

Baptism and the Regenerate Community of the New Covenant

Introduction

In this study, we are going to talk about baptism and the regenerate community of the New Covenant. That may sound fancy and complicated, but there was no other way for me to reword it without losing some of the glory and beauty of this wonderful reality. So my task today is to be used by the Holy Spirit so that we might all see in *these words* cause for worship and praise, as well as instruction in the faithful and obedient administration of baptism.

I. The Parable of the Weeds of the Field (Mat. 13:24-30, 36-43)

In our study of Matthew chapter thirteen, we looked recently at Jesus' parable of the weeds of the field (13:24-30, 36-43). The promised kingdom of the Messiah has come. It is a *present* reality. The sovereign authority of the Messiah now encompasses all of heaven and earth. And yet in the midst of this universal rule, the wicked are still allowed to remain in the world, continuing to live alongside the righteous. In fact, they will *continue* to remain in this world until the harvest at the close of the age.

But there are *many* people in the history of the church who have interpreted and applied this parable in a very different way than we have. These brothers and sisters understand the parable to be a picture of how *within the visible, professing, organized church* there will always exist both weeds and wheat until Christ's return and the final judgment. In this light, the obvious application is that we must not be too overzealous in seeking to root out the weeds and create a "pure" church here on earth, lest we end up doing more damage than good. J.C. Ryle says: "In our zeal to 'gather up the tares,' we are in danger of 'rooting up the wheat with them.' Such zeal is not according to knowledge, and has often done much harm. Those who care not what happens to the wheat, provided they can root up the tares, show little of the mind of Christ." There is certainly a lot of truth in what Ryle is saying! All the way back in the fifth century, Augustine interpreted this parable in the same way as Ryle and used it to argue against a group called the Donatists who had become way too "overzealous" in their practice of excommunication (cf. Carson). Augustine was basically saying: "It's not your job to create the pure and spotless Church here on earth. There will always be weeds within the confessing Church. It's not your job to judge people's hearts. There are some times when we just need to wait for God to sort everything out at the end of the age." And there is certainly a *sense* in which Augustine and Ryle (and most of the reformers) were right. But I don't believe that this is the intended meaning of the parable.

Jesus clearly says that the field is *the world* (38) – so the field (in which there is both weeds and wheat) is *not* the church! And yet what about the fact that Jesus says that at the end of the age, His angels will gather the weeds "*out of his kingdom*" (41)? Yes, in verse 38 the field is the world, but now in verse 41 the field is the *kingdom*! So if the field is Christ's kingdom, shouldn't we think of the field as the *Church* – spread throughout the whole world? If so, then Jesus is saying that His angels will gather the counterfeit weeds out of His church only at the end of the age and that we must not be guilty of trying to artificially create that perfectly pure church before Christ returns. So how do we explain the fact that the weeds are gathered out of Christ's

kingdom? Very simply! Remember, the kingdom of the Messiah doesn't necessarily refer to a visible and organized structure (such as the Church), but rather to the entire domain of Christ's authority and rule! Jesus said: "All authority [rule] *in heaven and on earth* has been given to me" (28:18). So when Jesus says that He will gather the weeds out of His kingdom, He is *not* saying that He will gather the weeds out of the Church – as the specific place where His rule is loved and obeyed. Instead, he is saying that He will gather the weeds out of the domain of His authority and rule, which includes the entire *world*, and even all of heaven and earth! Some people say, "But the parables are all about the secrets and mysteries of the kingdom! What's the great mystery about believers and unbelievers living side by side in the world? The only mystery is if they're living side by side in the church!" But this shows that we don't yet understand the full reality of Christ's present rule over all the nations of the world. Once we do understand this, we'll see that the presence of righteous and wicked people living side by side in the world in this present age of the kingdom is a great tension and mystery (even if we understand the reasons why).

So the field in which the weeds and wheat grow side by side until the harvest is *not* the church, but the *world*. And the application of this parable is *not* the fact that we should avoid actively pursuing the goal of a pure church here on earth. But why is this such a big deal?

II. The Parable of the Weeds of the Field and Infant Baptism

Many of those who see the field as the church actually use the teaching of this parable to support the practice of infant baptism. Now we need to admit that there is no text of Scripture that says "you shall not baptize infants", *or*, "You shall only baptize those who are old enough to believe". We must confess that in the Old Testament, God's law would not have allowed Israel to circumcise a Moabite unless he *first* converted to Judaism (unless he *first* "*believed*"). And yet by God's command, Israel still baptized their infants. There are, however, a number of strong, biblical arguments against the practice of infant baptism. And I believe that the argument we're about to look at today is the strongest and most *beautiful* one of them all. So how would our brothers and sisters in the Presbyterian and Christian Reformed churches use the parable of the weeds of the field to support the practice of infant baptism?*

J.C. Ryle says: "The *visible* Church is set before us as a *mixed body*. [The *visible* Church] is a vast 'field' in which 'wheat and tares' grow side by side." Now the Old Testament covenant community of Israel was also a "*mixed body*" of believers and unbelievers. This explains how infants could receive the covenant sign of circumcision even before they truly had the new birth and salvation. Through circumcision, infants were initiated into the *visible* Israel of Abraham's *physical* seed (which consisted of both believers and unbelievers), but not yet into the true,

* This is a very oversimplified and incomplete presentation of the Presbyterian and Christian Reformed defense of infant baptism. There is no way in this message to completely and fairly represent their position – *or* the Baptist position for that matter. However, I believe that what I have said is accurate and true. Also, when I refer to our brothers and sisters in the Presbyterian and Christian Reformed churches, I'm referring to the *confessional* Presbyterians (who still hold to the Westminster Confession) and the *confessional* Christian Reformed (who still hold to the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism). There are many Presbyterian and Christian Reformed churches who are no longer "confessional" and have blatantly denied the truth of God's Word. We are reformed and yet baptistic in our theology, and so we would stand in the tradition of the London Baptist Confession of 1689.

spiritual Israel. In a similar way, the *visible* Church is also said to be a *mixed body* (cf. J.C. Ryle). Just as Israel would not have knowingly circumcised an adult who was a pagan idolater, so neither would we knowingly baptize an adult unbeliever. Obviously not! However, just as Israel initiated their infants into the visible covenant community through circumcision, so we also initiate our infants into the visible covenant community of the church through baptism. Whether they ultimately bring forth the fruits of true regeneration and membership in the true “invisible” church only time will tell. So the assumption here is that the visible church is a mixed body in much the same way as Israel was a mixed body. And so circumcision (as the sign and seal of initiation into a visible and mixed body) corresponds to baptism (as the sign and seal of initiation into a visible and mixed body). You can see, then, that how we interpret the parable of the weeds of the field has much to do not only with our views on infant baptism, but also with how we understand the Church as the New Covenant community.

III. The True Nature of the Church

First of all, we have to admit that mixed in with the visible, baptized church throughout the world are many unsaved people. Simon the Magician was baptized, but later proved to be a fraud (Acts 8:9-24).

- ✓ Acts 20:30 – *From among your own selves* will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.
- ✓ 1 John 2:19 – They went out *from us*, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us.
- ✓ 1 Corinthians 11:19 – For there must be factions among you in order that *those who are genuine among you* may be recognized.

It is impossible for us to have a perfectly pure church here on earth simply because we cannot infallibly know the hearts of men! It is not our job to go ferreting out all of the hypocrites and pretenders who may be hiding in our midst. And *yet* on the other hand, the church is nowhere in the Scriptures presented as a mixed community of believers and unbelievers, but always and only as the community of the *saints* – the holy ones – who are faithful in Christ Jesus.

- ✓ Galatians 1:1-4 (cf. 1:22) – Paul... and all the brothers who are with me, ***to the churchES of Galatia***: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
- ✓ Romans 1:1, 7 – Paul... ***to all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints***: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
- ✓ 1 Thessalonians 1:1 – Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, ***to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ***: Grace to you and peace.
- ✓ Ephesians 1:1-2 – Paul... ***to the saints who are in Ephesus, and are faithful in Christ Jesus***: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
- ✓ 2 Thessalonians 1:1-2 – Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, ***to the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ***: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

- ✓ Philippians 1:1-2 – Paul and Timothy... *to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*
- ✓ 2 Corinthians 1:1 – Paul... and Timothy our brother, *to the church of God that is at Corinth, with all the saints who are in the whole of Achaia [with all the churches of Achaia].*
- ✓ Colossians 1:1-2 – Paul... and Timothy our brother... *to the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father... And when this letter has been read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you also read the letter from Laodicea.*
- ✓ 1 Corinthians 1:2 – Paul... and our brother Sosthenes, *to the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place [the churches everywhere] call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours.*

Notice that Paul never tries to *distinguish* between the visible church (which will almost certainly include some unbelievers) and the invisible church (which includes only the regenerate)! There is an obvious tension here, and yet Paul is apparently content to live with this tension as he treats the visible church as though it were the *exact* equivalent of all those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus and who are saints by calling! Yes, there are many unbelievers within the pale of the visible church, and yet that doesn't stop Paul from referring to the church very simply as the saints and faithful brothers in Christ. But Paul could *never* have written in this way to the Old Covenant community of Abraham's physical descendents in the nation of Israel. And here is the *difference* between the Old Covenant community of Israel and the New Covenant community of the Church! The Old Covenant community was a mixed community. The spiritual seed of Abraham was always a "remnant" *within* the larger covenant community of Abraham's circumcised descendents (his physical seed in the nation of Israel; cf. Schreiner and Wright). James White puts it this way, "For every [righteous] David there were a dozen [wicked] Ahabs; for every [believing] Josiah a legion of [unbelieving] Manassehs. Unfaithfulness, the flaunting of God's law, the rejection of the role of truly being God's people, the rejection of His knowledge, and the experience of His wrath, were the [normal] experiences [of the Old Covenant Community]."

- ✓ Deuteronomy 9:7 – From the day you came out of the land of Egypt until you came to this place, you have been rebellious against the LORD.
- ✓ Deuteronomy 31:27 – I know how rebellious and stubborn you are. Behold, even today while I am yet alive with you, you have been rebellious against the LORD. How much more after my death!
- ✓ Malachi 3:7 – From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them.
- ✓ Acts 7:51 – You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you.

What a depressing picture! And yet always within this rebellious covenant community there was a spiritual remnant of true Israel providing a glimmer of hope (remember the 7000 faithful ones that God had reserved for Himself in the days of the prophet Elijah – 1 Kings 19:14, 18; cf. Rom.

11:1-10). But now listen to how Jeremiah describes what the Covenant Community will look like under the New Covenant!

- ✓ Jeremiah 31:31-34 – Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And *no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, “Know the LORD,” for they shall **all** know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD.*

What is to be the difference between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant? The difference is this – that under the Old Covenant the covenant community was mixed, consisting of both believers and also a great number of unbelievers, but under the New Covenant, the covenant community will change from a mixed community to a *regenerate* community of saints including not only Jews, but Gentiles also, in the one church of Jesus Christ (see Luke 22:20 and Hebrews 8-10). So think about it... in the Church there is no longer any such thing as a *remnant*! Instead, the church *is* the true and spiritual seed of Abraham (Rom. 4:16; Gal. 3:7, 27-29).

- ✓ Galatians 3:7, 27-29 – Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham... For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for *you are **all** one* in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

And so now Paul can write:

- ✓ Galatians 6:15-16 – For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a ***new creation*** [this new creation is the regenerate New Covenant community]. And as for all who walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the ***Israel of God***.

In the Old Covenant mixed community, not everyone had the Spirit. In fact, *most* didn't. But this is what God promised through the prophet Joel:

- ✓ Joel 2:28-29 – And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit on ***all flesh***; your *sons* and your *daughters* shall prophesy, your *old men* shall dream dreams, and your *young men* shall see visions. *Even on the male and female servants* in those days I will pour out my Spirit.

And in Acts chapter two, Peter declares how this prophecy was fulfilled beginning in the Jewish Church at Jerusalem when on the day of Pentecost the Spirit was poured out on *all flesh* (the *entire* New Covenant community; Acts 2:1-41)! Circumcision was ultimately the sign of an inferior covenant because the Old Covenant (the Law) could not *save* (Gal. 5:2-4). And *because* the Old Covenant was powerless to save, therefore the Old Covenant *community* included both

believers *and* unbelievers (it included *all* of the *physical* seed of Abraham). This is why even unregenerate infants received the covenant sign and seal of circumcision. Because the Old Covenant could not save, therefore the Old Covenant could be *broken* – and it *was* broken over and over and over again by an unregenerate people. But Baptism is the sign of a better covenant. Why? Because the New Covenant is *powerful* to save! And *because* the New Covenant is powerful to save, therefore the New Covenant *community* includes *only* the saints – the true spiritual seed of Abraham. This is why we do not baptize infants, but only those who have made an intelligent confession of faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Because the New Covenant is powerful to save, therefore the New Covenant can *never*, ever be broken by the regenerate community of God’s saints and holy ones. And that is what *we* are – the *regenerate* community of the New Covenant, who now share in the better and superior covenant sign of baptism! We are the spiritual seed of Abraham who once were only a *remnant within* the Old Covenant community, but who are a remnant no longer now that the New Covenant has come! Look around you now and see the regenerate New Covenant community of the saints –long anticipated and foretold by the prophets of old! What a miraculous “new creation”! And how blessed we are to be members of this new creation because of God’s amazing grace.

Conclusion

So practically speaking, because the church is not a mixed, but rather a regenerate community, we believe that infants should not be baptized, but only those who have made an intelligent confession of faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Some Baptists, in their desire to guard as much as possible against giving the New Covenant sign to an unregenerate person wait until their children are “independent” young adults (even eighteen years old) before they will allow baptism. I believe that this is going to an extreme. However, we do need to be careful that we don’t baptize children who have not given sufficient evidence of regeneration through the fruits of true repentance and saving faith. In the case of adults, or those who convert to Christianity from a life of blatant idolatry and unbelief, the matter is different, and we ought to baptize them as soon as possible upon any apparently sincere confession of faith (Acts 2:37-41; 8:26-39).

But here again, we confront the tension! The New Covenant community is a regenerate community consisting only of the saints. And yet we have no infallible way of knowing the hearts of those that we baptize and accept into church membership! We admit this is a tension! And yet to escape the tension by knowingly baptizing unregenerate infants into a supposedly mixed community of believers and unbelievers is, I believe, ultimately to deny the very reason for the New Covenant which is in Christ’s blood. I say “ultimately” because none of my brothers and sisters who practice infant baptism have ever come close to such a denial. And yet because of my understanding of God’s Word, if I were to baptize an unregenerate infant today, for me it would be a denial of one of the most blessed and glorious realities of the Gospel. And so instead of trying to escape the tension, we *embrace* the tension in order that we might joyfully live in the “*already*” and still trustingly live in the “*not yet*”. God, in His providence, has not eliminated the possibility of unknowingly baptizing unregenerate people, yet by faith in God’s Word we are still able to see here before our eyes the regenerate community of the New Covenant. By faith in God’s Word, we know that Paul could have addressed a letter to us at Living Word Bible Church in these words: “To the church of God which meets at 304 East Jackson Street in Morris Illinois, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling... grace to you and peace from God our

Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (cf. 1 Cor. 1:2-3; NASB). Thanks be to God for His unspeakable gift! (2 Cor. 9:15) Now let us then walk in a manner worthy of the holy calling to which we have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Eph. 4:1-3).