ROMANS 4:11 AND THE CASE FOR INFANT BAPTISM

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The paedobaptist argument from Romans 4:11 asserts that because circumcision once signified the divine promise of justification by faith like baptism does now, the latter has replaced the former and should be administered to infants just as its predecessor was. An exegetical evaluation of this argument, however, demonstrates that Romans 4:11 does not establish the parallel between the two rites that is central to the case for infant baptism. In addition, a theological evaluation shows that a biblical understanding of the sign of the Abrahamic Covenant highlights specific points of discontinuity that argue against a correspondence between circumcision and baptism and therefore against the practice of infant baptism.

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Introduction

The birth of a baby brings indescribable joy and excitement, as well as a delightful anticipation of what the future holds for the little one. But for some Christian parents, it also brings a measure of apprehension, for it raises the unsettling question of infant baptism. Should we have our baby baptized? Or is baptism only for those who profess faith in Christ? The question is a significant one, and with godly theologians on both sides of the debate, how can the average believer possibly decide?

On one side of the debate is the view that the ordinance should be administered only to those who make a profession of faith in Christ. Commonly known as “believer’s baptism,” this view asserts that baptism should be restricted to believers alone.1 On the other side is the position of infant baptism—commonly known as

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1 Because the church baptizes an individual on the basis of his profession of faith and not on the basis of an infallible knowledge that he is indeed a genuine believer, it is often referred to as “credobaptism” (from the Latin credo, “I believe”).

233
“paedobaptism”—which affirms that infant children of believers should also be baptized.² In the words of the Westminster Confession: “Not only those that do actually profess faith in and obedience unto Christ but also the infants of one or both believing parents are to be baptized” (28.4).

Because paedobaptists can point to neither a clear biblical command to baptize infants nor a clear example of an infant being baptized in the New Testament,³ they often use theological inferences to support their view.⁴ The primary inferential argument in favor of infant baptism involves the continuity of God’s relationship with His covenant people throughout redemptive history.⁵ As paedobaptist Mark Ross explains, the key to this argument is the connection between Old Testament circumcision and New Testament baptism:

Those who subscribe to covenantal infant baptism maintain that baptism has now replaced circumcision as the mark of covenant membership, and that baptism’s meaning and application are essentially the same as circumcision’s in the Old Testament period. Included with this is the idea that the children of covenant members today are members of the covenant, as in the Old Testament period.⁶

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² The specific type of infant baptism being addressed in this article is the covenantal infant baptism practiced by those in the Reformed or Calvinistic tradition, in contrast to the infant baptism of Anglicans, Lutherans, and Roman Catholics.

³ This point is generally acknowledged by advocates of infant baptism, e.g., Bryan Chapell, “A Pastoral View of Infant Baptism,” in The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism, ed. Gregg Strawbridge (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2003), 15; Geoffrey W. Bromiley, Children of Promise: The Case for Baptizing Infants (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 107, 109; John Murray, Christian Baptism (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1980), 66, 69; Louis Berkhof, Systematic Theology (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 634; Charles Hodge, Systematic Theology (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 3:541; B.B. Warfield, “The Polemics of Infant Baptism,” in Studies in Theology, vol. 9 of The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield, 389–408 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 399. As B.B. Warfield concedes, “It is true that there is no express command to baptize infants in the New Testament, no express record of the baptism of infants, and no passages so stringently implying it that we must infer from them that infants were baptized” (ibid.). Similarly, according to John Murray, “It is only too apparent that if we had an express command or even a proven case with apostolic sanction, then the controversy would not have arisen; or at least it would be of a very different sort” (Christian Baptism, 69).

⁴ In the words of paedobaptist John Murray, “The evidence for infant baptism falls into the category of good and necessary inference” (Christian Baptism, 69).

⁵ More specifically, it flows out of a belief in Covenant Theology, which sees a fundamental continuity between OT Israel and the NT church in which the latter is viewed as the replacement, the continuation, or the fulfillment of the former. The centerpiece of Covenant Theology is the Covenant of Grace—a single, overarching covenant that is said to extend throughout redemptive history and provide a basis for the continuity between the covenant signs of circumcision and baptism. However, even though the Covenant of Grace provides the foundation for the doctrine of infant baptism, a belief in the former does not necessitate a belief in the latter, as evidenced by Reformed Baptists who affirm Covenant Theology and yet reject paedobaptism in favor of believer’s baptism.

In this way, the covenantal view of infant baptism can be summarized very simply—baptism is what circumcision was. In other words, baptism has precisely the same meaning and function in the New Testament church as circumcision did in Old Testament Israel. As paedobaptist O. Palmer Robertson writes, “In the fullest possible sense, baptism under the new covenant accomplishes all that was represented in circumcision under the old.”

This belief that baptism has replaced circumcision as the sign of the covenant is foundational to the case for infant baptism. According to this argument, if the covenant sign of circumcision was given to infants in Israel, how can the covenant sign of baptism be denied them in the church? Baptism is what circumcision was and should therefore be applied to infant children of believers.

Paedobaptists seek to establish this connection between circumcision and baptism in several ways. One of the most common is by appealing to Romans 4:11, where the apostle Paul describes Abraham’s circumcision as a sign and a seal: “And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised” (Rom. 4:11a). According to the paedobaptist, Paul’s description in Romans 4:11 provides clear evidence for the parallel between circumcision and baptism.

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7 In the words of John Calvin, “baptism is for the Christians what circumcision previously was for the Jews” (Institutes of the Christian Religion, 4.16.11). Quotations are from John Calvin, Institutes of Christian Religion, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill, 2 vols. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), and citations list the book, chapter, and section in that order (e.g., 4.16.11 = Book IV, Chapter 16, Section 11).

8 O. Palmer Robertson, The Christ of the Covenants (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1980), 166. According to paedobaptist Pierre Marcel, “There is … a difference between the sacraments as regards outward appearance, but they are identical as regards their internal and spiritual significance” (Pierre Ch. Marcel, The Biblical Doctrine of Infant Baptism: Sacrament of the Covenant of Grace, trans. Philip Edgcumbe Hughes [London: James Clarke & Co. Ltd., 1953], 90). Later Marcel writes, “The New Testament establishes no essential difference between circumcision and baptism; such differences as there are are only formal. Baptism has taken the place of circumcision” (210; emphasis original). The formal differences commonly acknowledged by paedobaptists include the gender of those baptized (male and female in contrast to only males being circumcised); the timing of the baptism (any time shortly after birth in contrast to being circumcised specifically on the eighth day); and the outward form of baptism itself (which obviously differs from the outward form of circumcision). These differences aside, paedobaptists believe that Scripture equates the essential meaning of the two physical rites (Murray, Christian Baptism, 72; Robert R. Booth, Children of the Promise: The Biblical Case for Infant Baptism [Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1995], 107; Sinclair B. Ferguson, “Infant Baptism View,” in Baptism: Three Views, ed. David F. Wright [Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009], 87; Bryan Holstrom, Infant Baptism and the Silence of the New Testament [Greenville, SC: Ambassador International, 2009], 114). As Marcel writes, circumcision and baptism “are identical as regards the promise and the thing represented, and as regards content, reason, motive, usage, and efficacy” (The Biblical Doctrine of Infant Baptism, 211).

9 According to paedobaptist Robert Booth, “This clear connection between the two covenant signs of circumcision and baptism creates a difficult problem for opponents of infant baptism, for any argument against infant baptism is necessarily an argument against infant circumcision” (Booth, Children of the Promise, 109; emphasis original). This same argument was made previously by Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, 4.16.20 and Marcel, The Biblical Doctrine of Infant Baptism, 211.

10 In Romans 4:11a, “circumcision” (περιτομής) is in apposition to “sign” (σημεῖον), and “seal” (σφραγίς) is in apposition to “circumcision” (περιτομής), and in this way circumcision is identified as both a sign and a seal.
sion and baptism that is so foundational to the practice of baptizing babies. The pur-
pose of this article is to evaluate the paedobaptist argument from Romans 4:11 and
to address how it relates to the overall case for infant baptism.11

The Paedobaptist Argument from Romans 4:11

In Romans 4:11, Paul describes circumcision as “a seal of the righteousness of
the faith.” According to the paedobaptist, this means that circumcision in the Old
Testament signified the divine promise of justification by faith, the very promise that
is now represented by baptism in the New Testament.12 Therefore, because baptism
now functions in the same way that its Old Testament counterpart did—signifying
the very same promise—it should be administered to infants just as circumcision
was.13

To clarify, when paedobaptists say that circumcision represented justification
by faith according to Romans 4:11, they do not mean that all who were circumcised
had already believed and been justified at the time of their circumcision. As Ross
writes, “If we understand Abraham’s circumcision to certify that he had faith, or that
God had given him righteousness, then we are at a loss to explain what Ishmael’s
circumcision meant, or Esau’s, or Saul’s, or any other candidate Jew who is an un-
believer and cut off from the blessings of God’s covenant.”14 In other words, because
so many circumcised Jews in Old Testament Israel never believed, paedobaptists
deny that circumcision should be understood as “a sign and seal of faith, or of im-
puted righteousness, or of an inward spiritual transformation.”15

How then does the paedobaptist understand the meaning of circumcision as “a
seal of the righteousness of the faith,” and what relationship is it said to have to the
promise of justification? According to paedobaptists, Romans 4:11 teaches that the
seal of circumcision was the visible pledge of God that when the conditions of the
covenant were met, the blessings promised in the covenant would apply.16 As Ross
explains:

11 For an evaluation of infant baptism in general, see Matt Waymeyer, A Biblical Critique of Infant
12 Marcel, The Biblical Doctrine of Infant Baptism, 37; Booth, Children of the Promise, 99, 102,
181; Berkhof, Systematic Theology, 619; Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, 4.14.23, 4.16.11, and
4.16.16. According to paedobaptist Robert Booth, Romans 4:11 indicates that “in circumcision God sig-
nified and sealed the fact that he justifies believers by faith and considers us righteous through faith; bap-
tism does likewise” (Children of the Promise, 102).
13 Marcel, The Biblical Doctrine of Infant Baptism, 155–56; Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Re-
ligion, 4.16.20.
14 Ross, “Baptism and Circumcision as Signs and Seals,” 92; also see Holstrom, Infant Baptism,
113–14.
15 Ross, “Baptism and Circumcision as Signs and Seals,” 91.
Circumcision is not a guarantee that Abraham has faith, nor even that Abraham has righteousness. What circumcision guarantees is the word of God’s promise: *that righteousness will be given on the basis of faith*. In other words, circumcision is the authenticating mark that certifies the truth of God’s promise, that he will give righteousness to the one who has faith. What is certified is not so much a truth about Abraham, or any other circumcised person, but a truth about God. In particular, circumcision certifies the truth of God’s word in the gospel, namely, that all who believe will be accounted righteous.17

In this way, paedobaptists believe that Romans 4:11 presents circumcision as a symbolic representation of the conditional promise of justification—a seal of the certainty that God will justify those who believe—without reference to whether or not the recipients of circumcision presently stood justified or would some day be justified in the future. God’s promise in circumcision, then, was not that all who were circumcised had been (or would be) given righteousness, but rather that *all who believe would be given righteousness*. 18 As paedobaptist David Gibson writes, “Circumcision is sign and seal that God justifies the wicked (Rom. 4:5).”19

For this reason, according to the paedobaptist, the validity of the covenant seal—whether circumcision or baptism—is not dependent on the timing of when the conditions of the covenant are met, for it is perfectly valid to apply the seal long before the recipient of the signified blessings meets those conditions. 20 In fact, because the seal actually says nothing at all about the present or future salvific status of the infant being circumcised/baptized, it is also perfectly valid to apply the seal to an infant who never meets those conditions. As Ross elaborates:

> On this understanding of circumcision as a sign and seal, there are no problems of meaning in giving circumcision to those not known to have faith, nor to those who later show themselves to have no faith. Since the sign and seal of circumcision is not a guarantee of either the faith or the righteousness of the one circumcised, the discovery that a circumcised person is an unbeliever does not invalidate the circumcision as an authenticating mark. God’s promise is not invalidated by the unbelief of his covenant children. His word stands: those who believe will be accounted righteous. 21

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17 Ross, “Baptism and Circumcision as Signs and Seals,” 94; emphasis original; also see Holstrom, *Infant Baptism*, 114. Therefore, says Ross, according to Romans 4:11 if Abraham possessed faith he could conclude that he also had righteousness from God “because God has promised to give righteousness to all who have faith, and he has given circumcision to attest to this promise, guaranteeing its truth” (“Baptism and Circumcision as Signs and Seals,” 94).

18 Ross, “Baptism and Circumcision as Signs and Seals,” 94. Also see Cornelius P. Venema, “Covenant Theology and Baptism,” in The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism, 221.


20 Chapell, “A Pastoral View of Infant Baptism,” 15; Chapell, *Why Do We Baptize Infants?*, 12.

According to the paedobaptist, this is why “God did not require that covenant parents wait until the child could express faith before commanding them to administer the covenant sign and seal of circumcision.” This is also why God does not require covenant parents today to wait until their infant children express faith before baptizing them. After all, if circumcision—as a sign and seal of the promise of justification—was applied to infants prior to their faith rather than subsequent to it, why shouldn’t the same be done with baptism? Because baptism signifies the same spiritual reality previously signified by circumcision—justification by faith—and because circumcision was given to infants regardless of whether they had been (or would ever be) justified, infant children of believers today should be baptized in the church. This is the paedobaptist argument from Romans 4:11.

**An Exegetical Evaluation of the Paedobaptist Argument**

The initial point of difficulty for this argument concerns the very meaning of baptism as a seal of the promise of justification. According to the paedobaptist, the baptism of an infant guarantees that the child will be forgiven and justified if and when he meets the conditions of the covenant, which are repentance and faith. One problem with this view is that the infant born into a pagan home has exactly the same conditional promise of justification extended to him: If he repents and believes in Christ, he too will be forgiven and justified. Therefore, regardless of whether a given infant is (a) a baptized child of believers, (b) an unbaptized child of believers, or (c) an unbaptized child of unbelievers, the same promise applies—he will be justified if and when he meets the conditions of repentance and faith.

As a seal of the conditional promise of justification, then, what exactly does baptism communicate about the “covenant child” which is not true of the “non-covenant child”? In other words, how does baptism—specifically as a seal of the covenant promise of justification via Romans 4:11—serve to distinguish the infant who is baptized from the infant who is not, since both have the same conditional promise? Baptizing an infant as a seal of God’s conditional promise of justification does not communicate anything that is objectively true about the “covenant child” which is not also true of every other child born into this world.

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23 Many have found this argument quite compelling. For example, paedobaptist Dennis Johnson recounts the story of his interaction with a man who changed his view from believer’s baptism to infant baptism while a student at Western Conservative Baptist Seminary: “I asked him what had changed his mind,” Johnson writes, “and he mentioned especially coming to see that circumcision in the Old Testament was a sign of ‘the righteousness of faith’ (Romans 4:11), and yet Abraham was commanded to circumcise infants who were too young to demonstrate faith. If that was so in the Old Testament, he concluded, it could also be true of baptism in the New” (Dennis E. Johnson, “Infant Baptism: How My Mind Has Changed,” http://thirdmill.org/magazine/article.asp/link/http://www.thirdmill.org/articles/den_johnson/TH.Johnson.Baptism.pdf/at/Infant%20Baptism%20Has%20Changed [accessed 4/12/2015]).

24 In response to this objection, paedobaptist Mark Ross suggests the illustration of two young ladies who are being pursued by two young men for the purpose of marriage, but only one of them has received a ring and is officially engaged. According to Ross, even though the women are treated equally in every
Even more to the point, however, the paedobaptist use of Romans 4:11 as an argument for infant baptism reflects a failure to understand what the apostle Paul actually said about circumcision in this verse. What paedobaptists fail to recognize is that Romans 4:11 does not define the significance of circumcision in general, but rather the circumcision of Abraham in particular, as an individual who stood in a unique place in the flow of redemptive history. For this reason, Romans 4:11 simply does not make the connection between circumcision and baptism that is so crucial to the argument for infant baptism. This can be seen by considering both the description of Abraham’s circumcision in Romans 4:11a and the purpose of his circumcision in Romans 4:11b–12.

The Description of Abraham’s Circumcision

In the paedobaptist paradigm, circumcision/baptism is viewed as the sign and seal of the Covenant of Grace. Because this definition is repeated so often, some may find it surprising that nowhere in Scripture is baptism actually referred to as a seal, and circumcision is described this way only once. That lone description is found in

respect apart from the proposal and the ring—and even though the visible token of the ring does not alter the promises made—the ring makes those promises more firm in the mind of the recipient: “For the engaged lady, receiving the ring has brought home to her both the promises and the duties in a much more tangible way” (“Baptism and Circumcision as Signs and Seals,” 109). In precisely this way, says Ross, the baptized child has something that the unbaptized child does not: “As a visible token of God’s promise, it gives tangible expression to the certainty of God’s promise to us, and that is something more than just the promise itself. God could have left things simply as a promise. That would have been enough. But he didn’t. He gave us more, choosing to give us a tangible reminder to assure us of his promises and to mark us out as his own. The child who grows up with that (and whose parents and church rightly apply it through instruction and training) has something that the unbaptized child does not have, and it is ‘great in every respect’ (Rom. 3:2)” (ibid., 109–10). Aside from the premature breakdown of this illustration (i.e., one young lady is engaged, having received a formal promise from her fiancé, whereas the other couple has only talked about marriage and no actual engagement promise has been made), the problem with Ross’ argument is that it fails to address the essence of the objection. Baptizing an infant may indeed be a tangible reminder of God’s promises and therefore personally meaningful to those who witness the baptism. But none of this changes the fact that every unbaptized infant has the same conditional promise extended to him, and therefore baptism—specifically as a seal of the covenant promise of justification (Rom. 4:11)—fails to distinguish in any objective way the infant who is baptized from the one who is not. Put another way, the subjective experience of witnessing an infant baptism does not alter the absence of any objective distinction between baptized and unbaptized children, for all have been promised the same justification if only they will believe in Christ. Thus, the baptism of an infant may make a tremendous subjective difference to those who witness it, but administering this rite as a seal of the conditional promise of justification fails to identify any objective difference between the “covenant child” and the “non-covenant child,” and therefore the objection remains.

25 Greg Welty, “From Circumcision to Baptism,” 4–7, http://v7.swbts.edu/tasks/render/file/?fileID=81CB3C88-CA44-AB66-35342FEC39E269DE (accessed 6/25/18). The failure to recognize this is reflected in the words of paedobaptist Mark Ross, who asserts that circumcision in Romans 4:11 certifies “not so much a truth about Abraham, or any other circumcised person, but a truth about God” (“Baptism and Circumcision as Signs and Seals,” 94; also see Holstrom, Infant Baptism, 114). This explanation is very appealing because of how theocentric it sounds, but as explained below, it simply fails to do justice to the language of the passage itself.

26 In addition, even though circumcision is clearly identified as the sign of God’s covenant with Abraham (Gen. 17:11), baptism is never explicitly called a “sign” in Scripture.
Romans 4:11–12, where the apostle Paul identifies Abraham as the spiritual father of everyone who believes in Christ:

And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised, that he might be the father of all who believe without being circumcised, that righteousness might be reckoned to them, and the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also follow in the steps of the faith of our father Abraham, which he had while uncircumcised (Rom. 4:11–12).

In verse 11, Paul refers to Abraham’s circumcision as “a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised.” In this description, “of the righteousness” (τῆς δικαιοσύνης) is an objective genitive (i.e., Abraham’s righteousness was sealed by circumcision), and “of the faith” (τῆς πίστεως) is a genitive of means (i.e., his faith was the means by which this righteousness was imputed to Abraham). Therefore, to say that circumcision was “a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised” is to say that Abraham’s circumcision sealed the presence of the righteousness he had received by means of his faith, a faith he exercised prior to his circumcision. In other words, at the time of Abraham’s circumcision, righteousness was not his potential possession—it was his actual possession, and circumcision served to confirm this reality.

The role of circumcision in confirming Abraham’s right standing before God is clear not only from the syntax of Romans 4:11a, but also from the terminology Paul uses. The noun “seal” (σφραγίς) refers to “that which confirms or authenticates” and can be translated “attestation,” “confirmation,” or “certification.” This same word is used in 1 Corinthians 9:2 where Paul defends his claim to be an apostle, referring to the Corinthians as “the seal [σφραγίς] of my apostleship.” Paul’s point in this verse is that the very existence of the Corinthians’ faith in Christ authenticated the fact that he was a true apostle, and in this way they themselves were the confirmation of his apostleship. Likewise, the word “seal” (σφραγίς) is used in Romans 4:11 to state that Abraham’s circumcision confirmed or authenticated his righteous status, a status that was his by virtue of his faith.

27 According to BDAG, the noun “seal” (σφραγίς) is used with the genitive of that which is confirmed or authenticated (e.g., 1 Cor. 9:2; Rom. 4:11), in this case the objective genitive “righteousness” (τῆς δικαιοσύνης) (BDAG, 980).


29 The reception of divine righteousness by means of faith is very much the dominant theme in the book of Romans leading up to this passage (see 1:16–17; 3:21–30; 4:1–10).

30 BDAG, 980.

31 Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, 269.
According to Romans 4:11, then, Abraham’s circumcision did not seal his need for righteousness; it confirmed the presence of a righteousness he already possessed. For this reason, Romans 4:11 does not say (as many paedobaptists do) that circumcision sealed a conditional promise that the recipient will be justified if and when he believes. Instead, it says that Abraham’s circumcision testified that God had already accepted him and counted him righteous because of his faith. It actually sealed the righteousness he received through faith by confirming his right standing before God. In this way, Romans 4:11 “does not speak of a general ‘promise’ at all, but of the present justified status of a particular person,” that person being Abraham.

When Abraham was circumcised, then, the rite functioned as a divine testimony that God had forgiven his sins and declared him to be righteous in His sight. No longer were Abraham’s transgressions a source of condemnation against him, for Yahweh had accepted and justified him by means of his faith apart from works. In fact, because Abraham was justified at least fourteen years before he was circumcised (Gen. 15:6; 17:24), it is obvious that he was not justified because he was circumcised, but rather that he was circumcised because he had been justified. Put another way, circumcision was not the cause of his justification, it was the seal of his justification.

32 Greg Welty, A Critical Evaluation of Infant Baptism (Fullerton, CA: Reformed Baptist Publications, n.d.), 14. As Welty explains elsewhere, a seal confirms that what it signifies is indeed a reality: “Seals guarantee things; they do not just picture something while we sit back and wistfully hope that what is pictured is actually the case, or actually comes to pass” (“From Circumcision to Baptism,” 5).

33 Welty, “From Circumcision to Baptism,” 5. For this reason, the paedobaptist denial that Abraham’s circumcision certified that he had faith or that God had given him righteousness (Ross, “Baptism and Circumcision as Signs and Seals,” 94) is the exact opposite of what Romans 4:11 actually says.

34 Welty, “From Circumcision to Baptism,” 6.

35 According to paedobaptist Sinclair Ferguson, Romans 4:11 describes circumcision as the seal not of Abraham’s response of faith, but of the covenant righteousness he received through his faith. Therefore, Ferguson argues, because circumcision signified an objective reality rather than the faith that corresponded to that reality, circumcision should be understood “as a seal of the promise of God’s grace to be received by faith, not of the faith that received the promise of grace” (“Infant Baptism View,” 93). Paedobaptist Bryan Holstrom argues in a similar way: “The critical point of distinction is this: it is not Abraham’s faith which is sealed in his circumcision, but the righteousness of that faith. That is what Paul says in Romans 4:11. God seals his promise to Abraham (and us through him) that all of those who have faith in Christ [will be justified]” (Infant Baptism, 114; emphasis original). Ferguson and Holstrom are correct in one sense, for Abraham’s circumcision did indeed seal righteousness rather than faith. But in making their case, they gloss over two critical details in Romans 4:11 that undermine their argument. First, as previously discussed, circumcision did not seal the divine promise of righteousness in general but rather Abraham’s possession of righteousness in particular. To argue from Romans 4:11 that Abraham’s circumcision was no more than a guarantee of the promise that all who believe will be justified is to transform the seal of an actual possession into the seal of a conditional promise. But that is simply not what Romans 4:11 teaches. Second, the righteousness that was sealed by Abraham’s circumcision was specifically a righteousness he received through faith. Because the objective standing of Abraham’s righteousness was subjectively appropriated by means of his faith, the two cannot be separated and therefore his circumcision ultimately confirmed the existence not only of his righteousness, but also of his faith. Abraham believed and was justified, and his circumcision sealed the righteousness he received through faith. As demonstrated above, that is the unambiguous meaning of Romans 4:11a.

Because circumcision was the seal of Abraham’s righteousness, it is clear that his circumcision was unique and therefore distinct in its significance from the circumcision of other Jews.37 For if the circumcision of Jewish males in Old Testament Israel carried the same significance as Abraham’s (as defined in Rom. 4:11), then their circumcision should be understood as confirmation that God had already justified them through faith at the time of their circumcision. For this reason, unless one is willing to affirm the justification of every circumcised male throughout Israel’s history, he must acknowledge a significant point of discontinuity between the two. This point of discontinuity is highlighted further in Romans 4:11b–12, where Paul explains the purpose of Abraham’s circumcision.

The Purpose of Abraham’s Circumcision

To understand the purpose of Abraham’s circumcision in Romans 4:11b–12, it is helpful to consider the larger context of these verses. In Romans 3:21–31, the apostle Paul establishes the fact that a man is justified by faith in Christ apart from the works of the Law. He supports this claim in Romans 4:1–8 by introducing Abraham as an example of one who was justified by faith (vv. 1–5) and by pointing to the words of David in Psalm 32:1–2 as teaching the very same truth (vv. 6–8). Then Paul raises the question of whether this blessing of justification by faith is available to Gentiles as well as Jews: “Is this blessing then on the circumcised, or on the uncircumcised also?” (v. 9a)38 To answer his own question, the apostle turns again to Abraham, quoting Genesis 15:6 and reminding his readers that the patriarch’s faith was credited to him as righteousness (v. 9b). He follows this reminder with a question that points the discussion in a slightly new direction: “How then was it credited? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised? Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised” (v. 10a). In other words, Abraham—who stood justified in Genesis 15:6

37 The reluctance of many paedobaptists to recognize the uniqueness of Abraham’s circumcision appears to flow out of an a priori assumption that circumcision must have had the same meaning for Abraham as it had for every other male circumcised in Israel. For example, paedobaptist Mark Ross writes, “Surely, whatever meaning circumcision had for Abraham, it had also for Ishmael and for every other male in Abraham’s household circumcised on the same day as Abraham (Gen. 17:23). This must be the starting point in our understanding of circumcision, baptism, or any other sacrament: there is one meaning for all who rightly receive the sign” (Baptism and Circumcision as Signs and Seals,” 92). But by insisting on this as the “starting point,” Ross rules out any interpretation of Romans 4:11 that sees Abraham’s circumcision as the authentication of his righteous status before God, which prevents him from embracing the clear meaning of the verse. According to Ross, “If we understand Abraham’s circumcision to certify that he had faith, or that God had given him righteousness, then we are at a loss to explain what Ishmael’s circumcision meant, or Esau’s, or Saul’s, or any other candidate Jew who is an unbeliever and cut off from the blessings of God’s covenant” (ibid.). Therefore, says Ross, circumcision in Romans 4:11 cannot be understood as the certification that Abraham had been justified before God. But the problem is that Ross’ assumption that circumcision had the same meaning for Abraham as it had for every other male is not only unwarranted, but also precluded by both (a) the description of Abraham’s circumcision in Romans 4:11a (see above) and (b) the purpose of his circumcision in Romans 4:11b–12 (see below).

38 Paul has already addressed this question earlier in Romans 3, where he explains that the righteousness of God is available to all who believe (v. 22), for God is the God of both Jews and Gentiles (v. 29) and will justify both of them by faith (v. 30). His reason for raising the question yet again is to provide the opportunity to expand on his previous discussion.
and was circumcised fourteen years later in Genesis 17:24—was justified by faith prior to his circumcision, and this, says Paul, is critical to understanding the purpose of his circumcision.

Put simply, the purpose of Abraham’s circumcision is that he would be the spiritual father of both Gentile believers (v. 11b) and Jewish believers (v. 12). This two-fold purpose can be seen clearly in the purpose clause which is introduced by εἰς τὸ εἶναι (“that he might be”) and followed by two predicate accusatives πατέρα / πατέρα (“father…father”) connected by the conjunction καὶ (“and”). These predicate accusatives—both the anarthrous use of πατήρ—are used to designate the two distinct groups of individuals of which Abraham is father. Thus, in Romans 4:11–12, the apostle Paul writes, “And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised, that he might be:

- the father of all who believe without being circumcised, that righteousness might be reckoned to them” [i.e., Gentile believers] (v. 11b)39

and

- the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also follow in the steps of the faith of our father Abraham, which he had while uncircumcised” [i.e., Jewish believers] (v. 12)

The point of Romans 4:11–12, then, is that the specific timing and circumstances of Abraham’s circumcision uniquely qualified him to serve as the spiritual father of two different groups of people. On one hand, because Abraham’s circumcision confirmed a righteousness he possessed through faith prior to (and therefore apart from) the rite of circumcision, he is the father of Gentile believers: “all who believe without being circumcised” (v. 11b). On the other hand, because Abraham was not only circumcised but also justified by faith, he is also the father of Jewish believers: “those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also follow in the steps of the faith of our father Abraham” (v. 12).

In this way, circumcision signified in Abraham what it did not (and could not) signify in any other Jew who was circumcised. For not only was circumcision a divine seal which certified Abraham’s present state of justification, but it also equipped him to serve in the unique role as spiritual father of both Jewish and Gentile believers. In contrast, the circumcision of male infants throughout the history of Israel was neither a seal of the righteousness of their faith (Rom. 4:11a) nor the means of enabling them to fulfill this unique purpose that could only be fulfilled by Abraham (Rom.

39 In addition, the first predicate nominative has a result clause (introduced by εἰς τὸ + the infinitive λογισθῆναι) contained within it: “that righteousness might be reckoned to them.”
For this reason, there is “a crucial disanalogy” between the circumcision of Abraham and the circumcision of his physical descendants, for circumcision served as a seal of righteousness by faith for Abraham alone and was never intended to have this meaning for the other members of the covenant. Only by ignoring this distinction can the paedobaptist insist that circumcision was “a seal of the righteousness of the faith” for all who were circumcised and therefore the Old Testament counterpart to water baptism.

A Theological Evaluation of the Paedobaptist Argument

The paedobaptist argument from Romans 4:11 raises the broader issue of the significance of circumcision and its implications for the baptism debate. For this reason, a theological evaluation of the argument involves clarifying the purpose of circumcision in its original context and revisiting the case for infant baptism in light of what Scripture teaches about the nature of the Abrahamic Covenant.

Clarifying the Purpose of Circumcision

As the sign of the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 17:10–14), circumcision served as a symbolic reminder of God’s promises in that covenant: (1) to bless Abraham; (2) to make Abraham’s name great; (3) to make Abraham a great nation; (4) to give Abraham and his descendants the land of Canaan as an everlasting possession; (5) to establish a relationship with Abraham and his descendants; and (6) to bless the nations of the world through Abraham’s seed (Gen. 12:1–3, 7; 15:7–21; 17:1–21; 22:16–18). The nature of the covenant involved blessing not just Abraham as an

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40 As Welty explains, because every descendant of Abraham was circumcised shortly after birth, such a ritual could not signify the future justification of the uncircumcised, for these descendants started their existence in the nation of Israel as circumcised individuals (“From Circumcision to Baptism,” 6). Welty writes, “There is a reason why as a matter of pedagogy Paul selects Abraham’s circumcision and not the circumcision of any other Jew in history: it is the unique circumstances of Abraham’s circumcision which make it … uniquely suited to teach the Gentiles the gospel of God’s grace. Thus, to assimilate the meaning of any and every circumcision in redemptive history to the meaning of Abraham’s circumcision (as a means of constructing some subtle argument for paedobaptism which is wholly extraneous to Paul’s context) is to, quite frankly, miss the point, and turn Paul on his head in the service of paedobaptism” (7).

41 Welty, “From Circumcision to Baptism,” 7.


43 As Robert Saucy explains, “God’s purpose through Abraham began with the gracious promises attached to a call for separation (Ge 12:1–3). It was subsequently ratified in formal covenant agreement (Ge 15:4–21) and later reiterated with more detail on three occasions during Abraham’s lifetime (Ge 13:14–17; 17:1–21; 22:15–18). It was finally confirmed to Isaac (Ge 26:3–5, 24) and Jacob (Ge 28:13–15; 35:9–12; cf. 46:1–4), making it possible for Israel subsequently to speak of God’s ‘covenant with
individual, but his physical descendants as well. For this reason, his descendants were to be marked off and identified in a tangible way, not only as recipients of the Abrahamic promises, but also as conduits of those promises to the next generation of Jews. In this way, the primary purpose of the rite was to mark out a physical seed in preparation for the coming of Messiah. As Stephen Wellum notes, it did so in two complementary ways. First, it marked out Israel as a national entity and distinguished the individuals in that nation as a part of God’s covenant people. Second, it marked out a male line of descent from Abraham to David to Christ so that every Jew who was born—particularly those in Judah’s line—pointed forward and anticipated the day when the true/unique Seed of Abraham would come.

One reason that circumcision and baptism cannot be considered interchangeable in meaning is because baptism does not signify the specific physical and national promises that were signified by circumcision. As Greg Welty observes, the fact that circumcision was solely for males—whereas baptism is for both genders—is a notable reflection of this fundamental point of discontinuity:

[I]f these rites were interchangeable in meaning, then why was there a change in the recipients of these rites, from males only (circumcision) to males and females (baptism)? Does this not argue quite strongly for the notion that there was something signified in circumcision (namely, the promised Seed, and the promise of blessing to the nations through the seed of Abraham) which is not and cannot be signified in baptism?

Circumcision was specifically administered to the male reproductive organ and was therefore a fitting symbol of the Abrahamic promises that were passed on from

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44 This is reflected in the Hebrew syntax of Genesis 12:1–3, which indicates that the final clause in verse 3—“in you all the families of the earth will be blessed”—is most likely a result clause “indicating what will be the consummation of the promises that the preceding verses have announced. That is to say, the personal promises given to Abram have final world blessing as their aim” (William J. Dumbrell, Covenant and Creation [Nashville: Nelson, 1984], 65).

45 Wellum, “Baptism and the Relationship Between the Covenants,” 155. For this reason, once the true/unique Seed of Abraham arrived, the primary role of circumcision was complete and it was abrogated as a covenantal sign (Acts 15:1–35; Gal. 1:6–9; 2:11–16; 6:15; 1 Cor. 7:18–19) (ibid., 155–56). Welty also argues that circumcision had a prophetic significance in pointing to and signifying the promised Seed to come: “Every OT believer was well aware that the promised Messiah, the seed of the woman (Gen 3:15), was to come from their loins, from the seed of Abraham, through whom would come blessing for the nations. It is quite plausible to hold that circumcision was specifically applied to the seed of the OT people of God in virtue of this prophetic significance of the sign itself. Likewise, it is in virtue of circumcision’s prophetic significance being fulfilled in Christ, that that sign was abolished” (“From Circumcision to Baptism,” 8).


generation to generation through the physical seed of the male. In contrast, the act of water baptism—and even more obviously the baptism of females—is not able to symbolize the “seed promises” that are so central to God’s covenant with Abraham. For example, baptism does not signify the promise to make Abraham “exceedingly fruitful” (Gen. 17:6) and “a great nation” (Gen. 12:2), with physical descendants like the dust of the earth (Gen. 13:16; 22:17) and the stars of the sky (Gen. 15:5; 22:17). But as recipients of the promises of the covenant, Abraham and his male offspring through Isaac and Jacob received the sign of circumcision to symbolize that their seed would indeed constitute this very nation (Gen. 28:14).

Even the promise of universal blessing to the nations—the very promise highlighted by paedobaptists to emphasize the purely spiritual nature of the Abrahamic Covenant—is not symbolized by water baptism. In this promise, God declared to Abraham that He will bless the nations of the world “in you” (Gen. 12:3; cf. Gen. 18:18) and “in your seed” (Gen. 22:18), later reaffirming this promise to Isaac (Gen. 26:4: “by your descendants”) and Jacob (Gen. 28:14: “in you and in your descendants”). In these passages, God promised to make Abraham and his physical seed—specifically through the line of Isaac and Jacob—the means or channel through which He would bring blessing to the nations of the world. This promise was fulfilled in the Lord Jesus Christ—the seed of the woman (Gen. 3:15)—the true and ultimate Seed of Abraham (Gal. 3:16) who brought salvation to the Gentiles (Gal. 3:8, 14). As those who constituted the physical line of the promised Messiah (Gen. 5:1–32; Ruth 4:13–22; Matt. 1:1–17; Luke 3:23–37), Abraham and his male descendants were circumcised as a symbol of this covenant promise that they would serve as a channel of universal blessing.

48 According to Jewett, “the covenant sign was administered to the male organ of reproduction in the Old Testament for the very reason that covenant status was passed on from generation to generation by physical birth and natural descent” (Paul K. Jewett, Infant Baptism and the Covenant of Grace [Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers], 103).

49 Also see Genesis 17:2; 18:18; 21:12; 26:24; 32:12; 46:3; and 48:4. It is significant to note that when Paul relates the Abrahamic Covenant to the salvation of Gentiles in the present age (Gal. 3:8), he cites only the Abrahamic promise that all the nations will be blessed through him (Gen. 12:3) (Michael Riccardi, “The Seed of Abraham: A Theological Analysis of Galatians 3 and Its Implications for Israel,” MSJ 25, no. 1 [Spring 2014]: 62; Robert L. Saucy, “Israel and the Church: A Case for Discontinuity,” in Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments, ed. John S. Feinberg [Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1988], 254). “Nowhere does he make reference to the ‘great nation,’ as if the Gentiles, as the seed of Abraham, were now that nation or part of it” (Robert L. Saucy, “The Progressive Dispensational View,” in Perspectives on Israel and the Church: 4 Views, ed. Chad O. Brand [Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2015], 196). Failure to make this distinction results from the more foundational error of failing to distinguish between the different senses of the “seed of Abraham” throughout Scripture (see below for further discussion).


51 In each of these key prepositional phrases—“in you” (Gen. 12:3), “in your seed” (Gen. 22:18), “by your descendants” (Gen. 26:4) and “in you and in your descendants” (Gen. 28:14)—the Hebrew preposition ֵּ introduces Abraham and/or his physical seed as the instrument or channel through which Yahweh will bless the world. Similarly, when Paul quotes Genesis 12:3 in Galatians 3:8, his instrumental use of the Greek preposition ἐν (“All the nations will be blessed in [ἐν] you”) identifies Abraham (“you”) as the channel through whom this universal blessing has come.
Recognizing the role given to Israel in this promise highlights an important difference between (a) the \textit{channel} of this blessing (Abraham and his physical seed, and ultimately the promised Seed) and (b) the \textit{object} of this blessing (the nations of the world). In the Abrahamic Covenant, God promised the former that they would serve as a channel of universal blessing to the latter, and they were circumcised to signify that they were recipients of this promise and would serve in this role. But the latter—as \textit{objects} of the blessing rather than the channel through which it came—were not recipients of this promise to be mediators, and therefore their baptism does not symbolize this promise like circumcision did.

This distinction between the physical seed of Abraham (who were circumcised between the time of Abraham and the coming of Messiah) and the spiritual seed of Abraham (who are baptized from the coming of Christ forward) can also be seen in Paul’s reference to the Abrahamic Covenant in Galatians 3:8.\textsuperscript{52} After stating that Abraham was justified through faith (Gal. 3:6) and identifying all who are of faith as “sons of Abraham” (Gal. 3:7), the apostle cites the Abrahamic promise of Genesis 12:3: “The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, ‘All the nations will be blessed in you’” (Gal. 3:8). According to Galatians 3:8, God’s promise that He would bless the nations through Abraham and his physical seed is fulfilled when Gentiles believe in Christ and are saved through the true and ultimate Seed (cf. Gal. 3:14, 16, 29).\textsuperscript{53}

\textsuperscript{52} As Gentry and Wellum observe, paedobaptists often fail to distinguish the different senses of the “seed of Abraham” both within the Abrahamic Covenant and throughout the rest of Scripture (Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, \textit{Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants} [Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2012], 696). The various senses of Abraham’s seed can be divided into the following four categories: (1) \textit{biological}, including all the physical descendants of Abraham, even Ishmael (Gen. 21:13; 25:12–18), the sons of Keturah (Gen. 25:1–4), and Esau (Gen. 36:9–19); (2) \textit{biological/special}, consisting of the physical descendants of Abraham (17:7–10) through Isaac (Gen. 26:4) and Jacob (Gen. 28:14), the covenant people of God—whether true believers or not—who were chosen to mediate the blessings of Yahweh to the nations of the world (Gen. 12:3; 18:18; 22:18); (3) \textit{typological}, as a reference to Christ who is the true/unique and ultimate Seed of Abraham through whom this universal blessing has come (Gal. 3:16); and (4) \textit{spiritual}, as a reference to all believers in Christ—both Jew and Gentile—who are sons of Abraham because they imitate his faith (Gal. 3:6–9, 26–29; Rom. 4:11–12; cf. Matt. 3:9; Luke 19:9) (ibid.; Riccardi, “The Seed of Abraham,” 57–58; cf. John S. Feinberg, “Systems of Discontinuity,” in \textit{Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments}, ed. John S. Feinberg [Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1988], 71–73; Saucy, \textit{The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism}, 49–50; Michael J. Vlach, \textit{Dispensationalism: Essential Beliefs and Common Myths}, Revised and Updated [Los Angeles: Theological Studies Press, 2017], 48–50). As John Feinberg explains, it is important not only to recognize the various senses of the “seed of Abraham” in Scripture, but also to refuse to let any one sense cancel out the meaning and implications of the other senses (“Systems of Discontinuity,” 72–73). In this context, recognizing the difference between (2) the \textit{biological/special} seed of Abraham (who are circumcised as the channel of universal blessing) and (4) the \textit{spiritual} seed of Abraham (who believe and are baptized as those who receive this blessing) is crucial to having a proper understanding of the relationship between circumcision and baptism.

\textsuperscript{53} At the same time, as Michael Riccardi demonstrates, Paul’s identification of believing Gentiles as “the seed of Abraham” in Galatians 3 does not mean that the church is now “spiritual Israel,” and it does not revoke the physical, political, and territorial promises given to national Israel (“The Seed of Abraham,” 51–64). Riccardi writes, “Rather than identifying the present Gentile church as spiritual Israel who receives a spiritualized version of the Abrahamic Covenant promises made to the nation, Paul is simply announcing that Yahweh’s promise to Abraham of universal blessing to the nations has come in the gospel of Jesus Christ. The descendants of Abraham have mediated Yahweh’s blessing to the nations,
Put simply, Gentiles who believe in Christ are “the nations” who are blessed, not the “you” through whom this blessing has come. In other words, to be spiritual children of Abraham among the Gentiles who are blessed (“the nations”) is not the same as being physical children of Abraham who served as the channel of this blessing (“you”). Therefore, the baptism of Gentiles does not signify that the nations will be blessed through these Gentiles and their physical seed—as if they themselves were the channel of universal blessing like the Jews who were circumcised—and for this reason, circumcision and baptism cannot be considered identical in meaning.

Rather than recognizing these points of discontinuity, however, the paedobaptist emphasizes the spiritual significance of circumcision to the virtual exclusion of its physical significance. For example, paedobaptist John Murray writes:

> With reference to circumcision it must be fully appreciated that it was not essentially or primarily the sign of family, racial, or national identity. Any significance which circumcision possessed along the line of national identity or privilege was secondary and derived. Its primary and essential significance was that it was the sign and seal of the highest and richest spiritual blessing which God bestows upon men.

In a similar way, paedobaptist Robert Booth writes, “Circumcision carried primarily a spiritual significance (i.e., justification by faith), and therefore may not be regarded simply a physical sign of descent.” According to Booth, “Circumcision, far from being a sign of ethnicity, was essentially a spiritual sign and seal that set God’s people apart.”

The reason this emphasis on the spiritual significance of circumcision is so crucial to the paedobaptist argument is obvious: The case for infant baptism depends on its ability to show that circumcision and baptism symbolize the same realities, and the realities symbolized by baptism are exclusively spiritual. The problem is that, in seeking to show the similarity between circumcision and baptism, paedobaptists focus on the spiritual significance of circumcision in such a way that minimizes (if not for the true and ultimate Seed of Abraham has come from Israel, having atoned for sin and provided righteousness for sinners” (64).

54 Note how the apostle Peter maintains this same Genesis 12:3 distinction between “you” (Israel) and “all the families of the earth” (the nations) even after the ascension of Christ (Acts 3:25–26).

55 Nor does baptism symbolize the promise of the land of Canaan as an everlasting possession, and yet circumcision signified that Abraham and his descendants had received the promise of this very land (Gen. 12:7; 15:7; 17:8; cf. Gen. 13:15, 17; 15:18; 24:7; 26:3–4; 28:4, 13; 35:12; 48:4; and 50:24). As Saucy explains, the land promise should be viewed as a necessary corollary to the promised seed because the concept of a “nation” carries a territorial aspect (The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism, 44). In this way, the great nation that would serve as the channel of universal blessing to the nations of the world would dwell in the very land promised by the God of the Abrahamic Covenant. Each of these promises—nation, land, and the mediation of universal blessing—were signified by the sign of circumcision but are not presently symbolized by baptism.

56 Murray, Christian Baptism, 45–46.

57 Booth, Children of the Promise, 99.

58 Ibid., 105.
eclipses altogether) its physical significance. This approach not only fails to recognize the diverse nature of the Abrahamic Covenant, but it also flattens out the covenant by reducing it merely to spiritual realities while neglecting its physical and national features.59 As Wellum observes, this is “a classic example of reading new covenant realities into [the Abrahamic Covenant] without first unpacking the OT rite in its own covenantal context and then carefully thinking through the issues of continuity and discontinuity between the covenantal signs.”60

Revisiting the Case for Infant Baptism

This “spiritualizing” of the Abrahamic Covenant can be seen in the broader paedobaptist argument for a correspondence between circumcision and baptism. According to this argument, circumcision signified three primary spiritual blessings: (1) covenant communion and fellowship with God (Gen. 17:11); (2) the need to remove the defilement of sin as an obstacle to favor with a holy God (Deut. 10:16; 30:6; Jer. 4:4); and (3) the righteousness of faith whereby believers become acceptable to God (Rom. 4:11).61 Because baptism now represents these same spiritual blessings, the argument says, it has now replaced circumcision and should therefore be administered to the infant children of believers just like its Old Testament counterpart was.62

59 Wellum, “Relationship between the Covenants,” 127; Gentry and Wellum, Kingdom through Covenant, 633, 695.
60 Wellum, “Relationship between the Covenants,” 120–21. The deeper issue here is the paedobaptist tendency to allow Covenant Theology to blur the lines of distinction between the various covenants in Scripture. As Wellum writes, “Generally speaking, covenant theology tends to equate the ‘covenant of grace’ (an overarching theological category) with the Abrahamic covenant (a specific historical covenant which includes within it national, typological, and spiritual aspects). Covenant theology does this by reducing the national (physical) and typological aspects of the Abrahamic covenant to the spiritual aspects, which then becomes the grid by which all other biblical covenants are viewed, specifically the new covenant. Thus, to speak of the ‘covenant of grace’ is really to speak in terms of the Abrahamic covenant reduced to its spiritual aspects alone” (“Baptism and the Relationship Between the Covenants,” 109). This tendency to minimize the physical aspects of the Abrahamic Covenant is reflected in the words of paedobaptist Louis Berkhof, who saw the Abrahamic Covenant as being “essentially identical” to the New Covenant (Berkhof, Systematic Theology, 633). According to Berkhof, “The covenant made with Abraham was primarily a spiritual covenant, though it also had a national aspect, and of this spiritual covenant circumcision was a sign and seal” (ibid., 632; emphases added). This tendency is not true of all covenant theologians, however, e.g., Reformed Baptist Fred Malone, who affirms Covenant Theology and its Covenant of Grace and yet makes this same critique of infant baptism (The Baptism of Disciples Alone, 74).

61 Venema, “Covenant Theology and Baptism,” 221. The same three arguments were previously made by John Murray to support his claim that circumcision was primarily a seal of spiritual blessings, and that any relationship it had to physical and national promises was only secondary and derived: (1) The spiritual blessing of union/communion with God is the deepest significance of the covenant (Gen. 17:7), and therefore any external or national privileges were merely the fruit of that spiritual blessing; (2) various Old Testament passages speak of circumcision as a symbol of the removal of defilement (e.g., Exod. 6:12, 30; Lev. 19:23; 26:41; Deut. 10:16; 30:6; Jer. 4:4; 6:10; 9:25); and (3) the apostle Paul taught that circumcision is the seal of justification by faith (e.g., Rom. 4:11; Col. 2:11–12; Rom. 2:25–29; Phil. 3:3) (Christian Baptism, 46–48). According to Murray, these three complementary notions—union and communion with God, the removal of defilement, and the righteousness of faith—were signified and sealed by circumcision and are “identical with that signified by baptism” (48).

62 Venema, “Covenant Theology and Baptism,” 222.
The logic of this argument appears to be sound, but a closer examination shows that each of these three assertions about the significance of circumcision is plagued with hermeneutical problems. First, in identifying the significance of circumcision in Genesis 17 as “covenant communion and fellowship with God,” the paedobaptist focuses on some of the Abrahamic promises to the exclusion of others. The Abrahamic Covenant clearly contains both physical and spiritual promises, but the paedobaptist insists that the spiritual promises are primary and therefore that these promises alone were signified by circumcision. For example, John Murray acknowledges that the Abrahamic Covenant contained external blessings and national privileges, but he argues from Genesis 17:7 that the covenant consisted of union/communion with God in “the highest reaches of its meaning,” and therefore that circumcision signified this one spiritual blessing rather than the physical promises as well. In a similar way, David Gibson identifies the promise of “spiritual ownership” in Genesis 17:7–8 as “what the covenant promise actually is” and insists that this one promise is the head to which all the earthly covenant promises refer.

But on what basis can the paedobaptist deny that circumcision equally signified the physical promises? On what basis, for example, can he deny that circumcision

63 Murray, Christian Baptism, 46–47.

64 Gibson, “Sacramental Supercessionism Revisited,” 198, citing Calvin, who writes, “In this way we ought to understand all the earthly promises given to the Jewish nation: that the spiritual promise, as the head to which they refer, should always hold the first place” (Institutes of the Christian Religion, 4.16.11). Gibson also argues that the significance of circumcision “is much more than merely physical” because it symbolizes “complete devotion to God” (“Sacramental Supercessionism Revisited,” 198). Gibson traces this understanding of circumcision back to the research of John Meade (see Meade, “Circumcision of the Heart in Leviticus and Deuteronomy: Divine Means for Resolving Curse and Bringing Blessing,” SB JT 18.3 [2014]: 59–85; “The Meaning of Circumcision in Israel: A Proposal for a Transfer of Rite from Egypt to Israel,” SB JT 20.1 [2016]: 35–54; and “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 Theologies, eds. Stephen J. Wellum and Brent E. Parker [Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2016], 127–58). According to Meade, the meaning of circumcision is not provided in Genesis 17 itself, and therefore its significance must be found in extra-biblical sources. The most likely religious-cultural milieu of Genesis 17, says Meade, is that of ancient Egypt, where circumcision was an initiation rite for those who would serve as priests in the court of Pharaoh. This leads to the conclusion that circumcision was intended to show devotion to the service of Yahweh and His kingdom (“Circumcision of the Heart,” 60–64; “Circumcision of Flesh,” 129–31; “The Meaning of Circumcision,” 35–54). As Meade summarizes, “According to the Egyptian background already ascertained, circumcision functions as a sign of remembrance to Abraham and his offspring that they are affiliated with Yahweh or devoted to him, just as the king-priest and his clergy in Egypt were specially devoted to the deity” (“The Meaning of Circumcision,” 48). The main problem with Meade’s argument is how quickly he dismisses the possibility that the meaning of circumcision can be found in Genesis 17 itself (“Circumcision of the Heart,” 60; “Circumcision of Flesh,” 129; “The Meaning of Circumcision,” 35). As the “sign of the covenant” that God made with Abraham (Gen. 17:11), circumcision symbolized the various promises that God made to Abraham and his descendants in that covenant. For this reason, circumcision did not function merely “as a sign of remembrance to Abraham and his offspring that they are affiliated with Yahweh or devoted to him,” as Meade asserts (“The Meaning of Circumcision,” 48). Instead, as previously discussed, it functioned as a sign of remembrance that God had promised: (1) to bless Abraham; (2) to make Abraham’s name great; (3) to make Abraham a great nation; (4) to give Abraham and his descendants the land of Canaan as an everlasting possession; (5) to establish a relationship with Abraham and his descendants; and (6) to bless the nations of the world through Abraham’s seed (Gen. 12:1–3, 7; 15:7–21; 17:1–21; 22:16–18).
signified the seed promises to make Abraham a great nation (Gen. 12:2; 13:16; 15:5; 17:6; 22:17; 28:14) and to bless the nations of the world through his descendants (Gen. 12:3; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14)? As previously discussed, the sign of circumcision marked out the descendants of Abraham through Isaac and Jacob as the physical seed who would constitute the nation of Israel and bring forth the true and ultimate Seed through whom God would bless the nations of the world. Only by denying that these physical promises were also symbolized by circumcision—or by relegating them to the category of “secondary and derived” and therefore not signified by the rite—is the paedobaptist able to maintain the equivalence of circumcision and baptism. If circumcision is the sign of the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 17:11), it must have symbolized all the promises of that covenant and not just some of them.

Second, in claiming that circumcision signifies the need to remove the guilt of sin as an obstacle to favor with a holy God (Deut. 10:16; 30:6; Jer. 4:4), the paedobaptist misunderstands the biblical metaphor of the circumcised heart. In the Old Testament, this metaphor is used in three closely related ways—to describe those with uncircumcised hearts (Lev. 26:41; Jer. 9:25–26; Ezek. 44:7, 9); to call upon God’s people to circumcise their hearts (Deut. 10:16; Jer. 4:4); and to promise that God Himself will one day circumcise their hearts (Deut. 30:6). According to many paedobaptists, circumcision of the heart refers to the forgiveness of sins, and therefore the physical rite of circumcision signified or pointed to the need for the cleansing of sin, the removal of guilt necessary for a relationship with God. They argue that

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66 As Wellum writes, “What promises were signified by circumcision? All the promises tied to the Abrahamic covenant, which included not only salvific promises but also national ones, particularly the land promise (e.g., Gen 12:7; 15:12–21; 17:8). All these promises in different ways lead us to Christ, but we must not reduce all of them merely to their spiritual sense” (“Baptism and the Relationship Between the Covenants,” 155; emphasis original). Paedobaptists often argue against the idea that the Abrahamic Covenant and its sign of circumcision were “merely physical” in their nature/significance (e.g., Jeffrey D. Niell, “The Newness of the New Covenant,” in *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*, 136; Booth, *Children of the Promise*, 99; Murray, *Christian Baptism*, 47; Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants*, 153; Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3:554)–as if that were the baptist view—but that is simply not the case. The baptist view is that the Abrahamic Covenant contains both physical/national and spiritual promises and that the covenant sign of circumcision signified all of them, not just the spiritual ones.

67 Booth, *Children of the Promise*, 99–100, 108, 118, 181; Murray, *Christian Baptism*, 47–48; Venema, “Covenant Theology and Baptism,” 221–22; Ross, “Baptism and Circumcision as Signs and Seals,” 87, 101–3; Chapell, “A Pastoral Overview of Infant Baptism,” 12; Chapell, *Why Do We Baptize Infants?*, 8–9; Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants*, 153, 161; and Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3:554–55. According to Booth, circumcision represented cleanliness and was “an outward sign of the fact that God required a ‘circumcised’ or cleansed heart” (*Children of the Promise*, 99–100), and later he argues that “both circumcision and baptism outwardly signify the necessary inward cleansing” according to passages such as Lev. 26:41; Deut. 10:16; 30:6; Jer. 4:4; 9:25; Acts 2:38; and 22:16 (108, 118). Venema similarly describes circumcision as a visible reminder “of the need for the removal of sin, the guilt and corruption of which constituted an insuperable obstacle to fellowship with a holy God” (“Covenant Theology and Baptism,” 221); and Ross concludes that “both circumcision in the Old Testament and baptism in the New Testament signify a cleansing from sin, a removal of the uncleanness of sin” (“Baptism and Circumcision as Signs and Seals,” 103). It should be noted that some of these same paedobaptists also describe circumcision of the heart as a reference to conversion or regeneration (e.g., Booth, *Children of the Promise*, 101–2; Venema, “Covenant Theology and Baptism,” 222; Ross, “Baptism and Circumcision as Signs and Seals,” 101; see discussion below).
because baptism symbolizes this same blessing of divine forgiveness (Mark 1:4; Acts 2:38; 22:16), the two rites have the same spiritual significance and therefore should be equated.68

The problem with this argument is that circumcision of the heart refers not to the forgiveness of sin but rather to the transformation of heart known as regeneration. In the metaphor itself, a hard outer core surrounds the uncircumcised heart and makes it unable and unwilling to respond to God. To remedy this spiritual hardness and rebellion, the “foreskin” that encases the heart and prevents it from following Yahweh needs to be removed in a radical surgical act called “circumcision.”69 In other words, the “foreskin” of the circumcised heart is not the guilt of sin that is forgiven, but the hardness of heart that is cut away and removed when the Holy Spirit inwardly transforms and renews the believing sinner in New Covenant conversion (Deut. 30:6; cf. Rom. 2:28–29; Col. 2:11–12).70 Because this metaphor does not signify forgiveness, the heart-circumcision passages give no support to the argument that both physical rites signify the cleansing of sin necessary for a relationship with God.

The stronger argument for infant baptism comes from those who recognize that circumcision of the heart refers to regeneration.71 According to these paedobaptists, because Old Testament circumcision signified the need for regeneration (Deut. 10:16; 30:6; Jer. 4:4)—and because baptism now signifies that same spiritual circumcision of the heart (Col. 2:11–12)—the two are essentially identical in meaning. In


70 This is indicated by the primary Old Testament passages that use the metaphor: the uncircumcised heart needs to be humbled (Lev. 26:41); spiritual circumcision remedies this hardness of heart (Jer. 4:3–4) and stiffness of neck (Deut. 10:16); and spiritual circumcision produces a love for God with all of one’s heart and soul (Deut. 30:6). It is also supported not only by parallel promises in the Old Testament that describe this New Covenant transformation of God’s people—He will write His law on their heart (Jer. 31:33), give them a new heart to fear Him always (Jer. 32:39–40; Ezek. 36:26a), and replace their heart of stone with a heart of flesh that will obey Him (Ezek. 11:19–20; 36:26–27)—but also by Paul’s description of spiritual circumcision as “the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ” (Col. 2:11), most likely a reference to “the stripping away of their sinful nature/old man, which has been performed by Christ at the time of conversion” (Martin Salter, “Does Baptism Replace Circumcision? An Examination of the Relationship between Circumcision and Baptism in Colossians 2:11–12,” Themelios 35, no. 1 (2010): 22–24; also see Douglas J. Moo, The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon, Pillar New Testament Commentary [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2008], 197–200). In a similar way, the Old Testament uses the metaphorical language of “uncircumcised ears” as a reference to ears that are rebelliously unresponsive to the Word of God (Jer. 6:10).

71 Douglas Wilson, To a Thousand Generations—Infant Baptism: Covenant Mercy for the People of God (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 1996), 42–43, 50–52; Gibson, “Sacramental Supercessionism Revisited,” 200–04. As noted above, some paedobaptists who view circumcision of the heart as signifying the forgiveness of sin also see it as a reference to conversion or regeneration and make this same argument (e.g., Booth, Children of the Promise, 101; Venema, “Covenant Theology and Baptism,” 222). For example, in explaining the significance of Leviticus 26:40–41, Deuteronomy 10:16, and Deuteronomy 30:6, Booth writes, “By implication, a regenerate and converted heart is a circumcised heart, in which there is sorrow over sin, repentance, and confession. This is the kind of heart that physical circumcision was to signify. Baptism, likewise, holds the same significance” (Children of the Promise, 101).
In this way, paedobaptists cite the Old Testament metaphor of the circumcised heart as evidence for attaching a primarily spiritual significance to the physical rite of circumcision, which allows them to argue for a correspondence between the two covenant signs.  

But even here the case for infant baptism faces significant difficulties. Apart from the exegetical problems with their argument from Colossians 2:11–12, paedobaptists have read the metaphor of the circumcised heart back into Genesis 17 in such a way that eclipses the meaning of the covenant sign in its original context. When circumcision was revealed to Abraham as the sign of the covenant in Genesis 17, it symbolized the specific promises that Yahweh made to the patriarch (Gen. 12:1–3, 7; 15:7–21; 17:1–21), and not until 700 years later was the metaphor of the circumcised heart first revealed through Moses (Lev. 26:41; Deut. 10:16; 30:6). Once that metaphor was introduced as a prophetic motif, physical circumcision certainly took on the additional significance of anticipating the circumcision of the heart that God would some day provide through the New Covenant (Deut. 30:6), but not in a way that cancelled, replaced, or reinterpreted its original meaning as a sign of the Abrahamic promises. Circumcision signified all the promises made to Abraham when it was first given to him as the sign of the covenant (Gen. 17:11)—including the physical and national promises—and it continued to do so even after the circumcision of the heart metaphor was introduced through Moses.

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72 Marcel, The Biblical Doctrine of Infant Baptism, 86–87. In explaining the Old Testament metaphor of the circumcised heart, Booth writes, “Since circumcision carried such spiritual significance, its reference to the national covenant was a very subordinate matter. Its main purpose was to signify and seal the promise of deliverance from sin” (Booth, Children of the Promise, 100).

73 According to this argument from Colossians 2:11–12, because circumcision and baptism signify the same spiritual reality (circumcision of the heart), they are interchangeable in meaning—the latter having replaced the former—and therefore baptism should be applied to infants just as circumcision was. Although a detailed discussion of this passage goes beyond the scope of this article, circumcision and baptism do not actually signify the same spiritual reality in Colossians 2:11–12. In this passage, circumcision serves as a metaphor for the removal or cutting off of the sinful nature, whereas baptism serves as a metaphor for union with Christ in His burial and resurrection. Both spiritual realities occur through the redemptive work of Christ—His death (ἐν τῇ περιτομῇ τοῦ Χριστοῦ), burial (συντάφθη), and resurrection (συνήγαγθη)—and both are experienced through faith in Christ (διὰ τῆς πίστεως). Therefore, Colossians 2:11–12 does not teach that baptism has replaced circumcision, but rather that all believers have both spiritually circumcised and spiritually baptized. For a helpful discussion of this passage and its implications for the baptism debate, see Salter, “Does Baptism Replace Circumcision?,” 15–29. Also see the paedobaptist response to this article: Gibson, “Sacramental Supersessionism Revisited,” 191–208, as well as Salter’s brief rejoinder: “Response to David Gibson,” Themelios 37, no. 2 (2012): 209–10.

74 See Wellum, “Baptism and the Relationship Between the Covenants,” 156; Gentry and Wellum, Kingdom through Covenant, 700–2; Salter, “Does Baptism Replace Circumcision?,” 19–22.

75 As G. R. Beasley-Murray explains, “The prophetic call for heart circumcision is a pictorial application of the rite, not an exposition of its meaning” (Baptism in the New Testament [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962], 158). In other words, the concept of the circumcised heart is not intrinsic to the original meaning of circumcision as revealed to Abraham in Genesis 17. Paedobaptist David Gibson disputes this, claiming that the promise of a circumcised heart (Deut. 30:6) was “there from the very start, attached to the rite’s inception” in Genesis 17 rather than appearing only later (“Sacramental Supersessionism Revisited,” 197). But the only evidence he provides from Genesis 17 is the promise in verses 7–8 that Yahweh will be God of Abraham and his descendants (see ibid., 197–200).
Third, as previously discussed in the first half of this article, in claiming that circumcision signifies the divine promise of justification, the paedobaptist reads his misinterpretation of Romans 4:11 back into the meaning of circumcision in Genesis 17 to establish a correspondence between the two covenant signs. As demonstrated above, however, a careful exegesis of this passage demonstrates that circumcision served as a seal of righteousness by faith for Abraham alone and was never intended to have this meaning for subsequent members of the covenant. The circumcision of male infants throughout Israel’s history was neither a seal of the righteousness of their faith (Rom. 4:11a) nor the means of enabling them to fulfill the purpose of Abraham as the father of all who believe (Rom. 4:11b–12). Only by ignoring this distinction can the paedobaptist insist that circumcision was “a seal of the righteousness of the faith” for all who were circumcised and therefore the Old Testament equivalent of water baptism.

Conclusion

To make the case that “baptism is for the Christians what circumcision previously was for the Jews,” paedobaptists use Romans 4:11 to argue that circumcision signified the promise of justification just like its New Testament counterpart. In doing so, they fail to understand not only the significance of Abraham’s circumcision in sealing the righteousness he had received by faith (Rom. 4:11a), but also its unique purpose in enabling him to serve as the spiritual father of both Jewish and Gentile believers (Rom. 4:11b–12). Both of these highlight the discontinuity between the circumcision of Abraham and that of his descendants, effectively refuting the paedobaptist argument from Romans 4:11.

The weakness of this argument reflects a broader tendency of paedobaptists to reduce the Abrahamic Covenant to its spiritual aspects while neglecting its national and physical features. The result of this flattening of the covenant is that “[a]ny significance which circumcision had of an ethnic or national character is not only subordinated to its religious and spiritual meaning but, for all practical purposes, submerged by it.” The fundamental error of this approach is its failure to “treat the Abrahamic covenant first in its own immediate context and then think through how it is picked up in later biblical covenants and then ultimately in the new covenant.”

The diverse nature of the Abrahamic Covenant—along with the reality that circumcision signified all the promises made to the patriarch—demonstrates that the two

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76 For example, Murray cites Romans 4:11 as evidence that circumcision did not signify the physical or national features of the covenant but instead served as “the sign and seal of the highest and richest spiritual blessing which God bestows upon men” (Christian Baptism, 45–48); Booth argues from Romans 4:11 that far from being a physical sign of biological descent, circumcision signified the reality that God justifies those who believe (Children of the Promise, 99, 102); and Ross’ lengthy explanation of the significance of circumcision is based almost entirely on his misinterpretation of Romans 4:11 (“Baptism and Circumcision as Signs and Seals,” 86–97).

77 Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, 4.16.11.

78 Jewett, Infant Baptism and the Covenant of Grace, 95.

79 Gentry and Wellum, Kingdom through Covenant, 633.
rites cannot be considered identical in what they symbolize. Baptism is only for those who make a profession of faith in Christ.