

## *An Introduction to the 17th Century Debate on Infant Baptism*

Solid Ground Christian Books has recently published an important work by Pascal Denault on the 17th century debate over baptism. Denault's work *The Distinctiveness of Baptist Covenant Theology - A Comparison Between Seventeenth-Century Particular Baptist and Paedobaptist Federalism* is a work that attempts to bring out the fundamentally different approaches to understanding the covenants between the early Baptists and the general Reformed majority, even as they shared a common body of truth regarding the doctrines of grace and the law of God.

While Denault decidedly comes from a Reformed Baptist perspective, the purpose of this paper will be to review Denault's work and provide an introduction to the 17th century debate. The 17th century saw the rise of the Calvinistic Particular Baptist movement in England as distinct from Anabaptists and General (Arminian) Baptists, and the systemizing of their doctrine in the First and Second London Baptist Confessions of Faith. As a result of the growth in this movement, a significant amount of literature was produced by paedobaptist Presbyterians and Independents to refute the credobaptist position. Denault explores this literature to unveil the foundational differences in their covenant theology.

The purpose of this paper is not so much to provide a biblical evaluation of the arguments on each side, but rather to accurately set forth the nature of the debate in the 17th century. Proverbs teaches us that a man who speaks first seems right until another examines him (Prov. 18:17) - and so, the goal of this review will be to re-enact the debate of the 17th century in a simple form, for the reader's evaluation. Seeing that this paper is a basic review of Denault's work, it will not extensively quote from the original sources used in the work, but will set forth the general features of the debate, pointing to Denault's work for a more comprehensive study. Further, as a caveat, this paper will primarily compare the "Presbyterians" and the "Baptists" as Denault does in his work, even though the debate also included paedobaptistic Independents (like Thomas Goodwin and John Owen), non-Calvinistic Baptists (like Thomas Grantham), and Anglican anti-paedobaptists (like John Tombes).

Denault begins by speaking about what all Calvinistic groups agreed on in the 17th century. Both Presbyterians and Baptists together affirmed the existence of a Covenant of Works that was broken, resulting in the fall of the human race, an eternal Covenant of Redemption between the Father and the Son to redeem the Elect, and a Covenant of Grace to historically apply that redemption to the Elect. The area of difference however concerned the nature of the covenant of grace.

### **Definition of Covenant of Grace**

Presbyterians (as articulated in WCF 7:6) affirmed that the covenant of grace is one in substance throughout all ages, but merely differing in its administration. Baptists, however, understood that while the covenant of grace was revealed in all ages after the fall, it was only established when it was fully unveiled and ratified in the New Testament. The Presbyterian paradigm was "one covenant - two administrations", whereas the Baptist paradigm was "promise revealed to promise

fulfilled". In other words, the key distinction for Presbyterians was between substance and administration, whereas the key distinction for Baptists was between promise and fulfillment.

This is not to deny that Presbyterians affirmed that there was a promise/fulfillment paradigm or that Baptists affirmed covenantal administrations. Rather, the Presbyterian while acknowledging the change from promise to fulfillment in the days of the New Testament (WCF 7:5-6), held that the Covenant of Grace actually existed in its substance in the Old Testament. The historical Old Testament covenants were administrations of the Covenant of Grace, setting forth in their substance, the very same Gospel that is at the heart of the Covenant of Grace. The Gospel was at the heart of every Old Testament covenant (although some questioned whether this was true of the Mosaic Covenant). This secured the unity of the covenant of grace across history.

For Baptists, none of the Old Testament covenants were covenants of grace, properly speaking. While God revealed the promise of the Covenant of Grace to His elect in the Old Testament, none of the covenants actually offered forth this gospel in themselves. As Denault argues with the Abrahamic Covenant, God revealed the promise of the Covenant of Grace to Abraham, but the Abrahamic Covenant did not actually grant this promise to Abraham. While believers existed in the Old Testament, they did not enjoy these benefits by virtue of any of the Old Testament covenants. Rather, they enjoyed these benefits by virtue of the New Covenant. For Baptists, therefore, the New Covenant was not a mere administration of the Covenant of Grace but was the very Covenant of Grace in itself. While the Covenant of Grace existed as a promise in the Old Testament, it only came into historical existence as a ratified covenant at the death of Christ. Thus, Old Testament saints were in effect saved by virtue of the New Covenant, even as they were also members of various Old Testament covenants.

Denault defends the historical validity of this claim by contrasting the 1689 London Baptist Confession of Faith (SLBC) with the Savoy Declaration and Westminster Confession of Faith. Whereas the Westminster Confession says that "there are not...two covenants of grace, differing in substance, but one and the same, under various dispensations (i.e. administrations)" (WCF 7:6), the SLBC simply speaks of the covenant of grace being revealed "by farther steps, until the full discovery thereof was completed in the New Testament" (SLBC 7:3). Given the SLBC's deliberate attempt to imitate the Westminster Confession on points of agreement, the significant rewriting of this portion of the Confession reveals the Baptists' distinct approach to the Covenant of Grace, Denault argues.

### **Covenant Membership**

This difference in understanding the nature of the covenant of grace resulted in several differing corollaries. For the Presbyterian, the Covenant of Grace in its essential substance is the same in every historical covenant. The differences arise only in its outward administration. Every covenant has the Gospel at its center. But the way it administers this promise outwardly differs from age to age - changing from the types, sacrifices, and shadowy ordinances of the Old Testament, to the simple New Testament ordinances of baptism and the Lord's supper. Nevertheless, the substance of all covenants has always been the same.

The result of this is a twofold understanding of the Covenant of Grace. The substance of the Covenant of Grace promises the spiritual blessings of the Gospel only to those who are inwardly

regenerate (Elect), making up the invisible church. However, outwardly the Covenant of Grace, administers the ordinances of worship to a mixed multitude consisting of both true believers as well as false professors and hypocrites. Speaking absolutely, the Covenant of Grace is with the regenerate alone (as to its substance). Speaking comparatively, the Covenant of Grace is with those who are visibly marked as the people of God (as to its outward administration). There is thus an inward and an outward covenant, an invisible church and a visible church, the substance of the covenant and the administration of the covenant.

This twofold understanding results in two important implications: First, the visible church is a mixed multitude of regenerate and unregenerate. While the substance of the Covenant of Grace is only enjoyed by the regenerate, the outward administration of the Covenant of Grace in the visible church is with all who visibly evidence themselves to be the people of God. This inevitably will include hypocrites and false professors like Simon Magus and Judas Iscariot. Second, it is not contrary to the nature of the Covenant of Grace to have infant children of believers included in the Covenant of Grace, as to its outward administration. While they may not all be inwardly regenerate, they may be visibly marked out as the people of God, giving them access to the outward privileges of the worship of God and the fellowship of the church. Presbyterians proved the existence of this outward privilege chiefly from the Abrahamic Covenant, where God commands the placing of the covenant sign upon infant children, sealing to them membership in the visible church. This is not sufficient to give them inward spiritual benefits that are promised in the substance of the Covenant of Grace, but it does give them outward privileges, which are to make them wise unto salvation (Rom. 3:1-2).

The Baptists on the other hand rejected this twofold understanding of the Covenant of Grace and instead argued that there was no formally established covenant of grace in the Old Testament. Thus, whatever privilege the children of Abraham had, it was not given them by the Covenant of Grace. The Covenant of Grace existed only as a promise in the Old Testament and was not formally in existence as a covenant. It only came into existence when the New Covenant was ratified by Christ's blood - indeed, the New Covenant and the Covenant of Grace are identical, Denault remarks. Therefore, since the Covenant of Grace, which was fulfilled at the death of Christ, promised full remission of sins, regeneration, justification, and all the benefits of the Gospel, one could not be part of the Covenant of Grace without possessing these benefits. By denying the substance/administration distinction, Baptists were able to assert that there was no inward/outward aspect of the Covenant of Grace, but that the Covenant of Grace is entirely inward and soteriological in its nature. As such, the only way of entering the Covenant of Grace was by the new birth, and all in the Covenant of Grace must by definition know the Lord. Since the New Covenant is the Covenant of Grace, it naturally followed for Baptists, that unregenerate infants could not be part of the New Covenant.

### **Covenant-Breaking**

A final implication of the differing federal theologies of Presbyterians and Baptists was their understanding of whether the Covenant of Grace could be broken. Both Presbyterians and Baptists affirmed that as to its substance, the Covenant of Grace was unbreakable - Christ grants faith to unite the Elect to Himself, to enjoy the benefits of the Gospel, such that none can pluck them from His hand. Nevertheless, Presbyterians did affirm that with respect to the outward administration of the covenant of grace, there were those who did break the covenant. They

argued this from the clear references to covenant breaking in the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 17:14), the curses of the Mosaic Covenant (Deut. 28), and the apostasy passages in the New Testament (Heb. 10:29). Those who were truly and inwardly in the Covenant of Grace were preserved and kept by Christ and could not break the covenant, but those who were merely in outward covenant through receiving the covenant sign and professing faith could break the covenant with respect to its outward administration.

For the Baptist, since the substance/administration distinction was denied, all who are in the Covenant of Grace must be regenerate and therefore must persevere till the end. Moreover, the covenant breaking of the Old Testament covenants was deemed irrelevant because none of these covenants were administrations of the Covenant of Grace. Furthermore, on the grounds of Jeremiah 31:32, they argued that the New Covenant (the Covenant of Grace) was different from the Old Covenant in that it could not be broken. Apostates were never truly part of the Covenant of Grace – “they went out from us, but they were not of us” (1 John 2:19). They did not fall away from the New Covenant, but rather from their profession and membership in a visible church. As Greg Nichols notes in his recent work *Covenant Theology – A Reformed and Baptist Perspective on God’s Covenants*, apostates were “sanctified ecclesiastically”, but were not properly in the New Covenant so as to be able to break it. Given that it was impossible to break the New Covenant, the concept of infant membership in the Covenant of Grace could not be plausible.

### **The Abrahamic Covenant**

These crucial differences in the nature of the Covenant of Grace resulted in significantly different approaches to the historical biblical covenants. For the Baptist, the Abrahamic Covenant could not be a covenant of grace, since the Covenant of Grace only came into formal existence in the New Testament. Nevertheless, they were forced to acknowledge that God revealed the promise of the Gospel to Abraham (Gal. 3:17-18). In order to reconcile these two beliefs, they argued that the Abrahamic Covenant was actually two covenants. The first covenant was a spiritual covenant with Abraham providing promises to his spiritual seed, initiated when God called forth Abram from the house of his fathers (Gen. 12). The second covenant was the covenant of circumcision with Abraham and his physical seed, promising him an abundant posterity and the land of Canaan (Gen. 17). This distinction was justified from the allegory of the two women - Hagar and Sarah - in Galatians 4:22-31. It was argued that Hagar as the bondwoman represented the carnal covenant of circumcision with Abraham and his physical seed, and that Sarah as the free woman represented the spiritual covenant with Abraham's spiritual seed (believers). Hagar represented the earthly Mosaic Covenant. Sarah represented the heavenly New Covenant. These two seeds (the physical and the spiritual) had distinct promises and distinct covenants - and were to be understood separately.

Acknowledging that this view had little exegetical warrant in the text of Gen. 12 and 17, Denault argues that the Abrahamic Covenant is not formally two covenants, but that it should be treated as such, because of the different nature of the promises. Further, he concedes that often the temporal and the spiritual promises are mixed together in the Scriptures, and that the physical and the spiritual posterity of Abraham intertwine - rather than being separated. However, quoting Nehemiah Coxe, he argues that this separation and distinction is necessary for reconciling other biblical texts on spiritual and fleshly Israel (cf. Rom. 9). Furthermore, Denault argues that God

intertwined the spiritual promise of the covenant of grace with the physical Old Testament covenants, in order to preserve the truth of the Gospel until the time of Christ.

The Presbyterians on the other hand affirmed the unity of the Abrahamic Covenant, and explained the distinction between true spiritual Israel and fleshly Israel, by appealing to the substance/administration distinction. Only believing Israelites enjoyed the true substance of the Abrahamic Covenant, which was justification by faith alone - signified by circumcision in the Old Testament (Rom. 4:11). However, those who were merely Israelites according to the flesh nevertheless enjoyed outward privileges such as the Scriptures (Rom. 3:1), the worship of God (Rom. 9:4), and the covenants of promise (Eph. 2:12). These outward privileges were designed to train the Israelites so that they might truly come to faith in the Messiah and be those who "are not of the circumcision only, but who also walk in the steps of that faith of...Abraham" (Rom. 4:12).

The Presbyterians used the very point that Denault concedes - the mixture of the temporal and spiritual promises - to argue for the substance/administration distinction and the concept of the visible church being a mixed multitude of the regenerate and the unregenerate. The physical and spiritual seeds of Abraham were not two separate groups, but rather one united covenant people. Isaac was the longed-for *physical* child of Abraham, and yet he was also the child of *promise* (Gal. 4:28). They argued that contrary to the Baptist view of two separate seeds giving birth to two radically different covenants - the Mosaic (physical) covenant and the New (spiritual) covenant - the Abrahamic Covenant proved that the Covenant of Grace had always existed with an inward spiritual substance and an outward visible administration. In this way, just as infants were granted the covenant sign of circumcision in the outward administration of the Abrahamic Covenant, so they were to be given the covenant sign of baptism in the outward administration of the New Covenant.

### **The Mosaic Covenant**

The groundwork of the Abrahamic Covenant established the foundation of the Baptist understanding of the Mosaic Covenant. The Mosaic Covenant was the realization of the temporal promises given to Abraham's physical posterity. As such, the Mosaic Covenant in its substance was not a covenant of grace, but rather a covenant of works. Citing texts like Exodus 19:5, Denault argues that the Mosaic Covenant was a conditional covenant based on an "if...then..." paradigm. If Israel obeyed God, they would prosper in the land. If they did not, they would be punished. This was the ground for the blessings and curses of Deuteronomy 28. Nevertheless, Denault argues that despite the existence of a works principle in the Mosaic Covenant, it is not formally a Covenant of Works as was made with Adam. God did not promise life by the keeping of the law, in the Mosaic Covenant. Rather, Denault argues that the Mosaic Covenant established a general works-principle in order to drive the Israelites to see their need for redemption, preparing them for the coming of the New Covenant. The Mosaic Covenant is thus said to have three purposes: 1) To preserve a physical and national lineage from which Christ can come forth, 2) To typologically point forward to Christ, and 3) To drive the Israelites to despair of their own righteousness, and prepare them for the New Covenant.

Amongst paedobaptists, Denault argues that there were two views of the Mosaic Covenant. The majority position was that it was an administration of the Covenant of Grace, as the Abrahamic

Covenant was. This was proved in several ways: 1) The preface to the Decalogue declares God as Redeemer before the giving of the Law, showing that the Law was given as a rule of life, rather than as a way to earn reward from God, 2) The sacrifices as types were intended to encourage the Israelites to set their faith in Jesus Christ and the Gospel, who was sacramentally presented to them in the ceremonial law, 3) The substance of the Mosaic Covenant declared Jehovah to be their God and that they were to be His people (Lev. 26:12) - the very same as the promise of the New Covenant (Jer. 31:33). As such, those of this position affirmed, as before that the substance of the Mosaic Covenant was the same as the Abrahamic and the New Covenants, even though its outward administration was more legal in nature.

The minority position, held by men like Samuel Petto and John Owen, separated the Mosaic Covenant from the Abrahamic Covenant, allowing the Mosaic Covenant to have a works principle, but denying this to the Abrahamic Covenant. They argued for this separation from texts like Galatians 3:17-18, where the promise and the law are placed in tension. Their defense of infant baptism thus simply relied on the Abrahamic Covenant and the organic principle ("I will be a God to thee and to thy seed after thee", Gen. 17:7), which finds fulfillment in the New Covenant (cf. Isaiah 44:3, Jeremiah 32:39, Acts 2:38, 1 Cor. 7:14).

Denault views this minority position as a mediating view between the majority-Reformed view and the Baptist view. In particular, Denault notes that John Owen's position was seen most positively by many Baptists, including Nehemiah Coxe who recommends Owen's Commentary on Hebrews 8:6-13 in his own *A Discourse on the Covenants*. Nevertheless, while many Baptists approved of Owen's view on the Mosaic Covenant and the New Covenant, John Owen was unreservedly an Independent paedobaptist. Historical theologians continue to struggle to explain John Owen, with groups as disparate as paedobaptists, Reformed Baptists, and doctrinally antinomian Baptists (proponents of New Covenant Theology), appealing to Owen's covenant theology in defense of their position.

Despite a certain lack of clarity on Owen's position, Denault provides a helpful survey of the different issues that set apart 17th century Presbyterians and Baptists. His work shows how the debates on baptism were rarely limited to the question of baptism, but extended to vital questions on the covenants. In some contemporary debates on baptism, simplistic "proof-texting" and clichés, have replaced solid biblical and covenantal thinking on the issue. Often, both sides will cite the very same verses in defense of their position, lacking more fundamental roots in covenant (federal) theology. It may be retorted that all this lofty debate on the covenants is irrelevant to the Christian and the simplicity of the Gospel. Yet, it should be remembered that "The secret of the Lord is with them that fear him; and he will shew them his covenant" (Ps. 25:14). The Covenant of Grace is the peculiar treasure of God's people - and so should be considered a worthy object of our study.