

CHAPTER 8.

HOLY BAPTISM

On the last day of October in 1517, an Augustinian monk named Martin Luther nailed his now famous ninety-five theses to the door of the church in Wittenberg, Germany. After he had done so, life certainly did not become any easier for Martin Luther. First he was questioned. Next he was opposed. Just over three short years later, on January 3, 1521, he was excommunicated from the church. Later in the spring of that year, after also being declared a notorious heretic by Emperor Charles V at the Diet of Worms, he found himself hiding in the Wartburg Castle to save his life.

Understandably, at times Martin Luther felt discouraged. He was making every effort to follow the Holy Scriptures in doctrine and life. Yet the more consistently he followed the Lord, the more persistently the church persecuted him. How did Luther find comfort in the midst of such agonizing misery? It is said that in some of his darkest moments he would take a piece of chalk and write these Latin words on his desk: *BAPTIZATUS SUM*. Translated this means: I have been baptized.

Remarkable, isn't it? Martin Luther was baptized on November 11, 1483, in Eisleben, Germany, only one day after his birth. Yet almost forty years later he was still looking back to that event, which he could not consciously remember, and drawing comfort from it. Added to that, he was baptized within the Roman Catholic Church, the very church that was now persecuting him and had even excommunicated him. Yet

Luther understood that baptism came, in the first place, from God and not from the church. Therefore the Roman Catholic context of his baptism was not a barrier for him as he sought solace in the truths of the gospel that the sacrament portrayed.

Luther, the man who in so many ways brought the Word of God back to the church, still reached for a sacrament when he really needed spiritual reassurance. *BAPTIZATUS SUM*. I have been baptized! Luther and his piece of chalk still serve as a valuable lesson for us today. Perhaps you have never reminded yourself of your baptism by writing on a desk with a piece of chalk. Yet undoubtedly you have come through some hard times in your life. Have you ever sought comfort in your baptism? At times baptism has been scorned as nothing more than a ceremonial splash of water. However, to those who understand its true purpose, as revealed in Scripture, it is a wellspring of consolation, provided by the Lord when his children need it the most.

BAPTISM AS SACRAMENT

In the previous chapter we defined sacraments as holy, visible signs and seals which were instituted by God so that by their use he might more fully declare and seal to us the promise of the gospel. Now let us explore how this applies specifically to baptism.

Baptism is a *holy, visible sign* which points to the washing away of our sins. Clearly, if it were just an ordinary washing, which just happens to be done within the context of a worship service, then the apostle Peter would never have written these words: “Baptism . . . now saves you, *not* as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience” (1 Pet 3:21; emphasis mine). So the sign of baptismal water is actually pointing away from itself and toward the forgiveness that only God can give in Christ Jesus. To confirm this, just look at the passages in the Bible that explicitly connect baptism and forgiveness of sins: Matthew 3:6, Mark 1:4–5, Luke 3:3, Acts 2:38, and Acts 22:16. For this reason the early church already highlighted this key aspect of the sacra-

ment when it confessed in the Nicene Creed that there is “one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.”

Yet there is more involved here than just the forgiveness of sins. A glance through the passages which speak about baptism will soon show that it is also a sign of receiving the Holy Spirit in order to fight, by his power, against the sin that still lingers in us (Matt 3:16; 28:19; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 3:33; Acts 1:5; 2:38; 10:47; 11:16; 1 Cor 12:13). In line with these passages, the Heidelberg Catechism emphasizes the double washing that is symbolized in the baptismal water. It says, “Christ instituted this outward washing and with it gave the promise that, as surely as water washes away dirt from the body, so certainly *his blood and Spirit* wash away the impurity of my soul, that is, all my sins” (LD 26, Q&A 69; emphasis mine). Please note that the spiritual washing is accomplished by both the blood *and* the Spirit of Christ. That this is significant, and not just added verbiage, is clear from what immediately follows in Q&A 70, where the washing with Christ’s blood is specifically connected with justification and the washing with Christ’s Spirit is particularly joined to sanctification.

Still, as much as washing with the baptismal water is an easily understandable picture of the cleansing from our sins, there is more involved here. It is also a *holy, visible seal*. In Scripture the people who received baptism were often uncertain, perhaps even spiritually scared. They longed not only for forgiveness but also for *assurance* of forgiveness. They wanted to know that it was true, also for them personally. This was obviously the case with the repentant Jews on Pentecost Day. Who cannot but hear the agony in their voices when, having been convicted of their sinful part in crucifying the Messiah, they cried out, “Brothers, what shall we do?” To this, Peter replies, “Be baptized,” for he knows the conscience-calming power that comes from heaven through this sacrament (Acts 2:37–38).

Similarly, the crowds that flocked to John the Baptist, including the dishonest tax collectors and the greedy soldiers, were looking for some kind of confirmation that forgiveness of all their grievous sins was not just a

hollow promise but a real, God-given absolution that they could count on. Along these lines, it is not surprising that baptism is also called a pledge in Scripture (1 Pet 3:21) and a seal in the Reformed confessions (LD 26; BC 34). It has that reassuring quality which sacraments should have, which Martin Luther cherished so deeply and which we all “of little faith” (Matt 6:30) urgently need.

That baptism was *instituted by Christ* is evident from the ending of the gospels of Matthew and Mark. In both books of the Bible, just before Christ ascended into heaven, he gave his disciples the instruction to baptize those who came to faith, not only from among the Jews but also from all the nations of the world (Matt 28:19–20; Mark 16:16). Clearly then, the initiative to begin baptizing did not come from the faith-lacking disciples (Mark 16:15) but from the risen Christ. Interestingly, even the forerunner of Christ, John the Baptist, did not baptize people on his own initiative, but was rather commissioned by God to do so (John 1:6). Also the people of Israel, and more reluctantly their leaders as well, recognized this fact (Matt 21:25; Mark 11:30; Luke 20:4).

Finally, the Word of God also makes it clear that baptism does not focus on peripheral spiritual matters but rather turns our attention to the heart of the matter: salvation itself. In this way it is truly a sacrament as it confirms to us *the promise of the gospel*. In fact, the connection between baptism and salvation is so strong that Christ said, “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved” (Mark 16:16). The apostle Peter seems to take it even one step further when he describes baptism as something that “saves you” (1 Pet 3:21). As we saw in the previous chapter, this is the typically promissory language of the sacraments. Ultimately, water, even baptismal water, cannot save anyone, for the wages of sin is not dirt but death (Rom 6:23). Thus, only the sacrifice of God’s own Son is our hope for eternal salvation (1 John 2:1–2). At the same time, the very fact that the apostle Peter dares to speak of a baptism that now saves you demonstrates that baptism is not a ceremonial sideshow. Rather, it centres our hearts on the very core of the gospel: being transferred from eternal death to eternal life through the atoning work of Jesus Christ.

When all the aspects mentioned above are considered together, it is clear that baptism more than adequately matches the definition of what a sacrament is.

BAPTISM AND UNION WITH OUR TRIUNE GOD

Not only is Christ the one who instituted the sacrament, but he is also the one with whom we are united through this sacrament. This is made plain by the apostle Paul in Romans 6. A short quotation will illustrate the point:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his (vv. 3–5).

The repeated use of the little word *into* is noteworthy. Through baptism we are brought into a special, close relationship, indeed, a union, with the person and work of Christ, including his death and resurrection. This is also reaffirmed by the apostle in his letter to the Galatians when he writes, “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (3:27). Using poetic language, then, he teaches us that baptism is so much more than a religious custom or tradition. It involves union with no one less than the Son of God, who supplies us with the robes of salvation (Isa 61:10).

This union is something that is done *to us* and is not accomplished by us. This is evident from the language that the Holy Spirit uses in Romans 6. He says that we “have been united with him” (v. 5), using what grammarians call a passive verb. Simply put, this means that the action, in this case the act of uniting, happens to us; it is not done by us. Even stronger than the grammar, though, is the truth that through baptism we are buried with Christ and raised with him (v. 4). Burial is not something that you do to yourself. That is impossible. At the point of burial you are dead and you *cannot* do anything. Likewise, resurrection from the dead is not something that we could ever do ourselves. Those who need to be raised

from the dead are obviously dead, incapable of doing anything for, or unto, themselves. This truth needs to be emphasized in connection with baptism. This sacrament seals God's gracious promise of what he will do to us.

Now, it is true that when new converts are baptized, there is something else that is chronologically close to their baptism, namely, their profession of faith in Christ (Mark 16:16; Acts 8:12). However, just because two things happen within a short span of time that does not necessarily mean that they are the same thing. Consider the process of becoming a citizen of a new country. In order to become a citizen an immigrant, let us call her Irene, will have to swear an oath of allegiance. It is true: Irene is the one who swears that oath. Still, it is the government of the country, for instance, the United States of America, which grants Irene citizenship. No one can make herself a citizen of a new country. The swearing of the oath and the granting of citizenship happen at the same time, but they are not the same thing. In a similar way, even when someone professes faith in Christ, salvation is still from God, not us (Eph 2:8, 9). Therefore baptism is a sign that points to what God promises to do for us, not what we may promise to do for him. It is vitally important to keep that sacramental direction straight in our minds and in our hearts.

Baptism not only signifies union with Christ, but also with God the Father and the Holy Spirit. The Son himself said so, unequivocally, when he instructed his apostles to baptize future disciples “*into* the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt 28:19).¹ Clearly, all three persons of our triune God are equally involved in the promises of the gospel that are sealed in baptism. Note the use of that little word *into* in order to indicate the close bond between God and us that baptism portrays. To be placed *into the name* of someone else is to be brought into a special, close relationship to him, including his care and protection. Thus, to be brought into the name of the Father points to the divine promise that not only are we forgiven sinners, but we are

1. Some translations read “baptizing them *in* the name of the Father . . .”; however, the original Greek uses the word *into*.

also God's adopted children. This follows, graciously and supernaturally, from being united with Christ. As we saw above, the apostle Paul states in Galatians 3:27, "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ." However, being clothed with Christ, the Son of God, also has implications for our relationship with the Father of Christ. Those who belong to Christ are not only children of Abraham (Gal 3:29), but even more significantly, they are children and heirs of God the Father because God has sent the Spirit of his Son into their hearts (Gal 4:4–7). Adoption, then, is the special baptismal promise of the Father.

At the same time, baptism into the name of the Holy Spirit also brings with it still more blessings. More than once, Scripture indicates that one of the key differences between the baptism administered by John the Baptist and the baptism instituted by Jesus Christ is the role of the Holy Spirit. John himself said, "I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit" (Mark 1:8). This is confirmed in other passages, such as Acts 1:5 and 11:16.

What precisely is this added work of the Spirit in baptism? Once again, John the Baptist points us in the right direction when he says that the Christ would baptize not only with the Holy Spirit but also with fire (Matt 3:11; Luke 3:16). Among other things, fire purifies (Num 31:23) and refines (Mal 3:2). In a similar way, the specific baptismal promise of the Holy Spirit is that he will continue to test and purify all our thoughts, words, and deeds by the refining fire of his sanctification, until one day all the dross of sin will be removed, leaving only the pure gold of unwavering faith in our hearts—to the praise of his glory (1 Pet 1:7).

The Belgic Confession masterfully summarizes the rich *triune* revelation concerning baptism in Article 34 when it affirms the following:

By [baptism] he signifies to us that as water washes away the dirt of the body when poured on us, and as water is seen on the body of the baptized when sprinkled on him, so the blood of Christ, by the Holy Spirit, does the same thing internally to the soul. It washes and cleanses our soul from sin and regenerates us from children of wrath into children of God. This is not brought about by the water as such but by the sprinkling of the precious

blood of the Son of God, which is our Red Sea, through which we must pass to escape the tyranny of Pharaoh, that is, the devil, and enter into the spiritual land of Canaan.

BAPTISM AND THE OLD TESTAMENT

In the above quotation the Belgic Confession describes baptism as “our Red Sea.” In doing so, it makes a direct link between this New Testament sacrament and the history of God’s redemptive work in the Old Testament. As one should expect from a confession, this link is not original to the author of the document, Guido de Brès. Rather, it comes from Scripture, to be more specific, from 1 Corinthians 10:1–4, where the apostle Paul says that all the Israelites who walked through the Red Sea on dry ground were “baptized into Moses.” We will come back to these fascinating verses in a moment. However, it is worthwhile observing that this is not the only link between baptism and the Old Testament. A number of connections can be mentioned.

First, although it is a challenging passage to interpret, 1 Peter 3:18–22 clearly draws a parallel between the water of baptism and the water of the flood in the days of Noah. The waters of that global flood punished the wicked generation with death by drowning, but using those very same waters God saved eight people of one family (1 Pet 3:20). In a similar way, the Lord now uses the water of baptism in his work to save far more than a handful of people from all the families and tribes of the earth.

Secondly, the global impetus of the old covenant (Gen 12:1–3, with Gen 17:3–6 and Ps 87) by which Abram was to be a blessing to *all nations* came to a most gracious fulfilment in the new covenant when the Lord Jesus Christ instituted baptism and sent his apostles out into *all nations* (Matt 28:19–20; Mark 16:15–16). In this respect, it is also significant that those who are baptized into Christ become children, or descendants, of Abraham (Rom 4:11; Gal 3:26–29).

Thirdly, water was used frequently in the Old Testament as part of the ceremonial cleansing that was necessary so that God’s people, and espe-

cially the priests, could appear before the Lord in his tabernacle, and later in his temple. For example, the priests had to wash regularly with water from the bronze laver, lest they would die (Exod 30:18–20; Lev 8:6). Yet washing with water was not limited to the priests and Levites. All of God’s people, when they became ceremonially unclean, needed to wash with water (Lev 11:32; 14:8–9, 52; 15:5–27; Num 8:7; 19:12–13, 19–21). Furthermore, already in the Old Testament, God’s people understood that these ceremonial washings had a symbolic aspect to them, and that the real cleanliness that was required was purity of moral conduct and spiritual devotion (Ps 15).

In the fourth place, as the New Testament sacrament of baptism points to sanctification through the blood and Spirit of Christ, so also in the Old Testament blood was sprinkled on the people to make their special, covenantal relationship to the LORD visible to them. In this respect the blood-sprinkling ceremony at Mount Sinai is most relevant (Exod 24:1–8). Just as the blood of young bulls sanctified God’s people in the Old Testament, so also the blood of Christ sanctifies them in the New Testament— that very blood which the water of baptism signifies.

Finally, in Colossians 2:9–12 the Holy Spirit also links baptism and circumcision. There is a circumcision done by Christ that occurs when someone is “buried with him in baptism . . . [and] raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God” (Col 2:11–12). In fact, the kind of circumcision that is not done by human hands was already occurring in the Old Testament. To be more specific, Moses once told the people, “The LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live” (Deut 10:6). In other words, circumcision of the heart and baptism into the name of the Holy Spirit amount to essentially the same thing: the LORD promises to work mightily in the hearts of his people to transform them from stubborn sinners to adopted children who love him, and obey him, from the heart.

All these parallels demonstrate that baptism is not an entirely novel phenomenon in the New Testament. Already in the Old Testament redemp-

tive events (the Flood and the Red Sea) and ceremonial actions (water washings, blood sprinklings, and circumcision) alike are leaning forward, longing for the day of fulfilment in Christ and the baptism that he instituted. In this respect John the Baptist, being the last of the Old Testament prophets (Mal 4:5) and the forerunner of the Christ (Isa 40:3), stands as a bridge between the two testaments. He baptizes with water, which is certainly in line with the New Testament sacrament that Christ will institute, but his baptism has not yet reached the point of fulfilment, for he recognizes that he only baptizes with the symbol of water and not with the reality of the Spirit (Mark 1:8). In this way John's baptism is still part of the Old Testament era. Bearing this in mind, we can understand why the believers in Ephesus, who had only received John's baptism, were rebaptized into the name of Jesus (Acts 19:1–5). If they had already received the New Testament sacrament, there would have been no reason to rebaptize them.

Yet of all the Old Testament lines that find fulfilment in the New Testament sacrament of baptism, none is quite as striking as the line which the apostle Paul draws in 1 Corinthians 10:1–4. We briefly mentioned it above, but we return to it in detail now. The passage reads as follows:

For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ.

Surprisingly, in this passage the apostle Paul teaches us about baptism into . . . no, not Christ, but Moses! Surely, someone will say, "Baptism is a new covenant sacrament, and Moses is the mediator of the old covenant. So how does that work?" Indeed, it is remarkable, but this new sacrament was already foreshadowed in the old dispensation, at the Red Sea. "All were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea." A cloud contains water. According to Exodus 14:19, the special glory cloud of the LORD, which to that point had travelled in front of the people, moved and stood behind the people, separating the Egyptians from the Israelites. Thus God's holy people and their enemies were distinguished by a wall

of water: “And there was the cloud and the darkness. And it lit up the night without one coming near the other all night” (Exod 14:20). As if that were not dramatic enough, next the LORD miraculously used the water of the Red Sea to both save his people and defeat their enemies (Exod 14:22, 28). The baptism into Moses was comprised of these waters of separation and salvation.

Of course, there was still a shadowy quality (Col 2:17), so typical of the Old Testament, to this baptism into Moses. To be delivered from the tyranny of Pharaoh is one thing; to be rescued from the enslaving power of the twin taskmasters sin and Satan is quite another. The LORD accomplished the former through his servant Moses; to proceed with the latter he had to work through his only-begotten Son. Nevertheless, in a manner that is both powerful and unmistakable, 1 Corinthians 10:1–3 demonstrates that baptism was not created, *ex nihilo* so to speak, when John the Baptist began preaching on the shores of the Jordan. There are many Old Testament lines, reaching back to Moses, and even further back to Abraham and Noah, which finally find their fulfillment in Christ and the baptism he set in place.

WHO SHOULD RECEIVE BAPTISM?

This question is controversial. The Roman Catholic Church and both the Lutheran and the Reformed churches have always baptized adult believers as well as the children in their households. The Baptist churches and other denominations with different names but Baptist theology baptize only those who make a credible profession of their faith and, obviously, who are old enough to do so. This excludes infants and young children. Both sides in this debate appeal to God’s Word to support their position. Indeed, some have found the arguments on both sides sufficiently cogent that they wish to agree to disagree on this matter. They want to leave it open to all Christians as to whether they should baptize infants or not.

To begin with, this matter should be dealt with compassionately and patiently. Those who have taken the time to discuss the matter of infant baptism will usually find that most people on either side of the debate are sincere and have a keen desire to follow Scripture. Where there is

a desire to submit to Scripture, there should be a corresponding desire to teach and learn—with much patience (2 Tim 4:2). At the same time, agreeing to disagree on this matter has the unacceptable consequence that it portrays God as being undecided on the question of whether children of believers should be baptized. If all involved truly want to find the answer in God’s Word, and if God does not say “yes” and “no” in the same breath (2 Cor 1:15–20), then there must be a clear and consistent answer to this question.

To begin with, let us narrow down the question. All agree that those who are of the age of discernment and are converted to the Christian faith ought to be baptized. Thus it is incorrect to frame up the debate in such a way that the Baptists are said to administer adult, or believer’s, baptism while the Reformed administer infant baptism. In fact, both churches administer adult, or believer’s, baptism. Therefore Reformed folk are just as comfortable with Mark 16:16 as the Baptists. There Christ says, “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved.” The baptism of new believers was never an issue. Rather, the real question is this: in addition to baptizing new converts, should the church also baptize the children of believers?

Before going any further, at least three factors deserve to be mentioned. For lack of a better term, we will call the first one the *Spurgeon* factor. Charles Haddon Spurgeon was a gifted and influential British preacher in the nineteenth century. He preached over three thousand sermons, often to thousands of people at a time and often emphasizing the sovereignty of God’s grace. His sermons are still widely read and quoted today. Spurgeon was also a Particular Baptist, a designation used at that time. This meant that he denied infant baptism. Today we have many contemporary Spurgeons, men who preach powerful sermons with many Reformed themes in them. Yet, like Spurgeon, they reject infant baptism. So the argument runs like this: is rejecting infant baptism really so bad if these preachers are so good? The simple response is then: even good preachers can make serious mistakes. When that happens, we ought to address it, not overlook it. That is the approach the apostle Paul took with Peter (Gal 2:11–16). We should do the same.

Next there is the *show-me-the-verse* factor. If you have ever had a discussion about infant baptism, you will likely have heard someone say, “Just show me the verse in the Bible where God commands us to baptize infants.” Well, there is no verse in the Bible that says, “Baptize babies.” Consequently, the underlying yet overarching implication is that baptizing infants must be wrong. However, this show-me-the-verse shoe pinches just as much on the other foot. For some two millennia, ever since the days of Abraham, the LORD made it abundantly clear that children were included in his covenant (Gen 17:7). Therefore this challenge could also be launched: “Just show me the verse in the Bible where God commands us to stop including infants in his covenant.” Well, no verse in the Bible says that either. So, all involved need to step beyond this show-me-the-verse mentality and start looking carefully at what the LORD does actually say.

Finally, there is the *infant-baptism-breeds-laxity* factor. Many people resist infant baptism because they are afraid that baptized babies will grow up to be spiritually sloppy individuals. They are concerned that people baptized as infants will grow up feeling rather comfortable with immoral, worldly lifestyles since, after all, they are baptized and, in the end, all will be well and forgiven. However, anyone who reads about the true meaning of baptism will quickly realize that it is not an excuse to sin but rather an urgent impetus to avoid sin at all cost (Rom 6:1–4).

With these three factors addressed, we can go on to take a closer look at Scripture’s teaching. Let us begin where we left off in the last section, with the baptism into Moses (1 Cor 10:1–3). Who was baptized into Moses? All of God’s people were baptized into Moses, since “all” were under the cloud and “all” passed through the sea: male and female, older and younger, including the little infants who were carried in the arms of parents swiftly walking to safety on the opposite shore of the Sea. Surely, the parents did not leave their children on the far shore of the Red Sea while they themselves walked ahead to safety. The very thought of it is unimaginable! Therefore, since it is clear that the babies of God’s people were baptized into Moses, surely they should also be baptized into Christ, for Moses was faithful only as a servant, but Christ is faithful as

Son (Heb 4:5–6). In moving from Moses to Christ, we move from less to more, not from more to less.

Furthermore, since the Holy Spirit himself pulls together the circumcision done by Christ and baptism (Col 2:9–12), we must reckon with the revelation that the children of believing parents were definitely included in God’s covenant in the Old Testament, and the little boys, at the tender age of eight days old, were circumcised as a sign of that covenant. In fact, the LORD was so strong on this point that if anyone failed to administer the sign of the covenant to his infant son, he would be guilty of breaking the covenant (Gen 17:14). Clearly, in the old covenant the LORD left no room for agreeing to disagree over circumcision.

Does all of this change in the new covenant? Many Baptists would argue that it does. Often they will say that the genealogical aspect of the old covenant was needed in order to bring Christ, the Mediator, into the world; however, after that, the new covenant is made with regenerated individuals and not with the households of believers. Now, it is true that there was something wrong with the first covenant. The Holy Spirit himself says, “For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion to look for a second” (Heb 8:7). Yet please note the next verse: “For he finds fault *with them [the people]* when he says: ‘Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will establish a new covenant’” (Heb 8:8; emphasis mine). Moreover, the following verses, quoting from Jeremiah 31:31–34, indicate that the stubborn sinfulness of the people was at fault. In the old covenant, the blood of bulls and goats could never deal effectively with that iniquity (Heb 10:4). Therefore the LORD ushered in the new covenant with the long-foreshadowed solution. The promised blood and Spirit of Christ achieved what animal sacrifices could never accomplish.

In other words, in moving from old to new, the LORD did not change the structure of the covenant. Neither did he change who was involved in the covenant. To be more specific, with the coming of Christ he did not begin excluding the previously included children. Instead, if we are looking for what is *new* in the new covenant, we need to point to the fact that

God changed the sacrifice for sin from shadows to substance. He moved forward from livestock to the Lord Jesus Christ.²

In addition to this, young children are still included in the new covenant. This can be demonstrated from familiar passages like Luke 18:16 (“Let the little children come to me”), Acts 2:39 (“the promise is for you and your children”), and 1 Corinthians 7:14 (“your children . . . are holy”). Once we understand all of this, it is no surprise that there are household baptisms recorded in the New Testament (Acts 16:15, 31–33; 1 Cor 1:16). In fact, that is exactly what we would expect.

In this regard there is yet one more illuminating parallel between the two testaments. When Abram was first called out of idolatry, he believed, and it was credited to him as righteousness (Gen 12:1–3; 15:6; Josh 24:2). Later, the LORD confirmed his everlasting covenant with Abraham and his children, and his entire household was circumcised (Gen 17:27; 21:3). Not surprisingly, this same basic sequence is repeated in the New Testament. In the first place, people are called out of idolatry, and when they, by the grace of God, believe, they are baptized in accordance with the command of Christ (Matt 28:19; Mark 16:16). However, the next step is that if those converts have children in their households, then God wants them to be baptized also (Acts 16:15, 31–33; 1 Cor 1:16), just as Abraham’s household was circumcised with him.

Once again, the Reformed confessions help us put all of this together in a few concise sentences. The Belgic Confession puts it this way:

We believe that these children ought to be baptized and sealed with the sign of the covenant, as infants were circumcised in Israel on the basis of the same promises which are now made to our children. Indeed, Christ shed his blood to wash the children of believers just as much as he shed it for adults. Therefore they ought to receive the sign and sacrament of what Christ has done for them, as the Lord commanded in the law that a lamb was to be offered shortly after children were born (Art. 34).

2. On the relationship between the old and new covenant, also see *Growing in the Gospel*, Volume 1, Chapter 11.

And the Heidelberg Catechism speaks along similar lines when it explains why infants ought to be baptized:

Infants as well as adults belong to God's covenant and congregation. Through Christ's blood the redemption from sin and the Holy Spirit, who works faith, are promised to them no less than to adults. Therefore by baptism, as a sign of the covenant, they must be incorporated into the Christian church and distinguish from the children of unbelievers (LD 27, Q&A 74).

BAPTISM, COVENANT, AND ELECTION

The above citations from the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism both speak of baptism in connection with the covenant promises of God. However, every covenant contains two parts: a promise and an obligation. This naturally leads to a question: what happens to the promises of the covenant if a baptized person reneges on his obligations? To put it in plainer terms, it does happen that someone who was baptized as a baby grows up and turns his back on the Lord and his church. However, in such a case what is left of all those blessed promises of our triune God, such as adoption, forgiveness, and purification? Do the sins of man nullify the words of God? Surely that cannot be the case (Rom 9:6). Yet how do we put the doctrinal pieces of this real, and heart-wrenching, puzzle together?

In short, we are dealing with the intersection of three doctrines: election, covenant, and baptism. Throughout church history, this crossroads has generated many hours of debate and many pages of writing. To begin with, it is clear that election and covenant, along with baptism as its sign, are not identical, even though they are connected with each other in significant ways. To mention but one obvious difference, election is a decree that God made before the creation of the world (Eph 1:4), while the covenant of grace is a relationship initiated by God after the fall and in history (Gen 15:18). Furthermore, not every child of the covenant is elect (Rom 9:6–13). There were both elect and reprobate among the circumcised in the Old Testament, just as there are both elect and reprobate among the baptized in the New Testament. Another way of expressing this is that the circle of the covenant is larger than the circle of the elect.

However, a challenge remains. What is the best way to describe this truth in a scripturally responsible and pedagogically effective way? Over time, theologians have used terms such as external and internal covenant, or administration and essence of the covenant, or conditional and absolute covenants. All of these terms try to grapple with the fact that not every baptized member of the covenant is necessarily elect. So, those who are elect belong to the internal, absolute essence of the covenant, while those who have been baptized but are not elect belong only to the external, conditional administration of the covenant. How shall we evaluate these terms? Although the motivation behind these expressions is understandable, the terms themselves often leave members of the church, both adults and children, wondering, “Am I really in the covenant, or just in the external covenant? Does my child truly have the promises of baptism, or only in a conditional way?”

Considering these drawbacks, it is helpful to take another look at terminology that is found in Scripture, namely, that of the blessings (Deut 28; Gal 3:7–14) and the curses (Deut 29:1, 9–14; Gal 3:15–18), both of which belong to the same covenant. These passages shift our attention from *aspects* of the covenant (e.g., internal and external) to *outcomes* of life within the covenant (e.g., blessing and curse). Clearly, among the baptized, those who believe “are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith” (Gal 3:9) and those who do not embrace Christ by faith are under the curse (Gal 3:13–14). At the same time, there is more than a difference in outcomes; there is also a difference in the way that baptized people live *within* the covenant. Someone can just go through the motions and live within the covenant in a merely superficial manner. This is ungodly hypocrisy. Conversely, someone can live within the covenant genuinely, that is to say, from the heart, in true dedication to, and in fellowship with, the Lord. This is the way it should be.

Here an analogy may help. The LORD compares his covenant with his people to the bond of marriage (Jer 31:32; Eph 5:22–33). Just as a couple can be truly and legally married, yet not live together in true harmony and love, so, too, people may be truly and legally part of the covenant, but not live in genuine faith and love toward the LORD.

In addition, much can be gained by emphasizing the two parts of the covenant: promise and obligation (Gen 17:4, 9). If both parts are emphasized—in the right order and in a balanced way—God’s people will not carelessly shuffle through life with the impression that one is automatically saved simply because he is baptized. Furthermore, the obligation is, in the first place, a call to trust the LORD and believe in the covenant promises he has given, and then, as something flowing out of that, to also live a life of holiness (LD 23, 32–33).

If the challenging intersection of election, covenant, and baptism is approached in this manner, then assurance, rather than doubt, should be cultivated in the hearts of God’s people. When believing parents bring their covenant child forward to be baptized, they should be certain that their child belongs truly—not merely possibly or potentially—to the covenant of grace. Along the same lines, as we mature in faith Christians should be fully convinced of the reality of God’s promises for them, as well as the reality of their obligations toward God. Rather than standing still on the path of life and constantly questioning whether they are elect or not, or whether they are actually in the covenant or not, children of God should forge ahead in faith, relying on God’s sure promises and picking up their solemn obligations.

This also brings us full circle, back to Martin Luther. Through all the ups and downs of his own personal spiritual journey, he kept coming back, at critical junctures, to his baptism. Why baptism? The reason is clear: baptism is a simple and straightforward, yet unmistakably strong and steady pledge from God to Luther, to us, and to all the rest of God’s people. Using baptism, as a means of grace, our triune God gives his people an anchor for their souls (Heb 6:19). He confirms us in his three-fold promise of the gospel: you belong to me, not Satan, and you are no longer filthy with guilt but washed clean from all your sins by the blood of Christ, and, finally, you are being prepared by the Spirit of Christ for eternal life, not for everlasting condemnation. This simple yet powerful assurance goes a long way in sustaining us, as God’s people, through all manner of affliction. For this reason Luther, in *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, describes baptism as “a shield against all assaults of

the scornful enemy, an answer to the sins that disturb the conscience, an antidote for the dread of death and judgment, and a comfort in every temptation.”³ Do you also use your baptism as a spiritual shield?

Suggested Readings: Romans 6:1–11; 1 Corinthians 10:1–4

QUESTIONS FOR UNDERSTANDING

1. Baptism signifies and seals a *two-fold* washing. Identify the two parts of this washing and in particular explain why each one is significant for the spiritual health of God’s people.
2. What does it mean to be baptized *into Christ’s death* and *into his resurrection*? Explain each phrase separately.
3. Choose three significant parallels between events or ceremonies in the Old Testament and the New Testament sacrament of baptism. For each one, explain how the Old Testament revelation is made much richer and fuller in the New Testament sacrament.
4. Jeremiah 31:31–34 is an important passage for those who reject infant baptism. According to them, when the prophet speaks about putting God’s law within people’s heart in the new covenant, this signals a change from a more external covenant in the Old to a more internal covenant in the New Testament. Is this correct? The following verses may help: Deuteronomy 6:4, Deuteronomy 30:6, Joshua 22:4, Psalm 37:30–31, Psalm 40:8, and Joel 2:12–13.
5. If someone who is baptized in infancy later intentionally walks away from serving the Lord, is that person still a member of the covenant, or is his covenant membership rescinded as a result of the spiritual rebellion?

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. Someone you know well, for example, a co-worker or neighbour, is a sincere Christian but feels strongly that infant baptism is wrong. What approach would you take in demonstrating why infants should be baptized? Do you start in the Old Testament or the New

3. Theodore Tappert, *Selected Writings of Martin Luther* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1967), 411.

Testament? Which biblical passages would you turn to first, and which ones later? Why? Often people also have certain personal experiences that make them uncomfortable with infant baptism. What kind of experiences might play a role in this? How do you address them?

2. Imagine that some sincere parents in your congregation are struggling with how they should think about their teenage daughter who is rebelling and does not want to serve the Lord. Is their child *truly* or *tentatively* part of the covenant? Does their daughter really have the promises of the covenant, or is the promise of the gospel held in some kind of limbo until such a time as the girl gives clear evidence that she is committed to the Lord for her entire life? How should they speak to their daughter at this time?
3. In what ways can we, encouraged by Martin Luther, make better use of our baptism? Be concrete and practical.

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