

CHAPTER 28

OF BAPTISM

Significance of baptism

“1. Baptism is a Sacrament of the New Testament, ordained by Jesus Christ, not only for the solemn admission of the party baptized into the visible Church, but also to be unto him a sign and seal of the covenant of grace, of his ingrafting into Christ, of regeneration, of remission of sins, and of his giving up unto God, through Jesus Christ, to walk in newness of life: which Sacrament is, by Christ’s own appointment, to be continued in his Church until the end of the world.”

Our Confession recognizes two primary meanings of baptism. The first is that baptism is “the solemn admission . . . into the visible church.” Jesus commanded that baptism be performed on those entering the church (Matt 28:19). And it has always been the prerequisite for church membership (Acts 2:38, 41). It was carried on after Pentecost by the apostles and early disciples:

- Philip, Acts 8:12-13, 36, 38 (v. 37 not original)
- Ananias, Acts 9:18; 22:16
- Peter, Acts 10:47-48
- Paul, Acts 16:15, 33; 18:8; 19:5; 1 Cor 1:14, 16

It is in baptism that the individual makes his solemn declaration to the church and to the world that he accepts the Lord’s covenant for himself, and pledges to live faithfully for the Lord.

The second significance is the spiritual meaning of baptism. Our Confession speaks of baptism as a “sign and seal of the covenant of grace,” which includes several spiritual benefits that we receive as Christians. Here are these benefits:

- Ingrafting into Christ (Gal 3:27)
- Regeneration (Titus 3:5)
- Remission of sins (Heb 9:10, 13-14, 19-23; 10:2, 4, 22; cf. Mark 1:4)
- Giving up unto God, through Jesus Christ, to walk in newness of life (Rom 6:1-4)

The section closes with the note that baptism is to continue “until the end of the world.” Jesus instructed the disciples to baptize until he should come again at the end of the age (Matt 28:19-20).

It is important to realize that the significance of baptism in the NT, is the same as the significance of circumcision in the OT. Just as baptism is required to join the church and partake of the Lord's Supper, so in Old Testament times circumcision was required to enter God's covenant people and eat the Passover (Gen 17:10; 34:14-17; Exod 12:44, 48). Now circumcision is optional, but baptism is required (1 Cor 7:18-20; Gal 2:3-5). The meaning of circumcision was the same as that for baptism:

- Deut 10:16, regeneration, love for God (cf. vv. 12-13)
- Deut 30:6, regeneration, love for God
- Jer 4:4, regeneration, cleansing heart (= "washing" heart in v. 14)
- Jer 9:25-26, knowing and loving God in heart (cf. v. 24)

Thus, in the NT, circumcision of the heart means the same thing as baptism of the heart (Rom 2:28-29; Col 2:11-13).

When the Confession mentions baptism as "a sign and seal of the covenant of grace," it fits beautifully with recent discoveries about covenant rituals. Ancient covenants between great kings and their subject kings (suzerains and vassals) followed a certain pattern. The ceremony usually included the slaughtering of animals, with imprecations on the one who should break the treaty obligations (usually the vassal). Two examples of this form are found in the OT:

- Gen 15:9-21, God binding himself to keep his covenant with Abraham
- Jer 34:18-19, Jerusalem's covenant with her slaves

The ritual pictured the sanctions of the covenant, that is, the penalties for disobedience.

In the OT circumcision pictured the sanctions of the Abrahamic covenant, as well as the blessings for obedience.

- Sanctions for obedience: regeneration, cleansing from sin
- Sanction for disobedience: cutting off from people of God

Likewise, in the NT, baptism pictures the sanctions of the new covenant:

- Sanctions for obedience: cleansing from sin, baptism of the Holy Spirit
- Sanctions for disobedience: death (cf. Mark 10:38-39; Rom 6), divine judgment

Jesus fulfilled the sanctions pictured in baptism when he died for us on the cross. By assuming the curses of the covenant, he secured its blessings for those united to him.

Therefore when we are baptized, or have our children baptized, we assume responsibility to obey God's requirements in the new covenant. We promise to believe in the Lord and have him as our king. We recognize, if we are unfaithful, that we are subject to the penalty for disobedience.

Method of baptism

The next two sections explain how baptism is to be performed, first with regard to the requirements to have a valid baptism, then the proper mode with which to administer it.

Requirements for valid baptism

“2. The outward element to be used in this Sacrament is water, wherewith the party is to be baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, by a minister of the gospel, lawfully called thereunto.”

Water is the element we must use for baptism (Acts 8:36; 10:47). It appropriately symbolizes our cleansing from sin (Acts 22:16; Heb 10:22; 1 Pet 3:21).

The formula given by Jesus is “in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit” (Matt 28:19). When the early Christians were baptized “in the name of the Lord Jesus,” that meant they received Christian baptism, not that the names of the Father and the Holy Spirit were left out (Acts 19:5).

The Confession notes here again that the Sacraments must be performed by a minister of the gospel, duly called to that office. Since baptism is not absolutely required for salvation, there is no situation in which a layman needs to take matters into his own hands and perform baptism.

Mode of baptism

“3. Dipping of the person into the water is not necessary; but Baptism is rightly administered by pouring or sprinkling water upon the person.”

Our Confession notes two things about the mode of baptism: dipping (immersion) is not necessary, and baptism ought to be by pouring (affusion) or sprinkling (aspersion). All three modes perform a valid baptism (as long as the requirements in section 2 are met), even though immersion is not the proper method. Improper modes do not negate the sacrament (cf. other improper modes: kneeling at communion, baptizing by immersing the head only, etc.). Reformed churches practice only pouring or sprinkling, since those two modes can be demonstrated from Scripture. The exclusive principle of divine worship causes us to refrain from any practice that cannot be proved by Scripture.

Dipping is not necessary for baptism. There are several arguments by which immersionists try to show that baptism means immersion:

- Use of Greek word *baptizo* and related words

Baptist writers maintain that these words always mean “immerse.” Actually, study of the use of the words in ancient Greek literature and in the Bible shows that they do not refer to mode at all. Sometimes the action is a dipping, sometimes it is sprinkling or pouring. But the word itself does not indicate mode. Rather, it shows the result of the action, regardless of the mode. Thus “baptize” is indeed a better translation than “immerse.” Examples are Mark 7:4; Luke 11:38; Heb 9:10; in all these cases the mode is sprinkling or pouring.

- Use of Greek prepositions

Baptist writers note that people were baptized “in” the Jordan, that they went “down into” the water, and came up “out of” the water; this, they say, proves baptism by immersion. Examples they offer include Matt 3:6; Mark 1:10; and Acts 8:38-39. But Greek prepositions are very broad in meaning; they can just as well be translated, “at, by, down to, up from.” They certainly do not require immersion. When people are baptized in a river, they must go down the bank; and they must go up the bank after baptism. In Acts 8 both Philip and the eunuch go down and come up; they obviously were not both immersed.

- Symbolism of death and resurrection

Baptist writers claim that, according to Rom 6:3-4 and Col 2:12, baptism should be by immersion since it pictures death and resurrection. True, baptism includes this meaning, but that is not the total meaning of baptism, or even the most important. As the initiatory rite of the new covenant, it pictures both the penalties and rewards of that covenant. More frequently that covenant is pictured by pouring or sprinkling (Ezek 36:24-27; Isa 52:15; Heb 9:13-15; 10:19-22; 1 Pet 1:2). The sprinkling of blood symbolized death for the victim, life for the recipient. The pouring out of the Holy Spirit was the promise of the new covenant, and that is parallel to the pouring out of water in water baptism (Joel 2:28-32; Zech 12:10; Acts 1:5; 2:3-4, 17, 41; 10:45-47; 11:15-16). Thus baptism by sprinkling or pouring, according to Scripture, symbolizes death and resurrection even better than immersion.

- Ancient church practice

Baptist writers claim that immersion was the practice of the early church, and that the Catholic church changed it to other modes. Even John Calvin wrote that the primitive church practiced immersion. These opinions are based on statements of a few early church fathers that can be interpreted in different ways. More recent study of the archaeology of the earliest frescos, drawings, and baptisteries has shown that during the early centuries the churches did not practice immersion. The most prevalent mode was having the person stand in water (not deep enough for immersions), and pouring water over his head. As the centuries progressed, the water level rose. It is not until the 9th century that immersions are depicted (3 of them, all of infants).

While dipping is thus shown to be unnecessary for baptism, these same verses and arguments show that it is biblical and proper to perform baptism by either sprinkling or pouring water on the person.

Infant baptism

“4. Not only those that do actually profess faith in, and obedience unto Christ, but also the infants of one or both believing parents are to be baptized.”

All available evidence from early church history indicates that infants were baptized regularly. This history goes back to about A.D. 200. There is no evidence of any conflict in the early church regarding this practice; it was assumed. Baptist scholars maintain that the early church changed the practice of the apostles; but certainly, if the apostles had been opposed to infant baptism, there would have been some record of the change, some opposing voice. Rather, the evidence points to a continuous recognition that the children are to be included in the covenant community, the church. This was expected in the OT, was assumed in the NT, and agrees with what we know of the early church.

It is true that there is no explicit mention of infant baptism in the NT, yet it is equally true that there is no explicit denial of infant baptism. We would assume that the apostles would continue the normal practice of including the children, as was done with circumcision. In none of the eleven Christian baptisms mentioned in the New Testament, were children said to be excluded. In all cases where families are mentioned the whole household was baptized along with the parents:

- Household of Lydia, Acts 16:15
- Household of Philippian jailer, Acts 16:33
- Household of Stephanus, 1 Cor 1:16

The church is founded on the Abrahamic covenant, which included the children as a part of the visible church (Gen 17:7-14; Acts 2:39; 3:25-26). We are children of Abraham, who was saved by faith (esp. shown in Rom 4, 9; Gal 3:7, 16-18, 29). Baptism continues where circumcision left off, as the sign and seal of the covenant of grace, now mediated through the new covenant.

The continuing relation of our children to the Abrahamic covenant is shown by our own status as children of Abraham by faith, by Jesus' blessing the infants (Luke 18:15-17), by Peter's declaration at Pentecost (Acts 2:39; cf. 3:25-26), by Paul's applying the same principle to the Gentile Philippian jailer (Acts 16:31, Greek), and by his teaching regarding the children of even one believer in 1 Cor 7:14.

It is appropriate that God chooses to bless the children of believing parents. This principle is firmly established in the OT. Job's children were blessed through him (Job 1:5). Abraham's blessing passed down through his natural children Isaac and Jacob (Gen 26:2-4; 28:12-14). The blessings of the Davidic covenant passed down to his natural children, many of whom were personally undeserving (e.g., 1 Kgs 11:12-13, 32; 15:4; 2 Kgs 8:19; 19:34; 2 Chr 21:7). And the Mosaic covenant specifically mentions the blessings that flow to the children of covenant-keepers (Deut 4:37-38; 7:7-8).

But the spiritual blessings of the covenant are not automatic, bestowed without human effort. Just as parents in the Old Testament were expected to bring up their children in the covenant structure and law, so are parents in the New Testament.

Old Testament parental responsibility:

- Covenant sign to children (Gen 17:9-14, etc.)
- Train their children (Gen 18:19; Deut 5:29; 6:6-9, 20-25; Ps 78:1-8)
- Discipline their children (Prov 13:24; 19:18, cf. Eli; 22:6, 15; 23:13-14; 29:15, 17)
- Protect from unbelief and apostasy (Neh 13:23-27)

New Testament parental responsibility:

- Covenant sign to children (Matt 28:19, baptism precedes teaching)
- Nurture and training (Eph 6:4, expanded in Deut. and Prov.; examples in 2 Tim 1:5; 3:14-15; 2 John 1, 4)

Effects of baptism

The next two sections tell what baptism actually accomplishes. They distinguish the Reformed position from the Roman Catholic and Lutheran positions on one hand, and from the Zwinglian on the other.

Baptism not infallibly tied to salvation

“5. Although it be a great sin to contemn or neglect this ordinance, yet grace and salvation are not so inseparably annexed unto it, as that no person can be regenerated or saved without it, or that all that are baptized are undoubtedly regenerated.”

It is a sin to neglect or downgrade baptism (cf. circumcision in Exod 4:24-26; Josh 5:2-9). Jesus has commanded it, and God considers his covenant ordinances of great importance.

Yet Abraham was saved before he was circumcised (Rom 4:10), and the thief on the cross never was baptized. Likewise, baptism does not guarantee salvation, just as circumcision did not guarantee salvation, and as many illustrations from the Bible and experience prove.

Efficacy of baptism

“6. The efficacy of Baptism is not tied to that moment of time wherein it is administered; yet, notwithstanding, by the right use of this ordinance the grace promised is not only offered, but really exhibited and conferred by the Holy Ghost, to such (whether of age or infants) as that grace belongeth unto, according to the counsel of God’s own will, in his appointed time.”

Baptism confers grace, but it is not automatic. While baptism “offers, exhibits, and confers” the grace of God, limited by these conditions:

1. The person is elect
2. The time is not tied to the time of baptism (John 3:5-6)
3. Other methods used to “improve” baptism are used (WLC 167)

Baptism not to be repeated

“7. The Sacrament of Baptism is but once to be administered to any person.”

Since baptism is the initiatory rite, it is to be administered only once to each person. It is parallel to circumcision. Even if one professes faith in Christ afterward, he is simply confirming his baptism. As long as the original baptism was performed in a valid manner (with water, the Triune formula, by a lawfully called minister), it is valid.

A vexing question in the history of the church has been the question of rebaptism of those baptized by heretics. Generally, it has been decided that if a church is orthodox in creed, holding to the fundamental, historic Christian faith, the individual has been baptized. If the church is heretical, denying fundamental Christian doctrine regarding Christ or the Trinity, the baptism is invalid. In our day there are differences of practice regarding baptism by the Roman Catholic Church or by liberal Protestant churches. Historically many Presbyterian theologians have considered such baptisms valid, as long as the proper form was followed; but many Bible-believing Presbyterian churches rebaptize such individuals. In our Synod this decision wisely is left up to the local churches and sessions to decide in individual cases.