

CHAPTER 28: OF BAPTISM

PCC 2004

Baptism is one of the most visible and well-known ordinances of the Christian Church to the ‘outside world’. Many religious non-Christians will not regard someone as truly Christian unless he or she is baptised. Yet, baptism is poorly understood by many professing Christian and differing understanding of what it entails have created sharp denominational lines within conservative Protestantism. Many professing Christian assume that baptism is a ritual usually involving immersion in water for a new convert to Christianity to testify of his faith, or perhaps to ‘wash away’ his sin. But is this what baptism is according to the Scriptures? The present of our confession presents what may be known as the covenantal-paedobaptist view of baptism, which we believe is the correct biblical understanding of baptism.

On the Purpose of Baptism

28.1 Baptism is a sacrament of the New Testament, ordained by Jesus Christ,¹ not only for the solemn admission of the party baptised into the visible church,² but also to be unto him a sign and seal of the covenant of grace,³ of his ingrafting into Christ,⁴ of regeneration,⁵ of remission of sins,⁶ and of his giving up unto God through Jesus Christ, to walk in the newness of life:⁷ which sacrament is, by Christ’s own appointment, to be continued in His Church until the end of the world.⁸

¹Mt 28:19; ²1 Cor 12:13; ³Rom 4:11; Col 2:11–12; ⁴Gal 3:27; Rom 6:5; ⁵Tit 3:5; ⁶Mk 1:4; ⁷Rom 6:3–4; ⁸Mt 28:19–20.

In the previous chapter, we have already seen why it is appropriate to call baptism a sacrament of the New Testament Church. This paragraph asserts that it was personally ordained by Christ: “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost” (Mt 28:19). It is also an ordinance that will be continued in the Church until the end of the world: “Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world. Amen” (Mt 28:20). Note that “unto the end of the world” does not mean “to every corner of the world” as commonly understood. The Greek of the phrase (*εἰς τὴν συντέλειαν τοῦ αἰῶνος*) may be literally translated “until the consummation of the age.”

More importantly, this paragraph teaches us that baptism serves six purposes, namely:

- a. It serves as *a sign and seal of the Covenant of Grace*. This can be shown from two angles, firstly, from the relationship between baptism and circumcision; and secondly, from the fact that Peter’s command to the believers at Pentecost to be baptised was made in the context of the Covenant of Grace.
 - i. The relationship between baptism and circumcision can be seen from the clear parallel between the two ordinances. Contrary to popular belief, circumcision in the Old Testament was not to mark out the nation of Israel. “For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh” (Rom 2:28). Circumcision was a spiritual exercise, it signifies the change wrought by God in the heart of God’s covenant people. This is why the OT frequently speaks of the circumcision of the heart (Lev 26:40–41; Deut 10:16, 30:6; Jer 4:4). In other words, *physical* circumcision points to the *real* circumcision, which is of the heart. Baptism has the same spiritual significance. Paul makes this clear. In his letter to the Philippians, he intimates that Christians

are “the [true] circumcision, which worship God in the spirit, and rejoice in Christ Jesus” (Phil 3:3). In his letter to the Colossians, Paul was correcting the errors of those who emphasise externalism, including circumcision. And so he assures the Colossian Christians that they did not need to be circumcised physically, because they have been circumcised spiritually. But when did that happen? Paul says “[being] buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with him through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him from the dead” (Col 2:12). To paraphrase, Paul is saying, “Don’t you see, physical circumcision does not save, it is a sign of the circumcision of the heart, and when you were baptised with water to signify your union with Christ, it was a sign of your heart circumcision.” Paul, in effect, is saying that baptism has replaced circumcision.

Since circumcision was a sign and seal of the Covenant of Grace (Rom 4:11), it follows that baptism is a sign and seal of the Covenant of Grace.

- ii. In Acts 2:38–39, the Apostle Peter preached: “Repent, and be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost. For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call.” The promise mentioned by Peter is frequently seen as merely as the promise of the Holy Spirit. But the promise of the Holy Spirit is not a promise that stands by itself, which is why Peter does not say “*this* promise,” but “*the* promise.” Peter was referring to the promise of the Abrahamic Covenant, which of course is a manifestation of the Covenant of Grace. The words of Paul in Galatians 3:14–16 confirms: “That the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ; that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.... Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ.” Thus Paul speaks about our being baptised into Christ and made partakers of the Abrahamic promise: “For as many of you as have been baptised into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. And if ye be Christ’s, then are ye Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Gal 3:27–29). It is therefore undeniable that baptism is a sign and seal of the Covenant of Grace.
- b. It serves as a *sign and seal of...* the individual’s *ingrafting into Christ*. In other words, baptism points to and ratifies our identification and union with Christ. Paul was alluding to this aspect of baptism when he says that the Jews who passed through the Red Sea “were all baptised unto Moses” (1 Cor 10:2), meaning they were identified with Moses. In the same way when a believer is baptised, he is identified with Christ. But unlike the Jews’ identification with Moses which is representative and external, the believer’s identification signifies our vital, mystical, spiritual union with Christ. This is hinted by John the Baptist when he said, “I indeed have baptised you with water: but he shall baptise you with the Holy Spirit” (Mk 1:8). Since our baptism with the Spirit unites us to Christ (cf. 1 Cor 12:13), our sacramental baptism points to that union. Thus Paul says, “For as many of you as have been baptised into Christ have put on Christ” (Gal 3:27). It is on the account of this union that Paul says that believers are baptised into Christ’s death (Rom 6:3). Christ represented us covenantally and spiritually in His death. (Note that Paul is not saying that baptism symbolises Christ’s death, as Baptists who insist on immersion would insist. Christ’s death is symbolised by another sacrament, namely the Lord’s Supper. Baptism represents our union with

Christ, and immersion is no better than sprinkling or pouring, as a symbol for it). The Westminster divines, moreover, astutely observe that it is also because of this union with Christ, that believers may participate in resurrection and everlasting life (see *WLC* 165; *WSC* 37; 1 Cor 15:29; Rom 6:5).

- c. It serves as a *sign and seal... of regeneration*. In other words, it points to and ratifies the Word of God in the individual's heart. Note that the ratification of a seal speaks only of how the inward reality is *perceived*, and this perception is not necessarily in accord with what is actual. Simon Magus was said to believe (Act 8:13) and was baptised by Philip, but later when Peter arrived, Simon sought to purchase the power of the Holy Spirit and so proved himself to be yet in unbelief (Acts 8:18–23). Though ministers of the Word have the responsibility to screen baptismal candidates, there is no guarantee that all who are baptised are genuine. Indeed, it should be carefully noted that baptism is not a sign and seal of faith, but of inward grace or, in the words of Paul, “the righteousness of faith” (Rom 4:11). This is why ministers may baptise anyone base on credible profession,—since it is impossible for ministers to know for certain if inward grace has begun. This is also one of the reasons why infants of believing parents may be baptised though they are incapable of believing. Infants in covenant families are covenantally holy (1 Cor 7:14). While we must not presume that they are all regenerate before they are able to understand the Gospel, we must also not swing to the other extreme to say that God must regenerate them only after they come to rational faith. In fact, the Scripture suggests that John the Baptist was regenerated while he was in his mother's womb (Lk 1:15, 44). In fact, as baptism is the seal of the righteousness of faith, the church, without presuming regeneration, ought to treat baptised children as believers and accord them the privileges of church membership.
- d. It serves as a *sign and seal... of remission of sins*, i.e., cleansing or washing from sin. This is clearly seen in Ananias' instruction to Paul: “Arise, and be baptised, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord” (Acts 22:16). Ananias, of course, must not be understood as telling Paul a theological fact that his sins are washed away when he is baptised, but that he should be baptised to symbolise the forgiveness of his sins, which had already occurred while he was on the road to Damascus. Washing from sin, or justification, is after all entirely by grace through faith (Rom 3:24).
- e. It seals and ratifies one's “*giving up unto God through Jesus Christ, to walk in the newness of life.*” Since the symbolism of washing in baptism lends itself to the idea of renewing what is old, Paul speaks also of “washing of regeneration” (Tit 3:5) and that we who are baptised “should walk in newness of life” even as “Christ was raised up from the dead” (Rom 6:4). In a sense every adult baptism carries with it an implicit vow that the candidate will seek to walk in newness of life. When baptised member of the church is tempted to stray away or to have doubts of his salvation, he should look back to his baptism and through the baptism to Christ who called him. Every infant baptism also carries a vow on the part of the parents, especially the father: to “command his children ... [to] ... keep the way of the LORD, to do justice and judgement” (Gen 18:19); and to “bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord” (Eph 6:4). So, when a father brings his child to be circumcised, he is covenanting with the Lord not to allow the child to grow up like an unbeliever but as a covenant child.
- f. It is necessary “*for the solemn admission of the party baptised into the visible church.*” In other words, it serves as a badge to ratify the membership of a professing

believer in the visible Church. It is the divinely instituted rite to admit a credible professor of faith into the visible covenant community, namely the church (Acts 2:41; 1 Cor 12:13). But it may be asked: What if the person who is baptised is not born-again? Would he still be a member of the church? My answer is: Yes, unless and until his unregeneracy becomes so obvious that the church excommunicates him. But how can a church be called “the people of God” (Heb 4:9; see also 2 Cor 6:16) or “the body of Christ” (see 1 Cor 12) if there are unregenerate people within? The answer is to be found in the fact that God views His people covenantally and organically. This is why Israel of old was called God’s people though a great majority of the people were unbelievers and unregenerate. This is why the whole nation of Israel could be represented by an olive tree in Romans 11, and why the unbelieving parts could be cut off. It is a tree covenantally and organically, which was pruned when the unbelieving parts excommunicated themselves by saying: “His blood be on us, and on our children” (Mt 27:25). And this is why Christ said: “I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing. If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned” (Jn 15:5–6). How can a branch that is in Christ (v. 2) ever be cast away when Christ said: “they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand” (Jn 10:28)? The answer lies in the fact that Christ is referring to His external covenant people rather the redeemed or those who are mystically united to Him. This final function of baptism is to incorporate a person into the covenant community in this sense. Once he is baptised into the body, he is seen as being part of the external covenant community by God, and he is to be viewed by the rest in the church as a believer, unless his testimony testifies against him, in which case the church must excommunicate him before regarding him as an unbeliever. The situation is the same in the case of infants who are baptised into the church. For all intents and purposes, they are to be treated as believers, apart from participation in the ordinance that requires self-examination, namely the Lord’s Supper. Thus, young covenant children, being treated as believers, are taught the catechism, how to pray and allowed to sing the songs of Zion. This does not mean that covenant infants must be presumed to be regenerate. No, they must still be exhorted to repent and believe and warned that if they disbelieve and live in sin that they will perish in their sin.

On the Manner of Baptism

28.2 The outward element to be used in this sacrament is water, wherewith the party is to be baptised, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, by a minister of the Gospel, lawfully called thereunto.¹

¹Mt 3:11; Jn 1:33; Mt 28:19–20.

Three things are asserted in this paragraph:

- a. The outward element to be used in baptism is to be water, not oil or red flag or anything else. In the Scripture, water is used to represent: (i) the Spirit of Christ: “Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost” (Tit 3:5; see also Jn 7:38); and (ii) the blood of Christ: “And from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, and the first begotten of the dead, and the prince of the kings of the earth.

Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood” (Rev 1:5). As water washes the body of dirt, so the blood of Christ removes the guilt of sin and cleanses the defile conscience, while the Spirit of Christ purifies the soul from the pollution of sin.

- b. Christian baptism is to be administered in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost (Mt 28:19). This means that we are baptised under the authority of the persons of the Triune Godhead, and that we are therefore identified with the worship and service of the blessed Trinity.
- c. Baptism is to be administered by “a minister of the Gospel, lawfully called thereunto.” Just as the command to preach the Gospel was given to the disciples of Christ, they were also given the commission to baptise (Mt 28:19). No one else is given the command to baptise. This is why we do not find any case in the New Testament in which baptism is carried by anyone other than those called to preach. The reason behind this restriction, is as we have mentioned, the sacraments are inextricably tied to the preaching of the Word. Without preaching, the sacrament, the rites of the sacrament become mere superstition (see also comments on *WCF* 27.4). Apart from this reason, it is the “the ministers of Christ” lawfully ordained who are the “stewards of the mysteries of God” (1 Cor 4:1; 1 Tim 4:14).

On the Mode of Baptism

*28.3 Dipping of the person into the water is not necessary; but Baptism is rightly administered by pouring or sprinkling water upon the person.*¹

¹Heb 9:10, 19–22; Acts 2:41; 16:33; Mk 7:4.

Note how carefully our Confession is worded so as not to deny that baptism may be lawfully performed by immersion, and yet suggesting that the proper mode is pouring or sprinkling water upon the person. Despite the insistence of our Baptist brethren, the word Greek word *baptizô* does not actually mean “dip, immerse or plunge.”

- *Firstly*, that while there are instances where *baptizô* could *possibly* mean immersion. For example the Septuagint translation of 2 Kings 5:14 uses *baptizô* to translate the Hebrew *tabal* which usually mean ‘dip’ or ‘plunge.’ We say ‘possibly’ because *baptizô* could be used to mean ‘wash’ here, especially when Elisha’s instruction in verse 10 was to “wash in Jordon seven times.”
- *Secondly*, there are instances where immersion is *unlikely* or *impossible*. Such is the case of the Septuagint of the apocrypha Judith 12:7, which suggests that Judith *baptizô* herself in a fountain or spring.
- *Thirdly*, there are places in the inspired Scripture where *baptizô* clearly *cannot* mean immersion. For example, in Luke 11:38—“And when the Pharisee saw it, he marvelled that he had not first washed [*baptizô*] before dinner,” surely the Pharisees did not expect Jesus to immerse Himself before dinner? Again Mark 7:4 speaks of ‘baptisms’ of tables or couches (Greek *klinê*). Surely these washings refer to ceremonial purifications, which are probably *done by* pouring or sprinkling.
- *Fourthly*, there are places where *baptizô* carries no suggestion of mode, e.g., Matthew 20:22–23—“... Are ye able to drink of the cup that I shall drink of, and to be baptised

with the baptism that I am baptised with?...” Also, no one would translate Galatians 3:27 with “immersed into Christ.”

- *Fifthly*, there are instances where *baptizô* is auto-suggestive of pouring. For example, John the Baptist compares water baptism with the Baptism of the Holy Spirit (Lk 3:16), and indeed, our water baptism points to our Spirit baptism. But according to Acts 2:4; 17–18, the Holy Spirit is poured out; we are not immersed in the Holy Spirit.
- *Sixthly*, in Hebrews 6:2, *baptismos*, literally ‘baptism,’ probably refers to the OT rites of sprinkling (cf. Heb 9:13 and Num 19:17–18; Heb 9:19 and Ex 24:6–8; Heb 9:21 and Lev 8:19).
- *Seventhly*, the verb *baptô* which is commonly seen as the root word of *baptizô* and almost consistently meaning ‘dip’ (e.g., Jn 13:26; Lk 16:24) is never used interchangeably with *baptizô* in the Bible. *Baptizô* always imply cleansing or purification, whereas *baptô*, never.
- *Eighthly*, whenever the object (e.g., liquid) involved in *baptizô* is specified, it is always applied to the subject, not vice versa, as would be implied in immersion. This is seen in Matthew 3:11; Luke 3:16; Mark 1:8; John 1:26 and Acts 1:5. I believe the KJV translators, together with almost all modern translators, have correctly rendered the Greek preposition *en* (*en*) in these verses as ‘with’ (instrumental) rather than ‘in.’

The weight of evidence up to this point suggests very strongly that *baptizô* and *baptismos* do not imply immersion at all. Indeed, although the words themselves signify purification and cleansing more than anything else, the mode that they suggest is pouring or sprinkling. This is confirmed in the instances of baptism recorded in the New Testament, such as:

- (1) The baptism of John. It is a common misconception that John Baptist baptised by immersion. This is not likely. John stood in the Jordan simply because it was the most convenient place to baptise the thousands who came to him (see Mt 3:5–6). John was a priest by descent as Zacharias was a priest (Lk 1:5). Surely the Jews coming for John’s baptism of repentance would not have been expecting an innovative ritual. More likely, John was sprinkling water on those who came with a sweep of a sprig of hyssop as suggested by the OT: “Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow” (Ps 51:7) and “Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean” (Ezk 36:25a). This must also have been the way in which the 3,000 could have been baptised in a day (Acts 2:41), in an event which, incidentally, took place in Jerusalem (Acts 2:5), more than 20 miles from any river which may be used for immersion for such a large crowd of people!
- (2) The baptism of our Lord. There is also no evidence that Christ was baptised by immersion. Did He not come “up out of the water”? Yes, but that is no suggestion of immersion: (a) The phrase simply mean stepping out of the river, else Acts 8:39—“And when they [Philip and the Eunuch] were come up out of the water,” would mean that Philip was himself immersed when he baptised the Eunuch. (b) Christ, in fulfilling “all righteousness” (Mt 3:15), was probably referring to His priestly ordination which involves sprinkling (cf. Num 8:6–7). After all, it would

be meaningless and fulfilling no righteousness for Him to have a “baptism of repentance for the remission of sins” (Mk 1:4, Lk 3:3) since He knew no sin. This also explains why He waited till He was 30 years old to begin His ministry (Lk 3:23), since the Old Testament priests were taken into the number and ordained only when they reach 30 (cf. Num 4:3, 23, 30, 35, 39, etc.).

- (3) The baptism of the Ethiopian Eunuch. Again there is no evidence that he was baptised by immersion. They were in a desert. Philip must have explained to him about John baptising in the river so that when he saw some water (Acts 8:36), he asked to be baptised. Not only would a pool of water in the desert be unlikely to be sufficient for immersion, it is likely that Philip explained to him that baptism is by sprinkling. The Eunuch was reading Isaiah 53:7–8 (Acts 8:32–33). Surely he would have read Isa 52:15—“So shall he sprinkle many nations; the kings shall shut their mouths at him: for that which had not been told them shall they see; and that which they had not heard shall they consider,” which is just a few verses up? Remember that there were no chapter divisions then.
- (4) All other instances of baptism. When we examine all the other instances of baptism recorded, again we find that in most instances immersion is *impossible* or *improbable*. Saul “arose, and was baptised” (Acts 9:18) or, literally in the Greek: “and arising he was baptised.” He did not go out to the river, nor do I think he “received meat” (v. 19) while dripping wet from immersion. The Philippian Jailer and his household were baptised in the middle of the night (Acts 16:33) in the outer prison (cf. vv. 24, 30). It is unlikely there was a tub of water sufficient for immersion there, nor is it likely that they went to a river in the dead of the night. There were no street lamps nor heated rivers! How much probable that Paul and Silas had baptised them with the same basin used to wash their wounds, for we read: “And he took them the same hour of the night, and washed their stripes; and was baptised, he and all his, *straightway*” (Acts 16:33; italics added).

Our Baptist brethren may protest that these are circumstantial: Surely, Paul was pointing to immersion when he speaks of our being buried with Christ in baptism (Col 2:12)? We respond: Besides the fact that Christ was entombed in a rock cavity rather than buried in the ground (which immersion may picture), this text is not directly speaking about the act of water baptism, but about what baptism symbolises. Besides that, if we want to press the case, we find Paul speaking about the Jews being “baptised unto Moses” as they passed through the sea (1 Cor 10:1–2). The Jews were being sprinkled by the sprays of droplets from the wall of water to their left and to their right (Ex 14:22). The Jews were not immersed. The Egyptians were (v. 28).

On the Subject of Baptism

28.4 Not only those that do actually profess faith in and obedience unto Christ,¹ but also the infants of one or both believing parents are to be baptised.²

¹Mk 16:15–16; Acts 8:37–38; ²Gen 17:7, 9; Gal 3:9, 14; Col 2:11–12; Acts 2:38–39; Rom 4:11–12; 1 Cor 7:14; Mt 28:19; Mk 10:13–16; Lk 18:15.

It is clear that “those that do actually profess faith in and obedience unto Christ” should be baptised: “And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptised shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned” (Mk 16:15–16); “And Philip said, If thou believest with all thine heart, thou

mayest. And he answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. And he commanded the chariot to stand still: and they went down both into the water, both Philip and the eunuch; and he baptised him” (Acts 8:37–38).

Baptism of “infants of one, or both, believing parents” is however not as explicitly commanded in the Scripture, for which reason our Baptist brethren, in particular, object to the practice. The practice is, however, firmly biblical.

- *Firstly*, we have already seen that baptism in the New Testament is equivalent of circumcision in the Old Testament as the sign and seal of the Covenant of Grace. As infants were applied the sign and seal of the Covenant of Grace by circumcision though they understood not the significance of it, so in the New Testament, it is right that children may also be applied the sign and seal of the Covenant of Grace by baptism. Thus Peter proclaimed: “Repent, and be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost. For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call” (Acts 2:38–39). What about the fact that only baby boys were circumcised? Well, the New Testament not only give us the warrant to baptise girls and women as in the case Lydia’s baptism, but Paul says: “For as many of you as have been baptised into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. And if ye be Christ’s, then are ye Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Gal 3:27–29). Note that Paul was contrasting circumcision with baptism. What about the fact that babies were circumcised at 8 days old (Gen 17:12)? Well, apart from possible physiological reasons, the number 8, which is 7 + 1 is probably a symbolic number pointing to completion of the Old Covenant and beginning of the New Covenant (when all bloody ordinances would be abrogated or replaced with bloodless ordinances).
- *Secondly*, infant baptism is founded on the fact that God views Christian families organically, so that when the head of household is a believer, then the whole family regarded as being covenantally holy. This has always been the way that God views families. We see for example how God saved Noah and his family although only Noah is said to have found grace with the Lord (Gen 6:8–9). We see it in God’s dealing with Abraham (Gen 17:7). An infant born into a covenant family under the Old Covenant was automatically part of the visible covenant community and was to be circumcised to ratify his membership and to signify to the rest of the community that he is a covenant child. The circumcision is not efficacious until the Lord circumcises the child’s heart. But until then, he is considered part of the covenant community, externally, and he is to receive the benefits of being part of the community, such as being instructed and taught the way of the Lord and to worship with the covenant assembly.

In the New Testament, God continues to view the families organically and covenantally. Thus we read of the Lord Jesus raising Jairus’ daughter on account of her father’s faith; raising the widow’s dead son out of compassion for her; healing the epileptic boy because of his father’s faith; and healing the son of an official of the city of Capernaum on account of his faith. This is why when the Lord came to stay with Zacchaeus, he said: “This day is salvation come to this house, forso much as he also is a son of Abraham” (Lk 19:9).

Peter in his Pentecostal sermon also suggests that when believers are engrafted into Christ, their children are subject to God's covenantal promises (Acts 2:38–39; cf. Gal 3:14–16, 29).

This principle is also confirmed in 1 Corinthians 7:14, where Paul argues that even the children of a family which has only one believing parent are relationally and covenantally holy, i.e., set apart to God together with the believing parent. But there is a problem: 1 Corinthians 7:14 indicates that the unbelieving spouse is also covenantally holy is it not? To be fair in our interpretation, should we not also baptise the unbelieving spouse? Well, I believe that if the spouse did not consciously object to the faith, he / she would also be baptised. In other words, the norm in those days would be household baptisms rather than individual baptisms, though an unbelieving and consciously objecting spouse certainly would not be forced to be baptised.

This fact is confirmed in the records of baptism in the books of Acts and 1 Corinthians. Several household (not just husband and wife) baptisms were recorded in these books: (1) the household of Lydia (Acts 16:15); (2) the household of the Philippian jailer (Acts 16:33); (3) the household of Stephanas (1 Cor 1:16); (4) almost certainly the household of Cornelius (Acts 10:24, 46, 48); and (5) the household of Crispus (Acts 18:8). The evidence suggests that it was the common practice in those days for whole families to be baptised. In the first century, where the head of the household had a very important place in the family and the society, it would have been an exception rather than the rule for anyone in a household to disagree with the head of the house. True, every adult will be responsible to repent and believe individually, but the family solidarity is so strong in those days that if you read Acts alone, you will get the impression that whole households were baptised solely on account of the faith of the head of the household. Thus, no mention is made of the faith of the members in Lydia's household; and the Greek of Acts 16:34 tells us that it was the Philippian Jailer who believe; the phrase "with all his house" is one word (*panoikiv*) in the Greek, which suggests that they were represented by the Jailer. These records suggests that Luke had in mind that it is normal and correct for the whole family to be baptised on account of the faith of the head of household. Indeed, if Luke, had not intended to convey that idea, then he would be an ambiguous and misleading historian.

I believe, Luke, writing under inspiration, was accurately reflecting what was being practised in the church. And the basis of this practice is simply the unchanging doctrine of the covenant and organic family. This being the case, it would have been odd if whole families were baptised and included into the covenant community, but the young children were forbidden. It is no wonder that the church father Origen believed that the doctrine of Infant Baptism was passed down from the Apostles. Origen himself was baptised as an infant in A.D. 185.

The first century Christians probably did not have the same problem of understanding that we may have. Having their infants baptised was probably understood as a natural extension to the Abrahamic covenant (especially for the Jews), or simply practised without question in view of the strong family solidarity of the age. In fact, to deny baptism for the children would probably have been more awkward for the first century believer than to include them. If infant baptism is forbidden, or unbiblical, the Apostles would probably have written against it. Thus, their relative silence speaks more loudly for the doctrine than against the doctrine.

On the Efficacy of Baptism

28.5 *Although it be a great sin to contemn or neglect this ordinance,¹ yet grace and salvation are not so inseparably annexed unto it, as that no person can be regenerated or saved without it,² or that all that are baptised are undoubtedly regenerated.³*

¹Lk 7:30; Ex 4:24–26; ²Rom 4:11; Acts 10:2, 4, 22, 31, 45, 47; ³Acts 8:13, 23.

This section teaches us two important points of doctrine pertaining to baptism:

1. “Grace and salvation are not so inseparably annexed unto it, as that no person can be regenerated or saved without it.” Although the sacramental union between ritual-baptism and real-baptism is taught and assumed in the Scriptures, so that there is not a clean dichotomy between the sign and the things signified, yet it is clear that they are not inextricably tied together so that no one can be regenerate without being baptised, as Rome teaches. This distinction between the ritual-baptism and real-baptism is clearly indicated in the Scripture:
 - a. The Lord told Nicodemus: “Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (Jn 3:3) and the Apostle Paul says: “For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God” (Eph 2:8). Even faith is a gift of God through regeneration, it is not the condition for salvation, how then can baptism be a condition?
 - b. Abraham had righteousness of faith before he was circumcised (Rom 4:11).
 - c. Paul, writing to the Corinthians, says: “I thank God that I baptised none of you, but Crispus and Gaius” (1 Cor 1:14). If Paul believed in baptismal regeneration, it would be a very strange thing to say, for he would be thanking God that he was not instrumental in the salvation of any.
 - d. The penitent thief on cross did not have opportunity for baptism, and yet he was certainly saved, for the Lord said: “And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise” (Lk 23:43).
 - e. On the other hand, Simon Magus was baptised, but he remained “in the gall of bitterness, and in the bond of iniquity” (Acts 8:13, 23).
2. However, “a great sin to contemn or neglect this ordinance.” Notice that the way in which the Westminster divines phrase the paragraph shows that the contempt of the ordinance was not such a great problem in the 17th century as it is today.

The sentiments expressed in our Confession is well expressed by Robert Shaw: “Baptism is an instituted means of salvation, and the contempt of it must be a great sin on the part of the parents, though the neglect cannot be ascribed to the child before he arrives at maturity, and cannot, therefore, involve him in the guilt” (*Exposition of WCF*, 346). Shaw rightly emphasises the neglect of baptism for infants because few adult believers will neglect the ordinance, but is there a basis for his and our Confessional assertion that it is a “great sin to contemn or neglect this ordinance”? Yes, the basis is found in the ‘proof-text’ given in our Confession:

And it came to pass by the way in the inn, that the LORD met him [Moses], and sought to kill him. Then Zipporah took a sharp stone, and cut off the foreskin of

her son, and cast it at his feet, and said, Surely a bloody husband art thou to me. So he let him go: then she said, A bloody husband thou art, because of the circumcision (Ex 4:24–26).

Moses, as a leader of the covenant people of God, had neglected the sign and seal of the covenant for his own children. It was a neglect so grievous the Lord sought to kill him. We live today in a dispensation of greater light and communication of the Holy Spirit, would not our neglect of duty be equally grievous?

What about our Baptist brethren and those who are yet to be persuaded of infant baptism? I believe that God is no respecter of persons (Acts 10:34), the importance of a sacrament is not diminished by personal inability to understand or accept the doctrine. However, recognising that we are all sinners saved by grace, we do not condemn our brethren, but urge them to study the issue with a mind open to the Scripture and we admonish them that they should consider that they will be guilty of neglect and contempt of God's ordinance if indeed the Scripture does require infants to be baptised, as we believe it does.

28.6 The efficacy of Baptism is not tied to that moment of time wherein it is administered;¹ 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.²

¹Jn 3:5, 8; ²Gal 3:27; Tit 3:5; Eph 5:25–26; Acts 2:38, 41.

We have already touch on this paragraph in our exposition of *WCF 27.3*, where we noted that baptism is a means by which the benefit of the covenant, namely regeneration is applied, though the actual application is not dependant on the time of the baptism, i.e., it may be before or after. We reiterate again that this is not the same as the doctrine of baptismal regeneration, which teaches that salvation and grace is inextricably annexed to water baptism. But there is enough evidence in Scripture for us to confess that “the grace promised is not only offered, but really exhibited and *conferred* by the Holy Ghost” in baptism:

- Mark 16:16—“He that believeth and is baptised shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned.”

This verse not only show the greater priority of faith, but also baptism as the ordinary means of salvation.

- 1 Peter 3:21—“The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us (not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God,) by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”

This verse shows that salvation is dependant on inward grace, but nevertheless shows us the ordinary means is baptism.

- Galatians 3:27—“For as many of you as have been baptised into Christ have put on Christ.”

It is clear that Paul is talking about water baptism and what it symbolises. There is no evidence at all that Paul ever speak about baptism without a reference to water baptism.

- John 3:5—“Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.”

The meaning of the phrase “born of water” is greatly disputed, but it is taken by numerous theologians who believe in sovereign grace in salvation as referring to baptism.

Commenting on the phrase, the *Westminster Annotated Commentary of the Whole Bible*, purportedly written by the Westminster divines or their associates states:

“Of baptism the sacrament of regeneration, which is the ordinary way into the Church and kingdom of God, though his grace be not tied to external means: and it is the contempt, not the privation of the sacrament which condemneth.”

John Owens, commenting on the verse remark:

“by the Spirit, as the principal efficient cause; and by water, as the pledge, sign, and token of it, in the initial seal of the covenant...” (Works [BOT], 3.208).

Matthew Henry comments most judiciously:

“It is probable that Christ had an eye to the ordinance of baptism, which John had used and he himself had begun to use, ‘You must be born again of the Spirit,’ which regeneration by the Spirit should be signified by washing with water, as the visible sign of that spiritual grace: not that all they, and they only, that are baptised, are saved; but without that new birth which is wrought by the Spirit, and signified by baptism, none shall be looked upon as the *protected privileged* subjects of the *kingdom of heaven*” (Comm [Hendrickson], 5.713b).

The doctrine taught in this paragraph may best be understood if we remember the statement in *WCF* 25.2 that out of the visible Church, “there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.” A person may be saved who is outside the visible church, but only in extraordinary circumstances. So we may say that a person may be saved without baptism, but only in extraordinary circumstances. We remember that a person is in the visible church by profession of faith, and a person born to believing parents is also a member of the visible church by the Covenant of Grace. But a wilful neglect of baptism is equivalent to cutting a person off from the visible covenant community or the visible church, albeit passively.

On the Frequency of Baptism

28.7 *The sacrament of Baptism is but once to be administered unto any person.*¹

¹*Tit* 3:5.

Baptism may not be administered more than once to any person without holding the sacrament in contempt seeing that: (1) baptism symbolises inward grace that once bestowed is not retracted; (2) baptism is not a necessary work unto salvation: “Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost” (*Tit* 3:5); and (3) the efficacy of baptism is “not tied to that moment of time wherein it is administered.”

What about the case of a person baptised as an infant or adult in a Mormon church or a church that does not believe that God is Triune? I believe that his baptism would not be a

valid baptism and he should seek to be baptised in the name of the Triune God in a Christian Church.

What about in the case of the Roman Catholic church? Though we do not regard the Roman Catholic church as a true Church of God, yet, baptism in the Roman Catholic church is in the name of the Holy Trinity. Thus Calvin spoke against the need for those who have been baptised in the Roman Catholic church to be baptised again:

A sacrament must not be judged by the hand of the one by whom it is ministered, but as if it were from the very hand of God, from whom it doubtless has come. From this we may infer that nothing is added to it or taken from it by the worth of him by whose hand it is administered. Among men, if a letter is sent, provided the handwriting and seal are sufficiently recognised, it makes no difference who or of what sort the carrier is. In like manner, it ought to be enough for us to recognise the hand and seal of our Lord in His sacraments, whatever carrier may bring them. ... when we teach what ought to be done in order that baptism may be pure and free from defilement, we do not abolish God's ordinance, however idolaters may corrupt it. For when in ancient times circumcision was corrupted by many superstitions, it did not cease nevertheless to be regarded as a symbol of grace (*ICR* 4.15.16).