

Covenant Baptism: I Will Be Your God and Your Children's God

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Introduction

Among Western Christians there are four major views on baptism:(1)

- 1.** Baptism is the means of spiritual renewal and initial justification and sanctification through the infusion of grace received in it, in such a way that one cannot be saved ordinarily without it. Baptism communicates saving grace, by the working of its own power. Children of all church members and unbaptized adult converts must be baptized (Roman Catholic).(2)
- 2.** Baptism is a public testimony to one's faith in Jesus Christ. Only those who have reached the age of discretion can make such a profession of faith. Therefore, only those who are able to confess Christ should be baptized. (Baptist).(3)
- 3.** Baptism is so closely related to the gospel that through it, Christians receive eternal life and without baptism there can be no assurance of salvation. Both the children of believers and unbaptized adult believers should be baptized (Lutheran).(4)
- 4.** Baptism is a means of sanctifying grace and a gospel ministry to the people of God. It is a sign and seal of the Covenant of Grace illustrating what Christ has done for his people and sealing salvation to the same. Therefore covenant children of believing parents as well as unbaptized adult converts should be baptized. (Reformed).(5)

Protestants uniformly reject the Roman Catholic view of baptism as unbiblical and sub-Christian since it replaces faith as the instrument of justification. Among Bible-believing Protestant churches, the Baptist view is easily the most common and the Reformed view is probably the least well known. The view labeled Lutheran is probably somewhere in the middle in popularity.(6)

Unfortunately, many Bible-believing Christians assume that all infant baptizing (paedobaptist) churches are identical.(7) This essay is intended in part to change that perception. I believe (perhaps naively) that if more Bible believing Christians understood the Reformed view of baptism, they would accept our explanation of what God's Word says about baptism. I also intend to give Reformed believers a clearer understanding of what God's Word says about baptism and to answer objections which are often made against the Reformed position.

Is Infant Baptism Protestant?

In short, yes. All the Protestant Reformers including Martin Luther, Huldrych Zwingli and John Calvin held to infant baptism. Though these three great Protestants disagreed on many things, they all agreed on the Protestant doctrine of justification by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. They also agreed that infant baptism is a biblical practice and the best expression of the Protestant gospel.(8) In fact, infant baptism has been the practice of the historic Christian church since the Apostolic period.(9) Of course the historic practice of the church does not settle the question. Historic practice, however, suggests a certain presumption in favor of infant baptism. Nevertheless, tradition alone is not sufficient reason for any practice in the church. Therefore Reformed Christians practice covenant baptism because we are commanded to do so in both the Old and New Covenant Scriptures. (10)

We believe that the Bible alone is the Spirit inspired, infallible, Word of God written. God's Word alone is the source of our faith.(11) Comparing our ideas with God's clear revelation in the Bible is the only way to safety and certainty.

Why Do Christians Reach Different Conclusions?

Christians study the same Bible, but we often read it differently. Sometimes we begin with different assumptions about the nature of things and authority. These different methods and starting points lead to different conclusions.

True Bible study requires comparing Scripture with Scripture and especially comparing clearer passages with those which are less clear. True Bible study requires a submissive attitude to the clear teaching of God's Word.(12) Bible study is not just looking for isolated texts which seem to prove one's point. Rather, Bible study means that we must do exegesis, that is, understand what the biblical writer is saying, why, and to whom.

What is the Covenant?

In the gospels our Lord Jesus left us two great signs to be observed until he returns, the Lord's Supper and Baptism.(13) These two New Covenant signs broadly correspond to the Old Covenant signs of circumcision and Passover.(14) We call baptism and the Lord's supper covenant signs because that is what God himself calls them. They are signs of his covenant relationship to those he loves, his people.

The term covenant is a very frequent word in the Bible. In fact, God's covenant with believers is so important that it is nearly impossible to correctly understand the Bible while ignoring the it.(15) The Covenant of Grace describes the way God relates to his people. It involves a binding oath between the LORD and his people in which he promises his people to be their God and his people, in response to God's grace, swear complete fidelity to the LORD. The Covenant of Grace was signed and sealed in blood.

God made a Covenant of Grace with Adam, after the fall, in the garden.(16) He made a promise to save and preserve Noah through the flood and us after it.(17) He promised to be a God to Abraham and his children.(18) With each the promise God attached conditions. The first is saving faith, which God works in us (Romans 4:3). The second is to make use of the covenant signs and seals. In Genesis 17 the LORD spoke to Abraham about his covenant:

I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised, including those born in your household or bought with money from a foreigner—those who are not your offspring....My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant. (19)

The LORD gave a bloody mark as a sign to Abraham that he and his children belonged to the LORD. Similarly, in Exodus 12:1-13; vv.21-29, 43-51; God remembered his covenant with Abraham.(20)

The LORD also instituted an annual celebration to remind his people how he mercifully and graciously redeemed his people from bondage in Egypt. (21) As a sign and seal of his saving grace he instituted the sacrament of Passover along with many other feasts. (22)

The Passover had many of the same characteristics as the circumcision. Both were bloody and associated with God's covenant promises. Passover (like the other feasts) differed from circumcision, however, in the same way that baptism and the LORD's supper differ: circumcision, the first covenant sign was applied to infants and adults alike, and was a mark of entrance into God's covenant people.

The Passover feast was restricted to those who are able to understand God's redeeming acts because it was a sign designed to nurture and lead to growth. It was not a sign of entrance into visible covenant assembly of God's people, but served as a means of renewing the covenant.

Is There Still A Covenant of Grace?

Just as God made a covenant with Abraham, he promised a New Covenant to come later. (23) He made this New Covenant in the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. (24) The Lord Jesus consciously and specifically established "the New Covenant". (25) The Apostle Paul said he was "a servant of the New Covenant". (26) How can this be if there is but one Covenant of Grace? The New Covenant is new as contrasted with Moses, but not as contrasted with Abraham or Adam. (27)

This is the point of Galatians 3:1-29; 4:21-31, and 2 Corinthians 3:7-18 where Paul says that the glory of the Old Covenant was fading but the glory of the New Covenant is permanent. The message of Hebrews chapters 3-10 is that the Old Covenant (under Moses) was preparatory to the New Covenant. The fundamental theme of Hebrews 11 is that Abraham had a New Covenant faith, that is, he anticipated a heavenly city and to the redemption which we have in Christ. (28)

The Promise Remains, The Circumstances Change

Now that the promise of the covenant has been fulfilled the circumstances of the covenant have changed. We who live on this side of the Cross view things differently because we live in the days of fulfillment. In biblical terms, we live in the "last days". (29) We have the completed Bible and the gift of the permanent indwelling of the Holy Spirit. (30)

The Old Covenant was designed to direct attention forward to the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross. (31) The old signs like Passover and circumcision along with the other bloody sacrifices and ceremonies have been replaced. Yet we still live in covenantal arrangement with God, and the bloody pictures of Christ have been replaced with bloodless signs (reminders) and seals.

Why is the Covenant of Grace Important?

Because it is a comprehensive category in Scripture, without which the Bible cannot be understood rightly. For example, because God administers his salvation through the covenant, and because there is but one Covenant of Grace, there is one salvation, one gracious promise (Christ) and people of God. Thus the Covenant of Grace unifies all of Scripture. (32) God made a salvation promise to Adam and Eve. (33) He repeated the promise to Abraham, whom Paul called "the father" of all believers. (34) All believers are saved because of God's faithfulness to his covenant promise. (35)

The Covenant of Grace is important because it also explains the Christian life. The God we serve is he who gracious and sovereignly saved us. Just as the way of salvation for Adam was the same as for us, faith in Christ, the moral standards of the Christian life are substantially the same from age to age.

The Covenant of Grace is central to our self-understanding as Christians. God is covenant making and keeping God, and we are his covenant people.

How Were Covenants Made?

Circumcision was the sign given to Abraham. (36) The covenant and the sign were so closely identified that the Lord called the sign of circumcision, "My covenant". Anyone who did not take the sign would be "cut off" from the covenant people. (37) In the Old Covenant Scriptures the phrase "to make a covenant" was expressed with the words: "to cut a covenant", that is, to perform the cutting away of the foreskin of the penis of the uncircumcised adult male or

the eight-day old Hebrew infant. (38) To be circumcised was to be identified with God and to be "cut off" from the world and to be included with God's visible covenant people.

Implied in the act of circumcision is the taking of an oath: "If I do not keep the covenant, may the destruction which is illustrated by the cutting of the foreskin, actually happen to me."(39) This is why the Lord spoke of covenant breakers being "cut off" in Genesis 17:14. In Exodus 4:25, 12:15,30:33,38; Leviticus 7:20-25; Psalm 37; Ezekiel 14:8-17, 25:7-16. Scripture used the same verb for "cutting off" of covenant breakers as it did for the "cutting" of a covenant in Genesis 15:18.

The Lord placed himself under this curse in Genesis 15:17-21. He sealed his promise to Abraham by passing between the pieces as a sign that he would keep his promise. He received the curse upon himself in the Lord Jesus Christ who was "stricken by God, smitten by him and afflicted...cut off from the land of the living".(40) Galatians 3:13,14; 2 Corinthians 5:21 clearly teach that Jesus became sin and endured the curses of covenant breaking for those who believe.(41)

Since the covenant was made by God, it is he who gets to set its terms. God's Word says that before we were "in Christ" we were dead in sins and trespasses. As dead people we could no more save ourselves than Israel could get herself out of Egypt.(42) Because God is sovereign, he has the final say about who receives Baptism and the Lord's supper and how they receive it.

What are the Relations Between the Covenants?

The Lord Jesus has fulfilled the bloody signs and types of circumcision and has replaced them with bloodless signs.(43) Christ's death was the reality to which the old signs and seals pointed.

Now, Christ having died, there is no need for the old sacraments and feasts. Scripture teaches that, by faith, all believers died with Christ.(44) If Christ died an accursed death and we died with Christ, then by faith in Christ we have undergone the curse implied by circumcision. Colossians 2:20; Philippians 3:3 explicitly say that by faith, in Christ's death, all believers have undergone circumcision.

Romans 6:2-10 says that we are baptized into Christ's death. That is, when the sign of the covenant is applied, the recipient is identified with Jesus' death and the cursedness of Christ.

The main difference between the Old and New Covenants is that what the Old Covenant promised through ceremonies and sacrifices, have been fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus. The New Covenant Scriptures refer constantly to the Old Covenant. Romans 3:21, 9:27, 11:13-32; Luke 24:27; Hebrews 9:15, and the whole of chapter 11 all teach that the Covenant of Grace instituted by God through Abraham continues into the New Covenant. God's Word clearly teaches that New Covenant believers are the New Covenant Israel.(45) Everyone who believes is the true son of Abraham.(46) Romans 9:6-9 teaches that a Jew is one who loves the Messiah Jesus and trusts him only for salvation.(47)

Thus we cannot say that there are two completely different "churches" or peoples of God. Paul teaches clearly in Romans 2:29; 4 [all]; 9:6-9 and Jesus teaches explicitly in John 8:31-58 no one is saved by being Jewish.(48)

What is the Connection Between Circumcision and Baptism?

In Colossians 2:11 Paul says "in him you were also circumcised with the circumcision done by Christ" and in v.12 he says exactly how it is we were circumcised in and by Christ: "having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith..."(49) For Paul, in the New covenant, our baptism is our circumcision. Baptism identified us with Christ's death and faith is the means by which we united to Christ for life.

One of the reasons that Paul so strongly opposed the imposition of circumcision by the Judaizers is that, by faith, we have already been circumcised in Christ, of which baptism is the sign.(50) We were already identified as belonging

to God and we have undergone the curse in Christ. So actual physical circumcision is, in the New covenant, unnecessary. Paul tells those who wish to circumcise themselves, to go the whole way and emasculate themselves.(51)

Acts 2:38,39 equates circumcision and baptism. In Acts 2:38 the Apostle Peter calls for repentance, faith in Christ, and baptism by Jews who are hearing his preaching. In v.39 the reason he gives for this action is this: "the promise is to you and to your children, and all who are far off..." The Apostle Peter consciously uses the same formula in his preaching as the LORD himself used when he instituted the sign of circumcision in Genesis 17, which the Jews listening understood precisely.

What are the Relations Between Faith and Circumcision?

Romans 4:1-8,13-25 teaches that Abraham was justified by grace alone, through faith alone and not by works and yet God required that Abraham take the sign (mark) of circumcision. Romans 4:11 says that circumcision was a sign and a seal of "the righteousness that he (Abraham) had by faith while he was still uncircumcised." Circumcision was a sign of God's Covenantal relationship to Abraham and to Abraham's children, all who believe in Christ.(52) The meaning of circumcision was spiritual and not just outward. Circumcision as a sign of faith and entrance into the covenant people as a member was also applied to children.(53)

What is the Relationship Between Faith and Baptism?

Acts 2:38,39 says,

"Repent and be baptized every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, so that your sins may be forgiven and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and for your children and for many who are-for all whom the Lord our God will call mine."

For adult converts, baptism is a sign of what Christ done for them, forgiven them and washed them. Adult converts are baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Forgiveness is through faith in Christ. Baptism is a sign of our new standing with God through faith. Notice, v.39 "The promise (of salvation to those who believe) is for you and for your children."

Our faith is in the Christ who died for us. Baptism is a sign of being united to him in his death by faith. Peter says that the flood waters of Noah symbolize baptism, because baptism is a sign of dying to sin, the washing away of sin by Christ's blood, and living by faith in Christ.(54)

Everyone, (adults and children), who has been baptized must be united by faith to Christ for salvation. Unbaptized, adult converts, profess their faith before baptism. Children of believers who received the sign in infancy profess their faith as soon as they are able. Both are responsible before God to be faithful to the grace represented by the sign and seal they have received.(55)

What Does Baptism Do?

Baptism and the Lord's supper proclaim the same message as the written Word of God: salvation is God's free gift, it is not earned or deserved. We are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.(56) Just as God the Holy Spirit inspired the Scriptures, so also God ordained, in his Word, baptism and the Lord's supper.

Covenant signs were given to strengthen our trust in Christ. Baptism and the Lord's supper have no more or less power than the written Word of God.(57) In the Scriptures baptism and the Lord's Supper are considered to be signs and seals of the Covenant of Grace between God and his people. As signs, the covenant signs are visible reminders of the great act of redemption which God has accomplished. As seals, they are God's way of separating his people from those in the world, and they give to us God's promise that, in example, as surely as we are washed by the water we are by faith washed by the blood of Christ. Just as in the preaching of the Word, the Holy Spirit strengthens our faith by the use of

these covenant signs and seals.

Baptism is not an end in itself. Rather, it is only the beginning of a life of faith and faithful discipleship in Jesus. As Peter reminds, it is not baptism which saves. It is

“...not the removal of dirt from the body, but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand-with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.(58)”

Because sacraments are signs and seals, they do not, in themselves, save. They testify to God's grace, they point us to Christ, and seal to us his salvation. Just as circumcision did not save, neither does baptism.(59)

Where Does the New Covenant Teach Infant Baptism?

From the point of view of the Covenant, every command to baptize, is a command to baptize the children of believers.

Because the promise of the Covenant, God is a God not only to adult believers, but also to their children. That is why, in 1 Corinthians 7:14, Paul said that children of believers are "holy". Paul deliberately used Old Covenant, ceremonial, language to teach the Corinthians that their children shouldn't be considered outside of the visible people of God. To use Old Covenant language, children of believers are "clean", and therefore have a right to share in the blessings of being a part of the visible people of God, including baptism.

Jesus made the same argument in Mark 10:14. He says that the Kingdom of God "belongs" to children of believers. In Acts 2:39, Peter specifically includes children in the fulfillment of the promise. In Ephesians 6:1 Paul addresses children as if they were in the covenant people of God .(60)

From this perspective, Matthew 28:19 and Acts 2:38,39 are direct commands to baptize infants. It is true that there is no explicit command "baptize infants". There is no such command because there is no need for such a command. Neither is there an explicit verse which states God is One in three persons, but God's Word teaches the existence of the Trinity throughout.

Nowhere in Scripture, however, is there a declaration that children are no longer to receive a covenant sign. If one needs an explicit command to baptize children then we should stop admitting women to the Lord's table, since there is no direct command to allow women to come to the table. This is clearly absurd.

The proper question therefore, is not where does Scripture explicitly teach infant baptism, but rather where does it reverse God's command to Abraham to administer the covenant sign and seal to children of believing parents. For two thousand years God's people had been applying the sign of God's covenant to the children of believers. Every faithful Jew understood circumcision to be a visible reminder that he was a part of the people of God. To fail to circumcise one's sons, would be to declare them to be cut off from God's people, grace and promises. To fail to circumcise one's children was unthinkable.

Some argue that because the New Covenant is new children should no longer receive the sign of the covenant. It is true that changes attend the institution of the New Covenant. Formerly the sign of admission was applied to males only. Now, males and females receive the sign of admission. These are changes which flow from the change from typical, promissory signs (circumcision) to signs of fulfillment (baptism). Thus, the change from circumcision to baptism was a change in circumstances, not substance.

To exclude the children of believing parents from the sign of admission to the visible covenant people or to say that God no longer wishes children to be considered a part of the visible community of God's people is no mere change in circumstance but rather a radical change in God's way of dealing with his people.

To change God's clear command to Abraham, one would expect a clear Word from God on the subject, but nowhere does God's Word tell believers to stop applying the sign of the covenant to their children. Since the New Covenant Scriptures never tell us not to apply the covenant sign to our children, we have every reason to believe that the children of believers must receive the sign of entrance into the covenant people.

The Apostles Baptized the Children of Believers

In fact, there is a good deal of positive evidence in the New Testament Scriptures that baptism was applied to infants.

In both the Old Covenant and the New Covenant, God speaks to households and "saves" them. In the language of the Bible, one's house does not refer incidentally, but primarily to the children.(61) The emphasis on "household" or "family" points to a continuity between the Old Covenant corporate view-point and that of the New covenant.(62) Children are viewed as being part of a covenant household, a covenantal unit. The sign, in Scripture, is applied to the whole household unit.(63)

Scripture uses this household formula in several clear passages which show a great deal of unity between Old Covenant practice and New Covenant (baptismal) practice.(64) We know that when Luke wrote Acts he was selective in his reporting. So it is important to note that proportionally, when we compare the number of household baptisms to other baptisms in Acts, household baptisms are common. In Acts, as with circumcision in the Old covenant, baptism is a household affair and the household texts prove it.

Lydia, the Jailer and Crispus.

In Philippi, in a "place of prayer", Paul and his co-workers met Lydia, a Gentile who was called "a God-fearer", i.e., someone on the fringes of the synagogue but not a full-member.(65) After hearing the gospel, "the Lord opened her heart" and "she and the members of her household were baptized." It cannot be argued reasonably that there were no children in this "household". (66)

Paul was jailed for his ministry to a demon possessed girl. Jesus delivered them from jail by sending an earthquake. Their jailer hears the gospel and professed his faith.

Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized....he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God -he and his whole family (Acts 16: 33,34).

As in the case of Lydia, Luke communicated the covenantal nature of baptism through the use of the *oikos* (household formula).

After Paul had been rejected by the synagogue in Corinth he went "next door" to the house of Titius Justus, another "God-fearing" Gentile. There

Crispus, the synagogue ruler, and his entire household believed in the Lord; and many of the Corinthians who heard him believed and were baptized. (Acts 18:8)

These patterns were identical with what occurred in Israel for 2000 years: The adult Gentile converts were circumcised along with their male children in accordance with Genesis 17:10-14. Certainly those adult converts had to confess their faith.(67) Both believing adults and their children are described by the word "household".(68)

Abraham is a New Covenant Figure

It is also important to remember that not everything which was given before Jesus is eliminated in the New Covenant. The fact that our Bibles are divided into the Old and new Testaments, gives some believers the impression that everything which occurs before Jesus' birth is part of the Old Covenant. This is not accurate.

When the Bible uses the term "Old Covenant" it refers to the period of Moses until the beginning of the New Covenant. Not everything which happens in the Bible before Jesus-namely the period of Adam to Abraham-belongs in the Old Covenant proper.(69)

Jesus said in John 7:22 that circumcision was not from Moses, but from the Patriarchs.(70) That means that circumcision does not belong, originally to the Old Covenant (Moses) but the Abraham.

Abraham has a very special relationship to New Covenant believers. In Romans 4:1-25, Paul says that Abraham is the "Father" of those who believe. Likewise, in Galatians 3:29 all believers are said to be "Abraham's offspring and heirs according to the promise" (71).

In many ways, Abraham is a New Covenant figure. Believers are his spiritual descendants. (72) He is said to have looked forward to Jesus' first coming.(73) He is a model of faith for believers in Hebrews 11:8-19; Galatians chapters 3 and 4. So what is true of Abraham is usually true of New Covenant believers. Just as Abraham's faith in Jesus (John 8:56) sets the pattern for New Covenant believers, so also his circumcision, and that of Isaac, sets the pattern for New Covenant baptism.

But Wasn't Circumcision a Sign of External Blessings Only?

In Romans 4:9-11 Paul says that Abraham believed before he was circumcised. He received the sign of circumcision as a sign of God's grace to him. Abraham loved God, not the promised land. Hebrews teaches us repeatedly that Abraham and Moses and other believers who were born before Jesus, looked for a heavenly city and not simply at the earthly Canaan.(74)

Believers born before Jesus received no blessing apart from faith. Like New Covenant baptism, the meaning of circumcision was spiritual and not just outward.(75)

How Can We Baptize Children Who Don't Understand What is Happening to Them?

Did the babies circumcised under Abraham and Moses understand what was happening to them? Of course not. How were Abraham, Isaac and Jacob saved? By grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.(76) The fact God require children of the believers to understand the sign of admission to the visible covenant community before it was given, doesn't mean that they did not need to understand it as they grew up. They certainly did. The same responsibility rests with every Christian today. Every time Christians come to the Lord's table, they renew the covenant, receive the promise of the Gospel again, take up their oath of obedience to God and renew their baptism.

In fact, every complaint raised against Covenant baptism can be raised against covenant circumcision. If those complaints were invalid for circumcision, they are invalid for baptism.

Isn't Repentance and Faith Required Before Baptism?

It is true, that when speaking to adult Jews (Acts 2:38) Peter commanded, "Repent and be baptized everyone of you for the forgiveness of your sins." It does not follow, however, that only adults who can understand and follow this command may receive the sign of entrance into the covenant community. This would have eliminated all infant circumcisions. Obviously, God commanded circumcision of the children of believers.

Substitute the word "circumcised" for the word "baptized" in Acts 2:38. To Jews, whose Bible was the Old Covenant Scriptures, this would have made perfect sense: Renounce sin and receive the sign of the covenant. The case in Acts 2:38 is parallel to that of the foreigner who took the sign of entrance into the covenant people Israel. He had to turn from his old ways and embrace the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The fact that adults were required to make a profession of faith before circumcision, did not prevent the Lord from demanding that they circumcise their infant sons.(77)

Nor should one ignore Acts 2:39 where Peter gives the positive reason for baptism:

The promise is to you and your children and for all who are far off-for all whom the Lord our God will call mine.

God's Word says the promise is to the children of believers as well as to those old enough to repent. Peter was deliberately repeating the Abrahamic-covenant promise in Genesis 17:7 and commanding them to baptize their children.

Isn't Faith Necessary for Entering the Christian Life?

This question seems to imply that somehow faith was not as necessary for Moses or Abraham. Such an implication is false. Hebrews chapter 11 teaches that all the heroes of the faith who lived before Jesus birth obeyed God in faith.(78) If faith was necessary in the Old Covenant and yet infants received the sign of the covenant, then the fact that adults needed to express their faith by circumcision does not rule out the children of believers receiving the sign of the covenant in the New Covenant.

The point of view expressed in this objection denies the unity of the Covenant of Grace. It argues that God deals with his people in two substantially different ways in the Bible.

To say that baptism is primarily an expression of my faith also misunderstands faith, salvation, and the sign of God's grace. Baptism is God's sign which he applies to me through the Church whether as infant or adult. It is God's sign of what he has done. Baptism is not, primarily, a sign of my faith. Baptism is a sign (and seal) of God's grace.(79) Circumcision is always a sign of the grace of God in making the covenant with Abraham. So also baptism is a sign of God's grace which includes adult converts or infant children of believers.

Should Infants Come to the Lord's Table?

God has instituted two types of sacraments. Circumcision, like baptism was a sacrament of initiation into the visible covenant community. The Passover feast (along with the other feasts), like the Lord's Supper, was a sign of covenant renewal for strengthening God's people. So different sacraments perform different functions and have different participants and different requirements.(80)

It is clear, from the institution of the Passover, that the children who participated had to be old enough to understand the significance of the Passover. (81) This same requirement was not made of infants to be circumcised. This distinction flows from the different functions of the signs and seals. Circumcision was a sign of entrance into the covenant applied to infants and to adults neither of whom had ever been circumcised. By its nature circumcision, (and baptism as its replacement), cannot be applied again. (82) The Lord's supper, however, by its nature is intended to be celebrated repeatedly in the life of the believer. (83) This is because the sign and seal of initiation distinct from the sign and seal of renewal.

This same principle was also in effect in the New Covenant community. It is latent in the Apostle Paul's principle that one who partakes of the Lord's supper must be aware of the Spiritual nature of the supper (1 Corinthians 11:29). On this principle (each sign has its own function) it is proper for infants to be baptized but improper to permit infants to partake in the supper.

Conclusion

The answer to questions about baptism lies in God's nature. He does not change and his promises do not change. He does not change the way he saves his people. Only the circumstances change, in which that promise is administered.

God is a faithful, gracious, loving, patient, kind, merciful, covenant (promise) making and keeping God.(84) Our gracious covenant God made a covenant-promise to give Abraham a "seed" and to send a Savior, which he fulfilled in Jesus Christ. (85) In Christ, we become Abraham's descendants and heirs. The same promise God made to Abraham, he has made to us,

I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your children after you for the generations to come, to be your God and your children's God.(86)

God was gracious to Abraham, God is gracious to us. He has given us visible reminders and marks of that grace, one of those is baptism.

Be a Berean, search the Scriptures to see if what has been said here is true.(87) The Word of God is, after all, our absolute rule for faith and life. If you are a Christian parent who has not presented your children to God to receive baptism, I urge you to do so as soon as possible.

If you have made a profession of faith in Jesus as your Savior and Lord, but have not been baptized, I urge you to find a Biblical, Reformed church in your area and seek membership and baptism.

If you have neglected God's grace, neglected your baptism, by not living gratefully, by not serving and loving Jesus with all your heart, I call you to turn away from your ingratitude, confess your sins, ask and receive God's forgiveness.(88)

Christian, your baptism is good news, a reminder that you have been bought with a price, sprinkled with the blood of Christ.(89) Rejoice in God's grace and be faithful to God's Word. If your children have received covenant baptism, be sure to take your oath seriously. You have sworn to fulfill your calling as a parent to bring up your children "in the training and instruction of the Lord"(90).

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Endnotes

* Revised January, 2000. References to the Greek New Testament are drawn from the United Bible Society's Greek New Testament 3rd edition and the Nestle-Aland 26th edition. The references to the Hebrew Bible are drawn from the Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia ((c) 1977). References from the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the O.T. used by the N.T. authors, abbreviated LXX) are from the Rahlfs edition. In most instances I have provided my own English translations. Nevertheless, this essay has consulted a number of English Bible translations, among them the New International Version ((c)1984, International Bible Society), the New American Standard (1971) and the Revised Standard Version (1951).

1 These categories are rough and ready. For example, by Baptist I do not mean only those who attend Baptist congregations, but rather most non-infant baptizing evangelical congregations in North America. Note also that there are other Christian traditions not in this list which wield some influence in North America. For example, the Campellite tradition (The Church of Christ; the Christian Church) teaches a type of baptism regeneration, (formally resembling the Lutheran position) but denies infant baptism (formally resembling the Baptist position).

2 See the Catechism of the Catholic Church (1994), 1210-84.

3 The Baptist Faith and Message adopted by the Southern Baptist Church (San Francisco, 1962), Article 8 says, "Christian baptism is the immersion of a believer in water in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It is an act of obedience symbolizing the believer's faith in a crucified, buried, and risen Savior, the believer's death to sin, the burial of the old life, and the resurrection to walk in newness of life in Christ Jesus. It is a testimony to his faith in the final resurrection of the dead. Being a church ordinance, it is prerequisite to the privileges of church membership and to the Lord's Supper. The Lord's Supper is a symbolic act of obedience whereby members of the church, through partaking of the bread and the fruit of the vine, memorialize the death of the Redeemer and anticipate his second coming". The Baptist position has received the significant support of Karl Barth in his Church Dogmatics.

Many Baptist churches also allow the practice of baby dedication. It would appear that this rite substitutes for baptism of the children of believers. Why? Because believers instinctively know that they need to present their children to God. Like the altar call this is a human substitute for divinely instituted covenant signs and seals of baptism and the Lord's Supper. Baptism is the sign of entrance or initiation into the visible Covenant assembly (church). Baby dedication fulfills this function. Similarly, the altar call often effectively replaces the Lord's Supper as an opportunity for believers to respond to God's grace.

Regarding the mode of baptism there are two major procedures: effusion (sprinkling, pouring) and immersion. Historically orthodox Christians have accepted any mode of Christian baptism. Baptists, however, usually acknowledge only immersion. Although this has not always been the case. "The original Baptists did not immerse" (B. B. Warfield, "The Archeology of the Mode of Baptism", Studies in Theology [Oxford, 1932], 347, n.10). This also unites them with the Campbellites and distinguishes them from the Reformed position. The latter have historically practiced effusion.

The argument over mode is really an argument about what is the appropriate action in baptism to symbolize the truths of baptism. If baptism is the gospel made visible and if we are baptized as an act of identity with Christ's death, then how we ought best symbolize those truths?

The Reformed practice of effusion draws from the rich history of the Biblical practice of sprinkling for sanctification and salvation. The typical Hebrew term for effusion/sprinkling is *Zaraq* (e.g., Exodus 29.16-21) which is translated with a variety of terms in the LXX. Two of the more interesting passages for understanding the Biblical background and basis for the Reformed practice of effusion are the Passover painting of the door-posts with the blood of the Lamb (Exodus 12:22) and Exodus 24:1-8.

In the former case, the Hebrew verb "to dip" is *Tabal* which was translated in the LXX with *Baptizen*, apparently strengthening the Baptist case. Yet, notice that the hyssop branch was "dipped" but the redeeming blood was "touch[ed]" (RSV) to the door-post. In the latter case, Moses "took the blood and sprinkled (*Zaraq/Kataskedannumi*) it upon the people, and said, "Behold the blood of the covenant which the LORD has made with you".... This is the sort of image Peter meant to invoke when he spoke of the sprinkling (*Rantismos*) of Christians with the blood of Christ (1 Peter 1:2).

In fact the word baptize and its cognate *Baptein* is used routinely in the LXX to describe ceremonial washings. The Jews were not in the habit of immersing objects for purification. Look at two notable immersions in the Old Covenant Scriptures. Peter compares God's judgment-flood

to baptism (1 Peter 3:20,21, See also 2 Peter 3:6,7). Notice in the case of Noah's baptism who was dry and who was immersed. The same is true of Moses' "baptism" in the Red Sea (See 1 Corinthians 10:1-13). Exodus repeatedly reminds us that Moses and the Israelites went through "on dry ground" (See Exodus 14:16, 22; 15:19; Psalm 66:6; Hebrews 11:29). Paul explicitly makes the point that Israel was "baptized in the sea" and yet it was dry baptism. The only ones immersed were Pharaoh's armies. It would seem, in the Israelite mind, that to be immersed would constitute an identification not with the God of the Exodus, but Pharaoh. This would hardly be appropriate for Christian baptism.

"Why", one might ask, "in the New Testament, do people go "down" to or "in" the river to be baptized?" (See Matthew 3:6,16; Acts 8:38). It is not certain that either John or Jesus was immersed. Practically, if one is to baptize in the desert, one must stand in the water. In the mass baptism of Acts 2:41 it is unlikely that 3000 people were immersed in the city's water supply. If the Ethiopian Eunuch was immersed, so was Philip who baptized him. Both men are governed by the same Greek preposition (Eis). So, if the immersionist view is correct, that the jailer was immersed, then both men went "into" (i.e., were immersed) the water. More likely, both men went "to" the water or perhaps both men stood "in" the water. For more information on the verb Baptize see J. W. Dale, *Baptizo* (Philadelphia, 1869 [repr. 1991-5]). See also Jay Adams, *The Meaning and Mode of Baptism*. Reformed churches who sprinkle infants do so on strong Biblical grounds and not out of sentiment or personal preference.

4 Article 9 of the Augsburg Confession (1530) says, "Of Baptism they teach that it is necessary to salvation, and that through Baptism is offered the grace of God, and that children are to be baptized who, being offered to God through Baptism are received into God's grace. They condemn the Anabaptists, who reject the baptism of children, and say that children are saved without Baptism".

5 The Heidelberg Catechism (1563), Q.69 says, 'How is it signified and sealed to you in Holy Baptism, that you have part in the one sacrifice of Christ on the cross? Thus: that Christ instituted this outward washing with water and joined therewith this promise: that I am washed with his blood and Spirit from the pollution of my soul, that is, from all my sins, as certainly as I am washed outwardly with water, whereby commonly the filthiness of the body is taken away; Q.70: 'What is it to be washed with the blood and Spirit of Christ? It is to have the forgiveness of sins from God through grace, for the sake of Christ's blood, which he shed for us in his sacrifice on the cross; and also, to be renewed by the Holy Spirit and sanctified to be members of Christ, that so we may more and more die unto sin and lead holy and unblamable lives'; Q.72: 'Is then the outward washing with water itself the washing away of sins? No, for only the blood of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit cleanse us from all sin'. See Belgic Confession (1561), Art.34; Art. 27 of the Thirty Nine Articles (1662); Westminster Confession (1647), chapter 28.

6 The Southern Baptist Convention is America's largest Protestant denomination. The Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA) and the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod (LCMS) are smaller, but much larger than all the confessional Reformed denominations added together.

7 The technical word for those who baptize the children of believers is paedobaptist from the Greek word for child Pais plus the Greek Baptizo which has been brought directly into English.

8 See B. A. Gerrish, *Grace and Reason. A Study in the Theology of Luther* (Oxford, 1962); R. S. Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of Word and Sacrament* (Edinburgh, 1953); W. P. Stephens, *The Theology of Huldrych Zwingli* (Oxford, 1984).

9 W. Wall, *The History of Infant Baptism* (London, 1705). Joachim Jeremias, *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries*, trans. David Cairns (Philadelphia: 1960) and *The Origins of Infant Baptism: A Further Study* (Naperville: 1963) defends a paedobaptist reading of ancient church practice. For a Baptist reading see Kurt Aland, *Did The Early Church Baptize Infants?* trans. G. R. Beasley-Murray (London: 1963).

10 Many liberal mainline denominations do not confess the Bible to be the infallible, inerrant Word of God and appear to practice paedobaptism more out of sentiment more than Biblical conviction. Covenant baptism should be sharply distinguished from the unfortunate practices of those churches who baptize children regardless of the spiritual state of the parents. Baptist practice is also abused. Just as there are churches who baptize infants without any regard for Biblical restrictions, so there are Baptist churches who also abuse Baptism even by Baptist standards.

11 Please see Jeremiah 36.27; 1 Corinthians 2.13; 2 Corinthians 13.3; 1 Thessalonians 2.13; Hebrews 1.5; 2 Timothy 3.16; 2 Peter 3.17.

12 The absolute authority of God's Word is a crucial starting point. It is not Bible Study to assume beforehand what Scripture must say.

13 See Matthew 28:18-20; Luke 22:7-23.

14 Genesis chapter 17 [all]; Exodus chapter 12 [all].

15 The Biblical teaching of the covenant is perhaps the sharpest dividing line between the Baptist and Reformed understandings of the Bible. Baptist scholars do write about the covenant. Christian theologians have been using the Biblical doctrine of the covenant to teach the unity of God's people, the unity of the way of salvation (Christ) since the 2nd century A. D. Since the early 16th century, however, Reformed scholars have worked most closely with this Biblical thread as a way of uniting the Biblical doctrine of justification with the Biblical doctrine of sanctification. Since the early 1520's there has been a steady stream of Reformed scholars who have been working out the relations between the Covenant of Grace and baptism.

16 Genesis 3.14-16.

17 Genesis 6:18; 9:9-17.

18 Genesis 15:1-18; 17 [all]; 1 Chronicles 16:16; Ps 105:8; Acts 3:25; 7 [all]; Romans 4 [all]; 9 [all]; Galatians 3 [all].

19 Genesis 17:10-14

20 Exodus 2:24; 6:4,5.

21 Exodus 12:24-27.

22 Exodus 19:5. Do not confuse a sacerdotal (from the Latin n. sacerdos, priest) view, which regards the minister as priest who procures salvation for God's people through sacraments, with the term sacrament. Sacrament comes from the Latin noun sacramentum. The term referred originally to a deposit (escrow account) held as part of a law suit. The term also signified an oath. This latter meaning was carried over into the church to describe the covenant (oath) signs and seals. See Lewis and Short, A Latin Dictionary (Oxford, 1879), s.v., sacramentum.

23 Jeremiah 31:32,33; Ezekiel 34:35.

24 Luke 22:20; 2 Corinthians 3:7-18; Hebrews 8:1-10:18.

25 Luke 22:20.

26 2 Corinthians 3:6.

27 Luke 1:54,55,72,73; Acts chapter 7.

28 1 Peter 1:10-12.

29 Hebrews 1:2; 1 Peter 1:20.

30 John 14:25-27; 15:26,27.

31 This is why the Bible speaks of "types" and "shadows". See Romans 5:14 (NIV-uses "pattern"); 1 Corinthians 10:1-13; Hebrews 8 [all].

32 Compare Jeremiah 31:31-34 with Hebrews 7:22, chapter 8, 9:15, 10:24.

33 See Genesis 3:14-16. Jesus fulfilled this promise by his death on the Cross.

34 Romans 4:11,17.

35 Ephesians 2:1-22, gentiles were brought into covenantal relationship with God by faith; compare Romans 11:17-24.

36 Genesis 17:10-14

37 God nearly took Moses' life because he failed to circumcise his second son. See Exodus 4:24-26. On the threats attached to circumcisions see Genesis 17:14.

38 Genesis 15:18, Exodus 24:8, 34:27; Deuteronomy 4:23,5.2, 9.9.

39 For a clear example of this curse bearing see the book of Jeremiah. Repeatedly God prosecutes Israel for failing to live up to the "terms of the covenant." In 34: 17-20 the Lord says, "The men who have violated my covenant and have not fulfilled the terms of the covenant they made before me, I will treat like the calf they cut in two and then walked between its pieces. The leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, the court officials, the priests and all the people of the land who walked between the pieces of the calf. I will hand over to their enemies who seek their lives. Their dead bodies will become food for the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth." This is a direct re-enactment of the covenant-oath ceremony of Genesis 15:8-21. God graciously, sovereignly enters into a covenant with his people, i.e., "I will be your God, you will be my people." That Covenant-oath-promise is always sealed in blood. This is a common practice of the Ancient Near Eastern world. See K.A. Kitchen, Ancient Orient and the Old Testament (Downers Grove, 1966); M. G. Kline, The Structure of Biblical Authority, (Grand Rapids, 1972); *ibid*, Treaty of the Great King, (Grand Rapids, 1963); G. E. Mendenhall, Law and Covenant in Israel and the Ancient Near East (Pittsburgh, 1955). This is not just an Old Covenant occurrence. In Galatians 5:12, Paul wishes this very curse upon enemies of the gospel.

40 See the Song of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 52:13-53:12.

41 Isaiah 53:4,8; Hebrews 13:12; see the section above on being "cut off" from the covenant. See also Deuteronomy 21:22,23.

42 Ephesians 1:1-15; 2:1-10.

43 Hebrews 9:11-10:1.

44 2 Timothy 2:11; Romans 6:2,5,6,8.

45 Ephesians 2:1-13 3:6; 1 Peter 2:9,10, 4:17.

46 Romans 4:11,17.

47 1 Corinthians 10:3; Ephesians 2:8-9.

48 Galatians 5:2-6.

49 The first word of v.39 "having been buried" (suntapheis from sunthapto) is a participle which describes the circumstances in which believers are circumcised. See the excellent discussion of the relationship between circumcision and baptism in Patrick Fairbairn, *Typology* (Welwyn, [repr.] 1975), 308-315.

50 Acts 15:1-21; Galatians 2:12, 3:13,14, 5:15 and 6:12 teach that the circumcision has been fulfilled.

51 Galatians 5:12.

52 This was evident even under Moses. See Deuteronomy 10:16 where God tells the Israelites to "circumcise your hearts". See also Romans 4:11; Galatians 3:6-14; Deuteronomy 10:16, 30:6; Jeremiah 4:4; Romans 2:28-9.

53 Genesis 17:10-14.

54 1 Peter 3:21.

55 It is sometimes said, "I was baptized as an infant but did not come to faith until much later, so I was re-baptized". Might it not be the case that if one is baptized in infancy and later comes to faith, God has been faithful to his promise in the sign. The sign is like a seed which God through his sovereign, gracious Holy Spirit, brought to fruition. We should rejoice that we believe and all that baptism promises is true for us.

56 John 1:12,13; 3:16; 4:3; 5:45,46; 6:32-58; 8:56; 20:31; Romans 4; Galatians 2:15-21; Ephesians 2:8,9; Hebrews 11:1; 1 Corinthians 10:1-5.

57 New covenant writers often remind readers of their baptism to encourage them to good works. See Romans 6:1-14; Ephesians 4:1-6; Colossians 2:[all]; Galatians 3:27; 1 Peter 3:8-22. Hebrews 6:4-6 probably refers to the fact that certain persons had shared the Lord's Supper, confessed their faith and then left the assembly. In 1 Corinthians 11 17-34 Paul complains about Corinthian abuse of the Lord's Supper. Their misuse of the Supper reflected their immaturity in Christ.

58 1 Peter 3:20-1.

59 It is possible that Colossians was written for largely the same purpose. 2 Corinthians chapters 3 [all] and 4 [all] deal with a similar topic as does Hebrews chapters 4-9. Romans 4 [all] also addresses the same topic.

60 Ephesians 6:1, Colossians 3:20-1. Be careful not to confuse the Biblical notion of "clean", with the notions of "saved" or "justified". To be "clean", in this sense, means to be formally or legally eligible to receive the sign and seals of the covenant. In the administration of his Covenant of Grace, not all who are legally eligible to receive the sign also receive what the sign signifies, but this does not mean that they should not receive the sign. We cannot decide a priori, whom God has or has not elected to saving faith. We must obey God's Word and administer the sign to all who are eligible to receive it.

61 Y. Feenstra, "Baptism" in *The Encyclopedia of Christianity* Vol. 1, E. H. Palmer, ed., 526-537. See also 1 Samuel 22:16,19; Genesis 17;12,23, 18:19, 45:17-19, 46:6,7 for clear examples of the Biblical idea of 'household'.

62 The Bible's emphasis on families and the visible assembly of the saints (the Church) is much different from American individualism in many evangelical churches. God does save individuals and no one else can believe for you. But throughout Scripture, God often saves and blesses whole groups (e.g., families) at one time. The actions or faith of one member of the group often affects the whole group. This is because God has set up a representative (or federal) system of salvation. Adam was our first representative. The old puritan rhyme had it right: "In Adam's fall, sinned we all". Adam's sin affected everyone at once. So Jesus saved all his people at the same time on the cross. See Romans 5 [all].

63 The New Testament word is Oikos from which we get our English word economic.

64 Matthew 10:12-14; Luke 19:9; John 4:53; Acts 10:2; 11:14; 1 Corinthians 1:6; 2 Timothy 1:16; Hebrews 11:7-9. See also Genesis 7:1.

65 "God-fearer" is the term Jews applied to Gentiles who worshipped in their synagogues. As a frequent worshipper of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Lydia heard the Word of God read regularly. She would have been familiar with the Old Covenant requirements to receive the sign of entrance in the covenant community.

66 Acts 16 :14-15. In fact, recent archeological research has uncovered the fact that it was not uncommon for single or widowed women to "head" a household composed of an entire entourage of employees, and family members. Chloe is one likely example. See Luke 8:2,3; 1 Corinthians 1:11; Romans 16:3-5; 12. N. T. scholar S. M. Baugh (among others) has shown that slaves, in the N. T. world, owned other slaves and property. So the word "household" includes not only an immediate family but slaves and their families. See S. M. Baugh "Paul and Ephesus: The Apostle Among His Contemporaries" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of California, Irvine).

67 Every Israelite and every Gentile convert confessed the Shema, "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one" Deuteronomy 6:4).

68 Some argue that only believers were baptized in the New Covenant. This is only supposition. It is illogical to argue from what is to what is not. If I tell you that I can find only blue cars on Antioch Road it does not follow that there are never any red cars on Antioch Road. It is true that adults are baptized in the New covenant. It is not true that only adults are baptized in the New Covenant.

69 2 Corinthians 3:14; Galatians 3:17; Hebrews 8:6; 9:15,16.

70 That is, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

71 See Genesis 17. The word Patriarchs refers to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

72 Hebrews 2:16; Romans 4; 9:7,8; James 2:20-23.

73 John 8:56.

74 Please see Hebrews 3:14ff; 11:8-10,16; 12:18-24; 13:13.

75 Please see Romans 4:11; Galatians 3:6-14; Deuteronomy 10:16, 30:6; Jeremiah 4:4; Romans 2:28,29. If Jews received earthly blessings for simply being Jews then "it is no more of faith, but of works." In fact the point of the exile is that judgment came to Israel because she lacked faith. If blessings were dependent upon circumcision and race then the exile is meaningless.

76 It is astonishing that many Bible-believing Christians think Abraham was saved by works. This is not true. No one in the history of the fallen human race has ever been saved by works. When Jesus says, "I am the way and the truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father, except through me." (John 14:6) he was speaking of Abraham and Moses as well as us. See John 12:41 where John says, "Isaiah said this because he saw Jesus' glory and spoke about him."

77 Genesis 17:27.

78 1 Corinthians 10:31-13. teaches that Old Covenant believers also obeyed God in faith.

79 We weren't saved because, first of all, we chose Christ, but because he loved us and chose us. See Romans 8:28-39; Ephesians 1:1-15; 2:8-10. We believe because God saved us. We receive salvation through faith.

80 Although the Lord's Supper corresponds to Passover generally, it is also likely that the New Covenant communion feast summarizes all of the great Old Covenant feasts and not just Passover. Each of those feasts was a renewal of the covenant and a reminder of God's saving grace.

81 Exodus 12:26.

82 This is an area of sharp disagreement between Baptists and Paedobaptists. If the Reformed understanding of God's Word is correct, then baptism does not need to be applied more than once just as circumcision cannot be done more than once.

83 This is a serious problem with the Baptist view. The roles of the covenant signs are confused. Because baptism is viewed as the primary symbol of professing one's faith and renewing one's relationship to Christ baptism becomes the means for Covenant renewal. But this is properly the function of the Lord's Supper. On top of this, many Baptist churches practice the "altar call" as a means of professing or renewing a profession of faith. The result is that in many Baptist churches, the Lord's supper then becomes somewhat meaningless. In some Baptist churches the Lord's Supper is hardly practiced at all.

84 Hebrews 13:8.

85 Galatians 3:16.

86 Genesis 17:7.

87 Acts 17:11.

88 1 John 1:9.

89 1 Peter 1:2

90 Ephesians 6:4.

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