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## HOLY BAPTISM

### Introduction

Sacraments are holy, visible signs and seals instituted by God so that by their use He might the more fully declare and seal to us the promise of the gospel (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 25). The Lord added the sacraments to the Word because He is mindful of our insensitivity and weakness. The two sacraments Holy baptism and Holy Supper, represent better to our external senses both what He declares to us in His Word and what He does inwardly in our hearts (Belgic Confession, Art. 33). Sacraments are a great treasure and have been given to be used.

The focus of this chapter is not to give a overview of what the Bible teaches about baptism, or of what we have learned in history of the church in this regard. The focus is the task of the overseers with regard to the sacrament of baptism. As overseers we have to help the congregation to work with and apply the sacrament of baptism. We may have to refer to baptism in situations of discipline. We may have to defend the Biblical teaching of Infant baptism in dealing with members. The elders have been charged to make sure that the sacraments are not profaned. This includes making sure that baptism is not used out of custom and superstition. In promoting the service of charity, baptism comes in view as well. By baptism we are grafted into the congregation of the Lord and have to use our gifts willingly and readily for the benefit of the other members. In order to deal with these points we will need to touch upon the Reformed doctrine of baptism, but this is done with the work of the overseers in mind.

### 1. Scripture

The command to baptize is given by the Lord Jesus Himself.

Mat 28:18-20

Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

This command of Christ is given in the context of His glorious resurrection. Just prior to this command we hear that He has received all authority in heaven and on earth. He, as the risen Lord, who will soon ascend to take upon Himself the royal power, wants to reach all nations on this earth. His power will go to the ends of the world. For this purpose He makes use of baptism. This baptism is in turn connected to the teaching the commandments of Christ. Through baptism can one enter the circle of His disciples.

In Mark 16:16 we find the parallel text to Matthew 28:19, yet the wording is somewhat different.

Mark 16:15-16

He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned."

In Mark we miss the reference to the Triune God in whose name one has to be baptized. Instead, baptism is related here to being saved. Some have taken this text to indicate that one has to believe before one can be baptized. If that were true then baptism is nothing but God's response to the decision of man. First man believes and then God will confirm that decision by baptism. However, careful consideration of the context shows that the text does not point in this direction. The saying about believing and being baptized comes in the context of the preaching of the gospel to the whole creation. This preaching comes with the demand to repent and believe. Both faith and baptism, yes, also the being saved are connected to the preaching of the gospel. Wherever this gospel will be preached, there man is called to answer in faith and there God will underline and confirm this gospel in baptism. Baptism is the confirmation of this preaching by God Himself.

How does baptism confirm the gospel? Baptism is performed with the use of water. Now water is, among other things, used for washing. In Scripture we find several references to this washing.

Titus 3:4-7

But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.

1 Cor 6:11

But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

Eph 5:25-27

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.

Baptism, or the washing with water, is connected to regeneration, to sanctification, to justification, or, to being cleansed. Our daily usage of water shows this as well. Someone who is dirty becomes clean through the washing with water. We are dirty before God in and of ourselves, but now through baptism we may live as a clean person before God. Baptism points to this decisive point in our lives when a totally new future is opened for us by Him who wanted to become our Redeemer. Paul writes about this in his letter to the Romans.

Romans 6:3

"Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into His death?"

Being baptized is like dying with Him and coming to a new life with Him. Baptism lays the foundation for the sanctification of life. We died with Him, but from day to day we live "in" and "with" Him. He is in us and we are in Him, in the Spirit. In this way the truth of God's redemption becomes a reality in our lives.

Baptism is the entrance gate into the kingdom of God. This kingdom manifests itself in the Church of Jesus Christ. Baptism tells us that we are in Christ. This Christ is the Head of His Church. The "in Him" cannot be isolated from the "in His congregation". Baptism is therefore also the public incorporation into the church and congregation of Christ. Paul writes in 1 Cor 12:13 that by one Spirit we have been baptized into one body. Baptism is never an individualistic matter. Life from now on, after this decisive break, is characterized by being in Christ and thus by living in His congregation. We see this in Acts 2.

Peter concludes His sermon with the call to be baptized in order to receive the gift of the Spirit and through Him the gifts of Christ. A few verses further we read that they devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and to the fellowship.

It is in the same chapter in Acts that we also see the connection between Old and New Testament. Peter applies the words of Genesis 17 to the church of the New Testament.

Acts 2:38-39

Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off--for all whom the Lord our God will call."

The Reformed Churches have correctly linked baptism to the covenant. The covenant is the reality that the eternal God has connected Himself with man. "I am your God, you are My people." In this everlasting covenant the holy God comes to His people with His promise and says "I will at all times maintain My Word." This promise comes with an obligation, namely, to live as His children and to be obedient to His Word. The covenant is not a theory, but the reality in which we may live with this faithful God and Father. A reality which is firmly founded in God's good pleasure. When the LORD took Abraham He did so for the sake of His promise of redemption. Abraham did not deserve it in any way. The sacrament of circumcision confirmed this. By nature every Israelite could not be part of God's kingdom. God had to do something to him to make him fit. Circumcision was never to be regarded as a reward for good behavior, but rather as a proof of God's good pleasure.

In establishing His covenant the covenant the LORD did not give up on the rest of mankind. He clearly said that He would bless the nations in Abraham. He used Abraham and his descendants to bring the promised Messiah into the world. This helps us understand Matthew 28:19. The LORD wants to reach all

the nations of this world, first through Abraham and his descendants, but now through the church of Christ. This shows the unity of the covenant in Old and New Testament. The covenant established with the believers and their children in the New Testament is no other than the covenant established with Abraham. It is the same Covenant God who into all eternity is faithful to His promise. The covenant of Abraham has not lost its strength or validity. On the contrary it has only increased.

Baptism is a sign of this new covenant. Christ says this in Matthew 28:19. Peter shows this in his sermon on Pentecost, Acts 2. Quoting from Genesis 17 Peter can also mention the children in his sermon (vs. 39). If under Abraham they were already included, then certainly now under Christ. In fact in Christ we belong to a new and better covenant. As the promise is now richer, so also is the sign of the promise now richer. For those circumcised need baptism, but those baptized do not need circumcision anymore. That is what Paul shows in Col.2:11 and 12.

Col 2:11-12

In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.

Holy Baptism is to be seen in the line of circumcision and since it has replaced circumcision.

## **2. Confessions and Church Order**

### **2.1. The Nicene Creed.**

The Nicene Creed is the only ecumenical creeds which mentions baptism. In the third part of this creed the church confesses: "I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins." The Nicene Creed is in many ways parallel to the Apostles' Creed. The parallel sentence to the quotation above from the Apostles' Creed is "I believe the forgiveness of sins". Both Creeds mention the forgiveness of sins, but the Nicene Creed connects it to baptism. This expression does not mean that baptism itself takes sins away. Only God forgives sins. But the expression used in the Nicene Creed comes directly from Scripture. John had already preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (Mark 1:4). In baptism God signs and seals to us that He is the God who forgives sins.

The Nicene Creed also speaks of "one" baptism. We hear in this word "one" the words of Ephesians 4:5 and it points to the unity with the other members in the body of Christ, the Church.

### **2.2. The Belgic Confession**

In the time of the Reformation and shortly after the Church had to take a stand against two directions: on the one hand against the over-emphasis of the sacrament by Rome and on the other hand the under-emphasis of the sacrament by the Anabaptist. Rome maintained that the sacrament itself gave grace. The Anabaptist made the sacrament dependent on the decision of man. This does not mean that the Reformers walked a tight rope balancing between the two extremes. No, they turned their attention to the God who speaks. They knew if we hear Him in these sacraments then we don't have to be worried for either extreme.

In the Belgic Confession we find the articles concerning the sacraments immediately following the articles about the church (Art 27-32). In Art 33 the character of the sacraments is described. They are seals of God's promises and pledges of His good will and grace to us. Our gracious God has ordained them because He was mindful of our insensitivity and weakness. We see in this article the opposition to Rome. The sacraments are not the grace of God in themselves. We also notice the opposition to the Anabaptist. The sacraments have been ordained by God. Against the over-emphasis of Rome we confess God speaks to us in baptism. Against the under-emphasis of the Anabaptist we confess that the sacraments are seals and pledges ordained by God.

In Art. 34 we find a description of the sacrament of baptism. This article begins with saying that the bloody custom of circumcision has come to an end. Christ put an end to all bloodshed. Baptism has been

instituted in its place. Baptism is also the entrance into the Christian Church. By baptism we are set apart. Here our confession makes use of the fact that the word sacrament in Latin referred to the mark, or ensign one could carry, as e.g. in an army. We bear the mark and emblem of Him who bought us. Further, baptism serves as a testimony that God will be our Father forever.

Next, the confession explains the sign element. As water takes away the dirt from the body, and as the water can be seen sprinkled on the one being baptized so we are cleansed by the blood of Jesus Christ. Then we find a reference to the Red Sea. This reference we also know from the prayer of the Form for baptism. Most likely that prayer goes back via Luther to the early church. The reference to the Red Sea can be found in 1 Cor 10:1. In the prayer the flood is mentioned as well. 1 Peter 3:20 and 21 form the background of this comparison. As the water separated Israel from the slavery to Egypt and marked the new beginning, so baptism marks the end of the bondage to sin. In the N.T. this is also expressed as we saw before as having died with Christ. The minister gives what is visible, the Lord gives what is signified. Clearly, baptism is not a pledge of man to God, but a pledge of God to man.

In the last part of this article the Anabaptist error is rejected. It is enough to be baptized once. Baptism benefits us throughout our whole life, therefore we have to use the sacrament. It has to be used in faith. One cannot say "I am baptized thus no matter what I do it is all right". No, "Now that I have been baptized, now all the more I have to hold on to God's promise and live accordingly."

Finally, the confession deals with infant baptism. Children should be baptized because they are included in the covenant. If they had the promises under the Old Testament, then certainly under the New.

### **2.3 Heidelberg Catechism**

The Catechism shows many similarities with the Belgic Confession. Lord's Day 26 explains how baptism signifies and seals to us that we benefit from Christ's sacrifice. Lord's Day 27 rejects the teachings of Rome (q/a 72 and 73) and of the Anabaptists (q/a 74).

### **2.4. The Canons of Dort**

In Canons of Dort Chapter 1, Article 17 we confess the following about children of believers who die in infancy:

We must judge concerning the will of God from His Word, which declares that the children of believers are holy, not by nature but in virtue of the covenant of grace, in which they are included with their parents. Therefore, God-fearing parents ought not to doubt the election and salvation of their children whom God calls out of this life in their infancy.

### **2.5. Church Order**

The Church Order reflects the Scriptural teaching concerning the sacraments, and the heritage of the Reformation.

Art 56

The sacraments shall be administered only under the authority of the consistory, in a public worship service, by a minister of the Word, with the use of the adopted Forms.

Art 57

The consistory shall ensure that the covenant of God is sealed by baptism to the children of believers as soon as feasible.

Art 59

Adults who have not been baptized shall be grafted into the Christian church by holy baptism upon their public profession of faith.

The Church Order stipulates that baptism be administered in the official worship service. We reject the so-called emergency baptism by doctors or nurses right after birth in case a baby would die. Baptism has to be administered by an ordained minister of the Word. This highlights the close connection between Word and Sacrament. It must also be done with the use of the adopted Forms. The minister is not allowed to make his own speech. In this way things are done orderly, in addition the person who is baptized can later in life know exactly what was said and prayed at that time, and the parents who make a promise can be held to these promises.

## **2.6. The Form for the Baptism of Infants**

The Canadian Reformed Churches have accepted two forms for baptism, one for infants and one for adults. These two differ in that the adult has to make profession of faith before being baptized. For the rest they are quite similar. The Forms explain the doctrine of baptism and the right to baptism. We recognize in these forms the heritage of the Reformation. For further information see e.g. G. Van Rongen, Our Reformed Church Service Book.

## **3. Goal**

Using the Form we can say that baptism is to be used for:

- the glory of God;
- the comfort of the believers, and
- the upbuilding of the congregation.

In terms of Art. 34 BC we can say that the goal of baptism is:

- to be publicly received into the church of God;
- to be set apart from all other peoples and religions, and
- to be entirely committed to Him whose mark and emblem we bear.

The task of the elders is to help the members use baptism and to make sure that those who present a child for baptism do this for the right reasons.

## **4. History**

### **4.1. Early Christian Church**

In the first centuries after Pentecost the majority of baptisms administered were adult baptisms. The growth of the church was mainly by adults coming to faith. As more joined the church, infant baptism became more prominent. Baptism was often administered outside the church service. There was a separate room in the church where baptism could be administered at any time. Baptism made one qualified to be part of the worship service. This is connected to the teaching which gained in importance during the Middle Ages that baptism itself gives to the child the forgiveness of sins. A third element we learn from the early history is that the administration of baptism was surrounded by many other ceremonies, such as exorcism, anointing, special clothing. This would indicate the break with a previous life.

### **4.2. Reformation**

The Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century meant a return to the Word of God and his covenant promises. In terms of the developments noted above, it is significant to note that the Reformed churches reduced the ceremonies surrounding baptism and increased the instruction about baptism. This instruction focussed on the wonderful teaching concerning God's covenant. The Reformed churches maintained that the sacraments were added to the Word. Thus their administration found again a place within the worship service. The whole congregation was involved. Because the sacraments are signs and seals the Reformed churches emphasized the use of the sacrament. The believers have to apply in faith what the sacrament signs and seals. At the same time the Reformed churches had to defend the right of infants to be baptized. In this struggle they came to a better understanding of the covenant that God made with the believers and their seed.

## **5. The administration of baptism**

The administration has the following elements: a prayer; an address to the parents and their answer; the actual baptism; a prayer of thanksgiving.

### **5.1 Prayer**

The prayer that precedes the baptism has a long history. There are several parts in this prayer that come from the early church. The references to Noah and the Red Sea are used to show how water makes

separation. The water that saved Noah destroyed the godless world. The water that killed Pharaoh and his army, set Israel free. So the blood of Christ saves us and sets us free. We find a similar image in Art. 34 of the Belgic Confession. "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."

This element is helpful for home visits. In the early church someone who joined the church by baptism had to renounce the devil and his kingdom. Before saying "Yes" to the LORD, the person had to say "No" to the devil. The older Form for Adult Baptism had this as part of the fifth question: "Do you firmly resolve always to lead a Christian life, to forsake the world and its evil lusts..." The older Form for Infant Baptism also said: "... that we forsake the world, crucify our old nature, ..." The current Forms have replaced "forsaking this world," with "not loving this world." Our current Form for Public Profession of Faith still speaks about "forsaking the world."

To forsake the world must not be understood in the sense that we withdraw from this world, a kind of cloister mentality. Rather it means that although we are in the world, we are not of the world. The pleasures of the world are no longer our pleasures. By our baptism we are called to follow Christ and crucify our old nature. The home visit is a good opportunity to speak about this.

In the prayer before baptism the congregation thanks the Lord for His gifts and asks that in the life of this child the Lord may show Himself to be the faithful God and Father. It is a prayer that can strengthen us time and again.

### **5.2 Address to the Parents**

The child is not aware of its great riches. The Lord gives parents the task to teach it, so that it may come to see this riches and how this determines their lives. The parents acknowledge the treasure given to the child in that although it was conceived and born in sin, yet it is sanctified in Christ out of grace. They make confession of the Reformed faith, and promise to teach the child in this doctrine.

The church can only ask these question from members who have made profession of their faith and live a godly life. This excludes non-communicant members and communicant members who are under discipline. In case one parent is unable to attend, the answer of the other parent is sufficient. In the past the church would baptize a child upon the promise given by grandparents if parents were unable, because of age or discipline. However, the church would only do this when it had been assured that the grand parents were responsible for the upbringing and education of the child. Otherwise the promise would be an empty promise.

In the situation that a parent cannot give the answer because of not being a non-communicant, it will be important to speak with this member about the baptism. If the member becomes a communicant member it must be pointed out that in making profession of faith there is also an obligation with regard to the children that have already been baptized. In the situation that one of the parents is not a member of the church, it will be very important to explain the meaning of baptism and its implication for the upbringing of the child. Hopefully the parent involved is prepared not to hinder this instruction.

For the connection between baptism and education see Chapter 1 - 7.

### **5.3. Administration of baptism**

After the answer has been given the parents carry the child to the baptismal font and the minister sprinkles water on the head of the child. The formula given by the Lord in Matthew 28 is used. The child is baptized into the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The expression "into the Name" means that the life of this child is claimed or ruled by this Name.

We note that at the baptism the full name of the child is used. The minister does not say "Child, I baptize you" but uses the name of the child. Our relation with the Lord is indeed a personal relation in which He addresses us personally in our baptism. That name is as it were the hand by which the Lord takes this child personally and brings it into His church.

We have the custom to use both first and last name. Often the child also has a middle name. In the past it was the custom to use only the first and middle name. Our fathers did not think it necessary to use the family name, because receiving baptism is a personal matter. Dr.H.Bouwman in his explanation of the Church Order (dated 1934) still maintains that there are not sufficient reasons to change the old custom. At what point in time this was changed is not clear.

What we should note is that neither in the confessions nor in the Form the family is central, but instead, the God of the church who within His congregation speaks to each one of us individually. It is true that the Lord uses the family to gather and increase His church. However, the sacrament of baptism, by which God signs and seals the personal relation He has established with that child, has not been given to the family but to the church. Texts like Matthew 28:19 and Acts 2:38 clearly show this. We should not forget that the sacraments are signs and seals to the Word. Just as the Word is for to the congregation, so is also the administration of the sacrament. Each administration of baptism is a sign and seal to every member in the congregation. This is also the reason we administer baptism in an official worship service and not, for example, at home. Certainly the Lord uses the family bond to gather and increase His church, but yet the primary focus is on the congregation. Baptism should not become a social event.

After the baptism the congregation sings a song in response. Some have objected to the custom of standing in front during the singing. They would rather see that the parents and the minister go back to their places before the singing. They fear that otherwise the child is too much in the centre, or people think more about the clothing of baby or parents than the sacrament. This is a valid concern but standing in front does not have to be seen that way. Standing around the baptismal font can also highlight the reality of the sacrament. Having little children come to the front, whether they are siblings of the baptized child or other children in the church is not fitting in light of the purpose of baptism. The song for baptism is chosen by the minister, not the parents. It is important that the administration takes place in a way that the congregation can see and hear what takes place.

#### **5.4. Prayer of Thanksgiving**

The administration closes with a prayer in which we thank the Lord for His covenant promises and ask that He be with this child.

#### **6. Preparations for Baptism**

The parents have to answer three questions prior to the administration of baptism. The introduction to these questions states that the purpose of answering these question is to show that the parents do not request baptism out of custom or superstition. They are required to answer these questions sincerely. The answer to these questions therefore has the character of an oath. We make a promise before God and His holy congregation.

How do we know that parents answer sincerely? It will become clear in that they keep these promises. How do we know that it is not done out of custom or superstition? Again, the way these parents live up to these vows will show it. From the side of the elders it is also important to speak with the parents about these questions before the baptism. The overseers must find out in speaking with the parents whether they understand the questions and the implications of the questions.

This visit with the parents can take place before or after the birth of the baby. The advantage of doing it before the baby is born is that it is easier to arrange a visit in which the father can be present as well. If the



parents have already more children, the mother can look up against the delivery. This can also be discussed at the visit. The advantage of visiting after the birth is that the Lord can be thanked for giving and protecting life. If the parents have already other children this visit is a good opportunity to speak about the task to bring them up in the fear of the Lord and how baptism is a help in this as well.

The aim of this visit is to speak about the gift of children, to direct the parents to the strength of the Lord, to speak about the baptism of the child. Here follow some pointers for this visit.

1. Life is a gift of the Lord. How do these parents look at the gift of new life? Do they indeed see it as a gift of the Lord? Especially when they have already more children it is important to discuss this. In connection with this the elders can also speak about the pressure by medical staff, or by others, that two or three children is enough. When there is anxiety because of the delivery, or when there are concerns because of difficulties during previous delivery, it will be good to comfort the parents with the promise of the Lord that He will not leave us. The life of the mother and the life of the child are in His Hand (See Ps. 139).

Marriage and receiving children will be discussed in Chapter 3 - 7.

2. The questions at baptism can be used for a good discussion. The first question speaks about our children being conceived and born in sin. Do we realize this? In how far does this effect the way we deal with our children. Parents have the inclination to have a positive picture of their children. The first question also speaks about being sanctified in Christ. What does this mean for these parents? How does it come out in their family life and the way they deal with their children that these children are sanctified in Christ? Keep in mind that sanctified does not mean without sin, but claimed, set apart by the Lord to be His own. How does this e.g. determine the way they discipline their children, or what kind of freedoms they give the children, or the friendships of their children?

3. The second question deals with the doctrine of salvation as revealed in Scripture, summarized in the confessions and taught in the church. The reason why we ask this question is because the parents have to instruct them in this doctrine. Before we ask them to teach we want to make sure that we understand what has to be taught. What do parents do to fulfil this task? Family worship, personal study, and participation in church life come in the picture here. The church needs good instructors in the homes. This instruction has to be specific, the doctrine of salvation as we confess it. When they already have older children the question can be asked how this is put into practice.

4. In the third question the church asks the parents to promise to teach their children. Are the parents aware of this calling. Do they fulfil this calling and how? In connection with this education we can also speak about the schools. If the parents have no children at school age yet, are they involved in the school? Do they see the need to send their child to a Canadian Reformed School? If they have children in school, do the parents support the work done in the school? Do they also realize that the teachers never replace the parents? Bringing up children requires consistency and wisdom. The LORD is the source of this as well.

5. Bringing children in this world is not always easy. Raising children in the Lord is not easy either. It is also good to speak about the concerns and difficulties we can meet. We may point the parents to the promises and comfort of God's Word. We live in a society that is losing its Christian values. This has consequences for our families too. Parents can be at a loss how to bring up children in the fear of the Lord. Much instruction is required in this regard. It is no luxury to ask parents what they do to equip themselves for this task, how much time they take to discuss this together.

## **7. The time of Baptism**

In Art. 56 of the Church Order the churches have agreed that the sacraments shall be administered only under the authority of the consistory, in a public worship service, by a minister of the Word, with the use of

the adopted Forms. From this article it is clear that in the Reformed Churches the sacrament is added to the Word.

This brings us to the task of the consistory to ensure that the covenant of God is sealed by baptism to the children of believers as soon as feasible. Since there is a command to baptize the consistory has to ensure that the congregation heeds this command. One expression in art. 57 C.O. has a colourful history, namely the expression "as soon as feasible". What is meant by it? When should our children be baptized? Or to put it differently yet: How long may we wait and for what reasons may we postpone baptism?

In the first place we should note that our Church Order does not mention a time limit as was the case with circumcision under the Old Testament. Voetius, a Reformed church politician of the Eighteenth Century, gives as reason for not stipulating the time that the times of our lives -birth and death- are in the hand of God. We should also note that at the time the Church Order was drawn up the expression 'as soon as feasible' meant, not after two, three or more weeks, but on the first assembly of the congregation after the birth of the baby, either during the week or on the day of rest.

What is the history with regard to the question when children were to be baptized? It might be good to begin in the Old Testament. There is a very close connection between circumcision and baptism. We read in the Old Testament that a boy had to be circumcised on the eighth day. This means under the old dispensation there was a time limit. For seven days the children of Israel were not distinguished from the children of unbelievers. For seven days they were uncircumcised just like all other infants in this world. This humbled Israel and accentuated the grace of God. Every Israelite knew 'For eight days I had to miss the seal of the covenant.' Some have suggested that since the New Testament is so much richer than the Old, we, today, should not wait as long anymore before presenting our children for baptism.

Going to the New Testament we see that baptism was administered right away. When someone confessed his or her faith in Jesus Christ baptism followed, and if there were children in the "house", they were baptized as well. Whereas we find in the Bible that baptism took place immediately upon profession of faith, in the centuries following the death of the apostles we see the institution of a teaching period prior to baptism, a sort of pre-confession class. One had to complete such a "class" before being baptized. The institution of such classes thus brought about the custom that baptism was administered at certain times in the year.

When in the fourth century we find more and more evidence of infant baptism we also see that gradually the time for baptism is postponed. Some even left it till the moment of their death. This was done out of fear for sins which could be committed after having been baptized. The punishment for such sins was believed to be more severe than for sins committed before baptism. Thus the longer one could wait the better it was. This changed in the Middle Ages with the development of a mechanical approach to the sacraments. It was mechanical in this sense that by baptism itself grace was poured into the child. The water itself washed the child from its sin. Thus baptism became indispensable in order to be saved. Without baptism no one could enter heaven. It will be clear that with such a mechanical view on the sacrament the baptism should be performed as soon as possible. Yes, if an infant was born and would not live very long, -infant mortality was very high- then the parents, the doctor or the mid-wife were allowed to baptize the baby, lest the child would die without the grace of God as given in baptism.

The Reformers departed from this mechanical view on the sacrament. They stressed the Scriptural truth that already before their baptism the children of believers are in the covenant. Baptism is the sign and seal of what the children already have in virtue of their birth from believing parents. Without their knowledge they are included in Christ. Baptism was again seen as a sign and seal to the promise, and not as an end in itself. The Reformers rejected the practice of allowing parents, doctors or midwives to baptize a baby.

Yet, the Reformers maintained that a child should be baptized as soon as possible. One was even allowed to ask for a special worship service during the week because a child was born. It is known of Guido de Bres, the author of the Belgic Confession, that he had his child baptized the day after it was born. Also Calvin stressed very much that it should be done as soon as possible. Calvin even puts it this way: "Certainly if someone does not bring his child in time, he will be severely punished for this neglect. Every day the church is open (for baptism). If someone's child comes to die without having been baptized, because he did not make use of the opportunity then he will be punished."

This quotation shows very clearly the position of the Reformers. Baptize the children as soon as possible. Not because the child will otherwise be lost. They knew better. It is significant that in the words of Calvin quoted above, he does not speak of punishment for the child, but instead of punishment for the parent. Why does he say this? Because there is a command from God to have our children baptized. Parents who unnecessarily postpone baptism are negligent with regard to this command. The main reason why the Reformers insisted on baptism as soon as possible was the command of God and their sincere desire to always be obedient to His commands. If God demands it who are we to postpone it?

This indeed became the rule within the Reformed Churches in The Netherlands. Children had to be baptized as soon as feasible. "As soon as feasible" meant the first assembly of the congregation after the birth of the baby. This meant that often the mother could not be present, but the word of the father, as head of the family, was considered sufficient. The Regional Synod of Dordrecht of 1574 made the following decision:

"The Covenant of God must be sealed to the children with baptism as soon as Christian baptism can be obtained, unless there are some weighty reasons to postpone baptism for a time, of which reasons the consistory shall judge. But the affection of parents who want to delay baptism of their children till the time that the mother herself can present the child, or who wait for family, the brothers do not see to be proper reasons to postpone baptism."

The beginning sentence of this decision was taken up in the Church Order.

We should note the role the consistory plays in this respect. Parents have to present their children as soon as possible. When this is impossible then they have to ask the consistory whether it can be postponed for these reasons. The consistory has to judge whether these reasons are indeed valid reasons. The decision to postpone is not a decision of the parents but of the consistory. The word "ensure" in Art. 57 points to this task of the consistory as well. The decision of 1574 became the rule and was in effect till the beginning of the 19th century. However, the rule was not always kept. One can read many warnings issued by consistories and classes urging the people to keep the rule. The celebrations connected to baptism were often a reason to postpone it. The whole family had to be present at this feast. Or such a feast was so expensive that baptism was delayed till there were more babies. The way baptism was used reflected the general state of decline within the Reformed Churches in this time between Reformation and Secession (1834).

In the beginning of the 19th century, to be exact, in 1817 the Dutch State Church made a new Church Order. At that time the prevailing thought was that the church had to stimulate religious feelings. This means that also with regard to baptism more attention was paid to the emotions. Sentimentality was introduced. This meant for example that there should be many people present. But also, the more babies the nicer. And the mother should be there. The whole service was centred around the special occasion of baptism.

In the Secession the Church Order of Dort was again given its proper place. This did not mean however that there was uniformity with regard to the time of baptism. Some returned to the older Reformed practice whereas others continued in the existing practice. On the whole one could say that it became normal to wait till the mother could be present as well. It were the men of the Second Secession (the "Doleantie" of 1886) who more forcefully argued to go back to the old custom. Dr.A.Kuyper and Dr.F.L.Rudgers advocated a return to the 16th century practise. The followers of Kuyper also in this respect went further than he did himself and saw it as a terrible sin to wait till the mother had recuperated. Even if she was

present she would be ignored. This extreme position called for a reaction in which the bond of mother and child and the education of the child by the mother was stressed. Rudgers was more careful. Though he fully favoured early baptism, he did not say that waiting till the mother was fit again was useless. He also believed that to wait for this does not in itself show contempt for baptism. However, he was afraid that such a custom could easily lead to contempt for the sacrament. He used the well-known example of the an earthly king. If an earthly king would give our children great riches and an inheritance in his kingdom, how long would we wait then before presenting the child? Would we not be eager to do it as soon as possible?

Dr. H. Bouman, the Reformed church-politician from the beginning of the Twentieth Century, is of the opinion that a child should be baptized in the first church service after birth. That is, if the health of the child allows it. If the mother cannot be present, then the father will have to give the answer to the questions as head of His wife. Bouman adds another argument yet. Indeed, baptism itself does not give the grace of God, but the Lord wants to sign and seal His covenant, and thereby strengthen the faith of His people. For this reason the congregation has a right to this sign and seal. This is why it should be done as soon as possible. Postponing baptism deprives the congregation of being strengthened. This is echoed by Deddens and VanRongen. "Wherever almost all babies are born in a hospital and as a rule are released together with their mother within one week, there is no longer any cause for friction. It is clear that delay of baptism is wrong. We may not let the Lord wait, when He is ready to sign and seal His covenant to our children!"

It used to be that mother and child stayed for five or six days in the hospital, but lately this has been cut back to only a few days. It can easily happen that a mother does not feel all that well when she has just come home and will not be able to sit through a whole church service. This leads to the question how necessary it is for the mother to be present. Because the mother plays an central role in the education of the child it would be important that, if at all possible, the mother is present. If the mother comes home but is not feeling well, there is no objection to postponing baptism for a week if so requested by the parents. As elders we have to trust that the parents do this for the right motives. It would, however, be incorrect if the mother is doing all her other tasks, visiting and going out, but does not feel she is ready for going to church. To postpone for the sake of family is not correct either. In such situations the elders should speak with the parents and point out the wrong. If the mother is so ill that she cannot come for a few weeks the baptism could be administered without her being present. It is up to the family whether the baptism takes place in the morning or afternoon service.

Because we can travel easily, the practise of visiting elsewhere because of a baptism becomes more and more common. As such it is not wrong to visit another sister church, at the same time it is important that we maintain what the Reformed Churches have always confessed, central is not that baby or the family, but God. Certainly it is beautiful when the family can be present because the Lord shows in the Bible how He gathers His church in the generations. The family may never take the place of the congregation.

## 8. Literature

The following books are listed for further study. Much material of this chapter was taken from these sources.

- H. Bouwman, Gereformeerd Kerkrecht, Kampen, 1928
- K. Deddens, Where Everything Points to Him, Inheritance Publications, 1993, chapter 9
- G. VanDooren, The Beauty of Reformed Liturgy, Premier Printing, 1992 (3rd printing), chapter 5
- W. W. J. Van Oene. With Common Consent, Premier Printing, 1990, see under articles: 56, 57, 59
- G. vanRongen, Our Reformed Church Service Book, Inheritance Publications, 1995, chapter 5.
- C. Trimp, Woord, Water en Wijn, Kampen 1985
- W. van 't Spijker ed. Rondom de Doopvont, Goudriaan 1983

**9. Evaluation**

1. The discussion can deal with the Scriptural and confessional basis for this sacrament, as well as the goal of it. Do we all agree on this? Are there points that have been overlooked?
2. How can we help the congregation to see the significance of baptism? How can we help them to “use” their baptism?
3. How does the sacrament of holy baptism receive attention in preaching, teaching, visiting, comforting, encouraging and/or admonishing?
4. How do the visits with parents function? Are the questions and their implications clear to the parents?
5. Are there points in this chapter that need our further attention? Why? How shall we do this?
6. Are there any concerns that need to be addressed as a result of this evaluation? What are these concerns? Why are they a concern? What plan of action could be taken to address this?

