

## ENGRAVED UPON THE BODIES OF THEIR CHILDREN: CALVIN ON INFANT BAPTISM

TIM PRUSSIC

### **Introduction**

John Calvin was much more than a theologian and doctor of the church of Christ, he was a faithful pastor of the flock in Geneva. That flock included both adults and children. Rarely does Calvin show himself more kindly pastoral than in his doctrine of infant baptism. This article will examine Calvin's thoughts regarding the sacraments generally and baptism specifically before turning to Calvin's doctrine of infant baptism and its significance. The examination of the sacraments and baptism is limited to issues directly pertinent to the doctrine of infant baptism.

### **On the Sacraments**

Relying heavily on Augustine,<sup>1</sup> Calvin defines a sacrament as “a testimony of divine grace toward us, confirmed by an outward sign, with mutual attestation of our piety toward him” (4.14.1).<sup>2</sup> Sacraments have two functional aspects for Calvin. The first, and by far the most important, is that God uses it to serve the faith of his people. God ministers in the sacraments; he feeds and nourishes his people through them. Secondly, and as a response to God's grace, we proclaim before God and humanity our indebtedness to God.

A sacrament is always tied to a promise and is rightly seen as a sign and seal of that promise. As a sign, the sacrament is a visible and physical reminder of the promise. The sacrament points to the promise to which God has appended it. Calvin views a sacrament as a seal in that it confirms for us that the promise is true. He often compares sacraments to a royal seal affixed onto a royal decree.<sup>3</sup> The royal seal confirms the genuine nature of the document. Since the sacraments are tied to promises, they are necessarily tied to the Word of God, since that is where God publishes his promises. Calvin sees the preaching of the Word as a necessary prerequisite to the sacrament. Without the preached promise, the sign and seal of that promise cannot make sense. The Word “should, when preached, make us understand what the visible sign means . . . the sacrament requires preaching to beget faith” (4.14.4).

---

<sup>1</sup> By the author's count, Calvin quotes or clearly alludes to Augustine 22 times in chapter 14 of his *Institutes* (only once negatively), while he references Chrysostom and Peter Lombard twice each and Bonaventure but once.

<sup>2</sup> All citations from Calvin's *Institutes* come from John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (vols. 20 and 21 of *Library of Christian Classics*; ed. John T. McNeill; trans. Ford Lewis Battles; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960). The traditional citation system will be used within the text.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, 4.14.5.

The blessing of the sacraments is Christ himself, who must be received by faith: The sacraments have effectiveness among us in proportion as we are helped by their ministry sometimes to foster, confirm, and increase the true knowledge of Christ in ourselves; at other times, to possess him more fully and enjoy his riches. But that happens when we receive in true faith what is offered there. (4.14.16)

The Holy Spirit is the active agent by whom we are united to heavenly Christ and partake of him in the sacraments. “But the sacraments properly fulfill their office only when the Spirit, that inward teacher, comes to them, by whose power alone hearts are penetrated and affections moved and our souls opened for the sacraments to enter in” (4.14.9).

Calvin boldly affirms that, in certain specific ways, the sacraments are better teachers to God’s people than the Word. Calvin knows that, in addition to being intellectual beings dealing in propositions, we are flesh and blood, of the earth—so are the sacraments. “For the clearer anything is, the fitter it is to support faith. But the sacraments bring the clearest promises; and they have this characteristic over and above the word because they represent them for us as painted in a picture from life” (4.14.5). In the sacraments, God “attests his good will and love toward us more expressly than by word” (4.14.6). Calvin considers this sacramental teaching a gracious condescension by God to teach us in our dullness.

By way of summary, according to Calvin, God meets us and ministers to us in the sacraments. In them he teaches us through our senses, draws us up by his Spirit to consider the infinite riches of the enthroned Son, and unites us to the person of his Son, who is our salvation.

### ***On Baptism***

Calvin understands baptism to signify and seal a broad array of blessings to God’s people. To begin with, Calvin says that “baptism is the sign of initiation by which we are received into the society of the church, in order that, engrafted in Christ, we may be reckoned among God’s children” (4.15.1). Baptism is the visible beginning of our membership in the body of Christ. Those baptized are to be reckoned as God’s own children. As will be seen below, this reckoning becomes important to how Calvin wants Christian parents to view their children.

God, through our baptisms, ministers to us throughout the entirety of our lives. Note all the benefits that Calvin finds in the sacrament of baptism:

We must realize that at whatever time we are baptized, we are once for all washed and purged for our whole life. Therefore, as often as we fall away, we ought to recall the memory of our baptism and fortify our mind with it, that we may always be sure and confident of the forgiveness of sins. For, though baptism, administered only once, seemed to have passed, it was still not destroyed by subsequent sins. For Christ’s purity has been offered us in it; his purity ever flourishes; it is defiled by no spots, but buries and cleanses away all our defilements. (4.15.3)

It should be recalled that all those benefits are received, according to Calvin, by faith. A Christian looks in faith to his own baptism and sees Christ there ministering to him through that very baptism.

In baptism, we are united to Christ himself, whom Calvin calls “the proper object of baptism” (4.15.6). Citing Rom 6, Calvin understands that in our baptism, we are united to Christ’s death and his resurrection (4.15.5). Baptism does not just represent these benefits to us. In baptism, God actually accomplishes what he signifies. Commenting on Eph 5:26, Calvin states, “When Paul says that we are washed in baptism, his meaning is, that God employs it for declaring to us that we are washed, and at the same time performs what it represents.”<sup>4</sup>

Calvin also understands baptism as a sign and seal of our adoption into God’s own family. This aspect was explicitly stated in Calvin’s preliminary definition of baptism quoted above: those who are baptized are to be “reckoned among God’s children.” Calvin says, “In baptism the first thing to be considered is, that God the Father by planting us in his Church in unmerited goodness, receives us by adoption into the number of his sons.”<sup>5</sup> According to Calvin, Christians should look back to their baptisms with the eye of faith and see, among many other things, their own adoptions.

### ***On Infant Baptism***

Before bringing together all that has been said and applying it to infant baptism, it is appropriate to examine briefly Calvin’s basis for infant baptism and the peculiarities of baptism when applied to infants instead of adults.

In his *Institutes*, Calvin offers two biblical lines of defense for the practice of baptizing the children of believers: the covenant, and Christ’s own dealings with children and infants. Calvin understands that the covenant God made with Abraham and his children is still in force. The sign and seal of that covenant under the old administration was circumcision, but under the new administration the same covenant has a new sign and seal, that is, baptism. Calvin consistently reasons by analogy between circumcision and baptism.<sup>6</sup> Calvin considers it “incontrovertible that baptism has taken the place of circumcision to fulfill the same office among us [New Covenant believers]” (4.16.4). While God does not specifically command New Covenant believers to baptize their children, he did explicitly command Old Covenant believers to circumcise theirs. Further, Calvin sees that New Covenant as a magnification and extreme growth of the grace of God. If our children were included in the covenant graces of God under the Old Covenant and were given the sign of that covenant, how much more under the New Covenant should they be included and given the sign of the covenant. Calvin reasons that “if the

---

<sup>4</sup> John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries* (22 vols.; Repr., Grand Rapids, Baker, 1998), 21:319 (Eph 5:26). Calvin warns that we should not seek the efficacy of the sacrament *in* the sacrament itself. This was mentioned above, but bears repeating: the blessings of the sacraments are not found in the sacraments but in Christ alone. Calvin understands that the Holy Spirit invisibly and internally ministers Christ and his benefits to us though the visible and external ministry of the sacraments.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 20:70 (1 Cor 1:13).

<sup>6</sup> Calvin uses this analogy quite effectively in defense of the practice of infant baptism against the Anabaptists; see 4.16.20 for a powerful example.

covenant still remains firm and steadfast, it applies no less today to the children of Christians that under the Old Testament it pertained to the infants of the Jews” (4.16.5). For Calvin, baptism does not bring the infant into the covenant, but baptism is given to the infant because of the child’s status in the covenant. Thus, he makes bold to say that “baptism is properly administered to infants as something owed to them” (4.16.5).<sup>7</sup>

Calvin sees Christ’s own dealings with infants and children as a confirmation of the same position.<sup>8</sup> When Christ is indignant that his disciples are preventing the children (infants and little children [breph and paidia]) from coming to him, Calvin takes careful note of what Christ says of the children and what he does to them. Christ wants the little children to come to him. He says that the Kingdom of God belongs to such children as those he holds in his arms, and then admonishes the adults to become like the children. Further, Christ blessed the children. Calvin reasons that if we are to take our children to Christ, if he holds them, blesses them, says that the Kingdom is theirs and commands us to become like them in order to enter the Kingdom, that we should not withhold or deny the mere external sign of all these blessings, that is, baptism. If the substance is present, should not the external indication of that substance also be present?

From the earliest moments of their existence, Calvin views the children of believers as in Christ: “The children of the godly are born the children of the Church, and that they are accounted members of Christ from the womb, because God adopteth us upon this condition, that he may be also the Father of our seed.”<sup>9</sup>

Calvin chides his Anabaptist opponents for not realizing that infant baptism differs from adult baptism in certain obvious ways. Calvin takes up sections 10-20 of his chapter on infant baptism answering a barage of charges against infant baptism. Some Anabaptists argued that since baptism was a sign of regeneration, faith, repentance and other things of which infants are not supposed to be capable, that the sign is not rightly applied to infants. They argue that since baptism is not applied to an adult until the church is satisfied by the fruit of a faithful profession of faith in Christ, then the same should apply to all baptized. Calvin reminds them that they have missed a necessary point: infants are not adults! For Calvin, the children of believers are children of promise. Parents submit their children to the church for baptism based upon God’s promise. They then nurture and train the children to bring forth the promised fruit. “Infants are baptized into future repentance and faith” (4.16.20). Moreover, “if it please him, why may the Lord not shine with a tiny spark at the present time on those whom he will illumine in the future with the full splendor of his light” (4.16.19)?

More than future grace, Calvin asks why we should ever suppose that God would not regenerate our children from the womb. All children are dead in sin from conception, but the remedy is close at hand:

---

<sup>7</sup> For a powerful and insightful treatment of Calvin’s view of children in the covenant, see Lewis Bevens Schenck, *The Presbyterian Doctrine of Children in the Covenant* (repr., Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 2003), 3-24. Also, see John A. Battle’s review of the same in this issue of the *WRS Journal*.

<sup>8</sup> See 4.16.7-9.

<sup>9</sup> Calvin, *Commentaries*, 18:363 (Acts 8:37).

In Adam we can but die. On the contrary, Christ commands that they be brought to him. Why is this? Because he is life. Therefore, to quicken them he makes them partakers in himself. (4.16.17)

Covenant children are spiritually dead by nature, but, according to Calvin, Christ summons them to himself and make them live in himself. Further, what if God in his infinite power regenerated and saved our children from their mothers' wombs? Calvin sees this as a real possibility: "God's work, though beyond our understanding, is still not annulled. Now it is perfectly clear that those infants who are to be saved (as some are surely saved from that early age [that is, from the womb]) are previously regenerated by the Lord" (4.16.17). Calvin sees both John the Baptist and Jesus himself as evidence that God can and sometimes does call infants from the womb and give them new life. Infant regeneration<sup>10</sup> may come through different means than that of adults, but Calvin does not pretend to know how God accomplishes this, he just knows that, when God wills, he does accomplish it.

### ***On the Significance of Infant Baptism***

The doctrine of infant baptism affords great comfort both to covenant parents and children. Calvin thinks that God's covenant grace and boundless generosity shown forth in infant baptism should flood "godly hearts with uncommon happiness, which quickens men to a deeper love of their kind Father, as they see his concern on their behalf for their posterity" (4.16.9). Calvin wants Christian parents to melt with love to God because God makes their children his children. He wants this doctrine to make Christians love God more. The following quote shows how God's covenantal grace comes together with his sacramental condescension to us and to our children:

If anyone should object that the promise ought to be enough to confirm the salvation of our children, I disregard this argument. For God views this otherwise; as he perceives our weakness, so he has willed to deal tenderly with us in this matter. Accordingly, let those who embrace the promise that God's mercy is to be extended to their children deem it their duty to offer them to the church to be sealed by the symbol of mercy, and thereby to arouse themselves to a surer confidence, because they see with their very eyes the covenant of the Lord engraved upon the bodies of their children. (4.16.9)

This point needs emphasis. Covenant parents should take great comfort that God not only promises mercy to their children, but signifies and seals that mercy to their children in baptism. God's grace to us, in Calvin's mind, is unfathomable and surely extends from generation to generation. "For without doubt he counts as his children the children of those to whose seed he promised to be a Father" (4.16.24).

---

<sup>10</sup> Schenck contends that in our day (he originally published his work in 1940) we have a narrow and limited notion of regeneration. He argues that Calvin would have understood the term more broadly encompassing the whole of the Christian life, not just a point in time when God takes one from spiritual death to life, though that is certainly included. See Schenck, *The Presbyterian Doctrine of Children in the Covenant*, 8-9, 15-18.

Far from a reason for laziness or idleness, Calvin uses God's covenant graces to admonish parents unto diligent and active instruction of their children. Calvin says that a man is given knowledge of God so that "he would faithfully fulfill the office of a good householder, in instructing his own family.... It is the duty of parents to apply themselves diligently to the work of communicating what they have learned from the Lord to their children."<sup>11</sup> The parents' conscientious and attentive work in training their children is rooted in and girded about by the pervasive grace of their covenant God.

Calvin grounds infant baptism upon the covenant promises of God to adult believers and to their children. God's promises of mercy are sure enough, but as a further condescension to the weakness of his people, he seals those promises upon their bodies and the bodies of their children with baptism. Such mercy should melt our hearts and spur us to faithful obedience in all areas of life, but especially in faithful childrearing.

---

<sup>11</sup> Calvin, *Commentaries*, 1:481 (Gen 18:19).