

The Sacraments: A Reformed Perspective

Chapter 7: How Should Baptized Infants and Children Be Regarded?

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There are some important questions that often arise concerning infant baptism that need to be considered. Some common questions are: If baptism is a sign and seal of regeneration does it not then logically follow that the children of believers are regenerated during baptism? If the infants of believers are not necessarily regenerated at baptism, how then can baptism be said to be a sign and seal of regeneration? If not all children of believers are regenerated at their baptism, then how should the church regard covenant children?

Regarding the question of whether or not the children of believers are regenerated there have been three main streams of thought on this issue among Reformed theologians. Some of the early Reformed theologians speak in a manner that at the very least implies sacramental efficacy. Beza writes, “It cannot be the case that those who have been sanctified by birth and have been separated from the children of unbelievers, do not have the seed and germ of faith.”¹ Another early theologian Amandus Polanus says that the infants of believers should be baptized “because they have been purchased by the blood of Christ, have been washed from their sins, and possess therefore by the work of the Holy Spirit the thing signified.... Because the Holy Spirit is promised to them, they possess the Holy Spirit.”² This position, which is becoming more popular today with the rise of Shepherdism and the Auburn Avenue heresy, whose followers are sacramentalists, suffers from serious problems. First, such talk of the efficacy of baptism explicitly contradicts the historical examples in Scripture of people who were circumcised or baptized that did not receive regeneration or the Holy Spirit. In the Old Testament, Ishmael and Esau are notable examples. In the New Testament, we find Simon Magus (Ac. 8:9-24), Hymenaeus and Alexander (1 Tim. 1:20), and Demas (2 Tim. 4:10). Second, whenever baptismal efficacy is asserted, in every case whether by Romanists, Lutherans or high church “Reformed” thinkers (e.g., the Federal Vision), one must alter various clear doctrines in order to account for the fact that many people who have been baptized have fallen away and are not saved. One must redefine the meaning of regeneration, union with Christ, election and the perseverance of the saints.

The second view, which (like the first view) is held by only a few Reformed theologians, is that although the children of believers have a right to the covenant sign they are to be regarded as non-regenerated unbelievers until they exercise faith in Christ. R. L. Dabney, for example, repeatedly refers to baptized children as the “unregenerate members” of the church.³ He writes, “In a word, the end of this church authority, under which Providence has placed them [covenant children], is to constrain them to live Christian lives, in order that thereby they may come unto the Christian graces in the heart.... If these baptized unregenerate members are fully adult, and passed from parental control then the church-session must apply their restraint directly to them.

¹ Theodore Beza, *Confessio Christianae Fidei*, IV, 48 as quoted in Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997), 946.

² Amandus Polanus, *Syntagma Theologiae Christianae*, VI. 55 as quoted in Reymond, 946.

³ Robert Louis Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust [1878] 1985), 795-797.

The mere continuance of their unregeneracy, unfitting them for communion, will of course be no suitable ground for judicial prosecution. For the church is already uttering her standing censure against this, in their exclusion from the Lord's table."⁴ If these unregenerate church members cannot be controlled by the session and engage in gross immorality or scandalous sins, they are to be excommunicated by the session.⁵ The great southern theologian James Henley Thornwell even argues that baptized children should be regarded as of the world, carnal enemies of God and under church censure until they exercise saving faith in Christ. He writes,

But in heart and spirit they [that is, the baptized covenant infants] are of the world. In this aspect, how is she to treat them? Precisely as she treats all other impenitent and unbelieving men—she is to exercise the power of the keys, and shut them out from the communion of the saints. She is to debar them from all the privileges of the inner sanctuary. She is to exclude them from their inheritance until they show themselves meet to possess it. By her standing exclusion of them from the Lord's table, and of their children from the ordinance of Baptism, she utters a solemn protest against their continued impenitence, and acquits herself of all participation in their sins. It is a standing censure. Their spiritual condition is one that is common with the world. She deals with them, therefore, in this respect, as the Lord has directed her to deal with the world.... Is not their whole life a continued sin? Are not their very righteousnesses abominable before God? Repentance to them is not the abandonment of this or that vice; it is the renunciation of the carnal heart, which is enmity against God: and, until they are renewed in the spirit and temper of their minds, they can do nothing which the Church is at liberty to approve as done by them.... *As of the world* they are included in the universal sentence of exclusion, which bars the communion of saints against the impenitent and profane. They are sharers in its condemnation. They are put, as impenitent, upon the same footing with all others that are impenitent. As rejecters of Christ, they are kept aloof from the table of the Lord, and debarred from all the rights and privileges of the saints. Their impenitence determines the attitude of the Church towards them; for God has told her precisely what the attitude should be to all who obey not the Gospel. What more can be required? Are they not dealt with, in every respect, according to their quality?... Is it not equally clear that their condition, as slaves, determines their treatment in all other respects, until they are prepared to pass the test which changes their status? Is not this precisely the state of things with the Church and its baptized believers? Are they not the slaves of sin and the Devil, existing in a free Commonwealth for the purpose of being educated to the liberty of the saints?...But, until they come to Him, it as distinctly teaches that they are to be dealt with as the Church deals with all the enemies of God.⁶

The position of these southern theologians (like the previous position) has serious problems. In the Scriptures the children of believers are never treated as little pagans who are the enemies of Christ. The children were saved from the angel of death in Egypt (Ex. 12:12). They were delivered from the armies of Pharaoh by the supernatural action of God (Ex. 14:21ff.). The heathen were drowned. They are called holy by Paul (1 Cor. 7:14). Zechariah refers to covenant parents and their children as the apple of God's eye (Zech. 2:8). Perhaps these southern theologians were influenced by the Baptists and Arminian revivalists who were "highly successful" (humanly speaking) during the nineteenth century. They certainly have gone beyond the teachings of Calvin and the Westminster Standards on the issue of covenant children.

⁴ Ibid, 796.

⁵ Ibid, 796-797.

⁶ James Henley Thornwell, *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1986), 341-348.

The third view, which one could call mainstream Reformed thought and is the position of the Westminster Standards, is that the infants of believers are to be regarded as federally Christians and federally holy *before* baptism (see Westminster Directory for the Public Worship of God); that baptism is only “made effectual to the elect” (Larger Catechism 161); that baptism is a means of grace only when attended by the working of the Holy Spirit and when received by faith (Shorter Catechism 91); that the time of regeneration is not tied to the moment of the administration of baptism but can occur before, during or after baptism (Confession of Faith 38:6).⁷

The Reformed view is that while baptism is a sign and seal of regeneration, God only regenerates the elect (those for whom Christ died; those for whom union with Christ is possible); and, He sovereignly regenerates a person either before, during or after baptism according to His good pleasure. The Scripture is very clear on this matter. John the Baptist was regenerated *before* he was born or circumcised (Lk. 1:41). The Bible indicates that Jacob was very likely regenerated many years *after* his circumcision (Gen. 32:24ff.). Lydia, Cornelius and the Ethiopian eunuch were regenerated *before* they were baptized (Ac. 8:37); 10:47; 16:14). Paul was regenerated long *after* his circumcision and *before* his baptism (Ac. 9:6ff.). Abraham was regenerated long *before* his circumcision (Rom. 4:11). Further, there are many examples in Scripture of people who were circumcised as covenant children who were *never ever regenerated*. Therefore, attempts (whether by Romanists, Lutherans, Anglicans or high church Federal Vision “Presbyterians”) to connect regeneration to the moment of baptism, in all cases or even as the God-ordained normal course of events, have clearly contradicted Scripture. Baptism

⁷ Apologists for the Auburn Avenue theology who argue for an objective power in the sacrament itself (e.g., Peter Leithart, Rich Lusk) or “a type of *ex opere operato* connection to the new covenant” (Doug Wilson) often appeal to the writings of John Calvin as support for their position. Their quotes of Calvin, however, are not taken in their overall context. Calvin’s position was virtually identical to the Westminster Standards. He argued that the *Word of God and faith must accompany the sacraments*. “You see how the sacraments require preaching to beget faith” (4:14:4). The sacraments *do not sanctify in every case*. “Augustine’s statement is just as true: there can be invisible sanctification without a visible sign and on the other hand a visible sign without true sanctification” (4:14:14). That without a work of the Holy Spirit the sacraments accomplish nothing. “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. 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 make such 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” (4:14:9). Calvin quotes Augustine to the effect that *the sacraments are efficacious only toward the elect*. “Hence, that distinction (if it be truly understood), often noted by the same Augustine, between a sacrament and the matter of the sacrament. For the distinction signifies not only that the figure and the truth are contained in the sacrament, but that they are not so linked that they cannot be separated; and that even in the union itself the matter must always be distinguished from the sign, that we may not transfer to the one what belongs to the other. He speaks of their separation when he writes, ‘In the elect alone the sacraments effect what they represent.’ Again, when he writes thus of the Jews: ‘Although the sacraments were common to all, grace was not common—which is the power of the sacraments. So also the laver of regeneration [Titus 3:5] is now common to all; but grace itself, by which the members of Christ are regenerated with their Head, is not common to all.’ Again, he says in another place of the Lord’s Supper: ‘We also receive visible food this day, but the sacrament is one thing, the power of the sacrament another’ (4:14:14). He teaches that God has not resigned His office to the outward symbols; “that the inward grace of the Spirit, as distinct from the outward ministry, ought to be considered and pondered separately” (4:14:17). (All quotations are from John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Ford Lewis Battles trans, John T. McNeil, ed. [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960]).

does not confer the Holy Spirit, but it is the sign and seal that the Holy Spirit *has been, is or will be* effected.

When people separate the necessity of faith from the efficacy of baptism they enter the realm of sacramentalism and mysticism. Charles Hodge's comments on the necessity of faith and his comparison between baptism and the Word as a means of grace can help us avoid high church mysticism. He writes,

Baptism, however, is not only a sign and seal; it is also a means of grace, because in it the blessings which it signifies are conveyed, and the promises of which it is the seal, are assured or fulfilled to those who are baptized, provided they believe. The Word of God is declared to be the wisdom and power of God to salvation; it is the means used by the Holy Spirit in conferring on men the benefits of redemption. Of course all who merely hear or read the Word of God are not saved; neither do all who receive the baptism of water experience the baptism of the Holy Ghost; but this is not inconsistent with the Word's being the means of salvation, or with baptism's being the washing of regeneration. Our Lord says we are sanctified by the truth. Paul says we put on Christ in baptism (Gal. iii. 27). When a man receives the Gospel with a true faith, he receives the blessings which the Gospel promises; when he receives baptism in the exercise of faith, he receives the benefits of which baptism is the sign and seal. Unless the recipient of this sacrament be insincere, baptism is an act of faith, it is an act which and by which he receives and appropriates the offered benefits of the redemption of Christ. And, therefore, to baptism may be properly attributed all that in the Scriptures is attributed to faith. Baptism washes away sin (Acts xxii. 16); it unites to Christ and makes us the sons of God (Gal. iii. 26, 27); we are therein buried with Christ (Rom. vi. 3); it is (according to one interpretation of Titus iii. 5) the washing of regeneration. But all this is said on the assumption that it is what it purports to be, an act of faith.⁸

Thus, while we must reject *ex opere operato* concepts of baptism (and their high church "Presbyterian" counterparts) we must also reject the idea that baptized children are unclean, Christ-hating pagans. We must trust in the promises of God and regard our children as Christians and treat them accordingly. Peter Martyr Vermigli writes, "We assume that the children of believers are holy; as long as in growing up they do not demonstrate themselves to be estranged from Christ. We do not exclude them from the church, but accept them as members, with the hope that they are partakers of the divine election and have the grace and Spirit of Christ, even as they are the seed of the saints. On that basis we baptize them."⁹ The children of believers are members of the visible church; live under the promises of the covenant; exist under the care and privileges of the church and the special spiritual nurture of their parents or parent. Their baptism and church membership distinguishes them from the world. Because of their relationship to their parents and their baptism and church membership, they are responsible to trust in Christ, serve Him, renounce this evil age and fight against the world, the flesh and the devil. If they reject Christ and instead love the world they will receive greater judgment than children who were never baptized; who never had the privilege of Christian parents and church membership.

⁸ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 3:589. Francis Turretin concurs: "For the efficacy of a sacrament faith is required, devotion and an internal motion of the mind, both because the Scriptures expressly assert it (Mk. 16:16; 1 Cor. 11:27; Ac. 2:38) and because without faith it is impossible to please God (Heb. 11:6), and because the promise (which is continued in the sacrament) and faith are correlated...." (*Institutes of Elenctic Theology* [Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1997], 3:365.

⁹Peter Martyr Vermigli *Loci communes* as quoted in Robert L. Reymond, *Systematic Theology*, 946.

The position of the Westminster Standards or what we have called mainstream Reformed thought not only best comports with the testimony of Scripture but also is perfectly in line with Christian experience. Anyone who has a Reformed church with a good number of Reformed families knows that many covenant children cannot point to a time when they did not believe in Jesus or to a moment when they had a conversion experience. In other words their whole conscious life is a life of trust in God's Word and the Savior. Whenever they came into contact with the truth they immediately loved it and embraced it. There are other children, however, who did not have any interest in spiritual things until later in life. These people (although raised in the covenant) can point to a time when they began to have a saving interest in Christ. Sadly, there are others who never really believed in Jesus, who as soon as they were able left the visible church to indulge themselves in a love of the world, in sinful pleasures and materialistic vanities. Such people were in the covenant externally and the visible church; but, their baptism was never efficacious. They were never regenerated, saved, forgiven or made members of the invisible church. As Paul says, (Rom. 9:18), the elect are saved and the rest were hardened. Unfortunately, there are usually some Esaus in the visible church.

Some Differences between Circumcision and Baptism

Although the essential meaning of baptism and circumcision is the same there are some important differences that need to be noted.

(1) Circumcision is an ordinance that involves the shedding of blood and pain while baptism only involves the sprinkling with water. Also, circumcision had to occur on the eighth day while baptism can occur at any reasonable time in the child's infancy. The bloody aspect of circumcision and the eighth day are ceremonial aspects of the ordinance that pointed to the future Messiah, the person and work of Christ. "The Old Testament sacraments pointed forward to Christ and were the seals of grace that still had to be merited while those of the New Testament point back to Christ and His completed sacrifice of redemption."¹⁰ Circumcision occurred on the eighth day (or the first day of the second week of the newborn baby's life) because the resurrection of Christ (which is the beginning of the new creation or regeneration) also takes place on the eighth day (the first day of the week). The eighth day was the day of dedication of the firstborn son (Ex. 22:29-30). Jesus is the first born or firstfruits of all who are regenerated and believe (1 Cor. 15:20; Rom. 8:29; Heb. 12:23). The eighth day (or the first day) was the day of cleansing from defilement (Lev. 14:10; 15:14, 29). Circumcision on the eighth day points to covenant members' union with Christ in His resurrection on the eighth day and all the benefits that flow from that union (cleansing from sin, regeneration, definitive sanctification, etc.) A secondary reason is physiological. A number of scholars note that on or after the eighth day the blood coagulates better and the procedure is much safer.

(2) Another obvious difference is that circumcision was only applied to males while baptism is to be applied to both males and females. The fact that only males received the sign should not be taken to mean that under the old dispensation the female children of believers did not receive promised blessings of the covenant, for they certainly did. The Bible does not give us specific reasons for this difference in the administrations. Therefore, the best one can do is to attempt to form some reasons based on logical inference from Scripture. First, the seed of Abraham (the Messiah) was to be his (Abraham's) direct descendant. Thus, the circumcision of

¹⁰ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 619.

the male organ pointed to this fact. Once the Messiah was born, blood lines and genealogies were no longer of any importance. Second, it may also have reminded the people of the fact that sin and depravity passes from one generation to another. Thus, the ordinance once again pointed to the Messiah to come—the great deliverer from sin and death. Third, in the old dispensation one had to join himself to national Israel to become a member of the church. One had to leave behind his own unique tribe or nationality and become an Israelite. Thus, circumcision was fleshly. Fourth, in the old dispensation the sign had to be bloody and flesh had to be removed to symbolize the removal of the filth of the flesh in regeneration. The only unnecessary flesh, easily removed from the human body in God’s providence, is found on the male sexual organ.

With the coming of Christ genealogies and ceremonies involving blood are abolished and are no longer necessary. Therefore, in the new covenant era the bloodless sign is as easily applied to females as well as males. “Is it not one of the glories of the New Testament that there is now in Christ Jesus no longer male nor female, just as there is no longer Jew nor Gentile, bond nor free, barbarian nor Scythian?”¹¹

(3) There was a national aspect of circumcision that does not apply to baptism. When a person was circumcised in the old dispensation, they were not only joining the church but a particular nation with geographical boundaries, a temple, a king or political leadership, civil laws, specific tribes and a centralized cultus and priesthood. With the coming of Christ, Israel’s special status as a nation has been put away and thus baptism means entry into the church of Christ alone which is a trans-national organization. Baptism, which applies to all nations (Mt. 28:19), comports better with the extension of grace in the new covenant and the greater privileges of this new era. (The idea that this change somehow eliminates the covenant sign for infants is dealt with above).

Responsibilities That Accompany Baptism

The doctrine of infant baptism must not be held in isolation from the responsibilities that accompany this practice. Baptism carries with it certain obligations and duties on the part of Christian parents and the church as a whole.

Since children are members of the visible church and part of the covenant community, parents must raise their children up to believe in Christ, to obey His law and be faithful to God’s covenant. People who have their children baptized because of tradition and do not raise their children in the Christian faith are guilty of mocking God’s ordinance, taking the name of God in vain and treating baptism as a magic superstition. Baptism is the starting point of Christian discipleship (Mt. 28:19-20). Consequently, the practice of Reformed churches is for parents to make a vow before God (at the baptism of their child) to bring up their son or daughter in “the nurture and admonition of the Lord” (Eph. 6:4). It is important to realize that the doctrine of covenant headship and the wonderful promises of God related to the children of believers all presuppose that the children of believers do not automatically become faithful Christians; that parents have a sobering responsibility to live the faith before their children and diligently teach their children the whole counsel of God. When parents are bad examples and neglect family worship; attend a mediocre church; miss public worship for frivolous reasons; send their children to state schools (i.e., public schools) which are secular humanistic indoctrination centers; and let

¹¹ John Murray, *Christian Baptism*, 76.

their children watch hours of heathen trash of television every night, they should not be surprised when their children reject the faith.

Infant baptism must be rooted in the covenant faithfulness on the part of the parents. Believing parents are commanded to observe the law (Dt. 6:1), fear the Lord (6:2), keep all of God's statutes (6:2) and be careful to observe them (6:3). Baptized children need to grow up in explicitly Christian homes where Christ is first in all things. Parents are to love God with all their hearts (6:5) and must diligently learn God's Word and place it in their hearts (6:6). They in turn are to pass their total devotion to God to their covenant children. "But the mercy of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear Him, and His righteousness to children's children, to such as keep His covenant, and to those who remember His commandments to do them" (Ps 103:17-18). Every time the parents in a church observe a baptism it ought to remind them of their solemn duty to their children before God.

We need to understand that the minds of young children are very malleable with regard to learning good or the ways of evil. God has chosen the agency of parenthood to convey the blessings of Christ to covenant children. God blesses the children of faithful parents because: a) He promises to do so, and b) Faithful parents are the normal means by which children are taught the "sum of saving knowledge." Christian parents must exhibit the truth of the gospel before the eyes of their children every day. They must discipline their children to follow the true Reformed religion. "Do not withhold correction from a child, for if you beat him with a rod, he will not die. You shall beat him with a rod, and deliver his soul from hell" (Pr. 23:13-14). "Chasten your son while there is hope, and do not set your heart on his destruction" (Pr. 19:18). The phrase "while there is hope" implies that if diligent discipline is not applied to children by their parents there will come a time (from a human perspective) when the child or young adult is beyond hope. The God-given opportunity to shape the child's character in a biblical manner has forever been lost. Such parents were unfaithful to the vows they took during the baptism of their child. "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it" (Pr. 22:6).

The baptism of children is an ordinance with important parental responsibilities. Baptized children still have sinful natures and thus must be diligently taught, catechized and disciplined to fear and love the Lord. The training of these baptized children is necessary to obey God's promises; for covenant continuity between generations and godly dominion over creation (the cultural mandate). Discipline and instruction are the ordinary means used by the Holy Spirit to cause devotion to God in covenant children. A biblical emphasis on parental obligations helps us avoid the empty ritualism of sacramentalist churches (e.g., "christening" without biblical follow-up and nurture) and the atomistic individualism of Baptist evangelical churches (where children usually go to public schools and are exposed to religion in Sunday school classrooms for one hour a week).

The church as a whole also has responsibilities toward baptized children and their parents. The elders are to provide leadership and training so that parents have the tools necessary to raise up a godly seed. One of the main reasons that elders engage in family visitations is to inquire about the progress of covenant children. If there are problems, the elders can offer counsel and help. If there is serious neglect, admonitions and even discipline is in order if parents obstinately refuse to raise their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. The pastor, elders, and all church members are to pray for covenant children and are to encourage them and the parents to fulfill their vows. Paul instructed older women who have a lot of sanctified experience to teach young women "to love their husbands, to love their children, to be discreet, chaste, homemakers, good, obedient to their own husbands" (Tit. 2:4-5). The church's future is

dependent on our precious covenant children. We must not neglect our responsibilities to these little members of the covenant.

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