

Why Baptism?

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In Reformed theology Baptism is a means of grace; that is, an institution God uses to grow our faith. Yet how many Christians really see their Baptism as an important element of their Christian identity and growth?

Neither Magic nor Mirage

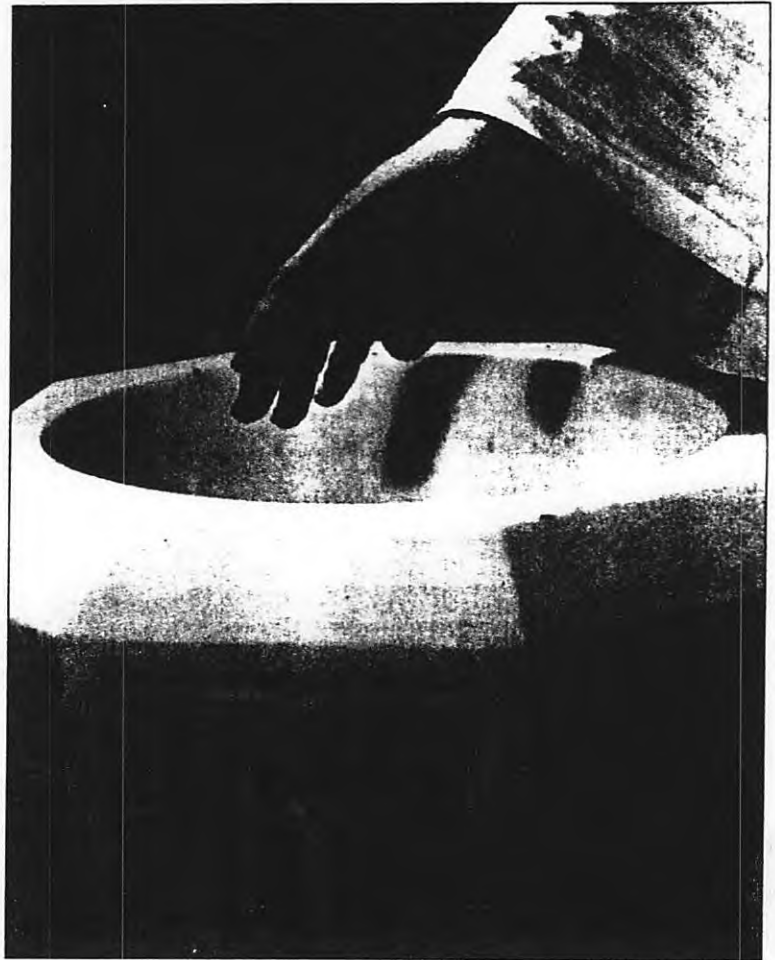
Calvin warned that when we study the Sacraments—whether Baptism or the Lord's Supper—we must avoid two errors. We can call these errors on the one hand, the error of magic and, on the other hand, the error of mirage (*Institutes*, IV, 14, 16).

Evangelicals are particularly sensitive to the danger of magic—placing some magical power in water or in bread and wine. Seeing grace so present that it irresistibly bowls people over. Calvin says that the danger here is that we so focus our attention on the elements that our minds are not lifted to Christ to experience him. The equal danger (perhaps the greater danger for us as evangelicals) is to treat the Sacraments as a mirage, mere ceremonies that have very little real meaning. We do them because, yes, they are commanded in the Word of God, but they do not seem to have much reality for us. They do not seem to bring blessing into our lives.

A Prominent Sacrament

Baptism is amazingly prominent in the New Testament. We need to let that truth of biblical revelation grip us.

We see that prominence in our Lord's ministry. His way was prepared by John the Baptist, who came to call people to repent of their sins and be baptized. Our Lord began his public ministry by being baptized by John. Jesus could summarize his ministry in terms of Baptism, for when he looked forward to his death he could say, "I have a baptism to undergo" (Luke 12:50). His final commission to his disciples emphasized Baptism: "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 observe



everything I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:19-20).

Baptism is also underscored in the apostles' experience as we see in Acts. The Church was founded by the great Baptism in the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. As the apostles went out preaching, we see repeatedly that people believed and were baptized. The church was established in place after place by those who were baptized in response to the preaching of the Word.

In the epistles we find numerous references to Baptism as a basis for ethical exhortation to God's people. Baptism testifies to what we are in Christ. So the apostles urge believers to live out what they are in him, to be true Christians as their Baptism testifies they are. We find this kind of exhortation in Romans 6, 1 Corinthians 10, Ephesians 4, Colossians 2, Titus 3 and other places. It is a frequent occurrence.

Some of the Bible's statements about Baptism are very strong. Ananias said to Paul after his conversion,

"Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name" (Acts 22:16). Galatians 3:27 says, "For all of you who were baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ." I Peter 3:21 even says, "Baptism...now saves you." What do these powerful expressions mean? How are we to understand them?

God's Pledge

Baptism's prominent role and the strong statements about it testify that God makes a pledge to us in this Sacrament. Calvin repeatedly stresses that God makes such a pledge to us because of our weakness. As Christians live out their faith, they are weak and need God's pledge made to them in their Baptism. Why? It is because, as Calvin observes, we are not disembodied spirits (*Institutes*, IV, xiv, 3). We are not just ears to hear the Word. As those who struggle with temptations and doubts in soul and body we need the Word where we can touch it and taste it as well as hear it.

In the Sacraments, God presents his Word to us in a tangible form. It is the same Word, but in a different form, a form that particularly speaks to our senses. Calvin is very insistent that none of us must ever think that we become so strong that God's Word is irrelevant to our weakness. Rather, the more we grow in faith, the more precious that visible Word becomes. There is a preached Word. There is a written Word. There is an incarnate Word. There is an eternal Word. But there is also a visible Word which speaks to our senses to encourage us in our weakness.

Only God could establish a Sacrament that could help us in our weakness. Only God could say of physical elements that they are useful to us in building up our faith. But that is what God has accomplished. He has given Baptism as a rite of initiation into his church, into the covenant community.

We see Baptism as that initiation to the Church right after Pentecost when Peter preached his sermon and there was a great response. The people said, "What shall we do?" Peter replied, "Repent, and be baptized" (Acts 2:38). The Bible then records that as many as believed were baptized and added to the Church.

Baptism comes as God's pledge at the initiation into our life within his Church. It is once and for all, definitive, as is the beginning of our Christian life. Calvin says that the element itself speaks of beginning. He writes that there is a particular fitness that water is the element, for it speaks of the washing away of sin, conversion, and regeneration. That is what Baptism pledges to us: our sinfulness and a new creation in Christ.

This pledge comes to us with God's promise, and the promise of God in our Baptism is that we are cleansed, forgiven, and renewed. Calvin says that in Baptism we have represented to us that by the blood of

Christ our sins are forgiven and we are justified and that by the Holy Spirit we are introduced into newness of life and are sanctified. All of this is represented and promised to us in Baptism. Hence, Calvin continues, the great function of Baptism is that it assures us of God's will individually, because it comes to us individually. Even in the preaching of the Word there is a possibility for people to say, "Well, that's true in general, but it may not be true for me." So God comes to each with the water of Baptism, that visible Word of his, and says to each of us in our Baptism, "I have a promise for *you*, not just for 'y'all,' but for *you*."

Therefore in times of distress or doubt or weakness, we have that objective promise of God to look back to. We are strengthened and assured that God does love us, and has promised us forgiveness and renewal, and that the promises of God are without repentance.

Calvin likes the little phrase "just as" when he talks about the Sacraments, saying that "just as" water washes dirt from the body, so does Christ wash sin from the soul. That is the correspondence between the two. "Just as" we need that cleansing of the physical body by water, so the soul needs and receives that cleansing by the blood of Jesus Christ. Calvin insists that Baptism "presents what it represents." It is not just a representation but also a presentation, a communication of the blessing it represents.

Faith does not make the Sacrament. Faith does not create the promise of God. God's promise comes before faith and through faith. Nevertheless, faith receives the Sacrament unto blessing. The Sacrament is like the preached Word, Calvin says. It can be the savor of life to life or the savor of death to death. It comes with God's promise to all who will receive it. But only those who receive it by faith receive the blessing. Only those who receive the Sacrament and hear the Word really experience in their own lives that assurance, upbuilding, and strengthening that is the proper function of Baptism. Calvin stresses this point. The promise of God is there. The promise of God is real and reliable. But for the fruit of that promise to take root in our hearts, we must live in it by faith.

God makes this wonderful pledge for us in our Baptism so that in our weakness we can look to it again and again and be reassured that God loves us. If you have been baptized, you have put on Christ Jesus. That is what the apostles say repeatedly to believers. Believers have a right to look to their Baptism and see that God has cleansed them from their sin and renewed them unto eternal life.

It is reported that Martin Luther was once asked, "How do you know you're a Christian?" and Luther's response was, "I've been baptized." That is a bad answer if it means that just because "I've had some water sprinkled

on me" or "I've been dunked in some water," willy nilly, "I'm a Christian." That's magic! But that is not what Luther meant. Luther believed that in order to answer the question, "How do I know I'm a Christian?", I need an objective standard. I do not want to be left awash with my feeling in the matter. Feelings are inadequate. God has said something objective, just to me. He has said, "In Baptism, you are mine." So Luther was making a statement of faith: "I know I'm a Christian because when I look to my Baptism, I am reassured in my soul that I'm a Christian; I look to it by faith."

God's People

We come now to the question: To whom does God make this pledge? Or, more particularly, What about infant Baptism? Should only believers be baptized (the Baptist position) or should believers and their children be baptized (the paedobaptist position). What follows is a brief defense of the traditional Reformed or paedobaptist argument.

The question is: Who is a member of Christ's church? Who is a member of his covenant community? In the Old Testament the answer to that is very clear. It is believers and their children. This was the explicit teaching given to Abraham in Genesis 17. The promises were to Abraham and his seed. The rite of initiation into the covenant made with Abraham was Circumcision, and Abraham is called the "father of the faithful" in the New Testament as well as the Old. In Romans 4, we read that Circumcision was given to Abraham *after* he believed. So the apostle is really saying that Circumcision was given to Abraham on this basis: "Believe and be circumcised." Yet in spite of this pattern, children were included in the old covenant. We have that ringing statement of Joshua, "As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord" (Josh. 24:15). Joshua did not reach that conclusion after surveying the family to see what they wanted to do. Rather, as the responsible head of his household, he dedicated his entire family to the Lord.

What about the New Testament? In the New Testament there is no command and apparently no example of what was done with the children of

believers. There is no command either that believers' children should be baptized as infants or that they should wait until they professed faith. There is no instance of a believer's child being baptized as an adult believer. So we are left to try to reason theologically and ask: Has the grace of God in the new covenant become more restricted than it was in the old covenant?

The normal pattern in the new covenant is that God's

grace is reaching out to more people in the new covenant than was true in the old. The restricted communication of grace in the old covenant is being expanded. Is grace, then, being restricted in only this one instance, namely, in the case of children? Are children in the new covenant worse off than they were under the old covenant? One would require very convincing evidence, it seems, to reach that conclusion. One would need an absolutely clear statement that children who were included previously are now excluded. But we have no such statement. Indeed, as we look at various evidence in the New Testament, we find that children are being related to in just the same way as they were in the old covenant. The assumption that permeates the New Testament is that believers' children are included in the covenant community.

Abraham is described as the "father of the faithful." In Galatians 3:29, for example, there is no problem in the apostle's mind in relating the promise given to Abraham and his seed to the promise given to us (and our seed) in Baptism.

We find our Lord receiving children as members of the covenant community as, for example, in the famous case of Matthew 19:14 where he says, "Let the little children come unto me." His disciples did not think it appropriate that children should have bothered the Savior. But Jesus was irritated with them for such an assumption and insisted that the children should come. He received them and blessed them. This was not something Jesus did to everybody. He resisted blessing the Canaanite woman, for example (cf. Matt. 15:21-28). But Jesus warmly received and blessed covenant children.

Writing in I Corinthians 7, Paul talks about the children of believers and develops his argument,



assuming that the children of believers are holy. He is talking about marriages between Christians and non-Christians, and he is willing to call such marriages holy on the assumption that the children of believers, indeed even of one believer, are holy. So it seems that the apostle is presuming that believers' children are in the covenant community. That idea seems to be reinforced in Colossians 2:11-13 where Paul appears to equate Baptism and Circumcision as parallel rites.

In Acts, we have five cases of household Baptisms where it is recorded that the head of the household believed and the household was baptized. None of these clearly says that there were infants in those households. However, the household pattern that we see in the old covenant seems reflected or appropriated in these new covenant teachings.

As Calvin observes, we are not disembodied spirits. We are not just ears to hear the Word. As those who struggle with temptations and doubts in soul and body we need the Word where we can touch it and taste it as well as hear it.

We have Peter's word at the end of his Pentecost sermon when he said, "The promise is to you and your children and for all who are afar off" (Acts 2:39). There are various ways of reading those words, of course. They can be read as saying, "The promise is to you (if you believe), to your children (if they believe), and to many who are afar off (if they believe)." But isn't Peter here really echoing the word of God to Abraham? God had said, "It is to you and your children, and also to the nations that the blessing will come" (cf. Gen. 22:17-18). It seems to me that Peter is picking up that Abrahamic promise and saying, "Yes, it is to you and your children—that principle remains—but now at last we see the nations brought in too."

Finally, there may actually be a case of infant Baptism in the New Testament. Look at I Corinthians 10:1-2: "For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers, that our forefathers were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. They were baptized into Moses." In this chapter Paul is reflecting on Israel's experience in passing through the Red Sea as a warning to the Church. He is stressing the similarity of the experiences of the Church and Israel. In stressing that similarity, Paul presents the Israelites' experience of passing through the Red Sea as a Baptism. But were there not infants in the nation of Israel that passed through the Red Sea? Had Pharaoh been so effective that there were no infants left? Of course, there were children. And so Paul says that *all* Israel—including infants—was baptized in passing through the Red Sea. We see that Paul assumes the continuity of God's dealing with children in the Old and New Testaments. They are always treated as members of the covenant community.

As we reflect on this, must we not conclude that children need God's pledge as much as adults? Don't children as they grow need that objective promise of God? We have no idea when faith may be born in a child's heart, but whenever it is, it needs to be stimulated, strengthened, and assured by the pledge made to him or her in Baptism. Even a pledge that he or she cannot self-consciously remember can be testified to by the community.

We have evidence in the New Testament that faith was born in the heart of at least one child at a very early age: John the Baptist, who had faith already in the womb. It is recorded in Luke 1:44 that when Mary came to visit her cousin Elizabeth and entered the room where Elizabeth was, John the Baptist leapt in his mother's womb because he was in the presence of the Savior. Indeed Elizabeth records that he "leaped for joy." We moderns may be skeptical about that, but it is what the Scripture says: this unborn baby in the presence of the Savior leapt for joy—an act of faith of some sort. Joy is a fruit of faith. So if faith can be in the heart even of the unborn, don't our children need to be nourished and strengthened for faith by the promise of God as they develop and live their lives?

Pierre C. Marcel, in his book on Baptism, says, "Little by little the child will come to a clear comprehension of the significance of his baptism, which will become for him the instrumental cause of the growth of his faith" (*Baptism: Sacrament of the Covenant of Grace*, Cherry Hill, NJ, 1973, 227). A covenant child should be reared then, being told, "You have been baptized. God has made his promise to you. You need rest in it by faith." Calvin expressed himself fairly strongly when he said,

Why Baptize Infants?

Some paedobaptist arguments...

1 God has brought us into a covenant of grace and although not all members of this covenant will persevere (i.e., they are not elect), they enjoy special privileges of belonging to the covenant people of God. This was true of Israel (the Church in the Old Testament), and the New Testament simply applies this to the New Testament church (Hebrews, esp. 4:1-11 and 6:4-12; Dt. 4:20 and 28:9 with 1 Pet. 2:9,10; Gal. 6:16; Hos. 2:23 and Is. 10:22 with Rom. 9:24-28).

2 Even though bringing someone under the protection of God's covenantal faithfulness does not guarantee that every member possesses true, persevering faith (Heb. 4:1-11), that does not mean that it is unimportant whether a person is in Christ and his covenant of grace.

3 Children were included in the covenant of grace in the Old Testament, through the Sacrament of Circumcision, and in the New Covenant (called the "better covenant"), God has not changed in his good intentions toward our children (Acts 2:35, 38). Circumcision has been replaced with Baptism (Col. 2:11). Therefore, our children must be brought into the covenant of grace and united to Christ through Baptism as the people of God in former times were brought into the covenant through Circumcision.

4 The children of unbelievers are unholy, but the children of believers are set apart unto God. This is a distinction not only of the Old Testament (see the Passover, Ex. 12:1; also the distinction between the "house of the wicked" and the "house of the righteous," especially in the Psalms), but is continued in the New Testament as well (1 Cor. 10:2). How are they marked or distinguished from unbelievers? Scripture teaches by the sign and seal of the covenant.

5 Household baptisms in the New Testament are common (see esp. Acts 16:15, 33; 1 Cor. 1:16), and when the jailer asked how to be saved, Paul replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household." We are told that this same night "he and his family were baptized" (Acts 16:31-33).

6 There is an unbroken record in church history of the practice of Infant Baptism. The earliest documents report that Infant Baptism was practiced in the period immediately after the death of the apostles, by the command of those who were trained by the apostles themselves. Where was the debate, assuming these immediate successors to the disciples were departing from the apostolic practice? There is no record of such a debate, which would have been momentous in the life of the church.

7 Baptism is the work of God, not man. It is not a sign of the believer's commitment to God (which would, therefore, require prior faith and repentance), but the sign and seal of God's promise to save all who do not reject their Baptism by refusing to trust in Christ. For the nature of Baptism, see Mark 16:16, Acts 22:16; Rom. 6:3; Tit. 3:5. The reason these references are to those who have first believed is that the first converts, obviously, were adults when they believed. Household Baptisms indicate that they baptized their children. The same was true of Abraham, who believed before he was circumcised, but then had his children circumcised as infants.