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Reforming Credobaptism: A Westminster Alternative for Reformed Baptist Identity

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Abstract: This paper argues that there is a pathway for Baptists to confess the spirit of the Reformed faith and the heart of the Reformed covenantal understanding while maintaining their position on credobaptism. To defend this claim, this paper defines the spirit of the Reformed faith, which is the litmus test for the legitimacy of historical and contemporary “Reformed” Baptist belief. In doing so, it analyzes the most common Baptist failures in relation to the Reformed faith. Despite their significant failures, it is argued that there is a twofold pathway for Baptists to affirm Reformed theology and credobaptism simultaneously while remaining theologically coherent.

Key Words: Reformed theology, covenant theology, baptism, sacrament, Baptist

Introducing the Problem

It is common for traditional Reformed folk to scoff at the idea of a “Reformed Baptist.” They consider Reformed theology and believer’s baptism to be like oil and water—the two cannot mix. Claiming the theology of the Magisterial Reformers while holding to Baptist principles on the sacrament of baptism is incoherent.¹ Baptists cannot believe and confess the Reformed covenant theology (henceforth CT) of Westminster while rejecting its vision for baptism and withholding the waters from the children of believers. Despite this, Reformed CT does not necessarily deny credobaptism.² Credobaptism has the theological resources to heartily affirm all that is essential to Reformed identity. To prove this claim, the argument proceeds in three steps. First, it provides a traditional account of the essential Reformed identity as a litmus test for credobaptism. Next, it shows how most Baptists revise the essentials of Reformed identity. Finally, it offers a potential path for the Baptist convinced

1. See Matthew C. Bingham, ““Reformed Baptist”: Anachronistic Oxymoron or Useful Signpost?” in *On Being Reformed: Debates over a Theological Identity* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 28.

2. *Contra* Joel R. Beeke and Mark Jones, *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012), 725-41. Most paedobaptist’s assume that CT necessarily implies paedobaptism.

of the theological essentials of Reformed identity alongside their Baptist distinctive of credobaptism.

As seen from the overall goal, this paper is not intended to join the overly populated landscape of typical anti-paedobaptist literature. Both theological positions (the essentials of Reformed identity and credobaptism) are assumed as accurate and the defense of such views is left to other works. The main goal is to show various popular revisions to Reformed identity as false hopes for Baptists desirous of Reformed theology. With those removed, it makes clear the most promising ways for someone who desires to affirm Reformed theology *and* credobaptism.

Clarifying Reformed Identity

Calvinistic Baptists who are fond of the Reformed label usually think they are as Reformed as any other. Once they lay hold of Calvin and the Reformers they enjoy claiming the title of “Reformed.” But is this true? Can they be Reformed if they fail to uphold all of Reformed identity? Therefore, what is essential to Reformed identity? The easiest description of Reformed identity is found in the original Westminster or Belgic confession. R. Scott Clark argues in this direction, saying that Reformed “denotes a confession, a theology, piety, and practice that are well known and well defined and summarized in ecclesiastically sanctioned and binding documents.”³ The confessional doctrine as a whole is a unified system that cannot be taken only at points of agreement and rejected elsewhere.⁴ Yet, it is not possible for the Reformed identity to be synonymous with the wording of the original documents (i.e. a full-subscription position). For example, is it necessary to Reformed identity to hold that the civil magistrate has power to call synods (Westminster 23.3)? Most would disagree. Therefore, not all of the original confession is necessary for Reformed identity.⁵ Not every word and line must be binding. There is room for diversity in particular doctrinal loci. But just how much room for diversity is there? Since the confession is the only stable definition of Reformed theology, how can diversity be allowed? The best way to allow for diversity is by holding to a *system* subscription model rather than a *full* subscription model.⁶ Reformed theology is not defined by the exact wording but by the unified system of doctrine. But what constitutes the unified system of the confessions?

3. R. Scott Clark, *Recovering the Reformed Confession: Our Theology, Piety, and Practice* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R: 2008), 3; See also Chris Caughey and Crawford Gribben, “History, Identity Politics, and the “Recovery of the Reformed Confession”” in *On Being Reformed: Debates over a Theological Identity* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 23. They say: “the term does not have any fixed meaning—unless the meaning is to be strictly historical.”

4. Richard A. Muller, “How Many Points?” *Calvin Theological Journal* 28 (1993), 428.

5. See Caughey and Gribben, “History, Identity Politics,” 6-13.

6. See Clark, *Recovering*, 172.

Certainly, being Reformed is vastly thicker than being a “Calvinist” as thought of in current terminology.⁷ Contemporary “Calvinism” is often a thinly veiled focus on divine sovereignty in salvation. Holding to such Calvinism and the Synod of Dort alone does not make one Reformed. But Reformed identity is not less than such Calvinism. Therefore, it is appropriate to distinguish between first order Reformed doctrines and second order Reformed doctrines. Broadly, Reformed theology is often identified by an Augustinian doctrine of providence, an orthodox doctrine of God, and a Protestant soteriology. These are of first importance. But none of these are unique to Reformed theology.⁸ For example, the church catholic has confessed the same doctrine of God throughout its existence.⁹ There is no unique contribution made by the Reformed here. While these are necessary beliefs for the Reformed, they are not *sufficient*. Therefore, it is best to focus on the doctrines unique to the Reformed to find their true identity. Three doctrinal loci best define Reformed identity: covenant, sacrament, and ecclesiology.¹⁰

Foremost Reformed theology confesses covenant theology which is the ahistorical covenant of redemption and the historical covenants defined by the covenant of works and grace.¹¹ There are two aspects to this broad definition of CT that are expressive of Reformed identity. First, it holds to the classical one substance and two administrations CT, rather than any revisionist version. The one substance and two administrations construction is the beating heart of Reformed CT. For example, Michael Horton says, “*Reformed* theology is synonymous with covenant theology.”¹² Herman Bavinck agrees, considering the Reformed vision of covenant to be “the fundamental premise and controlling principle of dogmatics as a whole...” for Reformed believers.¹³ But it seems these quotations merely press the importance of the covenantal idea and not the particular doctrinal formulation. While true, William J. Van Asselt concurs with the necessity of one substance and two administrations by making the substantial claim that “all federal theologians

7. Muller, “How Many Points?” 426.

8. Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1987), 1:63-64.

9. Richard A. Muller, “Reformed Theology between 1600 and 1800,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Modern Theology, 1600-1800*, ed. Ulrich L. Lehner, Richard A. Muller, and A. G. Roeber (Oxford: Oxford University, 2016), 170.

10. A full explanation of these doctrines is not given due to space. They are assumed for the sake of focusing on the primary argument.

11. See Muller, “Reformed Theology,” 176; William J. Van Asselt, “Christ, Predestination, and Covenant in Post-Reformation Reformed Theology,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Modern Theology, 1600-1800*, ed. Ulrich L. Lehner, Richard A. Muller, and A. G. Roeber (Oxford: Oxford University, 2016), 222; R. Scott Clark, “Christ and Covenant: Federal Theology in Orthodoxy,” in *A Companion to Reformed Orthodoxy*, ed. Herman J. Selderhuis (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 428.

12. Michael Horton, *Introducing Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids, Baker Books: 2006), 11.

13. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 3:210. See also Muller, “Reformed Theology,” 174.

agreed on the twofold administration of the covenant of grace.”¹⁴ The word “all” needs emphasis. The Reformed universally refuse deviance from the confessional position of one substance and two administrations. Therefore, to deny this essential meaning of CT is to depart from the course of Reformed theology.

In contrast, some think Reformed CT means using the *concepts* of the covenant of works, grace, and redemption, while the formulation of the concepts and their meaning does not matter. They allow for difference in “degree—not in kind” on this point.¹⁵ However, this makes little sense in light of the unified system. For example, there are CT adherents who use the phrase “dispensation” frequently when constructing their theology, yet their meanings for this word differ vastly from dispensationalists. Does this mean they merely differ in degree and not kind? Surely not. Granted, there is latitude here. As O. Palmer Robertson states, “Particular details of the covenants may vary. A definite line of progress may be noted. Yet the covenants of God are one.”¹⁶ While the details may vary, the core unity of the covenants cannot be surrendered. They are the same in substance, origin, and content, only differing in form.¹⁷ Thus, the Reformed argue for a difference in clarity and form but not in objective benefit.¹⁸ The content of salvation is the same, the means of salvation is the same, and the benefits of salvation are the same. For example, none in the Old Testament lack the internal substance or gifting of the Holy Spirit. The covenantal structure of one covenant under two administrations is *necessary* for Reformed identity. Reformed CT requires the oneness of God’s covenants. Second, Reformed theology confesses the law of God as divided into three types of law: civil, ceremonial, and moral. Reformed theology believes that while the civil and ceremonial ended with the death and resurrection of Christ, the moral law exists in perpetuity.¹⁹

The second essential Reformed identity marker is a confession of the means of grace and the objectivity of grace in word and sacrament. It is necessary for Reformed identity to believe that God works primarily through his promised signs and seals of word and sacrament which objectively speak of God’s grace to his people.²⁰ Baptism and the table do not merely take on qualities of remembrance for

14. Van Asselt, “Christ, Predestination, and Covenant,” 223. See also I. John Hesselink, *On Being Reformed: Distinctive Characteristics and Common Misunderstandings* (New York: Reformed Church, 1988), 97.

15. See Brandon C. Jones, *Waters of Promise: Finding Meaning in Believer Baptism* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2012), 81.

16. O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R: 1980), 28.

17. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:207; John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville: Westminster John Knox), 2.10.2.

18. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:211.

19. Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elencic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison, trans. George Giger (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1997), 2:2, 141-45.

20. Clark, *Recovering*, 326-37.

the loyal soldier pledging his allegiance. They speak on behalf of God and promise grace to those who believe. And the word proclaimed is not a relic of a bygone age transfixed by monologues without the attention distractions of the Internet. It is the power of God unto salvation. Thus, for the Reformed, God is the primary referent of the sacraments, and the church focuses spirituality on these ordinary means by which God has promised to bless his people.

Third, Reformed theology has a particular vision of the church. They confess a visible and invisible doctrine of the church and a regulated religious worship.²¹ Like covenant, two major themes are subsumed underneath this heading. First, the church is visible and invisible. There is a visible church in the world that gathers and confesses but contains both wheat and tares. In its external and visible administration it is mixed. There is also an invisible church worldwide that is completely pure and contains all true believers. Second, the Reformed church worships according to the regulative principle, which safeguards proper worship of God and its own Reformed identity. No formal worship of God should be attempted outside the explicit or necessarily entailed proscribed means within Scripture itself. This contrasts with the normative principle that would allow for worship of any kind not explicitly prohibited by Scripture.

Denying any of these substantial Reformed convictions is to cast oneself outside the camp of Reformed identity. These constitute the unified spirit of the Reformed faith and confession. Diversity in Reformed theology is possible, and a reality, but unity is necessary in these doctrines for the term “Reformed” to have any legitimate meaning beyond pop Calvinism. So, these are the markers of a “Reformed” identity. To make the coming argument as clear as possible, below again are the three markers in propositional format:

(R1): Reformed theology confesses CT. It confesses the covenant of redemption and the historical covenants subsumed under the covenant of grace and works.

(R1*): Reformed CT confesses one substance and two administrations of the covenant of grace.

(R1**): Reformed CT confesses the Law of God as tripartite and the moral law as perpetually binding.

(R2): Reformed theology confesses the two sacraments as the means of God’s objective grace.

(R3): Reformed theology confesses a visible and invisible doctrine of the church and a regulated religious worship.

Therefore, to be Reformed, one must hold to all three points at minimum—these summarize the distinctively Reformed characteristics of the unified system. One can be Reformed *if and only if* he holds to these, along with the first order doctrines.

21. See Wilhelmus A Brakel, *The Christian’s Reasonable Service*, ed. Joel R. Beeke, trans. Bartel Elshout (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 1992), 2:5-8; Clark, *Recovering*, 227-91.

There are no 2 or 2.5 point R's that can count as "Reformed." These are necessary conditions to obtain identity. Without these markers, the unified system is broken.

Surely many will quibble with these markers. Paedobaptist's will cry foul for not including infant baptism as a necessary condition. However, no matter how much one wants perfect uniformity on the doctrine of baptism in the church—even the Reformed tradition—it is not there.²² Further, it is *not* a foundational doctrine—it is an inference from a foundational doctrine (that of CT). Many assume that the affirmation of classical CT necessarily leads to paedobaptism but such a view is not a valid argument. To obtain the conclusion of paedobaptism, a further premise must be offered alongside CT. Even more, paedobaptism is not a uniquely Reformed doctrine but one practiced by Roman Catholics, Lutherans, and the Eastern Orthodox.²³ Thus, the goal is to mark the universal necessary foundational designators of identity. Once (R1), (R2), and (R3) are confessed, debate over legitimate inferences may progress within the Reformed camp.

Baptists and the Reformed Identity

Now that Reformed theology has a more perceivable face, the following three questions need to be answered to understand where Baptists fit among the Reformed. First, is there any historical precedence for being a Reformed Baptist? Second, are there contemporary Reformed Baptists? Third, how would one remain Baptist and uphold the three Reformed identity markers? Any Baptist who desires to own the name "Reformed" needs to satisfy the three criteria for Reformed identity since denying any of the three is to deny the unified system of the Reformed faith. For example, no Roman Catholic can remain Roman Catholic and deny the Pope. Now, the first question is answered in the affirmative, but it is less clear than both typical Reformed non-Baptists believe and contemporary "Reformed" Baptists think. The second is answered affirmatively as well. There are contemporary Reformed Baptists, but they are few because of a myriad of factors. Finally, the final question is answered in the affirmative once again. There is a pathway for Reformed credobaptism without denying (R1), (R2), or (R3).

Historically, Reformed Baptists?

Historically, Baptists are no doubt genetic heirs of Reformed theology, but do they have more than a genealogical link—is there any theological connection?²⁴ Having

22. See Paul K. Jewett, *Infant Baptism & The Covenant of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 78.

23. Bingham, "Reformed Baptist," 43.

24. See Muller, "Reformed Theology," 169. He says Baptists "...are certainly to be regarded as branches of the Reformed movement..." but that some differ over more than merely infant baptism—even soteriology. No one can deny the Reformed family heritage of Baptists but that alone does not

Puritans as fathers does not automatically bestow agreement with Reformed identity. The first London Baptist Confession of 1644 opens by saying, “a confession of faith of seven congregations or churches of Christ in London, which are commonly, but unjustly called Anabaptists.” So, Baptists at least from the time of 1644 were both labeled as non-Reformed and self-consciously desired to distance themselves from non-Reformed theology. They wanted to share in the lot of the Reformed heritage. These same Baptists, in their updated and expanded confession penned in 1677 (commonly known as the 1689 confession), virtually copied the Westminster and Savoy confession in order to prove their substantial unity with traditional Reformed theology. Yet the mainline Reformed denominations continually ostracized them. Does this mean they were not “Reformed?” Do Baptists historically maintain all three markers of Reformed identity?

The Second London Confession is the poster child for most “Reformed” Baptists. Thus, it seems best to consider whether it affirms the three necessary Reformed tests to know whether Baptists historically *or* in the future have the option of confessing the Reformed faith. It affirms (R2) and (R3) with little debate. In section 26 on the church, it explicitly affirms the invisible and visible church of (R3). In chapter 26.3 it follows Westminster in saying “the purest churches under heaven are subject to mixture and error...” They also affirm the regulative principle of (R3). Even the Reformed who intend to keep the label from Baptists concur that confessional Baptists of the 1689 variety agree with their practice of religious worship. Their chapter on religious worship is synonymous with Westminster. The confessional agreement with (R2) is a little murkier. They affirm God’s objective means of grace in the Lord’s Table in section 30.7, saying that receivers take it by faith and are nourished spiritually. However, the 1689 confession, unfortunately, is unclear on baptism. It seems liable to be taken in a memorial subjective means, which most contemporary Baptists seem fond of doing. Yet, susceptibility and vagueness do not necessarily remove one from the camp of the Reformed. Baptists can define the means of grace as objective and include both sacraments, like Westminster. Question 95 of the Baptist Catechism affirms both the table and baptism as ordinary objective means of grace. Thus, they can and some do affirm (R2).

Finally, what about (R1)? Confessional Baptists agree with (R1**). They agree with Westminster in chapter 19 of their confession, remaining resolute to maintain Reformed catholicity. But, what about (R1*)? Here is where the major debate lies. While the 1689 confession may copy (R1) broadly, confessing the covenant of grace and the Spirit as the means of regeneration across redemptive history, many Baptists struggle to affirm (R1*). The confession itself seems to muddy the waters in its own interpretation. It is best to read chapter 7 section 3 in full:

This covenant is revealed in the gospel; first of all to Adam in the promise of salvation by the seed of the woman, and afterwards by farther steps, until the bequeath Reformed *identity*.

full discovery thereof was completed in the New Testament; and it is founded in that eternal covenant transaction that was between the Father and the Son about the redemption of the elect; and it is alone by the grace of this covenant that all the posterity of fallen Adam that ever were saved did obtain life and blessed immortality, man being now utterly incapable of acceptance with God upon those terms on which Adam stood in his state of innocence.

As seen, it speaks of the covenant of grace as revealed in the gospel and “by farther steps” in the Old Testament until it is finally and fully discovered in the New Testament. This is the covenant that saves all believers. So, it appears that the 1689 confession does deviate from Westminster here, potentially substantially, but most Baptists insist that it only deviates to allow for greater diversity in the growing “Reformed” tribe.²⁵ J. V. Fesko thinks it goes too far, saying, “at least at a technical level, it seems more appropriate to call the Baptist Confession a Particular Baptist (or Calvinistic) confession rather than a Reformed confession.”²⁶ Thus, 1689 departs from (R1*) according to Fesko. But does the CT of 1689 need to be read in this modified way? Must it depart from Westminster in its meaning?

Baptists need not depart from CT to affirm 1689. While Fesko is right in sentiment—if the confession is interpreted in this way—the language is vague enough to allow for freedom of Westminsterian interpretation.²⁷ The greater latitude afforded to understanding the covenants in section 7 has the propensity to lead Baptists to reject (R1*) but it does not make it necessary. The classic understanding of (R1*) is not ruled out with the 1689’s confessional wording. There are some Reformed Baptists who subscribe to (R1*).²⁸ Therefore, these “Reformed” Baptists can theologically claim Reformed identity, though, it is no doubt anachronistic to apply retroactively the label to them from a purely historical viewpoint.²⁹

25. Jones, *Waters of Promise*, 73.

26. J. V. Fesko, *Word, Water, and Spirit: A Reformed Perspective on Baptism* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2010), 155.

27. There is growing popularity of the “1689 Federalism” reading of section 7 of the 1689 confession, which I very likely historically correct. However, it is a wrong reading theologically and certainly not Reformed. And it is very well possible to read the 1689 to follow Westminster and remain faithful to the spirit of the confession.

28. See for example Earl M. Blackburn, “Covenant Theology Simplified,” in *Covenant Theology: A Baptist Distinctive*, ed. Earl M. Blackburn (Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2013), 20, 34-36. He is a contemporary example, though he is inconsistent in his confession at times. See also John Spilsbery, *A Treatise Concerning the Lawfull Subject of Baptisme* (London: 1643), 8.

29. See Bingham, “Reformed Baptist,” 32-35. See R. Scott Clark, “A House of Cards? A Response to Bingham, Gribben, and Caughey” in *On Being Reformed: Debates over a Theological Identity* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 72. He notes that “Reformed Baptist” is not first used until 1826 and does not become popular until after World War II.

Contemporary Reformed Baptists?

With the confessional position in view, are there contemporary “Reformed” Baptists? No. The vast majority of contemporary Baptists are not Reformed if the three Reformed identity markers are accurate. Despite the growing group of Baptists that seek to claim the heritage of Reformed theology, they deny essential elements of Reformed theology—(R1), (R2), or (R3)—sometimes all three. The two most popular attempts that intend to maintain the Reformed label and the CT banner are popularly termed 1689 Federalism and Progressive CT. These two groups are not monolithic in their beliefs. 1689 Federalists who read the 1689 confession in the modified way that denies (R1*) are much more consistent in belief. However, the Baptists who subscribe to the newly popular “Progressive” CT are generally not confessional, have much more diversity, and deny (R1**) and (R3).³⁰ For example, Tom Schreiner denies (R1**) when he says, “New covenant believers say good-bye to the Sabbath, for it belongs to the old covenant, and we do not live under that administration.”³¹ While those who affirm Progressive CT are like 1689 Federalism by affirming Calvinism and certain key covenantal arguments, their denial of crucial tenants of Reformed identity requires them to be primarily marginalized from a research standpoint. The goal is to determine how one can hold to credobaptism and affirm Reformed identity. So outright rejections of clear tenants like (R1**) and (R3) makes them outside the bounds from the start. Therefore, the referent for “Baptists” throughout this section will refer primarily to 1689 Federalists, though where Progressive CT agrees with 1689 Federalism they may be noted.

To better show how Baptists can affirm Reformed identity, the common missteps among Baptists in relation to the three central Reformed doctrinal claims will be given. Thus, what follows will be the lengthiest portion of this paper. The inner workings of these Baptist theologies that deviate from Reformed theology will be put on display to understand why Baptists so frequently conflict with Reformed identity. By removing these as live theological options for credobaptism, a twofold goal is achieved. First, the removal of faulty arguments ensures logical and theological rigor. Those arguments that are legitimate are given focus and strength. Second, only once the faulty arguments have been cleared away is it feasible to obtain a better vantage point to see the legitimate Reformed Baptist possibilities.

To begin, how do Baptists often revise (R1)? While theological discourses on covenant abound in contemporary Baptist literature, attempts to revise (R1) abound no less. But voluminous literature on the topic and use of the CT terminology does not free one from revisionary thinking. (R1) in full is necessary to affirm Reformed

30. See *Progressive Covenantalism: Charting a Course between Dispensational and Covenant Theology*, ed. Stephen J. Wellum and Brent E. Parker (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2016).

31. Thomas R. Schreiner, “Good-bye and Hello: The Sabbath Command for New Covenant Believers,” in *Progressive Covenantalism: Charting a Course between Dispensational and Covenant Theology*, ed. Stephen J. Wellum and Brent E. Parker (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2016).

CT. So, where do these Baptists go wrong regarding CT? There are several areas of revision, primarily on (R1*), and five will be listed. Therefore, the majority of space will be dedicated to (R1*) and will mostly ignore those who deny (R1**) since there are enough Baptists who affirm (R1**).³²

First, Baptists who desire to be Reformed frequently equate the Mosaic Covenant with the Abrahamic Covenant. Here, Baptists deny (R1*) by denying two administrations. They build their argument against (R1*) by thinking Abraham is actually Moses. They assume that the contrast between old and new covenants so often found in Scripture is that of Abraham and Christ, but in reality it always signifies Moses and Christ.³³ This is the most common covenantal mistake made by Baptists when attempting to critique Westminster. But, as Beeke and Jones say, “nowhere do we read of anyone contrasting the new covenant with the promises made to Abraham.” The warrant does not come from Moses.³⁴ Because of their confusion, Baptists like Jeffrey Johnson think this is the hill on which (R1*) dies. He says, “the fatal flaw of the theology behind infant baptism is this notion that the Mosaic Covenant is a manifestation of the covenant of grace.”³⁵ But (R1*) need not deny the legal nature of the Mosaic Covenant.³⁶ Moses is not Abraham. For example, Michael Horton argues that, “the new covenant is not a renewal of the old covenant made at Sinai, but an entirely different covenant with an entirely different basis.”³⁷ The Baptist critique against Moses is a non-starter because the Reformed can agree and still affirm (R1*).

Second, many Baptists commonly locate regeneration/heart circumcision in the New Testament era alone. This is a denial of (R1)—and a denial of the 1689 confession itself (see section 7.2). Denying heart circumcision in the Old Testament means that there is not one substance since the substance differs across redemptive history. 1,000 notebooks could be filled with the amount of Baptist ink spilled here. Baptists generally begin with their “stronghold” of Jeremiah 31 and proclaim checkmate. But their reading of Jeremiah 31 requires a denial of (R1).³⁸ Conner represents most Baptists when he says, “the New Covenant is a New Covenant, not merely a renewed

32. See Walter J. Chantry, “Baptism and Covenant Theology,” in *Covenant Theology: A Baptist Distinctive*, ed. Earl M. Blackburn (Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2013), 129-30.

33. See Phillip D. R. Griffiths, *Covenant Theology: A Reformed Baptist Perspective* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2016), 77-78. Griffiths cites 2 Corinthians 3:7 for his justification that the old covenant is legal in nature and not a covenant of grace. The problem is that he conflates all covenants from the Old Testament, making no distinction between Abraham and Moses. Indeed, in his treatment he has chapters on the Mosaic, Davidic, and New Covenant but lacks any chapter dedicated to Abraham.

34. Beeke and Jones, *Puritan Theology*, 728.

35. Jeffrey D. Johnson, *The Fatal Flaw of the Theology Behind Infant Baptism* (Conway, AR: Free Grace, 2010), 69.

36. Horton, *Covenant Theology*, 101.

37. Horton, *Covenant Theology*, 53.

38. See A Brakel, *Reasonable Service*, 1:454.

covenant and should, therefore, not be pressed into the mold of the Old Covenant.”³⁹ He clarifies further what this means, saying, “up until now, the nation of Israel did not have the law of God written in their hearts in this sense. They had the law written in stone, but not written by the Spirit in their hearts. This is not to say that no one in the Old Testament had this blessing, for certainly some did.”⁴⁰ Baptists of this stripe think circumcision of the flesh marks the Old Testament while circumcision of the heart marks the New Testament.⁴¹ Thus, Old Testament circumcision does not signify a spiritual reality; it points to a future reality of spiritual circumcision. Johnson is quite clear when he says, “the New Testament emphatically teaches that the new covenant replacement of circumcision is inward circumcision of the heart.”⁴² Richard Barcellos agrees, saying, “the New Covenant counterpart to physical circumcision is spiritual circumcision.”⁴³ Therefore, they think the New Testament concept of spiritual circumcision has nothing to do with the Old Testament besides a typological relationship.⁴⁴ But this betrays the Reformed claim of the one universal plan of God—the one substance of the covenant of grace of (R1). And there is nothing in credobaptism that requires such a view.

However, many of these Baptists do not deny regeneration in principle to saints of old. Most Baptists who argue against (R1) by using these remarks do backtrack and agree that some experienced these blessings.⁴⁵ But this remains confusing if Jeremiah 31 is a future prophecy. If it truly is referencing a change of heart alone, then Old Testament saints should not be regenerate at all. And that poses a major problem for any saint of old to experience salvation. But maybe there are Baptists who wholeheartedly agree that regeneration is available for all the saints of old despite contrasting flesh and heart circumcision so strongly.⁴⁶ They do not think

39. Alan Conner, *Covenant Children Today: Physical or Spiritual?* (Owensboro, KY: RBAP, 2007), 35.

40. Conner, *Covenant Children*, 44-45; See also Robertson, *Christ of the Covenants*, 276. He makes a similar statement, saying “unique to the administration of the new covenant according to Jeremiah will be the internalized inscription of the law of God.... The new covenant therefore boasts a unique feature in its power to transform its participants from within their hearts.” This is unfitting of (R1) and strange for a confessing Presbyterian.

41. See Jeffrey D. Johnson, *The Kingdom of God: A Baptist Expression of Covenant & Biblical Theology* (Conway, AR: Free Grace Press, 2014), 52.

42. Johnson, *The Fatal Flaw*, 46.

43. Richard C. Barcellos, “An Exegetical Appraisal of Colossians 2:11-12,” *Reformed Baptist Theological Review* 1, no. 2 (January 2005), 19.

44. Matt Waymeyer, *A Biblical Critique of Infant Baptism* (Woodlands, TX: Kress Christian Publications, 2008), 64; John D. Meade, “Circumcision of Flesh to Circumcision of Heart: The Typology of the Sign of the Abrahamic Covenant” in *Progressive Covenantalism: Charting a Course between Dispensational and Covenant Theology*, ed. Stephen J. Wellum and Brent E. Parker (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2016).

45. See Johnson, *The Fatal Flaw*, 127, 160; James R. White, “The Newness of the New Covenant: Better Covenant, Better Mediator, Better Sacrifice, Better Ministry, Better Hope, Better Promises (Part II)” *Reformed Baptist Theological Review* 1, no. 2 (January 2005), 88.

46. See W. Gary Crampton who says that the Old Testament saints had their sins forgiven (Psalm

the argument about the typological relationship (where internal circumcision is the culmination of external circumcision) necessarily denies regeneration in the Old Testament. Their point is to deny the paedobaptist conclusion that baptism replaces circumcision in a one-to-one format. This is fair enough if the goal is to explain the typological shape of external signs versus internal signs. However, it is difficult to remain consistent in this critique considering that the New Covenant also has an external sign. Further, most of the critiques aim at promoting the internal sign as the chief blessing the Old Covenant lacked that the New brings. If the Old lacks it, they cannot help but deny (R1). While most likely do not intend to exclude regeneration from the Old Testament, the argument seems to entail it. Maybe it is possible to argue that the meaning behind the replacement of physical with spiritual circumcision is about the purity of the covenant community. If so, the argument is vague in how many present it. But this would not deny (R1), though it would deny (R3). Therefore, it is not a useful argument if Baptists desire to maintain Reformed identity.

Before moving on, it is important to develop the problem with the argument that the New Testament is internal while the Old Testament is external. First, how is anyone saved without internal heart circumcision? Can it be said that Old Testament saints were regenerated without spiritual circumcision? Such a belief in effect de-spiritualizes the Old Testament as if the Spirit could not work. As seen from the previous section, many Baptists change their conclusion when presented with the objection. They remain happily inconsistent. Second, the New Testament is also marked by an external physical sign: water baptism. It is not as if the New Testament suddenly sheds all external signs that point toward an inward reality. Water baptism guarantees a baptized heart as much as physical circumcision guarantees a circumcised heart. Why do Baptists think the New Covenant is purely internal when they have an external and physical sign in water baptism? It is the same situation as the Old. Conner is typical when he says “circumcision was also a sign of their greatest spiritual need, a circumcised heart, but many wore the sign without the spiritual reality.”⁴⁷ But water baptism also is a sign of the New Covenant member’s greatest spiritual need, a baptized heart, and many wear the sign without the spiritual reality.

Third, Baptists often attempt to destroy the link between circumcision and baptism, especially in Colossians 2:11-12. They know that linking these two signs is all but echoing Westminster. Therefore, they deny (R1*) in their effort to remove the link from the two signs. Some attempt to change the translation of Colossians 2 to

32:1-2), had the law of God written on their hearts (Psalm 40:8; 119:11; Isaiah 51:7) and professed faith in the Messiah. W. Gary Crampton, *From Paedobaptism to Credobaptism: A Critique of the Westminster Standards on the Subjects of Baptism* (Owensboro, KY: RBAP, 2010), 30. See also Griffiths, *Covenant Theology*, 127-28. He says, “there has never been a believer in all of history who has not possessed a heart of flesh, a heart upon which the laws of God have been written on account of their being in the new covenant.”

47. Conner, *Covenant Children*, 59-60.

break the link.⁴⁸ Most argue on theological lines. The two signs cannot be signifying the same reality. Why? Since Baptists cannot deny that infants were circumcised, it appears that the only way to refute infant baptism is to deny the connection between baptism and circumcision.⁴⁹ So, there are six primary ways that Baptists attempt to deny the link (besides changing the translation). First, they posit that circumcision threatens judgment and baptism does not.⁵⁰ Second, they say circumcision demands regeneration while Baptism proclaims it.⁵¹ Third, they say circumcision does not require a profession of faith while baptism does.⁵² Fourth, they say baptism and circumcision were allowed to be practiced simultaneously during the initial New Testament period, therefore they cannot be the same.⁵³ Fifth, they say circumcision signifies realities that baptism does not signify. Therefore, they cannot be the same since they have different referents.⁵⁴ Sixth, they say spiritual circumcision, not baptism, replaces physical circumcision, therefore there is no link.⁵⁵

However, none of these conclusions should follow. First, baptism also signifies judgment. It too is a double-edged sword. 1 Peter 3:20-21 proclaims a baptism of judgment as well as blessing. Water baptism is not fully efficacious, just like physical circumcision is not fully efficacious. Those who partake of the sign without the thing signified are bound for judgment.⁵⁶ Second, Baptists seem to forget that baptism is both a physical and spiritual reality—like outward and inward circumcision. There are plenty of people Baptists have baptized who are not carrying the internal reality of spirit baptism. As noted in the previous section, both baptism and circumcision demand and proclaim regeneration. Neither sign is automatically linked with regeneration nor do they lack the signification of regeneration. Third, circumcision also requires a profession of faith. What ancient Babylonian was allowed to administer or receive Israelite circumcision without a profession? What excommunicated Israelite was allowed to administer or receive the sign with their broken profession? Fourth,

48. See Barcellos, "Colossians 2:11-12," 12.

49. Jewett, *Infant Baptism*, 85.

50. Bobby Jamieson, *Going Public: Why Baptism is Required for Church Membership* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2015), 73. For what it is worth, Jamieson's book title is somewhat misleading. Who argues for church membership without baptism? His primary polemical target, Reformed paedobaptists, certainly would not practice such polity.

51. Jamieson, *Going Public*, 74; Fred A. Malone, "The Subjects of Baptism," *Reformed Baptist Theological Review* 1, no. 2 (January 2005), 78.

52. Crampton, *Paedobaptism to Credobaptism*, 25-27.

53. Crampton, *Paedobaptism to Credobaptism*, 28. Crampton says, "another difficulty involved with equating circumcision and baptism is that in the first century they were both practiced in the covenant community at the same time....If baptism and circumcision are one, not only would circumcision be unnecessary, it would also be confusing and contradictory."

54. Stephen J. Wellum, "Baptism and the Relationship between the Covenants" in *Believer's Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn D. Wright (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2006), 155-57.

55. Barcellos, "Colossians 2:11-12," 20.

56. See Fesko, *Word, Water, and Spirit*, 249-58.

noting the concurrent administration of circumcision and baptism as a reason to deny the link fails to recognize the necessary overlap during the administrative shift. Peter continued to abstain from unclean foods until Acts 10. Does this mean these laws were not fulfilled by Christ and have no inherent meaning in him? No. There is a necessary overlap between the signs during the administrative shift. Fifth, in order for baptism to replace circumcision there only needs to be analogy.⁵⁷ Identity between the signs is not necessary for the link to hold. Yes, there are distinctions between the two signs. Circumcision promises a host of earthly blessings that baptism does not, but they are analogously related as signs of entrance into the covenant community that are designed ultimately to point to spiritual regeneration by means of outward signification. And no Baptist needs to deny the link of circumcision and baptism as proclaimed in Colossians 2 to deny paedobaptism. One can remain Reformed on this point and not succumb to baptizing their infant children, as shown in the following section.⁵⁸ The administration of the two signs may be different but the substance remains the same according to CT—the spiritual referent remains unchanged.⁵⁹ Sixth, as has already been shown, spiritual circumcision is not new to the New Testament.

Fourth, many Baptists say that the covenant of grace is not formally administered in the Old Testament. This is a denial of (R1*). Pascal Denault, in explaining the position of the authors of the 1689 confession, says, “the Baptists believed that before the arrival of the New Covenant, the Covenant of Grace was not formally given, but only announced and promised.”⁶⁰ He continues saying, “the Baptists believed that no covenant preceding the New Covenant was the Covenant of Grace. Before the arrival of the New Covenant, the Covenant of Grace was at the stage of promise.”⁶¹ If anyone believes the covenant of grace was not historically administered in the Old Testament, they cannot follow Reformed CT as (R1*) confesses. Since the covenant of grace is identified with the New Covenant alone on this interpretation, these Baptists then argue that the Abrahamic covenant is not the covenant of grace. For example, Gary Crampton says, “the Abrahamic covenant is not, in and of itself (i.e. simpliciter), the covenant of grace.”⁶² The Abrahamic covenant is conditional, based on obedience, and never justified anyone, according to Griffiths.⁶³ But this goes against the argument of (R1*) and its interpretation of Galatians 3. The promise made to Abraham was not revoked because of the coming of Christ who remains

57. Crampton, *Paedobaptism to Credobaptism*, 35; Jewett, *Infant Baptism*, 104, 238.

58. Jewett, *Infant Baptism*, 88, 96.

59. Robertson, *Christ of the Covenants*, 153; Fesko, *Word, Water, and Spirit*, 341.

60. Pascal Denault, *The Distinctiveness of Baptist Covenant Theology: A Comparison Between Seventeenth-Century Particular Baptists and Paedobaptist Federalism* (Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2013), 62.

61. Denault, *Baptist Covenant Theology*, 63.

62. Crampton, *Paedobaptism to Credobaptism*, 94.

63. Griffiths, *Covenant Theology*, 106.

the same today as yesterday (Heb. 13:8). He remains the same in the Old Covenant administration and the New Covenant administration.⁶⁴

Interestingly, Francis Turretin similarly calls the covenant of grace the “varied dispensation of the new covenant”—apparently making the term synonymous with the covenant of grace.⁶⁵ But he distinguishes between two administrations and one substance. If 1689 Federalism intends to rename the covenant of grace as the New Covenant and have it functionally equivalent, there is no problem.⁶⁶ However, they are less clear than that. Many who follow 1689 Federalism intend to remove the covenant of grace from the Old Testament despite giving it retroactive power.

Fifth, when considering the relationship of the Abrahamic covenant, 1689 Baptists often have a unique view. Jeffrey Johnson sums up the view, saying, “the early Baptists of the seventeenth century understood that both the covenant of grace and the covenant of works were exhibited in the Abrahamic covenant.”⁶⁷ He says in another work, “Abraham received a covenant of grace in Genesis 12 and a covenant of circumcision/works in Genesis 17.”⁶⁸ Thus, there are two covenants in Abraham.⁶⁹ These Baptists think there is no hint in Genesis 17 that it had spiritual meaning.⁷⁰ Jones says, “both General and Particular Baptist accounts of covenant theology distinguish God’s promise to Abraham from God’s subsequent covenant of circumcision with him. This distinction is the heart of Baptist covenant theology, because it separates baptism from circumcision.”⁷¹ Therefore, some of these Baptists, such as Nehemiah Coxe, Thomas Grantham, and many contemporary 1689 Baptist thinkers argue not only that the covenant of grace is not historically administered in the Old Testament but also that Abraham has two covenants made with him—one of grace and one of works.⁷² Even Charles Hodge proposes such a view, saying, “it is to be remembered that there were two covenants made with Abraham. By the one, his natural descendants through Isaac were constituted a commonwealth, an external, visible community. By the other, his spiritual descendants were constituted a church....”⁷³ Therefore, as Micah and Samuel Renihan say, the Abrahamic Covenant

64. A Brakel, *Reasonable Service*, 1:453.

65. See Turretin, *Elenctic Theology*, 2:216.

66. See Griffiths, *Covenant Theology*, 125. He appears to follow this logic, saying, “the new covenant, in regard to its blessings, was before the old covenant. After the making of the old covenant, it ran parallel to the promise of the new covenant.”

67. Johnson, *Kingdom*, 36. There is a glaring inconsistency that appears here—removing the covenant of grace from the old altogether by limiting it to the new covenant alone *and* making it part of the Abrahamic covenant.

68. Johnson, *Fatal Flaw*, 216.

69. Johnson, *Kingdom*, 47.

70. Waymeyer, *Infant Baptism*, 66.

71. Jones, *Waters of Promise*, 87.

72. Jones, *Waters of Promise*, 99; Jewett, *Infant Baptism*, 97.

73. Charles Hodge, *Church Polity* (New York: Scribner, 1878), 66-67.

“differs from the New Covenant not merely in administration, but also in substance.”⁷⁴ Obviously, this view denies (R1*) but it also struggles on biblical grounds according to linguistic expert and Progressive CT advocate Peter Gentry.⁷⁵ Regardless, it is impossible to claim two covenants in Abraham and uphold (R1*).

Now, how do Baptists deny (R2)? Most Baptists deny the sacramental definition of signs and seals of the covenant while also abolishing the link between circumcision and baptism as noted above. They also deny (R2) by their definition of baptism. For example, see the following definitions of baptism from several Baptists who represent the typical Reformed Baptist approach. Bobby Jamieson defines it as a “personal profession of faith.”⁷⁶ Matt Waymeyer says, “baptism does not merely point to a profession of faith—baptism is a profession of faith...”⁷⁷ Since so many Baptists define baptism in such a thin and narrow way, they think it categorically denies paedobaptism since infants cannot profess faith and “go public.”⁷⁸ Leonard Vander Zee follows the Baptist logic. He thinks that how one defines baptism—either as marking a believer’s profession of faith or as a sacramental sign and seal of God’s grace—determines one’s view of infant baptism.⁷⁹ But not all Baptists deny the sign and seal theology of (R2). For example, Paul Jewett affirms baptism as a seal.⁸⁰ Brandon Jones also says, “the covenantal view of baptism states that the Spirit graciously uses baptism as a confirming sign and seal of a believer’s initiation into the new covenant, thereby strengthening his or her consciousness of salvation.”⁸¹ Therefore, confessing (R2) does not necessarily bind one to infant baptism according to some Baptists. Following the Baptist Catechism Question 100, Baptists are free to confess baptism as a sign and seal of the covenant of grace.

Finally, how do these Baptists deny (R3)? Most deny the mixed church classically known as Presbyterian polity. They argue that the prophecy of Jeremiah 31 means the church is to be presently wholly pure and unmixed.⁸² This is the primary reason to

74. Micah and Samuel Renihan, “Reformed Baptist Covenant Theology and Biblical Theology,” (Lecture, Westminster Seminary California), 3.

75. See Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 258-80.

76. Jamieson, *Going Public*, 2, 49.

77. Waymeyer, *Infant Baptism*, 102.

78. Jamieson, *Going Public*, 53; Waymeyer, *Infant Baptism*, 85.

79. Leonard J. Vander Zee, *Christ, Baptism and the Lord’s Supper: Recovering the Sacraments for Evangelical Worship* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2004), 122.

80. Jewett, *Infant Baptism*, 87.

81. Jones, *Waters of Promise*, 132.

82. Wellum, “Relationship between the Covenants,” 138. See also Johnson, *Kingdom*, 105. He says, “the Church has been God’s redemptive plan from the beginning, for spiritual Israel has always consisted of believers alone in both the Old and New Testaments.” This is very confusing. It seems he argues for an unmixed society in both Testaments or simply is misunderstanding the classic visible/invisible distinction that is available to him.

deny baptism of infants according to the newest Baptist manifesto on the covenants.⁸³ The authors flatly deny the validity of the visible/invisible distinction for the church.⁸⁴ But empirical evidence is enough to reconsider the timing of the Jeremiah 31 fulfillment in reality. What church is made of purely believers on this earth until the glorified state? Most Baptist churches have membership rolls far larger than weekly attendance. Is this not enough to convince them of the Reformed tradition on the visible and invisible church? The typical Baptist retort is that believing in a mixed church means laxity regarding the goal of purity. But J. V. Fesko responds by saying, “ministers and elders should always seek the purity of the church, but to say that the church is not a mixed body flies in the face of the biblical evidence.”⁸⁵ Again, Fesko says, “the administration of the covenant is broader than election; the visible covenant community is not synonymous with the elect of God.”⁸⁶ James White, a self-professed “Reformed Baptist,” also agrees with the invisible/visible church distinction.⁸⁷ The Reformed confess that the only true members of the church are the invisible members, but in this covenantal epoch, the external church has false members within its fold that will eventually be exposed as goats.⁸⁸ The covenant is always administered in a real and organic way. There is no way to avoid that this side of the eschaton. Sinclair Ferguson makes the burden of Jeremiah 31 clear, saying, “now, in the new covenant, the boundaries of the Mosaic economy within which the Spirit had, by and large, previously manifest himself are rendered obsolete.”⁸⁹ The point is not a perfectly glorified pure church in the New Testament era—that is reserved for the eschaton. Rather, the point is a larger community of faith made of all nations, tribes, and tongues, bonded by spiritual unity rather than national descent. Baptists need not follow an alternative interpretation to maintain credobaptism.

How to be Reformed and Baptist Without Losing Your Confession

Now that the typical Baptist objections to (R2), (R3), and particularly (R1) have been given, should Baptists tamper with these commitments, particularly (R1)? No. Need they tamper with them to maintain credobaptist convictions? No. No revision of any of them, even (R1*), is necessary to uphold believer’s baptism. Most Baptists

83. Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 685.

84. Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 688, 691.

85. Fesko, *Word, Water, and Spirit*, 316.

86. Fesko, *Word, Water, and Spirit*, 351.

87. White, “The Newness of the New Covenant,” 85.

88. See A Brakel, *Reasonable Service*, 2:10; Turretin, *Elenctic Theology*, 3:33.

89. Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996), 62. See also Augustine, *The Trinity*, trans. Edmund Hill (Hyde Park, NY: New City, 2015), IV.5.29.

assume that (R1*) necessitates paedobaptism. Most Presbyterians think the same.⁹⁰ R. Scott Clark even says, “at key points the Particular Baptists did not affirm and could not affirm the Reformed view that the covenant of grace is substantially one administered variously in redemptive history.”⁹¹ However, this is not the case. There is a safe haven for Baptists by conviction who see Westminster as largely accurate and nearly all other Baptist revisionist attempts as crude forms of dispensationalism in disguise. Therefore, affirming (R1), (R2), and (R3) does not require conversion to paedobaptism. There is a Westminster Baptist alternative. How is this possible? There are two primary avenues one can maintain (R1), (R2), (R3), and credobaptism. First, one must clarify the second administration of the one covenant of grace. Second, one must notate the nature of the covenant signs of circumcision and baptism as positive rather than moral law.

The first avenue revolves around Galatians 3:16 which says “now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, ‘And to offsprings,’ referring to many, but referring to one, ‘And to your offspring,’ who is Christ.” This verse is crucial for understanding the nature of the covenant sign of baptism and who has warrant to receive it. It signifies the differing nature of the administration of the same covenant of grace. The covenant given to Abraham is the same covenant in substance that is given to Christ. Each covenant is given to the heir and their offspring—indeed, offspring are not removed from any covenantal administration. God always includes children.⁹² However, the updated administration of this singular promise differs in scope of offspring. They continually narrow—from Noah to Abraham to David. Each includes a narrower segment of posterity. In the New Covenant administration of the same covenant of grace, the offspring of the covenant head (Jesus) are to receive the New Covenant sign of baptism. Jesus is the great patriarch with a promised offspring in the New Testament.⁹³ Therefore, who are the offspring of Christ? Believers alone.⁹⁴ Conner argues that “Christ is the last physical seed in Abraham’s covenant line to whom the promises were made. There is no other physical seed beyond Christ to whom these promises were directed....In Christ the physical line stops, even as the spiritual line continues.”⁹⁵ Thus, all aspects of the Abrahamic covenant are transformed from physical to spiritual in the new

90. For example, see the arguments made by A Brakel, *Reasonable Service*, 2:508-11. He assumes a confession of (R1*) necessitates a belief in paedobaptism. But this conclusion does not necessarily follow from the agreed upon premises. Affirming (R1*) does not require paedobaptism. It may be consistent with (R1*) but it is not necessary.

91. Clark, “A House of Cards,” 79.

92. Greg Nichols, *Covenant Theology: A Reformed and Baptist Perspective on God’s Covenants* (Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2011), 118.

93. Nichols, *Covenant Theology*, 115.

94. Johnson, *Fatal Flaw*, 152, 201; Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 697.

95. Conner, *Covenant Children*, 18.

administration, including land, nation, and seed.⁹⁶ As Philippians 3:3 proclaims, “for we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh.”

If this is a fair reading, an appeal to Ockham’s razor could also be raised at this point. This understanding of covenantal administration and the subjects of baptism is simpler than the alternative. The paedobaptist typically must offer significant theological and pastoral applications from the old administration to the new administration that are not necessary on a Reformed Baptist reading. For example, there is no need to explain why the children of believing grandparents but unbelieving parents should not be baptized like typical Reformed paedobaptists must explain. It is enough to require baptism upon profession. Of course Ockham’s razor has the habit of causing self-inflicted wounds. So it is possible that Ockham offers no help regarding this suggestion, but it appears to work in its favor.

Now, the problem with the aforementioned argument is this: Galatians 3 is not showing how believers are the offspring of Christ but how believers are the offspring of Abraham (Gal. 3:29). In fact, nowhere are Christians referred to as the “offspring of Christ.” They are referred to as his co-heirs and even his siblings, but never his offspring. So it appears wrong to say that there is a “new” offspring different from Abraham. It is the same offspring, the offspring of Abraham, to whom believers are united by faith and baptism.⁹⁷ If this is the case, the argument of Galatians 3:16 is significantly weakened but can still run in favor of credobaptism by claiming that Christ is the sole offspring and the sign is applied only to those united by faith. However, this is not as clean or elegant as making the link with Christ and his spiritual offspring.

Such a formulation of the second administration of the one covenant of grace still appears to stand or fall on whether the immutable promise of God in Genesis 17 is to be interpreted as Abraham/believers and his/their physical children or Christ and his spiritual children alone. Genesis 17 promises to be a “God to you and your children.” If this promise is made to Abraham and his physical descendants, how can it be “changed” without denying the unified substance of (R1*)?⁹⁸ The administration “changes” and not the substance because the promised seed has come who now administers his covenant in a different way. This does not remove the external administration that is given in an organic and historical way. This merely removes the format of administration. Now the offspring who receive the sign are confessing believers. Thus, Baptists can continue to uphold the commonly denied (R1*).

96. Conner, *Covenant Children*, 24.

97. Rory Chapman, e-mail correspondence, July 30, 2018.

98. This is not to ignore the question of how the promise of Genesis 17 can reference salvation according to traditional Reformed lore and yet not save every child. Indeed, this question points to Romans 9-11. However, such an engagement would take an entire paper.

Second, circumcision and baptism as covenantal signs are positive laws. What is positive law? Positive law is dependent on special revelation/the will of God alone for its obligation.⁹⁹ It is not moral or natural. It is law like the civil and ceremonial laws of the Old Testament rather than the perpetual command against murder.¹⁰⁰ For example, Hebrews 9:10 speaks of “regulations for the body imposed until the time of reformation.” As the Renihan’s state:

When it comes to positive laws we should not assume they are in effect unless rescinded. Positive laws, instead, end with the termination of the covenant in which they were given. Positive laws are given in a particular redemptive historical setting and in a particular covenant document. Positive laws only apply to the covenantal context in which they are given.¹⁰¹

These covenantal signs cannot be defined apart from God’s explicit instruction since they do not exist apart from the positive institution.¹⁰² Therefore, baptism as a positive sign of a new administration is free to be defined as its own unique sign even if it has a previous referent that it fulfills. It is not necessarily identical to the previous covenantal sign. What the previous covenantal administration has does not perfectly connect to what the new administration has.¹⁰³ Since the new administration is administered in a new way, the sign is administered in a new way. For example, women are now to receive the sign despite their inability to receive it in the first administration. No one denies this administrative shift for the sign, so why is it a cardinal sin to adjust the new administration to confessing individuals alone?

Now, to be clear, honoring the progress of redemptive history with the two signs and relegating them to positive law rather than moral law does not mean the Bible can be read as a non-Christian. The Old Testament is not some national historical footnote. It is foundational for understanding baptism. Too many Baptists follow the faulty hermeneutic expressed by Johnson when he says, “outside the New Testament there are no other inspired or authoritative writings regarding baptism.”¹⁰⁴ He thinks, “the purpose, the effects, and the participants of baptism should be ascertained entirely from within the confines of the New Testament.”¹⁰⁵ This is quite the proposal for someone who confesses the sufficiency of all Scripture. Now, certainly there is the ever present danger to “Christianize the Old Testament and Judaize the New.”¹⁰⁶

99. Turretin, *Elencic Theology*, 2:2.

100. Micah Renihan and Samuel Renihan, “Reformed Baptist Covenant Theology and Biblical Theology,” 10.

101. Renihan and Renihan, “Reformed Baptist,” 11.

102. Samuel Renihan, “Methodology and Hermeneutics: The Importance and Relationship of Biblical Theology, Systematic Theology, and Typology in Covenant Theology,” *Journal of IRBS Theological Seminary* (2018), 79.

103. Renihan, “Methodology and Hermeneutics,” 83.

104. Johnson, *Fatal Flaw*, 25.

105. Johnson, *Fatal Flaw*, 25.

106. Jewett, *Infant Baptism*, 91.

But this does not mean that the meaning and structure of the Old Testament can be jettisoned. To deny the validity of the Old Testament for understanding Baptism is to destroy any potential theological or typological link between it and circumcision. Circumcision and its practice matter to understand baptism correctly.¹⁰⁷ But, since they are positive signs that are analogically related and not identical, they can have different subjects and yet remain in a typological relationship. Therefore, one must make theological judgments regarding the actual nature of the proper subjects of the sign of baptism—it is not wholly continuous with circumcision. Real exegetical and theological work needs to be done. That said, the major difference between the two signs is that circumcision is the promise of the seed while baptism is the promise of the spirit.¹⁰⁸ Because of these differing positive purposes, they are applied to differing subjects without denying (R1), (R2), or (R3).

Conclusion

The title of this article suggests that Baptists are in need of Reform regarding their covenantal and credobaptist convictions. It has been argued that the majority who claim the label of Reformed reject it in their beliefs but that it is possible for them to reject their faulty arguments in favor of a classical Reformed understanding without losing their credobaptism. This path allows for them to be considered “Reformed” in the theological sense even if not historical. Baptists have freedom to confess the spirit of the Reformed faith and practice baptism of confessors alone. Whether one takes to the positive arguments for Reformed credobaptism or not, at minimum by defining Reformed identity more tightly and showing the failures of many Baptists, space has been created for credobaptists to be creative in defense of their vision of baptism and for the conversation between the two parties to advance beyond the usual skirmishes. There are probably other positive arguments that have failed to be mentioned that would be consistent with (R1), (R2), and (R3) and remain consistent with credobaptism. It is only hoped that this short article prompts more constructive theological work along these lines.

107. The argument that circumcision and baptism are linked does gesture toward how Baptists ought to view infant “baptisms” in a consistent and fair manner. Since baptism is a sign of the covenant of grace (rather than a sign of faith), the *timing* of one’s faith is not essential to the objective nature of the sign. While an infant baptism is irregular due to the positive command regarding the timing of the rite, it is not so distorted as to invalidate the sign. Indeed, what if an infant were regenerated? Then, on technical grounds, they are baptized as a “believer” and thus the sign is valid according to most Baptists. The essential elements of baptism are all present (including faith!). This simply relegates *timing* of faith to an accidental feature of baptism. This best promotes catholicity and texts like Acts 8 and the baptism of Simon. Indeed, this is the only way for Baptists to maintain catholicity and avoid their traditional schismatic attitude of barring those baptized as infants from membership and the table, which on logical grounds denies Christian faith to the vast majority of Christians in the history of the church. Mercy must be urged.

108. Fesko, *Word, Water, and Spirit*, 340.