism is misaligned with the administration of circumcision in the family of Abraham and therefore wrongly appeals to continuity with the Abrahamic covenant as the theological foundation for infant baptism.<sup>4</sup> While Reformed churches affirm that the children of Christian parents should be baptized just as the children of faithful Israelites were circumcised, Ortlund argues that "circumcision was never at any time administered to 'those who believe and their children.'" <sup>5</sup> He asserts that even if complete continuity between circumcision and baptism is granted, "the result would not be paedobaptism as practiced by the majority of Reformed paedobaptist churches today."<sup>6</sup> Ortlund claims that God instituted circumcision as a *national* sign to be administered *intergenerationally* in the family of Abraham. He references Genesis 17:9, where God tells Abraham that the covenant is for "you and your offspring after you throughout their generations."<sup>7</sup> Ortlund rightly interprets "your offspring" as the intergenerational descendants of

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<sup>4</sup> Ortlund cites B. B. Warfield, John Calvin, John Murray, and several modern Reformed theologians who all appeal to significant overlap in meaning and application between circumcision and baptism.

<sup>5</sup> Gavin Ortlund, "Why Not Grandchildren? An Argument Against Reformed Paedobaptism," *Themelios* 45, no. 2 (2020): 333.

<sup>6</sup> Ortlund, "Why Not Grandchildren?", 335.

<sup>7</sup> All Scripture quotations are from the *English Standard Version*.

Abraham, which includes but is not limited to his immediate children. He contends that the intergenerational application of circumcision is a critical difference unaccounted for by Reformed paedobaptists—infants in Israel were not circumcised based upon the faithfulness of their parents but on their Abrahamic ancestry. Ortlund concludes,

Thus, the “children” to whom circumcision was pledged are something less than identical to the “children” envisioned by paedobaptism. The lines of covenant throughout the Old Testament were not drawn around particular believing households within Israel, but around the national family of Abraham that comprised an intergenerational people. It was not the spiritual or covenantal status of the mother and/or father of an infant Israelite boy, in itself, that established their right to circumcision, but rather their identification as the “offspring” of Abraham.<sup>8</sup>

In an effort to accentuate the disparity between the administration of Abrahamic circumcision and Reformed paedobaptism, Ortlund constructs a hypothetical case as a *reductio ad absurdum*:

John Sr. is a devout believer in a particular paedobaptist church; John Jr. attends the church semi-regularly but has never personally professed faith in Christ or become a member, though he attends church nominally; John III is one week old. Should John III be considered a member of the church and a proper candidate for baptism?<sup>9</sup>

Ortlund suggests that most Reformed Christians would conclude that the grandson, John III, is not eligible for baptism because his father is not a true Christian, even though he was presumably baptized as a baby. But if Reformed paedobaptism is to be administered in continuity with Abrahamic circumcision, why would John III not be baptized since he is the descendant of a Christian? The crucial question is “on what basis do we differentiate the covenantal status” of the grandfather, son, and grandson?<sup>10</sup> According to Ortlund, the Reformed appeal to the father’s faith reveals a significant change from the Abrahamic covenant to now, since John III would have been circumcised as a descendant of John Sr., regardless of John Jr.’s faith. Therefore, Ortlund contends that the Reformed paedobaptist appeal to continuity with the Abrahamic covenant as

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<sup>8</sup> Ortlund, “Why Not Grandchildren?”, 336.

<sup>9</sup> Ortlund, “Why Not Grandchildren?”, 336.

<sup>10</sup> Ortlund, “Why Not Grandchildren?”, 336.

the basis for infant baptism is illogical and inconsistent. If his argument is correct, then Reformed Christians must choose one of two options: 1) reevaluate the traditional Reformed appeal to Abrahamic circumcision as an argument for paedobaptism or 2) baptize the grandchildren of Christians regardless of the personal faith of their parents. Orlund concludes, “If the rationale for infant baptism lies in its continuity with infant circumcision, what is the justification for its limitation to the first-generation children of believers? If children, why not grandchildren?”

Orlund devotes a considerable amount of his article to demonstrating that the contemporary Reformed argument for baptizing the infants of believing parents not only diverges from the Abrahamic pattern of circumcision but also the historic Reformed understanding of the relationship between the signs of the Abrahamic and New Covenants. Orlund frames modern Reformed paedobaptists against their theological forefathers, claiming that earlier Reformed theologians did not share this inconsistency. He appeals to the writings of John Calvin, Samuel Rutherford, and others to reveal that the historic Reformers recognized the intergenerational administration of circumcision in the Abrahamic covenant and articulated for the baptism of the descendants of believers as if every Christian assumed the covenantal position of Abraham.<sup>11</sup> Orlund claims that intergenerational baptism was “the dominant practice of the

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<sup>11</sup> Orlund is correct that Rutherford insisted on intergenerational baptism. Rutherford viewed the nation of Scotland as the visible church since they were a nation in covenant with God. He believed that Scottish children should be baptized since they belong to the visible (national) church, and that any child with Christian ancestry was eligible for baptism. “Rutherford understood the external covenant to stretch the canvas of a visible church over the whole population of Scotland, just as the Abrahamic covenant did for Abraham and his progeny. For Rutherford this was natural since ‘the visible church established in the New Testament’, like Israel in the Old, was at the national level.” R. Scott Spurlock, “Polity, discipline and theology: the importance of the covenant in Scottish presbyterianism, 1560–c. 1700” in Elliot Vernon and Hunter Powell, eds., *Church Polity and Politics in the British Atlantic World, c.1635-66* (Manchester, GB: Manchester University Press, 2020), 84. For a contrast between Rutherford and Thomas Boston’s understandings of paedobaptism, read John Macpherson, *The Doctrine of the Church in Scottish Theology*, ed. C.G. M’Crie (Edinburgh: Macniven and Wallace, 1903), 82–90.

Calvin’s views on intergenerational baptism are not as obvious and appear to have changed over the course of his ministry in Geneva. For an overview of Calvin’s evolving ecclesiology, read John W. Riggs, “Emerging Ecclesiology in Calvin’s Baptismal Thought, 1536-1543,” *Church History* 64, no. 1 (March 1995): 29–43.

early Reformed tradition.”<sup>12</sup> While he does not find the historic Reformed position convincing either, it is more logically consistent in Ortlund’s evaluation than the alternative expression amongst contemporary Reformed Christians. Ortlund suggests that the contrast between contemporary Reformed paedobaptist arguments and the claims of Calvin, Rutherford, and company should compel careful reconsideration as to why baptism should be limited to “the first-generation children of believers.”<sup>13</sup>

## II. Critical Evaluation of Ortlund’s Argument

### A. The Abrahamic Covenant and the Circumcised

Ortlund argues that Reformed paedobaptists are misguided in their claim of sacramental continuity with the Abrahamic covenant because infant baptism upon the basis of the parents’ faith is much different than God’s command to circumcise every male infant descended from Abraham in Genesis 17. Ortlund insists that infant circumcision was instituted for a “national and intergenerational body” according to their Abrahamic ancestry.<sup>14</sup> The religious convictions of his parents were irrelevant in considering an infant boy’s eligibility for the covenant sign. The only pertinent criteria for circumcision was whether the child belonged to Abraham’s family tree.

However, Ortlund neglects to give due consideration to the *other* recipients of circumcision in Genesis 17. God instructs Abraham to circumcise his male offspring *and* those who were “bought with your money from any foreigner who is *not of your offspring*, both he who is born in your house and *he who is bought with your money*, shall surely be circumcised” (Genesis 17:12–13, emphasis mine). God did not limit the “sign of the covenant” to Abraham’s progeny but commanded him to circumcise his servants as well. If Ortlund is correct that circumcision was intended as an ancestral symbol, why did foreigners unrelated to Abraham also

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<sup>12</sup> Ortlund, “Why Not Grandchildren?”, 342.

<sup>13</sup> Ortlund, “Why Not Grandchildren?”, 346.

<sup>14</sup> Ortlund, “Why Not Grandchildren?”, 336.

receive it? While his servants certainly did not enjoy the esteemed status of sonship like Isaac, they were members of Abraham's household and considered as family. As servants in Abraham's house, they were privy to the covenant blessings God promised to Abraham and all those who belong to him.<sup>15</sup> Matthew Poole comments that as household members, they would have been "thoroughly instructed in religion... and doubtless did willingly embrace it, and submit to this sacrament."<sup>16</sup>

The circumcision of his servants indicates that circumcision was not a symbol of Abrahamic ancestry but of the Abrahamic community. Whether one was born into Abraham's house as a son or bought into the house as a slave, he received the sign of God's covenant with Abraham. Stephen Myers writes, "God commands that the sign be applied not only to Abraham's physical seed, but also to everyone in his household, and thus the people of the circumcision would not be a people of ethnic descent, but a people marked by God's promise."<sup>17</sup> Already in Genesis 17, it is apparent that the principle upon which circumcision in the Abrahamic covenant was predicated was not Abraham's *genealogical* headship but his *federal* headship.<sup>18</sup> All who were under Abraham's *authority*, sons or servants, were circumcised.

The regulations for Passover in the Mosaic administration further reveal that circumcision was not a sign of ethnic identity but of membership in the covenant community. In Exodus 12:43–49, God instructs Moses and Aaron about who is allowed to participate in the sacred meal. God establishes that foreigners are forbidden from the feast unless they have been circumcised. Servants and sojourners are invited to eat as long as they have received the

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<sup>15</sup> "The covenant promises are extended to all the circumcised, who are reckoned as members of the faithful family." Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 261.

<sup>16</sup> Matthew Poole, *Annotations upon the Holy Bible*, v. 1 (New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1853), 40.

<sup>17</sup> Stephen Myers, *God To Us: Covenant Theology in Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2021), 181.

<sup>18</sup> Myers, *God To Us*, 301.

covenant sign, but “no uncircumcised person shall eat of it” (Exodus 12:48).<sup>19</sup> The restriction of uncircumcised foreigners is not an *ethnic* principle but a *religious* principle—they are barred from the meal because they are uncircumcised, not because they are foreign. The nation of Israel was not exclusive to ethnic outsiders. Foreigners who embraced the God of Israel and received the covenant sign were welcomed into the family. Paul the apostle clearly articulates that circumcision was never an ethnic badge: circumcision was always “a matter of the heart” and a “seal of the righteousness” Abraham received by faith (Romans 2:29; 4:11; cf. Genesis 15:6). If a foreigner converted to the religion of Israel, he was circumcised as a sign that he shared Abraham’s faith and belonged to his family of faith.

At this point, Ortlund would likely object that his claim regarding the intergenerational administration of circumcision for the natural descendants of Abraham has not been disproven. A return to Genesis 17 is necessary in order to complete the task. God introduces the idea of circumcision to Abraham in verse 10: “This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: *Every male among you shall be circumcised.*” It has already been established that the males among Abraham would have included his children and his servants. However, it is essential to recognize that “every male among you” certainly would have included *the children of his servants*.<sup>20</sup> But on what basis could a son of one of Abraham’s servants be circumcised? A servant’s infant child had no claim of Abrahamic ancestry, and he could not be considered a convert to Abraham’s religion. Bannerman explains,

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<sup>19</sup> “A slave born in the house would naturally be circumcised, and thus eligible. Even a slave ‘bought for money’ may eat it if circumcised, because, as a possession, he is part of the family. This at one and the same time reiterates the essential ‘family’ nature of the passover.” R. Alan Cole, *Exodus: An Introduction and Commentary*, v. 2, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 120–121.

<sup>20</sup> The male children of Abraham’s servants fit the criteria of “born in (Abraham’s) house” (Gen. 17:12). When Abraham circumcised Ishmael and “all those born in his house or bought with his money” later in the chapter (17:23), it is clear that “all those born in his house” *refers to the sons of Abraham’s servants*. Abraham did not have any other sons besides Ishmael at this point. The only other boys who could have been born in his house were the children of his servants.

(The circumcision of Gentile infants) demonstrates that not remote connection with Abraham, but immediate connection with the parent, is the ground of the infant's right to circumcision... (they) had no connection with Abraham through ordinary descent; and yet in virtue of their father's circumcision they had a right to be circumcised also.<sup>21</sup>

The infant boys born to Abraham's servants had a right to circumcision by virtue of their fathers' membership in the household of Abraham. They were circumcised because they were under the authoritative headship of their fathers, who were under the federal headship of Abraham. In the Abrahamic covenant, circumcision was administered to those who belonged to the house of Abraham. Those born in Abraham's household—his sons and the sons of his servants—received the covenant sign because they were born to parents within the covenant community.

#### B. The New Covenant and the Baptized

In his compelling case for Reformed infant baptism, David Gibson writes, "What God establishes with Abraham, as head of his family and household, God also establishes with his family and household, and that principle within the covenant of grace continues across both old and new administrations."<sup>22</sup> God established a paradigm for covenant membership in the Abrahamic administration of the covenant of grace. In God's covenant with Abraham, children born to parents within the covenant community are themselves treated as members. They receive the sign of the covenant as a birthright. They are covenant members because they belong to parents who belong to Abraham. They are in a household that is one among many in the Abrahamic household.

The covenantal paradigm established under Abraham's headship is advanced in the New Testament. When Peter preaches the first sermon of the New Covenant church at Pentecost, he rehearses the Abrahamic paradigm when he proclaims "the promise is for you and for your

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<sup>21</sup> James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2015), 600. Bannerman further argues that mere ancestral connection to Abraham did not indicate inclusion in his covenant. Ishmael and Esau were both descendants of Abraham, yet they were not considered heirs of the covenant.

<sup>22</sup> David Gibson, "'Fathers of Faith, My Fathers Now!': On Abraham, Covenant, and the Theology of Paedobaptism," *Themelios* 40, no. 1 (2015): 16.



children and for all who are far off” (Acts 2:39). Ortlund objects that paedobaptists have no business citing Acts 2:38–39 as a proof-text, since Peter is preaching about “the gift of the Holy Spirit” for those who repent and believe in Christ, not about covenant membership.<sup>23</sup> However, the two are not mutually exclusive. In Galatians 3:14, Paul identifies “the blessing of Abraham” as “the promised Holy Spirit.” Peter and Paul both view the arrival of the Holy Spirit as the pinnacle of the blessings God promised in the Abrahamic covenant. God promised the arrival of the Holy Spirit to Abraham, and his children received the sign of this promise.<sup>24</sup> Ortlund also asserts,

The recipients of this promise are not just “you and your children,” but also “all who are far off.” Syntactically, both these classes of people are in the same position. It is not clear how we might regard children as recipients of the promised Holy Spirit in a different sense than those far off are recipients of this promise.

This is precisely the Reformed paedobaptist point. God’s promises to Abraham were for him, his children, and the foreign servants whom he purchased (Genesis 17:12–13). The Abrahamic paradigm persists in the New Covenant: “the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off” (Acts 2:39). Gibson observes, “it cannot be a coincidence that the threefold categories for circumcision in Gen 17 (Abraham, his seed, foreigners in his house) is matched by the threefold categories for baptism in Acts 2:39... (you, your children, the far off).”<sup>25</sup>

The Abrahamic paradigm for the church is further exhibited by Paul calling him “the father of us all” who “share(s) the faith of Abraham” (Romans 4:16). Paul tells the Galatians that it is “those of faith who are the sons of Abraham” and that they “like Isaac, are the children of promise” (3:7; 4:28). The New Testament is clear that Christians share in the covenantal heritage

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<sup>23</sup> Ortlund, “Why Not Grandchildren?”, 340.

<sup>24</sup> Some credobaptists object that Acts 2:38–39 is a fulfillment of Joel 2 and therefore should not be understood as a continuation of the Abrahamic covenantal paradigm in the church. Although Peter is undoubtedly referencing Joel’s prophecy about the Holy Spirit’s outpouring, they fail to recognize that Joel 2 *itself is a fulfillment of God’s promises to Abraham* (cf. Isaiah 44:3–5; Galatians 3:14).

<sup>25</sup> Gibson, “Fathers of Faith, My Fathers Now!”, 27.

of Abraham. Reformed theologians have historically argued for continuity between the Abrahamic and New Covenants. Joel Beeke notes, “Nowhere (in Scripture) do we read of anyone contrasting the new covenant with the promises made to Abraham.... Reformed theologians all affirmed that the new covenant was the fulfillment of the promises made to Abraham.”<sup>26</sup> Harrison Perkins argues that the New Covenant “intensifies rather than overturns” God’s promises to Abraham.<sup>27</sup>

Since the church operates according to the Abrahamic paradigm, the sign of the New Covenant should be similarly administered. Reformed theologians rightly refer to Colossians 2:11–12 as evidence for continuity between the spiritual signification and proper application of circumcision and baptism.<sup>28</sup> Berkhof asserts that baptism “corresponds” with circumcision in spiritual meaning.<sup>29</sup> Thomas Witherow claims that “circumcision was the religious rite by which”

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<sup>26</sup> Joel R. Beeke and Mark Jones, *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012), 728. *The Westminster Confession of Faith* asserts that the covenant of grace is “but one and the same” across its dispensations, from the Abrahamic administration to the New (WCF VII.6)

<sup>27</sup> Harrison Perkins, *Reformed Covenant Theology: A Systematic Introduction* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Academic, 2024), 397.

<sup>28</sup> Colossians 2:11–12, “In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.” G. K. Beale offers an excellent analysis of Colossians 2:11–12 in G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2011), 803–16. Beale writes, “If spiritual circumcision in Christ is the fulfillment of the type of physical circumcision, and since spiritual circumcision is virtually equated here with spiritual baptism, it seems plausible that such baptism is also seen as the fulfillment of the physical type of circumcision.” Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology*, 809. In another excellent resource on the relationship between circumcision and baptism in this passage, David Gibson paraphrases Colossians 2:11–12 as “You have been circumcised. It is a circumcision done by Christ (spiritual). It is not a circumcision done by the hands of men (physical). You were circumcised spiritually in Christ, having been baptized. When you were circumcised, there was no knife present—but you did get wet.” David Gibson, “Sacramental Supersessionism Revisited: A Response to Martin Salter on the Relationship between Circumcision and Baptism,” *Themelios* 37, no. 2 (2012): 203.

<sup>29</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Louisville, KY: GLH Publishing, 2017), 542. Reformed theologians should be careful when describing the relationship between circumcision and baptism. Many assert that circumcision and baptism are virtually synonymous and do not allow room for any difference between the two (see examples in footnote 4). Berkhof’s language of “correspondence” is preferable. Bavinck writes that while baptism “replaces” circumcision, baptism is “more than” circumcision. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Holy Spirit, Church, and New Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend, vol. 4. (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2008), 526–527. Reformed theologians should happily admit that baptism is an objectively better sign than circumcision: it is not bloody or painful, and it is a sign for both males and females. Baptism is similar to circumcision in meaning, but the sign itself is not similar. Baptism is a better sign. Our New Covenant is still new after all: better signs, wider scope, and a fuller picture of the glory of Jesus Christ.

membership in the Abrahamic covenant was “recognized.”<sup>30</sup> In the New Covenant, baptism functions as the sign of covenant membership in place of circumcision. Calvin writes, “Baptism is the sign of the initiation by which we are received into the society of the church.”<sup>31</sup> Reformed confessions and catechisms identify baptism as the sign of membership in the New Covenant.<sup>32</sup>

Since baptism is the sign of membership in the New Covenant, it is essential to rightly identify those who were considered covenant members in the Abrahamic administration in order to determine the proper subjects for baptism. Abraham’s male infants, his servants, and the male children of his servants were all circumcised as members of the covenant community. Therefore, infant boys born to parents within the extended household of Abraham received the covenant symbol. In the New Testament, the church is identified as the true family of Abraham. The New Covenant continues the paradigm established in the Abrahamic. Therefore, baptism as the sign of the New Covenant belongs to infants who are born in the community of the church. Children of Christian parents are eligible for baptism because they belong to the covenant community by virtue of their parents. They are included in the visible community and are incorporated in the family of faith because their parents have involved them in the life of the church.<sup>33</sup> Richard

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<sup>30</sup> Thomas Withrow, *I Will Build My Church: Selected Writings on Church Polity, Baptism and the Sabbath*, ed. Jonathan Gibson (Glenside, Pennsylvania: Westminster Seminary Press, 2021), 187.

<sup>31</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2008), 4.15.6, cited from J. V. Fesko, *Word, Water, and Spirit: A Reformed Perspective on Baptism* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2013), 85.

<sup>32</sup> Westminster Confession of Faith XXVIII.1: “Baptism is a sacrament of the new testament, ordained by Jesus Christ, not only for the solemn *admission of the party baptized into the visible Church*; but also to be unto him a sign and seal of the covenant of grace...” Westminster Larger Catechism Q&A.165: Baptism is a sacrament of the New Testament... *whereby the parties baptized are solemnly admitted into the visible church.*” Heidelberg Catechism Q&A.74: “Therefore, by baptism, the sign of the covenant, they too (infant children of Christian parents) should be *incorporated into the Christian church* and distinguished from the children of unbelievers.” Belgic Confession Art. 34: We believe and confess that Jesus Christ... hath instituted the sacrament of baptism... *by which we are received into the Church of God.*”

<sup>33</sup> The Reformed tradition has historically distinguished between the visible and invisible church; the visible containing those who participate in the external elements of the covenant community, and the invisible consisting of the elect who possess saving faith in Jesus Christ. Both the elect and non-elect intermingle in the visible church, since it is the expression of the covenant community for all those who profess faith in Christ and participate in the life of the church. The visible aspect of the church is evidenced by the presence of unregenerate adults in the covenant communities of both the Old and New Testaments. Harrison Perkins explains, “God’s old and new covenant community, therefore, include those who truly partake of the substance by faith along with those who

Sibbes explains, “all that live in the Church are Christ’s to some degree... by vouchsafing them the seale of Baptisme, (they are made) members of the visible church.”<sup>34</sup>

Ortlund and other credobaptists insist that Reformed theologians assume too much overlap between the membership requirements and covenant signs of the Abrahamic and New Covenants.<sup>35</sup> Many also contend that the New Testament does not continue any principle of parental representation present in the Old Testament—the New Covenant deals with the spiritual vitality of individuals, not families.<sup>36</sup> However, the New Testament offers significant evidence for the persistence of a representative principle in the New Covenant community. The household baptisms of Acts and 1 Corinthians would have included everyone who lived in the house and were considered under the authority of the household head: parents, children, grandparents and extended family, and servants (Acts 10:44–48; 16:14–15; 16:31–34; 18:8; 1 Cor. 1:16).<sup>37</sup> When credobaptists argue that the entire households expressed faith in Christ (explicit in Acts 18:8) and that there is no evidence that any of these households contained infants, they neglect to answer why there was such a thing as household baptisms at all.<sup>38</sup> The glaring reality is that on multiple occasions in the New Testament, the baptism of entire households was initiated by the conversion and baptism of the head of the house. Gibson writes, “The significant thing... is that there were such phenomena as household baptisms at the very point in redemptive history when,

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participate in only the external administration.” Perkins, *Reformed Covenant Theology*, 395. The Westminster Confession of Faith Ch. XXV further explains the differences between the visible and invisible church.

<sup>34</sup> Richard Sibbes, *The Christians End* (London, 1639), 92–93, cited in E. Brooks Holifield, *The Covenant Sealed: The Development of Puritan Sacramental Theology in Old and New England, 1570-1720* (Eugene, Or: Wipf and Stock Pub., 1974), 43.

<sup>35</sup> Shawn D. Wright, “Baptism and the Logic of Reformed Paedobaptists” in Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn D. Wright, eds., *Believer’s Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, NAC Studies in Bible & Theology (Nashville, Tenn: B & H Academic, 2006), 244.

<sup>36</sup> Stephen J. Wellum, “Baptism and the Relationship between the Covenants” in Schreiner and Wright, eds. *Believer’s Baptism*, 138–139.

<sup>37</sup> Scot McKnight, *It Takes A Church To Baptize: What The Bible Says About Infant Baptism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2018), 64.

<sup>38</sup> McKnight argues it is impossible that no infants were baptized among these households. “Households were too large and too encompassing for them to be absent.” McKnight, *It Takes A Church To Baptize*, 66.

apparently, the structure and blessing of households had been abolished: what the head of the house did, or what a parent did, everyone did.”<sup>39</sup> Just as a household circumcision occurred when a new servant and his family joined Israel, household baptisms were performed when a household authority converted to Christ—his entire family joined the church by baptism. Myers helpfully argues that the household baptisms of the New Testament display continuity with the Old Testament principle that when a man or woman embraces the promises of God’s covenant, the covenant sign was placed upon all under their authority.<sup>40</sup>

Paul’s instruction to Christians within interfaith marriages in 1 Corinthians 7:12–16 reinforces the pattern of God’s covenantal recognition of entire families. Paul commands Christian spouses to remain married to their unbelieving husband or wife, because God regards their unbelieving spouse and their children as holy. He writes that their children are considered “holy” instead of “unclean” because of their Christian parent (v. 14). J. V. Fesko argues that the covenantal household principle is driving Paul’s instructions.<sup>41</sup> The children are considered holy because of the federal headship of their believing parent. They enjoy the blessed status of covenant members because one of their parents is in covenant with God. Witherow explains, “If one parent only be a believer, the children are not to be counted with the world, but with the church.”<sup>42</sup> Children with Christian parents (or, in the case of 1 Corinthians 7, a Christian parent) are incorporated into the covenant community because of the headship of their parents. “The

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<sup>39</sup> Gibson, “‘Fathers of Faith, My Fathers Now!’”, 27.

<sup>40</sup> Myers, *God To Us*, 301.

<sup>41</sup> Fesko explains that “unclean” (ακαθαρτος) and “holy” (αγιος) are cultic terms often contrasted in their canonical usage. Israel was considered “holy” because they were in covenant with God, but the Gentiles were “unclean” because they were not in the holy covenant (Exodus 19:6, Lev. 18:24, Acts 10:28). Fesko writes, “The Israelite cult and community were essentially the same. In other words, to be holy was to be in the covenant, but to be unclean was to be outside the covenant. The holy and unclean categories cannot be divorced from the concept of covenant.” Fesko, *Word, Water, and Spirit*, 349.

<sup>42</sup> Witherow, *I Will Build My Church*, 197.

holiness of such children is therefore a covenantal holiness.”<sup>43</sup> Whole households are holy because whole households enter into covenant with God according to the religious commitment of the family representative.<sup>44</sup> If the children of a believing parent are clothed in covenantal holiness, they should receive the sign of the holy covenant.

According to the passages referenced above and many others, Reformed theologians conclude that the infant children of Christian parents who are born into the church should be baptized. The theological basis for their baptism is the biblical principle of parental headship and covenantal representation. The circumstantial basis is their involvement in the life of the covenant community from the earliest days of their infancy. Witherow suggests that Christian babies enjoy birthright citizenship because they were born within the kingdom of Christ.<sup>45</sup> Their eligibility for baptism is not founded upon their Christian ancestry. God’s covenants have never operated according to a genealogical principle. Myers explains, “At no point in God’s pursuit of His covenantal purposes have covenantal signs been administered based on a genealogical principle. Always they have been administered on a federal principle, being placed upon believers and all of those who come under their authority.”<sup>46</sup> Christian parents are compelled to steward their authority to teach their children about their covenantal heritage and to raise them “in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (Eph 6:4). An essential component of this Christian instruction is to incorporate their children into the life of the community of the gospel. Christian parents exercise their authority by involving their children in the church, and they are

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<sup>43</sup> Wilhelmus à Brakel, *The Christian’s Reasonable Service: The Church and Salvation*, vol. 2. (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 1993), 509

<sup>44</sup> In the 1 Corinthians 7 scenario, the unbelieving spouse should not be baptized because he or she is presumably resisting involvement in the church and persistently rejecting the gospel of Christ. Baptism should not be forced upon the unwilling, nor should it be administered to those who reject Christ and his church. Witherow states, “When anyone born beyond the membership of the Christian church, whether a Pagan, a Samaritan, or a Jew, would seek admission within its pale, he cannot be baptized until he believes.” *I Will Build My Church*, 178.

<sup>45</sup> Witherow, *I Will Build My Church*, 198.

<sup>46</sup> Myers, *God To Us*, 301.

received into the church by the bestowal of the gospel sign in baptism. The Westminster Directory of Public Worship states, “children, by baptism, are solemnly received into the bosom of the visible church, distinguished from the world... they are Christians, and federally holy before baptism, and therefore are they baptized.”<sup>47</sup> Christian mothers and fathers bring their kids to church. If the children are in the church, they should be baptized. The gospel promise belongs to those within the community of promise. “To whom the promises belong, to them belongs baptism.”<sup>48</sup>

### III. Answer to Ortlund’s Hypothetical

A response to the arguments of “Why Not Grandchildren?” would be insufficient without addressing Ortlund’s hypothetical. What should be done about poor John III? Is he eligible for baptism? It is a fool’s errand to establish an ecclesiological determination based on such little detail. Murray wisely warns that every complicated baptism situation “must be dealt with on its own merits. There is no stereotyped pattern for treatment.”<sup>49</sup> However, some immediate conclusions can be established about John III’s case. First, John III’s eligibility for baptism has nothing to do with the piety of John Sr. The sign of the covenant is not administered according to Christian ancestry. Baptism depends on the parent and child’s presence in the covenant community. Second, John Jr. has proved himself not a Christian and is not involved in the life of the church.<sup>50</sup> Therefore, it is safe to assume that John Jr. would not involve John III in the community of the church or seek to nurture his faith in the Lord. Witsius writes, “The baptism of an infant lays on the parents the most inviolable necessity to train their children carefully in the

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<sup>47</sup> Westminster Assembly, *The Directory for the Public Worship of God*, <https://thewestminsterstandard.org/directory-for-the-public-worship-of-god/>

<sup>48</sup> William Perkins, *The Works of William Perkins*, ed. Paul M. Smalley, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2014), 231.

<sup>49</sup> John Murray, *Christian Baptism* (Phillipsburg, N.J: Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co, 1980), 81.

<sup>50</sup> It is possible to make the case that since John Jr. was baptized and raised in the church, as an adult he is under the discipline of the church and is in some sense still part of the visible community. It is difficult to arrive at such a determination without more detail.

mysteries of the Christian religion, the practice of true piety, by instruction, admonition, and good example.”<sup>51</sup> There is no reason to believe that John Jr. would exercise his authority to raise John III in the Christian faith. Calvin writes, “Nothing is more preposterous than that those whom we do not expect to become Christ’s disciples should be engrafted into his body.”<sup>52</sup> If John III’s childhood would not be spent hearing the promises of God preached and enjoying the fellowship of the Christian church, he should not be baptized. His baptism must be delayed until the day when he follows in the faith of his grandfather.

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<sup>51</sup> Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2024), 4.16.49, cited from Fesko, *Word, Water, and Spirit*, 150.

<sup>52</sup> Calvin’s 1559 letter to John Knox regarding the proper subjects of baptism, cited from John Knox, *The Works of John Knox*, ed. David Laing, vol. 6 (Eugene, Or: Wipf & Stock, 2004), 96.



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