

A Brief Critique of Fred Malone's *The Baptism of Disciples Alone*

by Joseph Richard Nally

Introduction

There has been a lot of ink spilled in *The Baptism of Disciples Alone*, written by Fred Malone. Malone is a former Presbyterian minister and graduate of Reformed Theological Seminary (Jackson). He is now a Baptist. In this work Malone attempts to prove the credo view of baptism. While I respect Malone's scholarship, I must radically disagree with his findings. Even the title of the book cries out for attention, as how can Malone prove who is and is not a true disciple of Christ and thus worthy of baptism? Malone's whole thesis seems to wash away right here.

This work has been attested to by many scholars, among whom are Dr. R. Albert Mohler, Jr., Dr. Timothy George, and Walter J. Chantry. However, some have discovered the error of this book and written against it. One such person is C. Matthew McMahan, who wrote, *The Rejection of Baptism of Disciples Alone*. McMahan states,

Malone has written a work that reshapes and redefines the 'covenant structure' of the Bible. In this he, and those who endorse the book, continue to produce works that misrepresent Covenant Theology.¹

Clearly, this is not an issue merely to be trifled with.

Malone has amassed a lot of material in this 284-page work. Thus, we will not be critiquing every segment of his writing. However, let us look briefly at some issues that Malone raises in his work.

Malone's Problems with Infant Baptism

Malone begins his book by addressing what he believes are major problems with the doctrinal issue of paedobaptism. Malone states that he sees two basic problems with infant baptism: 1) the regulative principle of worship; and

¹ C. Matthew McMahan. *The Rejection of the Baptism of Disciples Alone*. [<http://www.apuritansmind.com/BookReviews/Sourpuss/MaloneFredBaptismDisciplesAlone.htm>]. Last accessed, December 1, 2005.

2) biblical hermeneutics.² As to regulative worship Malone states that “baptism is a violation of the regulative principle of worship.”³ Malone’s argument is that Christ instituted a new covenant and in this new covenant it is incorrect to apply Old Testament forms of worship. Malone says, “To resort to Old Testament forms by possibly erroneous inference or to practice constituted forms is a violation of His Lordship over Christian worship.”⁴

As to Malone’s problem with hermeneutics, he sees it basically as a disagreement with John Murray’s teaching of “good and necessary inference.”⁵ Malone asks the question, “Is good and necessary *inference* a safe hermeneutical principle to apply to a New Testament sacrament instituted by Christ?”⁶ Malone’s answer is that Murray’s use of the term “inference” refers only to making a “plausible case,” whereas the term “consequence,” as used in the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, refers to an “inescapable conclusion.”⁷

After calling paedobaptists all but cultic,⁸ Malone concludes his argument by stating that he has chosen the designation “the baptism of disciples alone” to describe the only instituted and regulated baptism “expressly set down in Scripture.”⁹ He then desires us to add to the five *solas* of the Reformation¹⁰ a sixth: The Baptism of Disciples Alone.¹¹ Should there really be a sixth *sola* based on Malone’s opinion(s)? Let us look at his arguments in more detail.

Problems with Malone’s Hermeneutic

Malone suggests that Christ instituted a new covenant, and that in this new covenant it is incorrect to apply Old Testament forms of worship. One of the problems¹² here is that Malone believes the term “new” means “brand new with no relation to what is old.” Malone does not see as much covenant continuity between the old and new covenants as paedobaptists do. Malone states:

² Fred Malone. *The Baptism of Disciples Alone* (Cape Coral, FL: Founders Press, 2003), p. xiv.

³ *Ibid*, p. xvi.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. xvi.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. xvii.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. xviii. Please notice how closely related reason one is to reason two for Malone. Both are related to his idea of the New Testament regulative principle.

⁷ *Ibid*, p. xviii.

⁸ *Ibid*, p. xviii.

⁹ *Ibid*, p. xix.

¹⁰ Scripture alone, grace alone, faith alone, Christ alone, and God’s glory alone.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. xix.

¹² Can we still sing the Psalms, etc.?

Also, the new covenant is a “new” covenant (Greek [*kainos*]). It is new because it is not like the old covenant at Sinai. Those who try to establish an exaggerated unity and continuity between the covenants as a basis for infant baptism do not emphasize this stated newness enough... The fact is [*chadash*] is used in the Old Testament of a brand new king (Exodus 1:8), house (Deuteronomy 22:8), wife (Deuteronomy 24:5), cart (1 Samuel 6:7), song (Psalm 33:3), heavens (Isaiah 66:22), earth (Isaiah 66:22), and heart (Jeremiah 31:31-34).¹³

Malone, though, fails to explain the full use of such terms as *chadash*. While the term may mean “brand new,” it may also mean “repaired” or “rebuilt.” In opposition to Malone, Hebrew scholars understand a more complete meaning of *chadash* than Malone presents his readers. *The Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* states that *chadash* is:

used in the sense of “repair” or “rebuild” referring to cities (Isa 61:4), the temple (2Chr 24:4, 12), and the altar (2Chr 15:8). It is also used figuratively. Under Samuel the kingdom was renewed at Gilgal (1Sam 11:14). David wanted a right spirit, equivalent to a clean heart, renewed within him (Psa 51:10 [H 12]). The prophet asked for renewal as of old (Lam 5:21). God renews the face of the ground, that is, gives it new life (Psa 104:30), and he renews one’s youth (Psa 103:5). Job complained that God was bringing new witnesses against him (Job 10:17).¹⁴

Thus, Malone’s analysis is incomplete, and as a result it is erroneous.

In addition to typical definitions, context plays a role in establishing a term’s meaning. If one understands continuity between the covenants, he will look at several dynamic passages of Scripture in wonder and awe and see their continuity. However, we must be careful of reading into Scripture, thus we will let the Scripture speak for itself. The context of all Scripture reveals a special continuity:

I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations *for an everlasting covenant*, to be God to you and to your descendants after you (Gen 17:7; emphasis added).

¹³ Ibid, pp. 86-87.

¹⁴ Harris, R. Laird; Gleason L. Archer; and Bruce K. Waltke. *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, Vol 1 (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), pp. 265-266.

The LORD heard the voice of your words when you spoke to me, and the LORD said to me, “I have heard the voice of the words of this people which they have spoken to you. They have done well in all that they have spoken. *Oh that they had such a heart in them,* that they would fear Me and keep all My commandments always, that it may be well with them and with their sons *forever!* (Deut. 5:28-29; emphasis added).

“Behold, days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them,” declares the LORD. “But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,” declares the LORD, “*I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it,* and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. They will not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them,” declares the LORD, “for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more” (Jer. 31:31-34; emphasis added).

There are several other texts that could be cited as well, but the continuity is clear. It is an everlasting covenant that is clearly seen with Abraham and his descendents. Next, God’s desire was always to have His laws written upon the hearts of His people. What God fulfills in the new covenant is not something brand new, but something that He had purposed and planned from eternity, for He said that He “will be their God and they shall be [His] people” (Heb. 8:10; cf. 11:16; Gen 17:7; Deut. 26:17-19; Ps. 144:15; Ezek. 11:20; 36:28; 37:37; Jer. 24:7; 30:22; 31:1,33; Zech. 13:9; Rev. 21:7). Mankind in his weakness could not and did not fulfill what God desired (Rom. 8:3), but this does not nullify the goodness of the law or God’s covenant promise. Paul wrote, “So then, the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good” (Rom. 7:12). God’s covenant in view here is eternal. A “good and necessary consequence” of this study, clearly reveals that from Genesis to Revelation God is seen to have one covenant plan with different administrations to His glory alone!

When Malone analyzes the text of Jeremiah 31:31-34, he assumes that the new covenant has come in its fullness. From this he deduces that he is justified in baptizing “disciples alone.” At this point, Malone is taking language that belongs to the *consummation* of the kingdom and applying it to the *continuation* of the kingdom. Malone fails to apply what he was taught of the “now, but not yet” (see Charts 1 & 2 at end) reality of Scripture. In opposition to

Malone, though, individuals are still being taught¹⁵ and many still do not know the Lord. However, Jeremiah says, “[T]hey will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them.” Therefore, we cannot rightly conclude that the new covenant has come in all its fullness. Without understanding the “now, but not reality” of Scripture one cannot make sense of Jeremiah 31 or several other passages of Scripture.

Nevertheless, Malone continues and deduces that:

In the new covenant there is no curse for covenant breaking (Jeremiah 31:27-34; 32:40). The reason is that God guarantees each covenant member a heart to keep the new and everlasting covenant (Jeremiah 32:40)... The New Testament warns against false conversions, or false professed membership in the new covenant, but not against covenant breaking. The new covenant has promises for blessing those in it but no curses for covenant breakers.¹⁶

There are several issues at play here. First, Malone fails to realize the visible and invisible church distinction (this will be touched on below). Second, Malone fails to realize that without “cursings” a covenant does not truly exist. Covenants are made up of “blessings” and “cursing.” Old Testament scholar Dr. Richard Pratt states:

Scripture describes the elements of God’s covenants with his people in ways that parallel the international treaty arrangements of human emperors in the ancient Near East. Either explicitly or implicitly, four basic dynamics appear in each stage of the Biblical covenant: (1) God shows himself to be the benevolent King who initiates and sustains his chosen people throughout their covenant relationship with him, (2) God requires loyal gratitude from the people embraced by his covenants, (3) Judgments come against those who flagrantly violate his covenants, (4) Blessings come to those who are faithful to the covenants.¹⁷

Malone is giving us a new covenant which does not even meet the requirements for a covenant. Moreover, the New Testament reveals that there are covenant cursings. We can see this simply as the new covenant is the old covenant (which has cursings) renewed or refreshed. However, the New Testament is full of examples in which judgment is threatened against individuals (1 Cor. 10:1-14;

¹⁵ Credobaptists still evangelize and have missions, in opposition to Malone’s thesis!

¹⁶ Malone, p. 58.

¹⁷ Pratt, Richard, ed. *NIV Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), p. 21.

11:23-32; Heb. 6:1-12; 10:26-31) as well as churches (Rev. 2–3). It is not until the consummation of the Kingdom that we read that we will experience no more curse: “And there shall be no more curse: but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it; and his servants shall serve him” (Rev. 22:3, KJV).

Malone continues and states of new covenant members: Who then is a member of the present new covenant administration? new covenant members are those disciples of Jesus Christ who have the law written on their heart by the Holy Spirit of God, who know God experientially by faith, and who possess in reality the forgiveness of sins (Heb. 8:8-12). These are the circumcised of the heart, the true Jew, the faith seed of Abraham, the seed of Christ, the people for whom He died, the sheep whom He will keep from falling and bring safely to the eternal kingdom... These alone are entitled to the new covenant sign of baptism, evidenced by their confession of Christ as Lord.¹⁸

Here Malone states in so many words that credobaptists know who the “elect” are — they are the ones who confess Christ as Lord and thus are worthy of baptism.

While paedobaptists would most certainly agree that we should attempt to baptize professors of Christ as Lord, none do it perfectly (which Malone admits!). Thus, the identity of a “disciple” cannot be proven beyond doubt. Not everyone who makes a profession of Christ possesses Christ in his heart. The Scripture is very clear here:

Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity (Matt. 7:21-23).

If we were to use Malone’s formula for baptism, we could never baptize a single person. After all, we can never fully know who is and who is not a “true” disciple.

This brings us to yet another distinction about which Malone is unclear. Malone’s thesis breaks apart when the flood of God’s Word comes upon it in the distinction between the visible and invisible church (see Chart 3 at end). Malone’s failure to understand this distinction compromises his interpretation of Scripture. Malone suggests that “only” believers are members of the new covenant. But the reality is that lost individuals are without a doubt in the church, and therefore they are also in the new covenant. As in the old covenant,

¹⁸ Malone, p. 91.

unbelievers within the covenant community receive several of the covenant blessings (e.g., they hear the Word; they have fellowship with God's people; they share in the ministry of the Holy Spirit). This is a reality of the church in all ages until the consummation of the kingdom at the return of Christ in glory. There is both a visible and an invisible church, and while all the invisible members are members of the visible Church, all the visible members are not members of the invisible Church.

In summary, Malone uses an incorrect hermeneutic throughout his understanding of: 1) the meaning of *hadash*; 2) the "now, but not yet" nature of the kingdom of God; 3) the idea that there is no curse in the new covenant; 4) the baptism of "only" the elect; and 5) the distinction between the visible church and the invisible church. These errors are repeated throughout his work to one degree or another.

Malone's Problems with Paedobaptism

Malone does not stop with the critique above. He goes further and attempts to establish that the meaning of Acts 2:38-39 proves his conception of disciples' baptism.¹⁹ Malone desires a literal reading of the Scripture. He states, "Those who were baptized *were those effectually called* by God; that is, received the gospel as evidenced by their repentance and faith. It was disciple's baptism alone" [emphasis added].²⁰ Besides Malone's continuous assertion that every person baptized (without exception) was "effectually called,"²¹ there are some other problems that need to be addressed.

Let us look at this text again. Peter said to them, "Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). If we take Peter's words "literally," bifurcating them from the rest of Scripture (for argument's sake setting aside the *Analogy of Faith*), we would have to conclude that remission of sins results from two things: repentance and baptism.²² Is that what Malone holds to be true: that salvation results from repentance and baptism? Where does faith come in? Is salvation denied to those who are not first baptized? If the text is taken the way Malone appears to be interpreting it, then remission of sins is only granted upon the act of repentance and physical baptism. However, Malone knows we can not isolate this text from the rest of Scripture — to do so will lead to error! How do we deal with this?

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 141.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ The believers were, but what of the unbelievers that were baptized?

²² This section (Acts 2) is from notes and comments made by Jeff Nesbitt (a former WTS student), owner and administrator of the website: The-Highway [<http://www.the-highway.com/>].

First of all, it must be determined what this “promise” is. Biblically, it is salvation, summed up in Peter’s exact phraseology “forgiveness of your sins.” Secondly, it must be determined who the “you” are. Are they (a) only those who were “pricked in their heart” and who asked, “what shall we do?” (Acts 2:37)? Or are they (b) those who “received the Word and were baptized” (Acts 2:41)? Or are they (c) everyone who was within Peter’s voice? (Acts 2:5-6)? Biblically, I do not think a case can be made for (a) since the “promise” spoken of was not to those who had a movement of conscience, but rather to those who would repent and be baptized. And further, Peter also mentioned those “who are afar off” — those who were not even there. In turn, (b) is untenable because the “promise” was mentioned *before* they actually received the word and were baptized. So that leaves us with (c), everyone who was in the audience that day, who was told that the promise was to them and to their children. The promise even extended to many who lived elsewhere and who were not even present that day.

Thirdly, Peter’s words are actually old covenant phraseology and should not be construed as something totally “new.” He was simply repeating what the Lord had told Abraham concerning his salvation and that of his “seed” (Genesis 17:7ff.). This “promise” was an infallible/immutable promise that God could not break, and that has never been broken (Rom. 9:6-8; 11:1ff.).

Fourthly, the promise is given to “as many as the Lord our God shall call unto him.” What we are actually told is that this “promise” (of salvation) is extended to everyone who is effectually called by God — those whom the Spirit regenerates and enables to apprehend the message of the Gospel, to repent of sins and to embrace Christ by a living faith. The “you” are therefore the spiritual “seed” of Adam, Abraham, David, etc. They are the elect of God who are, in God’s wisdom, “made willing in the day of His power” (Ps. 110:3). Within God’s purpose of election, even infants are included.

Worded differently, the question is not if an infant can repent or trust in Christ, but what a Jew in that day would have done about the sign and seal of his newfound faith. If we compare Genesis 17:7ff. and Acts 2:38ff., we see a similarity not only of terms, but of concepts as well. Acts 2:38-39 associates circumcision and baptism! First, in Acts 2:38, the Apostle Peter calls for: repentance, faith in Christ, and baptism. The clear link is seen in Acts 2:39, where Peter gives the reason for this action: “the promise is to you and to your children, and all who are far off” (cf. “and thy seed after thee in their generations”; Gen. 17). The Apostle Peter consciously uses the same formula (because it is an everlasting covenant) as the LORD himself used when he instituted the sign of circumcision in Genesis 17. The Jews listening understood this precisely. Thus, as they understood circumcision was for Abraham and his seed, they understood that baptism was for those that believe *and their seed*. Thus, it seems clear that Peter and his audience understood there to be link between circumcision and baptism

Paul also spoke of this link. As Scott Clark states:

The connection between baptism and circumcision is quite clear in Colossians 2:11-12. The connection is not direct, but indirect and the point of contact between them is Christ and baptism is the sign and seal of that circumcision. In v.11 Paul says “in him [i.e. in Christ] you were also circumcised with the circumcision done by Christ” and in v.12 he says exactly how it is that we were circumcised in and by Christ: “having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith....” For Paul, in the new covenant, our union with Christ is our circumcision. In baptism, we are identified with Christ’s baptism/circumcision, as it were, on the cross. Neither baptism nor circumcision effects this union (*ex opere operato*), rather God the Spirit unites us to Christ, makes us alive and gives us faith.

The point not to be missed here is that, in Paul’s mind, baptism and circumcision are both signs and seals of Christ’s baptism/circumcision on the cross for us. By faith, we are united to Christ’s circumcision and by union with Christ we become participants in his circumcision/baptism. Because circumcision pointed forward to Christ’s death and baptism looks back to Christ’s death, they are closely linked in Paul’s mind and almost interchangeable. Paul’s point here is to teach us about our union with Christ, but along the way we see how he thinks about baptism and circumcision and his thinking should inform ours.

One of the reasons that Paul so strongly opposed the imposition of circumcision upon Christians by the Judaizers is that, by faith, we have already been circumcised in Christ, of which baptism is the sign and seal. We were already identified as belonging to God and we have undergone the curse in Christ. So actual physical circumcision is, in the new covenant, unnecessary. Paul tells those who wish to circumcise themselves, to go the whole way and emasculate themselves.

Acts 2.38,39 equates circumcision and baptism. In Acts 2.38 the Apostle Peter calls for repentance, faith in Christ and baptism by Jews who are hearing his preaching. In v.39 he gives the reason for this action: “the promise is to you and to your children, and all who are far off....” The Apostle Peter consciously uses the same formula in his preaching as the LORD himself used when he instituted the

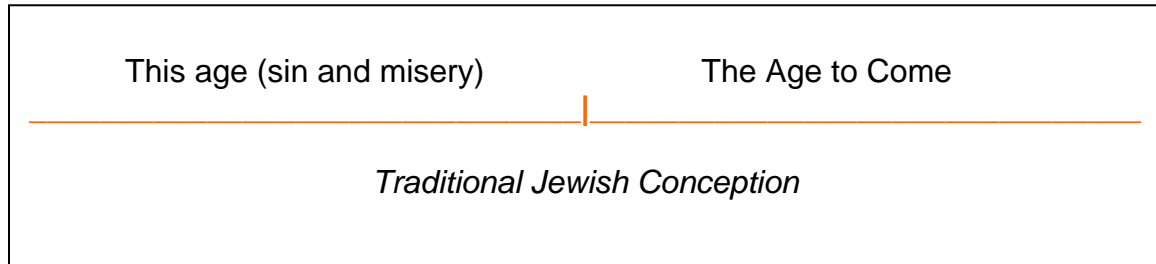
sign of circumcision in Genesis 17, which the Jews listening understood precisely.²³

The correct view of baptism is to baptize those who profess Christ and to baptize the children of those that profess Christ. To deny our children this special relationship is to deny them the very Word of God itself.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *The Baptism of Disciples Alone* contains serious errors. It may even be dangerous to the body of Christ, not because it is credobaptist, but because of the way it forms its arguments for credobaptism. To argue as Malone has suggested: 1) denies Scripture; 2) commits gross hermeneutical errors; and 3) denies the faithfulness of God in the continuity of the covenants. Credobaptists and paedobaptists alike agree that if we begin with a right view of the covenants and proper hermeneutics, we end with a much better overall picture of what God means by the covenant sign and seal. Sadly, Malone has not begun rightly.

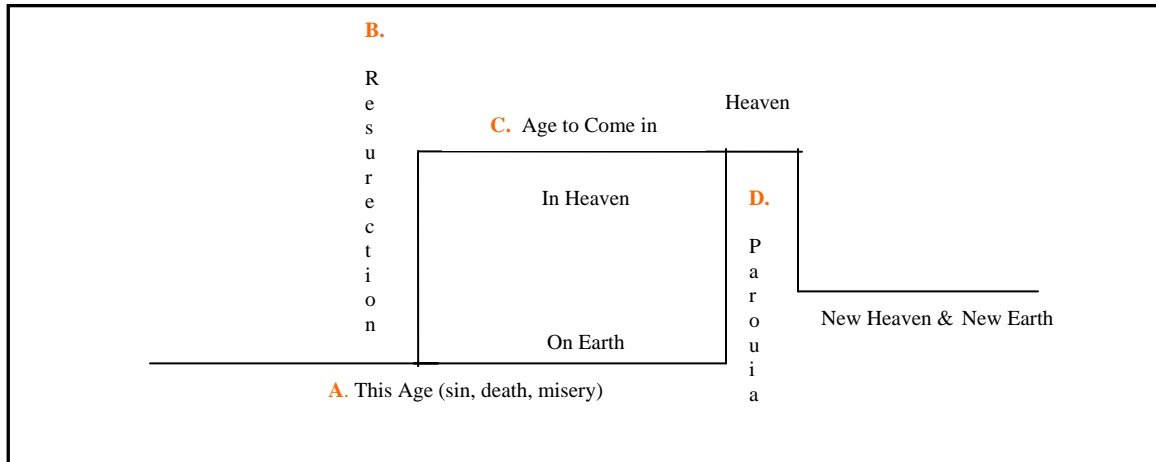
Chart 1: This Age and the Age to Come



Eschatology in New Testament biblical theology looks very Jewish. Jewish theology of the inter-testamental period referred to the “now” as “this age.” It also taught that the rescue from “this age” would come through the great son of David, who would usher in the “age to come” by fully restoring God’s kingdom on earth through the kingdom of his people. The Messiah would physically dominate societies and set up a perfect world order. Significantly, this change was to take place all at once.

²³ R. Scott Clark. *Covenant Baptism: A Contemporary Reformed Defense of Infant Baptism*. [http://public.csusm.edu/guests/rsclark/Infant_Baptism.html]. Last Accessed on December 1, 2005.

Chart 2: The Now But Not Yet



One of the primary goals of the New Testament was to deal with the fact that people still suffer even though Jesus, the Messiah, has come. It does this by explaining that the “age to come” does not replace “this age” all at once, as Jewish theology had expected.

(1) This age or world will continue through all the work of Christ. The old expectation was that this world would stop, but it doesn't; sin and death are still in the world (A).

(2) But, Jesus and his resurrection (B) bring about the world to come (eschaton) in heaven parallel to this age (C).

(3) So, we live in faith of the world to come while living in this age.

(4) The Messiah has come, salvation has come, death has been conquered, etc. They have been accomplished but we do not live in them as of yet; we are still dealing with sin and death. Both are happening at the same time (A & C).

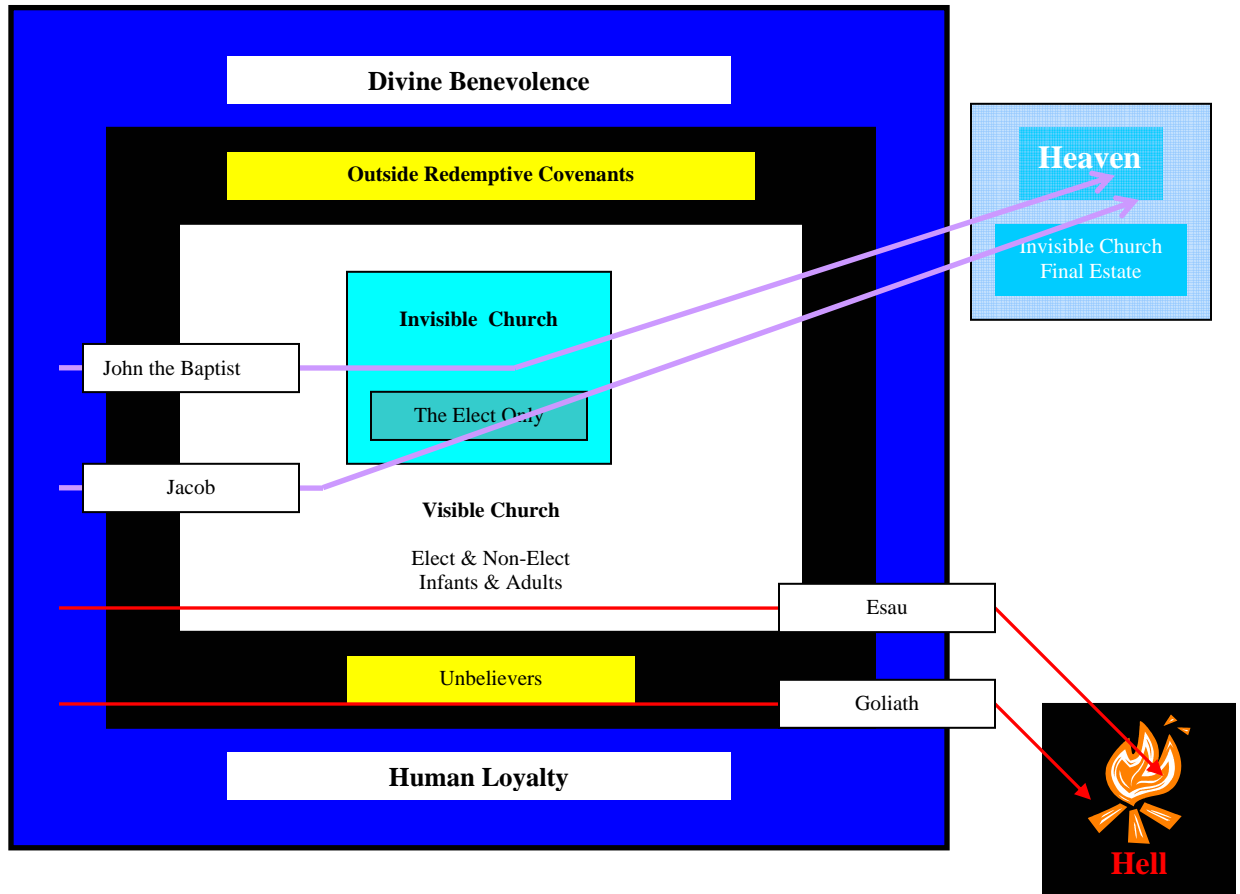
(5) In the Exile there was still hope for the “latter days” or age to come. (N.B.: Jacob and Joseph desired their bones not buried in Egypt for they had faith in the Promised Land to come.)

(6) The New Testament explains that the latter days have come, but are not complete. The age to come began with the first coming of Christ, but will not be consummated (i.e., arrive in all its fullness) until the second coming of Christ (D). The whole book of Acts describes the inauguration of the latter days.

(7) The time between the inauguration and the consummation of the eschaton is the “continuation” of the kingdom, which is the time in which we presently live.

(8) The idea of “now, but not yet” is that we now realize the age to come in some sense, but that we do not realize the age to come in other senses.

Chart 3: The Visible Church and the Invisible Church



This diagram reveals that there are four categories of human beings within the confines of God’s covenantal relationships with humanity:

1. John the Baptist: Effectually Called from the womb. He was a member of the Invisible/Visible Church.
2. Jacob: Effectually Called later in life (the norm for the elect). He was a member of the Visible Church for a length of time (circumcision, corporate community, et al.). Then he was saved and became a member of the Invisible/Visible Church.
3. Esau: Reprobate, but a member of the Visible Church. But, never a member of the Invisible Church.
4. Goliath: Reprobate. An Unbeliever. Never a member of the Visible/Invisible Church.

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