BAPTISM AS A MEANS OF GRACE

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The meaning of the sacrament of Holy Baptism has not been vague and ambiguous in the Reformed branch of Christendom. In its liturgies and creeds this branch of the Church of Jesus Christ has taken a very definite stand on the meaning contained in the rite of baptism. The Reformed Church in America, as one segment of the Reformed faith, has always taken a strong stand on this matter also. For the members of the Reformed Church in America the meaning of baptism is interpreted in The Liturgy in "The Office for the Administration of Baptism." Definitive statements on this matter are also found in two of the creeds of this church, The Heidelberg Catechism and The Belgic Confession of Faith.

"The Office for the Administration of Baptism," as contained in The Liturgy, is used for every administration of the rite. It begins with a presentation of the "principal parts of the doctrine of Holy Baptism..." These three are:

*First.* That we, with our children, are conceived and born in sin, and therefore are children of wrath, insomuch that we cannot enter into the kingdom of God, except we are born again. This the dipping or sprinkling with water teaches us, whereby the impurity of our souls is signified, and we are admonished to loathe and humble ourselves before God, and seek our purification and salvation without ourselves.

*Secondly.* Holy Baptism witnesseth and sealeth unto us the washing away of our sins, through Jesus Christ. Therefore we are baptized in the Name of the Father, and the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. For when we are baptized in the Name of the Father, God the Father witnesseth and sealeth unto us that He doth make an eternal covenant of grace with us, and adopts us for His children and heirs, and therefore will provide us with every good thing, and avert all evil or turn it to our profit. And when we are baptized in the Name of the Son, the Son sealeth unto us that He doth wash us in His blood from all our sins, incorporating us into the fellowship of His death and resurrection, so that we are freed from all our sins and accounted righteous before God. In like manner, when we are baptized in the Name of the Holy Ghost, the Holy Ghost assures us, by this Sacrament, that He will dwell in us, and sanctify us to be members of Christ, apply unto us that which we have in Christ, namely, the washing away of our sins and the daily renewing...
of our lives, till we shall finally be presented without spot or
wrinkle among the assembly of the elect in life eternal.

Thirdly. Whereas in all covenants there are contained two parts,
therefore are we by God, through Baptism, admonished of and
obliged unto new obedience, namely, that we cleave to this one
God, Father, Son and Holy Ghost; that we trust in Him and
love Him with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our
mind, and with all our strength; that we forsake the world, cru­
cify our old nature, and walk in a new and holy life.¹

The first statement is a negative preparation for the presentation of the
meaning of baptism. It sets forth man's need of salvation of which bap­
tism is a sign. The main teaching of *The Liturgy* concerning baptism is
found in the second paragraph. *Baptism* is here related to the work of
the Trinity, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. In
relation to God the Father, baptism means that He has elected the bap­
tized persons to be members of his eternal covenant. In relation to God
the Son, baptism means that those baptized share in the death and resur­
rection of Jesus thus making them free from all of their sins. In relation
to God the Holy Spirit, it means that the baptized are anointed with Him
and assured that He will remain with them. The teaching of this liturgical
statement concerning the meaning of the sacrament of baptism is in com­
plete accord with the Heidelberg Catechism and the Belgic Confession,
so therefore it is not necessary to present their teachings here.

The fidelity of our Reformed liturgy and standards to the New Testa­
ment teaching regarding baptism has been ably demonstrated by others.
Although this is a profitable study it cannot enter into this discussion.
The primary question is whether or not all of this meaning can be at­
tached to the sacrament of baptism. Does everyone who is baptized receive
all of these blessings? Does the mere fact of having the water of baptism
placed upon one's head assure him that these blessings are his? There
have been many answers to these questions. We will notice two of them,
the Roman Catholic and the Anabaptist. It will then remain for us to
formulate the Reformed position on this question.

Probably the most distinctive aspect of Roman Catholic sacramental
theology is its position set forth in the formula *ex opere operato*. Rome
has always held that after the proper conditions for the sacrament have
been met it functions automatically. It works because the work has been
performed. Roman Catholicism believes that there must be a sensible
sign, one authorized to give the sacrament, the intention to give the sign,
and no negative block in the recipient which would hinder the working
of the sacrament; then the meaning of the sacrament will certainly be ful­
filled in the recipient. Thus to Rome there is no question that if the

¹*The Liturgy of the Reformed Church in America*, pp. 10f.
sacrament has been performed properly that sacrament will operate as a means of grace in the life of the recipient.

Rome has also given a very distinctive meaning to the sacrament of baptism. In the Middle Ages the Catholic theologians began to subjugate the meaning of baptism. It was thought that the real work of baptism was performed in the life of the baptized. The recipient of baptism was inwardly cleansed from all sin, and his old life was completely ended. The baptized stood perfect before God at the moment of his baptism. It now remained for him to continue in this state.

... the baptized person, at the moment of baptism, is no longer a sinner deserving in himself the wrath and punishment of God, but a spotless saint, washed from every stain of sin and endowed with graces to enable him to persevere in the new life which he himself has now actually begun.2 To the Roman Catholic baptism was such a great means of grace that it completely changed his old nature. It, working ex opere operato, changed the sinner into a saint.

This view raises serious problems concerning the meaning of the rite of baptism, but aside from these it is necessary to look upon its teaching that there is no salvation without baptism (except in extremely unusual circumstances). This is too extreme a view of baptism as a means of grace. It attributes too much to the sacrament of baptism. This is especially true because of Rome's doctrine expressed by the words ex opere operato. Baptism cannot be regarded as an absolute necessity for salvation. This is to replace the symbolical character of the sacrament with the reality of grace.

The Anabaptists were concerned about the Roman Catholic doctrine of baptism. They believed that it was too subjective, and not related closely enough to repentance and faith.

Indeed, so rigorous is it in opposition to the earlier errors that it will not allow baptism without a profession of repentance and faith, so that there can be no question of an empty sacramentalism.3

The only person that the Anabaptists would baptize was one who could make a definite confession of faith in Jesus Christ. They viewed baptism as having meaning only for those who had subjectively responded to the call of the Gospel.

To the Anabaptists baptism did not operate as a means of grace. It only provided a witness to the repentance and faith of the baptized. The sacrament had no meaning for the individual but was used as a witness

3Ibid., p. 52.
to the rest of the congregation of the individual’s faith and repentance. This is too low a view of baptism as a means of grace; it is, in fact, a denial of it. A proper understanding of baptism as a means of grace will have to avoid these two extreme errors.

The Reformed tradition has taken a different view of baptism as a means of grace. Reformed believers have not agreed with Roman Catholics that it operates mechanically and is necessary for salvation; nor have they agreed with the Anabaptists that it is only a witness to the Christian’s repentance and faith. *The Belgic Confession* takes a very definite stand on this matter:

We believe and confess that Jesus Christ . . . hath instituted the Sacrament of Baptism . . . by which we are received into the Church of God, and separated from all other people and strange religions, that we may wholly belong to him whose ensign and banner we bear, and which serves as a testimony unto us that he will forever be our gracious God and Father. Therefore he has commanded all those who are his to be baptized with pure water, \*in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost*: thereby signifying to us, that as water washeth away the filth of the body, when poured upon it, and is seen on the body of the baptized, when sprinkled upon him, so doth the blood of Christ, by the power of the Holy Ghost, internally sprinkle the soul, cleanse it from its sins, and regenerate us from children of wrath unto children of God. Not that this is effected by the external water, but by the sprinkling of the precious blood of the Son of God, which is our Red Sea, through which we must pass to escape the tyranny of Pharoah, that is, the devil, and to enter into the spiritual land of Canaan. Therefore, the Ministers, on their part, administer the Sacrament, and that which is visible, but our Lord giveth that which is signified by the Sacrament, namely, the gifts and invisible grace; washing, cleansing and purging our hearts and filling them with all comfort; giving unto us the new man, and putting off the old man with all his deeds.4

The Belgic Confession of Faith holds that there is grace communicated through the sacrament of baptism. The meaning of the rite of baptism is applied to the life of the baptized. This is because “our Lord giveth that which is signified . . .” It is through the Lord Jesus Christ that grace is given in the sacrament of baptism. Therefore baptism, to be a means of grace, must be in his name.

In the New Testament this fact is taught us especially in connection with the rebaptism of the Ephesian disciples.5 These men had been baptized with John’s baptism, which was only a baptism of repentance.


Therefore they had not received the gift of the Holy Spirit, which accompanied baptism in the name of Jesus Christ. Paul baptized them “in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.” In this baptism they received the gift of the Holy Spirit, and certainly all of the other gifts connected with the sacrament of baptism were given to them. Baptism does not magically convey grace. This grace is given by our Lord Jesus Christ, consequently baptism must be in his name. Only those who have been baptized in his name will receive the gifts of grace which are attached to the sacrament of baptism.

For the church today this means that baptism must always be in the name of Jesus Christ. This must not become a mechanical repetition of words. It must always be acknowledged in baptism that the Lord Jesus Christ gives the grace that is communicated. Unless this is the confession of the church it is to be doubted that baptism will be a true means of grace in it. It may then have no more meaning than the baptism of John had for the Ephesian disciples.

The Heidelberg Catechism also presents a prerequisite for baptism to be a means of grace.

Question 72: Is, then, the outward washing of water itself the washing away of sins? No; for only the blood of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit cleanse us from all sin. Thus to the necessity of baptism in the name of Jesus Christ, the Catechism adds the need for the operation of the Holy Spirit. The Catechism takes the position that without the operation of the Holy Spirit there will be no cleansing from sin in baptism. This holds true also in respect to the other elements of grace that baptism represents.

There are several passages in the New Testament which link the work of the Holy Spirit with the sacrament of baptism. “For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body — Jews or Greeks, slaves or free — and all were made to drink from one Spirit.” Grosheide, in commenting on this verse, writes:

Baptism receives significance only if there is an activity of the Spirit, hence the addition: in one Spirit . . . Where that work of the Spirit is wrought, people entirely different from one another form one body, a body which according to v. 12 may be called ‘Christ.’

Paul also links the work of the Holy Spirit with baptism in Titus 3:5: "he saved us . . . by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit.”

6 Acts 19:5.  
7 Nixon, op. cit., p. 39.  
8 I Cor. 12:13.  
... Paul, while he speaks directly about the Holy Spirit, at the same time alludes to baptism. It is therefore the Spirit of God who regenerates us, and makes us new creatures; but because his grace is invisible and hidden, a visible symbol of it is beheld in baptism.¹⁰

It is thus the Holy Spirit who applies the meanings contained in baptism to the life of the baptized. Without his operation this does not take place.

Calvin elaborates on the necessity of the operation of the Holy Spirit in his Institutes. There he writes:

The sacraments properly fulfill their office only when the Spirit, that inward teacher, comes to them, by whose power alone ears are penetrated and affections moved and our souls opened for the sacraments to enter in. If the Spirit be lacking, the sacraments can accomplish nothing more in our minds than the splendor of the sun shining upon blind eyes, or a voice sounding in deaf ears. Therefore, I must make a division between Spirit and sacraments that the power to act rests with the former, and the ministry alone is left to the latter — a ministry empty and trifling, apart from the action of the Spirit, but charged with great effect when the Spirit works within and manifests his power.¹¹

The sacrament of baptism, consequently, only operates as a means of grace when the Holy Spirit accompanies the outward rite with his applicatory power.

There is an analogy between the operation of the Holy Spirit in the sacrament of baptism and his operation through the Bible. Neither has an effect on the life of the recipient unless the Spirit operates through it. Men cannot understand the meaning and intention of the Word of God unless the Holy Spirit applies it to their lives. Neither can men receive a blessing of grace from the sacrament of baptism unless the Spirit operates through the rite.

The Holy Spirit acts together with the Word, without His power and action being contained in the Word; He acts likewise together with the water of baptism.¹²

God has promised to accompany the reading and preaching of His Word with the work of the Holy Spirit. In the same manner He has promised to accompany the performance of the sacrament of baptism with the action and power of the Holy Spirit. What God has joined together, let not man put asunder!

Calvin, whom we quoted above as stressed the need for the operation of the Holy Spirit in baptism, also stressed the fact that God has promised to accompany baptism with the work of the Holy Spirit. In a sermon in Galatians 3:26-29 he says:

Saint Paul here shows the means by which we are assured of our membership in the body of our Lord Jesus Christ. I have already said that there is no need for us to look for another cause than the pure bounty of God, for as we wander off elsewhere we are like men who are desperately thirsty and who yet turn their backs on the fountain of water. Let us learn, then, that it is God alone who, by His pure liberality, unites us to our Lord Jesus Christ, and does so by the secret operation of the Holy Spirit; yet He does not hesitate to work through baptism as through an inferior instrument...  

In his commentary on this passage Calvin also emphasizes that for believers God works through the sacrament of baptism with the power of the Holy Spirit. Thus the work of the Holy Spirit is necessary for baptism to be a means of grace, but God has promised to accompany this sacrament with the necessary power and work of the Holy Spirit.

The sacrament of baptism is related to the Word of God in more than just the fact that the Holy Spirit operates through both of them. The true preaching of the Word of God must be present in the church or baptism will not function as a means of grace. Although this does not receive extended treatment by him, Calvin does point this fact out in his Institutes. He writes:

The sacraments, therefore, are exercises which make us more certain of the trustworthiness of God's Word. And because we are of flesh, they are shown us under things of the flesh, to instruct us according to our dull capacity, and to lead us by the hand as tutors lead children.  

... the sacrament requires preaching to beget faith.

The sacrament of baptism can only be understood in relationship to the Word of God. Where this Word is not proclaimed, no understanding of the sacrament will exist. Calvin holds that the sacrament must be understood to beget faith, therefore for its true operation it must be accompanied by the preaching of the Word. Where the preaching of the Word of God is non-existent the sacrament of baptism will not function as a means of grace.

In stating that preaching must accompany baptism "to beget faith" Calvin implies that faith has a definite relationship to baptism as a means of grace. This is the last subject to be discussed as a prerequisite for baptism to function as a means of grace.

13Quoted by Marcel, op. cit., p. 163.  
14Calvin, Institutes, IV, xiv, 6.  
15Ibid.
In beginning his discussion concerning the place and function of faith in baptism Cullmann\textsuperscript{16} stresses the fact that there is a difference between faith’s function at the moment of baptism and its function in post-baptismal life.

When the New Testament speaks about falling away from the grace of Baptism, as in Heb. 6:6 and 10:26, this distinction is evident. If one can irretrievably lose the grace of Baptism it is clear that the later life of the person baptized is critical for the act of Baptism.\textsuperscript{17}

In developing this distinction he appeals to the example of the Israelites crossing the Red Sea as related by St. Paul in I Corinthians 10:1ff. All of the people were baptized into Moses.\textsuperscript{18} "Nevertheless with most of them God was not pleased; for they were overthrown in the wilderness."\textsuperscript{19}

What happened to all (\textit{pantes}) the members of the people, namely, the miracle of God, is opposed to what happened to \textit{tines}, whom that miracle did not suffice to save, since they did not respond to it with faith, but incurred the guilt of the sin mentioned there.\textsuperscript{20}

This also explains the majority of the references to baptism in the Pauline epistles. In these references Paul is exhorting Christians to become what they are, to live according to their baptism. He calls upon them to take to themselves in faith that which was signified to them in their baptism.

What then is the function of faith at the moment of baptism? Is it necessary to have faith to be baptized? It would seem from the baptisms recorded in the New Testament that a personal faith should be a prerequisite. The Philippian jailer and the Ethiopian eunuch were baptized because they believed. Therefore must not everyone whom we baptize today have a similar personal faith?

The faith of an adult becomes for Cullmann the sign for the Church that this person is a likely candidate for baptism. The Church cannot indiscriminately baptize all men, and therefore they must have some sign from God as to whom they should baptize. This sign is given to them in the faith of the adult.

The faith of a candidate is thus not a condition of the possibility of divine action; nor is it a guarantee of the future perseverance of the person baptized. It is a sign for the Church and a criterion to baptized adults of their being chosen.\textsuperscript{21}

\textsuperscript{16}I wish to acknowledge my reliance upon Oscar Cullmann’s, \textit{Baptism in the New Testament} (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1950).
\textsuperscript{17}Ibid., p. 47.
\textsuperscript{18}I Cor. 10:12a.
\textsuperscript{19}I Cor. 10:5.
\textsuperscript{20}Cullmann, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 49.
\textsuperscript{21}Cullmann, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 50.
Accordingly the faith of the baptized, at the moment of his baptism, does not determine the grace given to him. It is the post-baptismal faith which is of supreme importance. Pre-baptismal faith only serves to mark one as a likely candidate for baptism!

Against this it should be observed that the case of the infant, as exhibited in the relevant New Testament texts, is so far different from that of an unbelieving adult, that the natural membership of a Christian family conferred on him by his birth, or at least the possession of Christian parents, by reason of the sanctifying and baptismal solidarity affirmed, is a sign for the Church that the divine baptismal event will in his case be completed, and that he will really be incorporated in the Church of Christ. In the case of an adult candidate coming over from heathenism or Judaism, the natural sign of birth is lacking. But his affirmation of faith has an analogous function to perform for the Church, and is for this reason indispensable: it shows the Church that God will operate within the Church of Christ, and by the Spirit baptizes a man into it. The Church requires such a sign in order to avoid arbitrariness in the selection of persons to be baptized. This sign is provided for the Church by the birth of the child into a Christian family in the one case, and in the other by the faith of the adult.22

Adult baptism can therefore be held to be distinct from infant Baptism only in so far as prior confession of faith is demanded in the case of adults coming over from Judaism or heathenism. The doctrine of what happens in Baptism is nevertheless in both cases the same, since even with the adults the faith that is to be confessed after Baptism by mouth and deed is decisive. Faith thus essentially belongs to the second and not to the first act of the event of Baptism.23

The faith of the Church is also important for baptism. It is to be remembered how often Jesus healed people because of the faith of someone else (cf. Mark 2:5; Matt. 8:10; Mark 9:23ff.). In the same manner the faith of the congregation is to function during the baptismal act. In faith, the congregation is to call upon God in prayer, asking him to fulfill in the life of the baptized that which is promised.

Consequently we see that true faith must follow after baptism in order for it to be a means of grace. This faith must appropriate to the baptized that which was signified as being his in the rite of baptism. He must claim, through faith, those blessings which were promised to him by God in his baptism.

My baptismal faith is not simply faith in Christ's work in general but on the quite specific deed which he performed upon me at the moment of my Baptism in my being received into the inner circle of his Kingdom, that is, his earthly body.24

22 Ibid., p. 51.
23 Ibid., p. 52.
24 Ibid., p. 50.
An analogy can be drawn between the operation of faith in baptism and the matter of becoming a citizen of a country.\(^{25}\) The child whose parents are citizens of the country, automatically becomes a citizen at birth. It only remains for him to claim the advantages of his citizenship when he becomes of age. The person who likes to become a citizen of a country as an adult, must first show that he is desirous of taking this step. Having then followed the normal procedure, he may be initiated into citizenship. He too can then claim the privileges which his citizenship affords him. Whether a person becomes a citizen automatically through birth, or gains his citizenship through naturalization, he must as a citizen claim those advantages which are his. So too the baptized person must claim for himself, in faith, those promises which were given to him in his baptism. Failure to do so removes these promises from him, and baptism ceases to be a means of grace.

The prerequisites for baptism to function as a means of grace have been discussed. They are: (1) baptism in the name of Jesus Christ; (2) the operation of the Holy Spirit; (3) the true preaching of the Word of God; and (4) a faith which claims these promises for the baptized. Although this must not become mechanical, it is through the proper functioning of these four aspects that baptism becomes a means of grace. When they are present that which is signified and symbolized in baptism actually becomes the possession of the baptized. All of the various meanings and operations of grace which are attached to baptism in the New Testament, of which some were pointed out in the opening parts of this paper, become the personal possession of the baptized when these factors operate. Thus it is that baptism becomes a means of grace.

It remains only for us to point out the marvelous union that exists between the sacrament and that which it signifies. In his book on Calvin's view of the sacrament Wallace calls this "The Mystery of Sacramental Union."\(^{26}\)

In such sacramental action a union takes place between the divine element — the Spirit or action of God — and the human activity, so that the whole event is effectual in conveying the very grace depicted in its outward form.\(^{27}\) This sacramental union, we are told, is called a mystery by Calvin because he can find no natural analogy for it.

This union is so close and intimate that the thing signified can be identified with the sign.\(^{28}\)

\(^{25}\) For this analogy I am indebted to Karl Barth *The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism*. (London: SCM Press, 1948).


Calvin continually acknowledges that this union, which has been effected by the grace of God, exists and causes the sacraments to be effective means of grace. In his commentary on Acts 1:5 he writes:

So must we, in like manner, think that we are not in vain baptized with water by men, because Christ, who commanded the same to be done, will fulfill his office and baptize us with the Spirit.29

The grace of God has effected this sacramental union. Since God is present in them the sacraments are an effective means of grace. It remains for the Christian to accept this fact in faith and use the means of grace which God has given him.