



Baptism

The pure administration of the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper are the second mark of Christ's Church (art. 29) because they are the external means by which God "*confirm(s) in us the salvation which He imparts to us*" (art. 33). Christ creates His Church through the preaching of the Gospel, and confirms her as His new creation by the sacraments (cf. *Heidelberg Catechism*, Q&A 65).

We turn now from the general truth about sacraments to what the *Belgic Confession* says about baptism in particular. Baptism is a dramatic portrayal of the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ as well as the outpouring of His Holy Spirit upon the Church. In one of the longest and most interesting articles in our Confession, Article 34 ("Of Baptism") describes the Reformed view of baptism. This article lays out the biblical teaching concerning baptism by moving from the large theme of baptism's place in the history of redemption as the sign of initiation into the covenant community, replacing Old Testament circumcision, to the teaching about baptism's benefits, to the lawful recipients of this sign and seal.

The place of baptism in the history of redemption

"*We believe and confess that Jesus Christ...is the end of the law,*" the *Confession* begins, citing Paul's words to the church in Rome (Romans 10:4). Because our Lord is the goal (Greek, *telos*) of all the Old Testament laws and ceremonies, He "*has made an end, by the shedding of His blood, of all other sheddings of blood which men could or would make as a propitiation or satisfaction for sin.*" Since all the sacrificial rites of the Old Testament were subsumed by our Lord and fulfilled in His work on our behalf, the New Testament writers teach that the sacrifices are ended (e.g., Hebrews 9:23-28). Among the many bloody rituals of the Old Testament was circumcision. Although itself not a sacrifice, the fact that it involved blood showed that it belonged to that epoch of redemptive history in which everything looked forward to a final shedding of blood by the seed whose heel would be bruised by crushing the serpent's head (Genesis 3:15).

We see this applied in the New Testament when circumcision was being demanded of Gentile converts to Israel's Messiah (Acts 15:1, 5). The Church rejected this "*yoke ... that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear*" in its pastoral letter to the Gentiles (Acts 15:23-29). The *Confession* follows the apostle Paul in saying that circumcision has been "*abolished,*" for as Paul says, circumcision no longer "*counts for anything*" (Galatians 5:6; cf. Romans 2:25-29).

In the place of circumcision, Jesus "*has instituted the sacrament of baptism*" for the New Covenant. What this teaches us is that both circumcision and baptism's place is that of an initiatory sign of membership in the covenant. There is one covenant of grace and this covenant always has a sign, yet, the administration of the one covenant of grace is multifaceted. Under the Old administration, circumcision was the rite of initiation, while under the New baptism is the sign of initiation. As the *Confession* says, the sign initiates one "*into the Church of God,*" that is, into the visible, covenant community. As an initiatory rite, baptism separates us "*from all other people and strange religions*" as the sign "*that we may wholly belong to Him whose mark and ensign we bear.*" Under the Old administration of the covenant, slaves bought with money as well as foreigners who desired to join Israel were marked out with the sign and shown to belong to the LORD (Genesis 17:12-13; Exodus 12:43-48). We, too, have been marked out in baptism, in which "*the honorable name*" was placed upon our foreheads (James 2:7; Revelation 22:4).

These truths, that circumcision has been abolished, along with all other sacrificial rites of the Old Testament, and that baptism takes the place of circumcision, were vital for the ancient church fathers in their apologetics against Judaism.

The most famous usage of these themes is found in Justin Martyr's *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*. In it he said, "*Wash therefore, and be now clean, and put away iniquity from your souls, as God bids you be washed in this laver, and be circumcised with the true circumcision*" (18 cf. 19). He then described that we have not received "*carnal circumcision*" but "*spiritual circumcision*" through baptism because the blood of Christ has made the blood of circumcision obsolete (43 cf. 24).

Cyprian also used these truths to counter the argument that infant baptism had to be done legalistically on the eighth day just like circumcision in his *Letter* 58:4.

This first section of the *Belgic Confession* ends by saying that baptism is not only a sign, but also a seal (assurance), that is, "*a testimony to us that He will be our gracious God and Father.*"

The administration of baptism

As a sign and seal of the covenant of grace in Christ, "*All those who are His (are) to be baptized with pure water.*" The phrase "*pure water*" is mentioned because we are to administer baptism "*according to the pure Word of God*" and are to reject "*all things contrary thereto*" (art. 29). This means that we are to follow the example of the apostles, who simply used water, and not add all the additional ceremonies that have crept in over time such as anointing with oil, using salt, or saliva.

This water is to be accompanied by the words of our Lord, "Into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19). The Trinitarian formula is evidenced outside the New Testament in the *Didache*, written sometime between the late first-century and early second-century A.D. (ch. 7). As John Calvin said so eloquently,

*There are good reasons why **the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit**, are expressly mentioned; for there is no other way in which the efficacy of **baptism** can be experienced than when we begin with the unmerited mercy of **the Father**, who reconciles us to himself by the only begotten **Son**; next, Christ comes forward with the sacrifice of his death; and at length, **the Holy Spirit** is likewise added, by whom he washes and regenerates us, (Titus 3:5,) and, in short, makes us partakers of his benefits. Thus we perceive that God cannot be truly known, unless our faith distinctly conceive of Three Persons in one essence; and that the fruit and efficacy of **baptism** proceed from God **the Father** adopting us through his **Son**, and, after having cleansed us from the pollutions of the flesh through **the Spirit**: creating us anew to righteousness.*

Baptism's benefits

The *Confession* then moves into a discussion of the benefits of baptism. This was one of the heated debates of the Reformation, between Rome, Lutherans, Anabaptists, and the various Reformed groups as typified by Calvin and Zwingli. Baptism signifies to us,

that as water washes away the filth of the body when poured upon it, and is seen on the body of the baptized when sprinkled upon him, so does the blood of Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit internally sprinkle the soul, cleanse it from its sins, and regenerate us from children of wrath unto children of God.

The water of baptism is the sign and seal of the twofold benefit that Christ has won for us and that He gives to us, cleansing our souls from sin (justification) and regenerating us (this was the pre-Synod of Dort way of speaking of sanctification). Yet the *Confession* goes on to say,

Not that this is effected by the external water, but by the sprinkling of the precious blood of the Son of God; who is our Red Sea, through which we must pass to escape the tyranny of Pharaoh, that is, the devil, and to enter into the spiritual land of Canaan.

Here the author of our *Confession*, Guido de Bres, draws upon the rich prayer of Martin Luther, his so-called "Great Flood Prayer" (German, *Sindtflutgebet*), which he wrote for the German people in 1523 as a part of the rite of baptism, and which was adopted in almost every Reformed baptismal liturgy. This prayer, as summarized into our *Confession*, is filled with the full biblical significance of baptism as a passing through death and an entrance into spiritual life.

What is so crucial to understand about these two paragraphs is that when our *Confession* speaks this way that it does not make a simultaneous link between receiving the sign and the thing signified. While never wanting to separate the sign from the thing signified, which would make the sacrament “empty” and “meaningless,” our Reformed forefathers were just as zealous not to equate them. The sacramental union between the outward water and the inward washing is not *physical*, contra the Roman Catholic Church. This means that it is not the water that cleanses us. Furthermore, this union is also not *local*, contra Lutheranism. This means that when the water is administered, so too is the grace which is “*in, with, and under*” the water. This is suggested by the *Augsburg Confession* when it says that original sin condemns all “*that are not born again by baptism and the Holy Spirit*” (Art. 2; cf. The Saxon Visitation Articles of 1592, Art. III.2, 4, 5).

Yet this view is what is taught by imprecise Reformed commentators such as William Goulooze, who said, “*As we are washed externally with water, so we believe we are washed spiritually with the Holy Ghost ... When we are truly baptized with water we are also baptized with the Holy Spirit.*” Although Goulooze went on to retract the force of these statements when he said, “*We do not assert that infants are regenerated by baptism into a newness of life,*” we are left wondering at how he could speak out of both sides of his mouth.

Confusing statements like these occur when the Protestant and Reformed doctrine of justification by faith alone (*sola fide*) is forgotten in a discussion concerning the sacraments. The preaching of the Gospel and the holy sacraments both present Jesus Christ as their object, and He can and must be received only by faith. The Reformed view of the sacramental union is that it is a *spiritual* union, that is, the Holy Spirit effects it.

Several commentators on the *Belgic Confession* understand this and express our view. First, J. Van Bruggen of the Theological University in Kampen, The Netherlands, explains that “*Holy Baptism is joined to the Gospel; it seals the **promise***” (emphasis in original). He goes on to explain what this promise is, and how one receives it, saying,

The promised benefit of cleansing is only received in the way of faith, to which the Lord also encourages us through holy baptism ... to receive what is promised in holy baptism one must go to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Cornelis Gerhardus Bos, a former minister in the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (Liberated), cites the case of Rev. L. E. Oosterhoff who, along with others in the 1960’s, taught that “*all who were baptized have received the forgiveness of sins in reality*” and “*that this actual washing away of sins could be lost again.*” In contrast, Bos stated,

“This contradicts Scripture. Therefore the confession speaks differently. All the benefits God has promised are truly ours if we accept them with a believing heart.”

This section of the *Confession* is concluded by stating the parallelism between the sign and the thing signified without losing sight of what it has already stated, that the union and the benefits of that union come about “*by the power of the Holy Spirit.*”

The ministers, therefore, on their part administer the sacrament and that which is visible, but our Lord gives that which is signified by the sacrament, namely, the gifts and invisible grace; washing, cleansing, and purging our souls of all filth and unrighteousness; renewing our hearts and filling them with all comfort; giving unto us a true assurance of His fatherly goodness; putting on us the new man, and putting off the old man with all his deeds.

One final note on this section is that the *Confession* rejects the error of the ancient Donatists, because although it is the minister who “*administer(s) the sacrament and that which is visible,*” it is the Lord who “*gives that which is signified by the sacrament, namely, the gifts and invisible grace.*” Just as Balaam preached the Word (Numbers 23, 24), Judas was sent out to preach (Luke 9), and some preached Christ from wrong motives (Philippians 1:15-18), nevertheless, Christ was preached and offered to His people, just as He is by ministers in the sacraments, no matter how faithful or unfaithful they are.

The life of baptism

Another fascinating aspect of baptism is that although it is administered once, its benefits do not end once the water is poured, Christ's words uttered, and prayer is made. Baptism does not *"avail us only at the time when the water is poured upon us and received by us, but also through the whole course of our life."* The teaching of Martin Luther is clearly seen here, as well, as he is said to have said to himself every morning, *baptizatus sum*, "I am baptized."

Baptism is the sacrament of initiation into a life of discipleship. Discipleship involves repentance from sin and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. We ought to recall our baptism continually as a testimony that we belong to the Lord, and therefore, that we ought to live to His glory.

Rejection of errors

Finally, the teaching of the Anabaptists is rejected. They were a group of radical reformers who we have already seen denied the true humanity of our Lord, and insisted that those baptized as infants had to be re-baptized:

We believe, therefore, that every man who is earnestly studious of obtaining life eternal ought to be baptized but once with this only baptism, without ever repeating the same ... Therefore we detest the error of the Anabaptists, who are not content with the one only baptism they have received.

Here we as Reformed believers follow the ancient catholic Church against the Donatist error, which said that re-baptism is necessary for those who rejected their faith during persecution upon returning to the church, as well as those who were baptized by one who later turned out to be apostate.

Augustine of Hippo, the great opponent of the Donatists, wrote in his *Letter 23.4* about the implications of re-baptizing, when he said, *"Ye, therefore, who wish to baptize twice, must seek as subjects of such double baptism men who have double hearts."* The reason for this sarcastic statement, like Paul's in Galatians 5:12, is that baptism is the sign of being born again. So when the *Belgic Confession* says the reason for rejecting the Donatist and Anabaptist doctrine of re-baptism is that "we cannot be born twice," it is following the ancient argument of Augustine.

Second, we also reject the Anabaptists because they *"condemn the baptism of the infants of believers."* Our response is basically this: our children belong to the covenant and therefore *"ought to be baptized and sealed with the sign of the covenant."* This was done to the children of Israelites as they were circumcised *"upon the same promises which are made unto our children."*

As the *Confession* says, *"And indeed Christ shed His blood no less for the washing of the children of believers than for adult persons; and therefore they ought to receive the sign and sacrament of which Christ has done for them."*

An example of this from the Old Testament is found in Leviticus 12, where *"the Lord commanded in the law that they should be made partakers of the sacrament of Christ's suffering and death shortly after they were born, by offering for them a lamb, that was a sacrament of Jesus Christ."*

This article concludes with the words of Paul, saying,

*"Moreover, what circumcision was to the Jews, baptism is to our children. And for this reason Paul calls baptism the **circumcision of Christ**."*

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Study/application questions for article 34

1. Why did circumcision involve blood, while baptism does not?
2. What is the *sign* in baptism?
3. What is *signified* in baptism?
4. What is the analogy between ordinary water and baptismal water, and what does this teach us about baptism's benefits?
5. What are some of the Old Testament "types" (a type is an Old Testament preview of something in the New) of baptism?
6. Does the mode (i.e., immersion, sprinkling, pouring) of baptism make a baptism true?