# BAPTISM

A CORAM DEO POSITION PAPER

## INTRODUCTION

"There is no doctrine of the Scripture over which there has been more controversy, nor about which there is more misunderstanding within the Christian Church, than the doctrine of water baptism."[1] Our Protestant forefathers killed each other over their differing views on this issue.[2] Thankfully, we don't fight to the death over baptism these days, but that doesn't mean the debate is over. Baptism still divides various traditions within the Christian community.

The purpose of this paper is to articulate Coram Deo Church's theology and practice of Christian baptism. It is not intended to be a full theological treatise, but rather a short and helpful summary. Our aim is to explain concisely and clearly our position on baptism and to acknowledge where our view agrees with and differs from some of the major church traditions.

The first part of this paper is ***theological***. It seeks to lay the biblical and theological framework for baptism. The second part of this paper is ***practical***. It seeks to answer some specific questions people often have about baptism. This paper will be most coherent if read in that order. However, readers who are primarily interested in practical questions may wish to skip ahead to have their questions answered and then backtrack to understand the theological foundations.

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[1] Robert Rayburn, *What About Baptism*? (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1957, reprinted 1979), 11.

[2] During the early years of the Reformation, "The martyrs [killed for their view of baptism] were many – probably more than those who died during the three centuries of persecution before the time of Constantine" (Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, vol 2 (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1985), 56).

# SECTION ONE:
# A THEOLOGY OF BAPTISM

## PRIMARY VS. SECONDARY ISSUES

It is important to acknowledge at the outset that the Bible does not speak with equal clarity about all issues of doctrine. Christians have traditionally differentiated between primary theological issues – those foundational to the gospel message and essential to orthodox Christianity – and secondary theological issues, which are less central. On the primary issues, there is no room for debate; these are the doctrines that distinguish Christianity from other worldviews. On the secondary issues, however, there is room for debate and discussion.

As a helpful metaphor, we can think of secondary issues as "state boundaries" and primary issues as "national borders." Various Christian traditions vary from each other on secondary matters, just like different states or regions. But the primary doctrines enshrined in the great ecumenical creeds of church history (the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed) mark the "national borders" of Christian orthodoxy. Cross these borders, and you've crossed into another religion.

When it comes to baptism, the ***necessity*** of baptism is a ***primary*** issue. All Christians must be baptized in accordance with Jesus' command (Matt. 28:18-20) and the witness of the church throughout history. But the ***practice*** of baptism is a ***secondary issue*** on which good and godly people may disagree.

Therefore, each local church must study the Scriptures and arrive at convictions about baptism that will guide its own teaching and practice. A church's position on baptism should be held charitably, leaving room for intramural discussion and debate, but firmly, guiding its practice for spiritual formation, discipleship, and membership.

## SUMMARY: TWO VIEWS OF BAPTISM

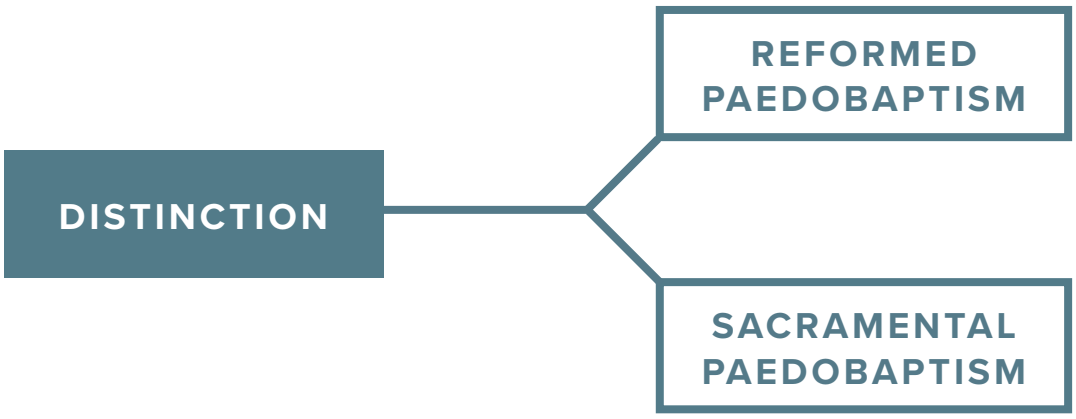
Two basic views on Christian baptism exist in the church today: ***credobaptism*** (also called ***believer's baptism***) and ***paedobaptism*** (also called ***infant baptism***). Credobaptists believe that only those who make a credible ***profession*** of faith (hence ***credo*** or "creed") should be baptized. Paedobaptists believe that baptism should also be extended to the infant children of Christian parents. Credobaptism is practiced in all Baptist churches and in many independent or non-denominational churches, while paedobaptism is practiced in the Catholic, Anglican, Presbyterian, Lutheran, and most Reformed traditions.

So which is the biblical view? That's the million-dollar question. According to credobaptists, the New Testament reveals a uniform pattern of conversion, then baptism. Nowhere in the New Testament do we see infants being baptized. Paedobaptists offer a convincing reply: that's because all of the conversions in the New Testament are adult conversions! Of course adult converts to

Christianity should be baptized upon their conversion. But this does not solve the problem of what to do with infants born to Christian parents. Arguments from silence ("The New Testament doesn't mention infant baptism, therefore it's illegitimate") are never very compelling.

To further complicate the matter, both traditions claim legitimate precedent in the history of the church. The ***Didache***, one of the earliest writings in church history, instructs church leaders to "order the baptized to fast one or two days before [baptism]" – something infants clearly could not do. Yet "by the fifth century [infant baptism] had become the general practice of the church."[3] Both credobaptists and paedobaptists can find support for their views in Scripture and in history.

New Testament scholar Kurt Aland summarizes well the difficulty of arriving at a "biblical" view of baptism: "The New Testament undoubtedly makes statements about the character and significance of baptism for the Christian, but it makes these statements ***without providing any binding prescription*** as to the manner in which it is to be carried out."[4] The paucity of clear biblical instruction on this matter should cause us to be open-handed, cautious, and charitable in our conclusions.




Before going further, we need to understand an important distinction within the paedobaptist camp. On the surface, paedobaptists seem united in extending baptism to the children of Christian parents. But beneath this unity of practice lies a radical divergence of theology. For the purposes of our discussion, we must distinguish between ***Reformed paedobaptism*** and ***sacramental paedobaptism***. The difference centers around this question: What does infant baptism ***do***? Lutherans, Catholics, and Anglicans, with minor variations among them, believe that baptism is a converting ordinance. That is, baptism causes regeneration. In baptism, a child's soul is cleansed from sin and born again. The Roman Catholic church declares that "Baptism… includes forgiveness of original sin and all personal sins [and] birth into… new life."[5] Lutherans hold that "through Baptism we are reborn as children of God."[6] And the baptismal rite of the Episcopal

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[3] A.W. Argyle, "Baptism in the Early Christian Centuries," in A. Gilmore, *Christian Baptism* (Chicago: Judson Press, 1959), 187.

[4] Kurt Aland, *Did the Early Church Baptize Infants?* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963), 113.

[5] The Catechism of the Catholic Church, sec. 1279, from www.vatican.va, accessed 15 July 2009. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963), 113.

[6] *What Every Lutheran Should Know About The Sacrament of Baptism: A Scriptographic Booklet* (South Deerfield, MA: Channing L. Bete Co., 1984, rev. 2000), 3.

church declares those children who are baptized to be "cleansed from sin and born again."[7] We refer to this point of view as ***sacramental paedobaptism***.

The Reformed[8] or Calvinistic view of paedobaptism is entirely different. John Calvin wrote: "How false is the teaching… that through baptism we are released and made exempt from original sin."[9] Reformed paedobaptists do not believe that baptism causes regeneration. Rather, they baptize infants in order to show that "the infant children of believing parents are to be considered within the covenant and thus members of the Church."[10] In other words, they view baptism not as a ***converting ordinance***, but as a ***covenant sign*** which marks children as part of God's people. Robert G. Rayburn, a Reformed Presbyterian scholar, writes:

> *In baptizing infants, we are not asserting their regeneration… the administration of the sacrament of baptism to an infant does not in itself bring any guarantee of anything, certainly not salvation… There is no biblical teaching of infant salvation through baptism. Instead of faith, such ideas are superstition.*[11]

Reformed paedobaptists understand baptism to be the new-covenant equivalent of circumcision. In the Old Testament, every Jewish male was circumcised, whether he was faithful to God or not. "This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: "***every male among you shall be circumcised***" (Gen. 17:10). Similarly, Reformed paedobaptists believe that ***every child*** of believing parents ought to be baptized. Baptism is not a guarantee of salvation, but rather a sign marking the child as part of God's covenant people. In baptism, believing parents claim God's promise of faithfulness to their children (Ex. 34:6-7) and pledge themselves to raise their children in "the discipline and instruction of the Lord" (Eph. 6:4). By marking their children with the sign of baptism, parents are acknowledging their biblical responsibility before God: "Those parents who have laid hold of God's promise concerning their children will do everything in their power to bring their children into realization of the fulfillment of the promise."[12]

Therefore, though Reformed paedobaptists and sacramental paedobaptists practice the exact same external rite (infant baptism), they do so from radically different viewpoints about what that rite accomplishes (covenant sign vs. converting ordinance). This difference will prove to be important in understanding Coram Deo's position on baptism.

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[7] *Book of Common Prayer* of the Episcopal Church, 1979, 307.

[8] "Reformed" refers to the theological tradition which stems primarily from the influence of John Calvin during the Reformation period, including the Puritan heritage in England and the United States.

[9] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.15.10.

[10] Rayburn, 81.

[11] Rayburn, 81-87.

[12] Rayburn, 87.

## CORAM DEO'S VIEW: SOFT CREDOBAPTISM

Coram Deo's view of baptism could best be described as soft credobaptism. We are credobaptists, because we believe the Bible teaches that proper baptism should follow a credible profession of faith on the part of the baptized person. But we are soft credobaptists, because we stand in the Reformed heritage and consider the Reformed version of paedobaptism to be biblically defensible. How this influences our church's practice of baptism will be explained below. First, let's consider the biblical and theological evidence for credobaptism.

The most important argument for credobaptism is the fact that ***biblically, baptism is a sign of discipleship to Jesus.***

Nowhere is this made more clear than in the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20): And Jesus came and said to them, *"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations,* ***baptizing them*** *in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."*

Biblically, baptism is not merely a mark of belief; it is a mark of discipleship. As a general rule, conversion and discipleship are inseperable: an unbeliever is converted to faith in Christ, and thus begins the journey of discipleship. This is the pattern we see in the New Testament. It makes sense, then, why people in the NT were immediately baptized upon their conversion. In the cultural context of the Roman world, baptism was not a harmless religious ritual. It was a public, decisive declaration of allegiance to Jesus Christ which would immediately cause the baptized person to stand apart from the surrounding pagan culture. When Peter told the Jews on the day of Pentecost to "repent and be baptized" (Acts 2:38-41), he was not suggesting that they merely acknowledge their sin and get dunked in water. He was asking them to turn from their former life and decisively identify with Jesus Christ in a public ritual. Participating in that ritual would not only signify their spiritual union with Christ; it would also mark them as a new people – set apart from both Jewish and Roman social norms and forms of worship.

Because of the crucial biblical connection between baptism and discipleship, we are a credobaptist church. We understand the Bible to teach that baptism is both a means of God's grace to us and a declaration of our intent to follow Jesus. So we want to see people begin on the path of discipleship before we baptize them.

We are not inferring that paedobaptists do not want to see this. In fact, most conscientious Reformed paedobaptists see infant baptism as an affirmation of the family's intent to raise a child to be a disciple of Jesus, in reliance on God's gracious promises. But while a family can (and must) start a child on the path of discipleship, each person must eventually take responsibility for his or her own soul: "to his own master he stands or falls" (Rom. 14:4). ***For this reason, we baptize children only after they make a conscious, credible profession of faith as disciples of Jesus.***

Reformed paedobaptists and credobaptists simply disagree on the proper order of events with respect to the children of Christian parents.

| CREDOBAPTIST ORDER OF EVENTS | REFORMED PAEDOBAPTIST ORDER OF EVENTS |
|---|---|
| DISCIPLESHIP | BAPTISM AS INFANTS |
| CONVERSION | DISCIPLESHIP |
| PROFESSION OF FAITH | CONVERSION |
| BAPTISM | PROFESSION OF FAITH |
| ADMISSION TO THE COMMUNION TABLE | ADMISSION TO THE COMMUNION TABLE |
| ONGOING SANCTIFICATION | ONGOING SANCTIFICATION |

Neither group views their children as unbelievers or as part of the pagan culture. Rather, in both traditions, discipleship begins at birth: Christian parents are to raise their children "in the discipline and instruction of the Lord" (Eph. 6:4). Also, notice that neither tradition "assumes" the conversion of their children; both expect a credible profession of faith, even from children who were raised in a Christian home.

Credobaptists and Reformed paedobaptists have different understandings of the purpose and meaning of baptism. However, careful analysis shows that credobaptists and Reformed paedobaptists are closer in belief and practice than what is typically acknowledged by either side. All the same essential elements are present; only the order of events is different.

Some paedobaptists will argue that our position on baptism is a misunderstanding of grace. If we really believe the gospel of grace, why not mark infants with the sign of baptism when they are still helpless? Doesn't that most clearly signify that salvation is entirely by grace? And this is a good argument, for we are indeed saved by God's grace, apart from works, while we were dead in sin (Eph. 2:1-10). Our response is simply that we are exalting God's grace by trusting in his covenant promises as we raise our children.

This is the crux of the difference between good, gospel-driven credobaptist parents and good, gospel-driven paedobaptist parents. Both are going to have a high view of God's grace and sovereignty. Both are going to raise their children to know and follow Christ. Both are going to believe the same covenant promises and entrust their children to God in the same faith-filled obedience. At the end of the day, the paedobaptist is going to baptize his child simply because he believes it's obedient to God to do so. And that is exactly the same reason why we, as convinced credobaptists, don't baptize infants: because we believe it's obedient to God *not* to do so.

In addition to the primary biblical argument for credobaptism – the fact that baptism is a sign of discipleship to Jesus – there are a number of secondary biblical arguments that add weight to the credobaptist position:

1. In every New Testament command and instance of baptism, repentance and faith precede baptism.

- Acts 2:37-38, 41: *Now when they heard this, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brethren, what shall we do?" And Peter said to them, "Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. . ." So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and there were added that day about three thousand souls.*

- Acts 8:12: *But when they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women.*

- See also Acts 10:44-48; Acts 18:8; Ephesians 4:1-6

2. There are lots of commands to baptize and be baptized, but there is no biblical command that we should baptize infants.

- Though he argues in favor of paedobaptism, Presbyterian scholar Robert Rayburn does acknowledge: "There is no specific New Testament command to baptize the infant children of believing parents."[13]

- In our view, a practice as important as baptism needs to be warranted by clear biblical imperatives and not merely by arguments from inference.

3. The household baptisms in the Bible give no conclusive evidence of the baptism of infants.

- Acts 16 and 1 Corinthians 1 speak of the conversion and baptism of entire households. Acts 16:30-34: *Then he brought them out and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" And they said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds; and he was baptized at once, he and all his family. Then he brought them up into his house and set food before them. And he rejoiced along with his entire household that he had believed in God.*

- Paedobaptist scholars argue from these verses that "the evidence… indicates that infants were included in the baptisms whenever heads of families accepted Christ and were born again."[14] This is a very tenuous inference. It is possible that infants were included, but we simply have no way of knowing.

4. Baptism does not directly replace circumcision in the New Covenant.

- The justification of infant baptism in the Reformed tradition hangs on the notion that baptism replaces circumcision as the sign of God's covenant. According to the Heidelberg Catechism, infants of Christian parents "belong to the covenant and people of God . . . they also are to be baptized as a sign of the covenant, to be ingrafted into the Christian church and distinguished from the children of unbelievers, as was done in the

[13] Rayburn, 75.

[14] Rayburn, 75.

Old Testament by circumcision, in place of which in the New Testament baptism is appointed."[15]

- There is certainly ***some*** continuity between circumcision and baptism because both are covenant signs. But they are not exactly the same, as paedobaptists claim. John Piper explains:

> *There is in fact an important continuity between the signs of sons of Abraham who made up the physical Israel, so baptism should be administered to all the spiritual sons of Abraham who make up the spiritual Israel, the church. But who are these spiritual sons of Abraham who constitute the people of God in our age?*
>
> *Galatians 3:7 says, "So you see that it is men of faith who are the sons of Abraham." The new thing, since Jesus has come, is that the covenant people of God are no longer a political, ethnic nation, but a body of believers.*
>
> *John the Baptist inaugurated this change and introduced the new sign of baptism. By calling all Jews to repent and be baptized, John declared powerfully and offensively that physical descent does not make one part of God's family and that circumcision, which signifies a physical relationship, will now be replaced by baptism, which signifies a spiritual relationship. The apostle Paul picks up this new emphasis, especially in Romans 9, and says, "Not all are children of Abraham because they are his descendants… it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God" (vs. 7-8).*
>
> *Therefore a very important change has occurred in redemptive history… The people of God are no longer formed through natural kinship, but through supernatural conversion to faith in Christ.*[16]

- Obviously, only God knows who has truly experienced "supernatural conversion to faith in Christ," since regeneration is an invisible work of the Holy Spirit in the heart of the believer. But Piper's point stands: under the Old Covenant, a person entered the covenant people of God through physical circumcision. Under the New Covenant, a person enters the covenant people of God through faith in Christ. So, who should receive the sign of the covenant (baptism)? Not those who are born into a Christian family, but those who profess faith in Christ. These are the biblical and theological considerations which compel us to practice believer's baptism. ***Coram Deo is a credobaptist church; we will only baptize those people who make a credible profession of faith in the Lord Jesus.***

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[15] Heidelberg Catechism, Q. 74.

[16] John Piper, "Brothers, Magnify the Meaning of Baptism," in *Brothers, We are Not Professionals* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman/Desiring God Foundation, 2002), 133-134.

Our intent in this section has been to cogently explain our position as a credobaptist church. However, let us conclude with nine important points, borrowed from theologian John H. Armstrong, that should guide our thinking on the subject of baptism:[17]

1. We can and should believe that no one is warranted to neglect or denigrate baptism because there is disagreement among believers regarding its practice.We can differ about the way in which grace and salvation are related to baptism without concluding that those in other traditions are without the grace of God because of this disagreement.

2. We can agree that not all who are baptized are truly regenerate and thus not all who have been baptized will be finally saved.

3. We can agree that baptism is not magic and that the application of the water of Christian baptism to a person in and of itself never saves them, which is the old danger of ***ex opera operato***.

4. We can agree that baptism is commanded by our Lord Jesus Christ (Matt. 28:19-20) and thus should never be treated as trivial. Put simply, baptism is important, and this is why we must be serious about it: baptism is bound up with Christ and his gospel, and this connection makes it important for all who wish to be faithful to Jesus.

5. We can believe that baptism is a sign of Christ given to his people under the new covenant. It is the outward mark that is received prior to entry into the Christian church and still stands as a commandment for all who follow Christ. This will be so until the end of this present age. By this mark, we are set apart from others and from all non-Christian faiths and practices.

6. We can believe that baptism and the Lord's Supper are related to one another as blessings and benefits given by Christ to his church. We can also believe that baptism is to be administered once, while the Lord's Supper is to be administered frequently. Both of these signs nourish and strengthen our faith in Christ.

7. We can further believe (as Protestant Christians) that there are only two sacraments, or ordinances, given by Christ to his church--baptism and the Lord's Supper. Therefore, we reject additions to these two and wish to practice only these two in a manner that will continually relate them faithfully to the gospel of grace. We should also reject all human innovations and laws imposed on believers from outside the Bible.

8. We can affirm that baptism in water, understood by means of the full teaching of the NT, is to be performed in the triune name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:19-20).

9. We can agree that baptism is related to the redemptive work of Christ in the past, and thus we can see how it looks back to what Christ has done to bring in the "new creation" (2 Cor. 5:17), while it also looks forward to the consumation of all things in the coming of Christ in the future (cf. Rom. 8:18-25).

Let us now turn to some of the practical questions Coram Deo's view of baptism raises.

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[17] John H. Armstrong, gen. ed., *Understanding Four Views on Baptism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 161-174.

# SECTION TWO:
# THE PRACTICE OF BAPTISM

## PRACTICAL QUESTION #1:
*What constitutes a "credible profession of faith?"*

What constitutes a ***credible*** profession of faith? In using this language, we are acknowledging that it's not enough to simply profess faith. The world is filled with people who claim to be Christians, but live in utter disobedience to God. Jesus acknowledged that there would be many who called him "Lord" and even did ministry in his name, but in the end he would declare to them: "Depart from me, I never knew you" (Matt. 7:23). Something more is required than a bare statement of belief in Christ.

We believe that the Bible lays out three criteria for what makes a profession of faith credible: a clear understanding of the gospel (justification by faith in Christ), evidence of a regenerate heart, and a commitment to obedience.

1. ***A clear understanding of the gospel.*** The Bible consistently contrasts works-righteousness (i.e. self-salvation) with faith-righteousness (i.e. salvation by Jesus' atoning sacrifice), because the natural tendency of the human heart is to trust in our own goodness to commend us to God. So, Scripture asserts that we have "all sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 3:23-24). The fundamental realization of the gospel is that "I am a sinner and Jesus is my only hope." I have nothing to commend me to God, and my only hope is to turn from my vain attempts at self-righteousness and accept the righteousness of God offered by faith in Christ, so that I "may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith" (Phil. 3:8-9). In order for someone's profession of faith to be credible, they must demonstrate that they are "resting upon Christ alone for salvation as he is offered to us in the gospel."[18]

2. ***Evidence of a regenerate heart.*** Regeneration is the supernatural work of God to awaken a dead soul to living faith (Eph. 2:1-5). Though we cannot see regeneration, we can see its effects (John 3:8). So a credible profession of faith requires not just an understanding of the gospel, but evidence that the new birth has actually "happened" in someone's heart. Some of the biblical evidences of regeneration include repentance from sin (1 John 1:5-10), deep love and

[18] Westminster Shorter Catechism, answer 86.

affection for Jesus (1 Peter 1:8), and a decreased appetite for sin as new inclinations and desires replace old ones (2 Cor. 5:17, Eph. 4:22-24).

3. ***A commitment to obedience.*** There is simply no such thing as a Christian who is not seeking to obey God. "The one who says, 'I have come to know Him,' and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him" (1 John 2:4). Though indwelling sin renders our best obedience imperfect, every true Christian desires to obey God and to "do all to the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31).

Only God knows the heart, and even the most discerning Christians sometimes mistake momentary "spirituality" for true repentance and faith (2 Tim. 4:10; 1 John 2:19). We are not seeking error-free knowledge of the human heart. Rather, we are simply holding up the mirror of Scripture to the life of a professing believer to see if the biblical evidences of faith are truly present.

In requiring a ***credible*** profession of faith before administering Christian baptism, we are seeking to honor and protect the biblical connection between repentance, faith, and baptism (Acts 2:38; Gal. 3:26-27). As Anthony Lane points out, "For the New Testament writers faith means 'faith confessed in baptism' and baptism means 'baptism as a confession of faith.' They thought of faith and baptism as a unity."[19] We want baptism to be a vital, rich initiation into the family of God, not a meaningless ritual.

***Readers who are ready to be baptized may consult Coram Deo's process for baptism at the end of this paper.***

## PRACTICAL QUESTION #2:

*What is our practice for baptizing children?*

Like our Reformed paedobaptist brothers and sisters, we believe in God's promise of faithfulness to the children of his covenant people. We believe God has a special concern for the children of believers, and we welcome them into the life of the covenant community – the church – as the expected heirs of God's covenant blessings.

Furthermore, the Bible teaches that very young children – yes, even infants – can be regenerated by the Holy Spirit. The angel Gabriel promised Zechariah that John the Baptist would be "filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb" (Luke 1:15). Children raised in faithful, believing Christian households may "grow up never knowing a time when they weren't embracing Jesus Christ freely offered in the gospel."[20] Because of this, we certainly do not believe that "believer's baptism" means "adults-only baptism." While we do not practice the baptism of infants, we also disagree with the practice of some credobaptist churches who make children wait until young adulthood before baptizing them.

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[19] Anthony N.S. Lane, "Dual-Practice Baptism View," in David F. Wright, ed., *Baptism: Three Views* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 2009), 142.

[20] Stephen Smallman, *How Our Children Come to Faith* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2006), 21.

In an ideal world, parents would present their children for baptism whenever they were convinced of the authenticity and credibility of their children's faith. Wise, prayerful, discerning parents should be able to recognize the difference between religious mimicry and true conscious faith, as well as the variations in maturity and understanding among different children. However, in the real world things aren't so neat. All faithful Christian parents want to see their children come to Jesus, and will therefore be tempted to see baptism as a validation of their own work as parents (despite good theological teaching to the contrary). For this reason, we are convinced of the need to set some basic standards for the baptism of children.

Therefore, ***Coram Deo recommends that parents wait until a child is at least 10 years old before presenting him for baptism.*** Please note that this is a ***recommendation*** and not a mandate. There is nothing magical or biblical about the age of 10. Parents are welcome to present younger children for baptism if they desire. However, all children will be interviewed and their readiness for baptism considered on a case-by-case basis.

In accordance with the biblical teaching on eldership, all decisions about baptism will be made by Coram Deo's elders and deacons. Because we are accountable to God for the souls of those under our care, we will withhold baptism from children until they demonstrate ***a credible profession of faith***. Parents should see this as a blessing and not as a challenge. We are not interested in performing a religious ritual to appease religiously inclined family members. Rather, we want to help parents teach their children the gospel, bring them to faith in Jesus, and shape them as faithful, obedient disciples of Jesus.

Functionally, we are treating children in the exact same way as those who practice biblically grounded paedobaptism. Biblically conscientious paedobaptists welcome infants into the covenant family through baptism, but often require additional maturity and instruction (often via the ritual of "confirmation" or something of the sort) before accepting them as full communicant members (i.e. those who can participate in the sacrament of communion). At Coram Deo, we delay baptism until a later age. In both cases, we are acknowledging that the children of believing parents are part of the covenant family, and yet not "fully" a part of the family in the same sense as an adult member. Both traditions seek to do justice to God's covenant promises to the descendants of his people and to the biblical imperative that each individual believer must be personally regenerated by the Holy Spirit and persevere in faith.

Furthermore, neither tradition is perfect. Biblically informed paedobaptists will baptize some infants who will later turn away from the faith. And credobaptists will likewise baptize some professing believers who later turn away from the faith. We are not seeking to ensure some tighter "quality control" over baptism, as though waiting for children to make a credible profession of faith ensures that they will not fall away. Rather, we are credobaptist because we believe this to be the best interpretation of Scripture.

In summary, then:

- Coram Deo will baptize children upon the criteria of a credible profession of faith. We recommend parents wait until age 10 before pursuing baptism.

- No child may participate in communion unless he or she has first been baptized.[21]

As a general rule, parents should:

- Walk faithfully with Christ themselves as an example to their children (Deut. 6:1-9).

- Raise children "in the discipline and instruction of the Lord" (Eph. 6:4). Teaching children from the Bible and from good Christian resources should be a regular part of your parenting rhythms. Remember that baptism is a ***covenant sign,*** not a ***converting ordinance***. Those who have family members in more sacramental traditions may experience great pressure from relatives who believe that unless the child is baptized, he or she will be damned. This pressure provides an excellent opportunity to study the Bible and/or share the gospel with family members.

- Read the booklet ***How Our Children Come to Faith*** by Stephen Smallman to better understand God's covenant promises and how they inform a Christian parent's role in raising children.

When parents are convinced a child is ready for baptism:

- They should make their desire known to an elder or deacon at Coram Deo. That elder or deacon will connect the parent(s) with a mentor representing Coram Deo's leadership who will help guide them through the process of preparing a child for baptism.

- In preparation for baptism, the parent should guide the child through a short children's catechism that helps children learn the basics of the Christian faith. This study may take a number of months. For parents who are newer/younger Christians or who desire help in this process, the mentor may meet with the parent and child together to guide them through this study.

- At the conclusion of the catechism study, the parent and/or mentor should review the gospel with the child using a basic illustration like "The Cross Chart" and help the child come to a decisive affirmation of faith in Christ.[22] The child should be able to give a simple, clear, and biblical answer to the question: ***How do you know that you belong to Jesus?***

- The parents and child will then meet with the mentor, who will discern whether the child understands the gospel clearly and demonstrates evidence of personal faith in Christ.

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[21] Throughout the history of the church, baptism has been considered an initiation rite. That is, baptism celebrated one's entrance into the believing community. The Lord's Table, on the other hand, was the community meal open to all who had declared their unity with the believing body through baptism. Thus, the church throughout history has held that baptism should precede one's participation in the Lord's Table. It is interesting to note that a similar arrangement was seen with the Old Covenant rites of circumcision (initiation into the community) and the Passover (the community meal). For this reason we ask parents to wait until their children are baptized before allowing them to take communion.

[22] As a helpful resource, we recommend the booklet "Preparing Young People for Baptism" (Minneapolis: Children Desiring God, 2001), especially pages 29-35.

- If the mentor is satisfied with the child's understanding, he or she will recommend the child to the elders for baptism.

- The elders and/or deacons will follow up with the parents in order to clarify areas of concern and/or to make preparations for baptism.

- If the elders and deacons of Coram Deo determine that your child is not ready for baptism, receive this feedback as an invitation to renew and continue your efforts in biblical instruction. We consider the family unit to be the primary entity in God's kingdom purposes, and we want you as a parent to have the joy of instructing your child and seeing God's covenant promises come to fruition in their life. Our goal is to resource, equip, and pray for you – not to usurp your role. As your child grows up, we want them to remember not just their baptism, but your faithful work in teaching them about Jesus.

## PRACTICAL QUESTION #3:
*What about those who were baptized as infants?*

We have already stated that Coram Deo is a credobaptist church; ***we will only baptize those people who make a credible profession of faith in the Lord Jesus.*** Now we address the question: Will we honor as legitimate the prior baptisms of those who were baptized as infants?

This question marked a serious dividing line during the Protestant Reformation. On one side were the eminent Protestant leaders Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, and John Calvin, who all believed that Trinitarian baptism was valid regardless of who administered it or how it was administered.[23] On the other side were the so-called Anabaptists, who held that "infant baptism must be rejected, for it takes for granted that one becomes a Christian by being born in a supposedly Christian society. This obscures the need for a personal decision that stands at the very heart of the Christian faith."[24] The title "Anabaptists" ("rebaptizers") was a derogatory moniker given by their enemies; "such a name was not quite accurate, for [they] did not hold that one should be rebaptized, but rather that infant baptism was not valid, and therefore the first real baptism takes place… after having made a public confession of faith."[25]

The essential question behind this debate is this: what makes baptism ***legitimate*** or ***valid***? Is the mere use of the Trinitarian baptismal formula ("in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit") enough? Or does the minister performing the baptism need to be a faithful minister of the gospel? And is there also a need for faith on the part of the person being baptized?

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[23] From Luther's Larger Catechism: "Baptism is valid, even though faith be wanting. For my faith does not make Baptism, but receives it. Now, Baptism does not become invalid even though it be wrongly received or employed; since it is not bound (as stated) to our faith, but to the Word."

[24] Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, vol 2 (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1985), 54.

[25] Gonzalez, 55.

Coram Deo's conviction from Scripture is that a biblically valid baptism a) must be Trinitarian and b) must be accompanied by authentic faith in the gospel. In Matthew 28:18-20, Jesus commanded his disciples to "go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you." It is clear in this text that baptizing is part of disciplemaking. Therefore, the bare recitation of a Trinitarian baptismal formula does not meet the requirements for Christian baptism. A true Christian baptism involves a commitment to faith and discipleship – embracing the person and work of Jesus and living in ways that bring honor and glory to his name.

The importance of personal faith has always been at the heart of Reformation theology. The Westminster Catechism – one of the guiding documents of Reformed theology in the English-speaking world – acknowledges that "the sacraments become effectual means of salvation, not from any virtue in them, or in him that doth administer them; but only by the blessing of Christ, and the working of his Spirit ***in them that by faith receive them.***"[26] So, while the framers of this document agree with Luther and Calvin that a bad minister doesn't invalidate baptism, they also acknowledge the necessity of faith on the part of those who receive the sacrament. Calvin seems to agree: "From this sacrament [baptism], as from all others, we obtain only as much as we receive in faith" (4.15.15).[27]

We urge all those who were baptized as infants, then, to wrestle with the question: ***was my infant baptism biblically valid?*** Was it Trinitarian, and was it accompanied by authentic faith in the gospel?

If you were baptized as an infant in a church with a robust and biblical understanding of the gospel – namely, in the Reformed paedobaptist tradition – your infant baptism may be valid, according to the judgment of charity. As we have stated, our conviction from Scripture is that a ***biblically valid baptism a) must be Trinitarian and b) must be accompanied by authentic faith in the gospel.*** We understand "authentic faith in the gospel" to mean faith on the part of the person being baptized. But this is not the only biblical way to understand the nature of faith. Reformed paedobaptists baptize infants on the basis of the parents' faith in God's promises. According to Presbyterian theologian Robert Rayburn, "An infant who has been baptized is in no different relationship to God from an unbaptized infant unless there has been ***a sincere exercise of faith in God's covenant promise on the part of his parents.***"[28] The faith such parents have is indeed faith

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[26] Westminster Shorter Catechism, answer 91.

[27] Why, then, did Calvin not go so far as to call Roman Catholic baptism "invalid?" Perhaps because of the complexity of his moment in history. On the one hand, he knew that there were true, gospel-believing Christians who were still part of the apostate Roman Catholic church. He wanted to assure these people that their salvation was not in doubt just because they had been baptized in a theologically aberrant church. So he reassured them: "…A sacrament must not be judged by the hand of the one by whom it is ministered, but as if it were from the very hand of God… baptism is accordingly not of man but of God, no matter who administers it" (Institutes, 4.15.16). On the other hand, he knew many baptized but unregenerate Roman Catholics who believed that baptism mechanistically dispensed grace to them and secured their eternal salvation. So he wrote of the importance of faith in receiving the sacraments: "The Lord offers us mercy and the pledge of his grace both in his Sacred Word and in his sacraments. But it is understood only by those who take Word and sacraments with sure faith - just as Christ is offered and held forth by the Father to all unto salvation, yet not all acknowledge and receive him. In one place Augustine, meaning to convey this, said that the efficacy of the Word is brought to light in the sacrament, not because it is spoken, but because it is believed" (Institutes, 4.14.7).

[28] Rayburn, 87.

in the gospel. Reformed paedobaptists do not believe that baptism guarantees their child's salvation. They do not view baptism as a converting ordinance. Rather, in presenting their children for baptism, they are laying hold of God's gospel promises and expressing their trust in him to bring their children to saving faith.

If you were baptized and raised in this sort of tradition, we would hold your infant baptism to be biblically valid, even though we disagree with the practice of infant baptism in general.

However, if you were baptized as an infant in one of the traditions that holds baptism to be a ***converting ordinance*** (Roman Catholic, Episcopal/Anglican, or Lutheran), then it is very possible that your baptism was not rooted in a proper understanding of the gospel. Your parents may have baptized you in good conscience, with honest intentions, in keeping with their church's teaching – and yet apart from authentic faith in the gospel. We commonly interview people for baptism whose story goes something like this: "I was raised as a good ____ and baptized as an infant, but I never understood the gospel of grace. I was religious, but not converted. Recently, I've understood the gospel and God has drawn me to himself in faith and repentance. I actually ***trust in*** and ***love*** Jesus now. I've experienced true conversion. Should I be baptized?"

This is a very thorny question. We are a credobaptist church, so our default answer would be: "Yes!" And at the same time, we stand in a Protestant tradition that has traditionally taken a very high view of Trinitarian baptism, believing God to be at work in baptism even when it's done incorrectly.

Therefore, our practice for those previously baptized as infants is as follows:

- We will ***instruct*** them in the Bible's teaching about baptism. (This paper is a part of that instruction process).

- We will ***invite*** them to assess the validity of their infant baptism, based on the biblical teaching presented above, and to be baptized as believing adults.

- We will ***honor*** their individual consciences on this matter. If, after study, prayer, and dialogue, they cannot in good conscience be baptized as believing adults, we will honor their Trinitarian infant baptism as sufficient for church membership and Christian discipleship.

- We will ***ask them to conform*** to our church's practice on this issue. Those who wish to be part of the ministry and mission of Coram Deo must agree to follow our church's practice of baptism and not be divisive or contrary on this issue.

In summary, then:

- Though Coram Deo is credobaptist, we consider the practice of baptism to be a secondary issue on which good, Christ-loving, Bible-believing people may disagree. While we hold credobaptism to be the Scriptural position, we wish to be gracious and charitable toward thoughtful Christians who hold a robust, biblically informed, Reformed/Calvinistic view of paedobaptism.

- Therefore, in dealing with those who were previously baptized as infants, we ask them to consider: was their prior infant baptism biblically valid? ***Our conviction from Scripture***

***is that a biblically valid baptism a) must be Trinitarian and b) must be accompanied by authentic faith in the gospel.***

- Because baptism is a prerequisite for church membership, every potential church member who was baptized as an infant must assess the legitimacy of their baptism according to these biblical criteria, in dialogue with the elders and deacons of Coram Deo.

If you were baptized as an infant and want to become a church member at Coram Deo, you must either:

- Be baptized based on a credible profession of faith in Christ; OR
- Express a settled conviction of conscience that your infant baptism was biblically valid and that you cannot in good conscience be baptized as a believing adult.

Final authority in issues of membership and baptism rests with the elders of Coram Deo, as those called by God to shepherd his flock (1 Peter. 5:2).

# APPENDIX: RESPONSE TO SPECIFIC QUESTIONS

## AREN'T YOU COMPROMISING BIBLICAL TRUTH BY MAKING ROOM FOR A PAEDOBAPTIST VIEW?

No. Remember what we said: the necessity of baptism is a primary issue (Matt. 28:18-20), but the practice of baptism is a secondary issue. We agree with Kurt Aland who observes: "The New Testament undoubtedly makes statements about the character and significance of baptism for the Christian… without providing any binding prescription as to the manner in which it is to be carried out." The divisiveness among Protestants over the mode and method of baptism is a detriment to the unity of the church. While we respect the strong convictions people have on this issue, we make no apologies for being charitable and open-handed toward Christians who hold a different theological conviction.

The need for charity on this issue was illustrated by a comment John Piper (a credobaptist) made concerning Sinclair Ferguson (a paedobaptist). Piper observed that he has more in common with Ferguson than he does with the majority of pastors in his own denomination. And yet if Ferguson

attended Piper's church, he would be barred from membership because of his view of baptism. That doesn't seem right!

We feel this same tension. We are seeking to build a church – and a church-planting movement – that is centered around the gospel. While baptism is important to the life and practice of a local church, one's convictions about the mode of baptism should not bar gospel-believing Christians from membership in a local church body. So while we are persuaded that credobaptism is most in line with the Bible's teaching, we are not willing to exclude from membership Reformed paedobaptists who share our love of the gospel and our commitment to missional, Reformed church planting. We will not practice the baptism of infants at Coram Deo. But neither will we exclude those who have well-formed biblical convictions about it.

### I HOLD TO A REFORMED VIEW OF PAEDOBAPTISM. MAY I BECOME A MEMBER AT CORAM DEO?

Maybe. If your views on this issue are so strong that you cannot in good conscience accept credobaptism as legitimate, you should probably find a different church. Additionally, if your views on this matter compel you to desire to have your children and/or grandchildren baptized, you would be better off joining a church that practices infant baptism. Coram Deo will not baptize infants. However, if you can hold your views charitably, affirm our church's practice of credobaptism, and pledge not to be divisive on this issue, we welcome you to pursue church membership.

### DO YOU BELIEVE THAT CHILDREN ARE A PART OF GOD'S COVENANT PEOPLE?

Absolutely. Children of believing parents are part of God's family and are the "expected heirs" of the covenant blessings.

### IF YOU BELIEVE THAT CHILDREN ARE A PART OF GOD'S COVENANT PEOPLE, WHY WITHHOLD THE COVENANT SIGN OF BAPTISM FROM THEM?

To put it plainly: because we're not convinced that the Bible commands it. We are aware of the paedobaptist argument that if children are a part of the covenant people, they should bear the mark of the covenant (baptism), just as all Israelite children in the Old Testament were circumcised. The logic of this argument makes sense; but the biblical proof is lacking. We are confident in God's grace that he will be faithful to the children of believers. We see no fundamental difference between the practice of godly Christian parents who practice

paedobaptism and godly Christian parents who practice believer's baptism. Both are going to raise their children "in the discipline and instruction of the Lord" (Eph. 6:4). Both are going to seek the conversion of their children. Furthermore, as mentioned above, even biblically conscientious paedobaptists acknowledge some difference between children and adults within God's covenant family, as evidenced by the practice of "confirmation" or catechism before a child can be a communicant member.

## I WANT TO BE BAPTIZED! WHAT DO I NEED TO DO?

1. Repent of sin and trust in Jesus Christ alone for salvation. Consult practical question one (in section two of this paper) for some of the evidences that the gospel has truly "happened" in your life.

2. Be in community. Because baptism is an "initiation rite" that celebrates your entrance into the people of God (the church), other Christians around you need to know you and affirm the change in your life. This is part of how we verify that your profession of faith is credible.

3. Make your desire for baptism known to community, or an elder or deacon. The deacon of baptism, alongside your community, will help guide you through preparation for baptism.

4. Complete the baptism process. This includes some reading and writing assignments and some teaching to prepare you for baptism.