

# SACRAMENTS AND BAPTISM IN THE REFORMED CONFESSIONS

*by Cornelis P. Venema*

## Introduction

FEW STUDENTS OF the great reformation of the Christian church in the sixteenth century would quarrel with the thesis that it restored the centrality of the pulpit to the worship of the congregation of Jesus Christ. A casual observer of the architecture of the churches of the Reformation will immediately notice the central location of the pulpit in their sanctuaries and the prominence of preaching in the liturgy or form of worship. Convinced that Christ was pleased to communicate himself to his people through the living preaching of the Word of God, the Reformers uniformly insisted upon the central and indispensable place of the ministry of the Word as a means of grace.

However, this emphasis upon preaching was not intended to diminish the indispensable and integral role of the sacraments in Christian worship and the imparting of Christ's grace to his people. Though the Reformers opposed what they regarded as an unbiblical sacramentalism or sacerdotalism in the medieval Roman Catholic Church, they never embraced a spirit or practice of anti-sacramentalism. In the confessions and polemics of the sixteenth century regarding the nature and effectiveness of the sacraments, ample evidence is provided of the Reformers' conviction that Christ is pleased to dwell among and in his people, not only through the preaching of the Word, but also

through the proper administration of the sacraments which necessarily accompany the Word.

Indeed, when measured against the teaching and practice of the magisterial Reformers, the practice of many evangelical churches, even churches that stand historically in the tradition of the Reformation, represents a declension and impoverishment with regard to the sacraments. The architecture,<sup>1</sup> liturgies, and popular piety of many contemporary evangelical churches witness to an uncertainty at best, a relative indifference at worst, regarding the role of the sacraments in the ministry of the church. One of the factors, for example, fueling the fascination of some evangelicals with the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions, is the rich liturgical and sacramental practice of these communions.<sup>2</sup> Liturgical renewal for many evangelicals consists of a return to the teaching and practice of the ancient church, including all of the trappings and accoutrements of its sacramental administration. Compared to the perceived barrenness of the liturgy of many evangelical churches, the “smells and bells” of the ancient liturgies of the church seem attractive. Weighted with the approval of long-standing tradition, immune from the tendency to mimic the latest fashions of

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<sup>1</sup>In this connection, I am reminded of an incident from my days as a graduate student at Princeton Theological Seminary. In a course on the theology of Calvin, a professor was severely critical of the architecture in Miller Chapel, especially the presence of what he labeled an “altar” in front of the pulpit. As I recall the students’ reaction to this criticism—and these students represented a fair cross-section of the Protestant church in North America—most regarded the matter as too “trivial” to merit any comment and exhibited little or no interest in pursuing the subject further. I am informed that, in the recent remodeling of Miller Chapel, this architectural error has been remedied.

<sup>2</sup>For an introduction to this phenomenon and its causes, see “‘New’ Orthodox Attract Evangelicals,” *Christianity Today* 36/6 (May 18, 1992): 50,53; Thomas Doulis, ed., *Journey to Orthodoxy: A Collection of Essays by Converts to Orthodox Christianity* (Minneapolis, MN: Light and Life, 1986); Max Thurian and Geoffrey Wainwright, eds., *Baptism and Eucharist: Ecumenical Convergence in Celebration* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984); and Timothy Weber, “Looking for Home: Evangelical Orthodoxy and the Search for the Original Church,” *New Perspectives on Historical Theology: Essays in Memory of John Meyendorff*, Bradley Nassif, ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 95-121.

popular culture and piety, steeped in the rich liturgical and theological inheritance of the catholic church—the sacramental liturgy of these communions appeals to the sensitivities of those who have felt the absence of a genuine theology and administration of the sacraments as a means of grace in the modern Protestant church.

The problem with much of the so-called “liturgical renewal” movement, including the greater emphasis upon the sacraments in Christian worship, is that it is often born primarily out of reaction and lacks an acquaintance with and understanding of the historic sacramental theology of the churches of the Reformation. Continuing reformation among the churches, however, cannot be accomplished either by traditionalism, a return to the practices of the past uninformed by a living confession, or by progressivism, introducing changes for the sake of change.<sup>3</sup> For a Reformed church to be ever reforming (*ecclesia reformata semper reformanda est*), particularly when it comes to the subject of the sacraments, there must first exist a substantial acquaintance with and appreciation of the confessional and historic position of the church.

The following consideration of the teaching of the Reformed confessions on the subject of the sacraments generally, and the sacrament of baptism in particular, aims to contribute to such a reacquaintance with the reformational view. Admittedly, renewal in the church’s sacramental practice requires more than a consideration of the doctrine of the sacraments set forth in these confessions. Consistent with the reformation principle of *sola Scriptura*, the primary source and authoritative standard for understanding the nature and purpose of the sacraments must be the Word of God in Scripture. Nevertheless, because the confessions provide a corporate and unifying reiteration of what the churches believe the Scriptures to teach regarding the sacraments, their doctrine of the sacraments is more than of

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<sup>3</sup>Cf. Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition, A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol. 1: *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 9: “Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.”

merely historical interest. For churches that are confessional—and the Reformed churches are, if nothing else, confessional churches—a starting point for reflection upon the sacraments has to be the doctrine of the confessions. For these confessions represent the distillation of the churches' historic understanding and exegesis of the Scriptures. Contrary to the tendency in the modern evangelical churches to grant greater authority to the private opinions of individual theologians and exegetes, the Reformed churches have always insisted that the burden of proof, when there is a departure in practice and teaching from the historic consensus of the churches, rests with those whose positions are innovative. The choice here is not one between "biblicism" and "traditionalism," but between a biblicism unconstrained by the weight of the churches' historic reading of the Scriptures and an uncritical acceptance of whatever the confessions declare. When we consider the teaching of the confessions on the subject of the sacraments, accordingly, we are considering what the churches historically and unitedly believe to be the teaching of the Scriptures.<sup>4</sup>

My procedure in examining the Reformed confessions' doctrine of the sacraments and baptism will be as follows. The confessions selected, with the exception of the Scots Confession of 1560, have served and continue to serve as confessional standards of the Reformed churches throughout the world.

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<sup>4</sup>For a recent debate regarding the relation between the Reformed confession of *sola Scriptura* and the authority of the confessions in Christian theology, see John Frame, "In Defense of Something Close to Biblicism: Reflections on *Sola Scriptura* and History in Theological Method," *Westminster Theological Journal* 59/2 (Fall, 1997): 269-91; David F. Wells, "On Being Framed," *idem*: 293-300; Richard A. Muller, "Historiography in the Service of Theology and Worship: Toward Dialogue with John Frame," *idem*: 301-10; and John Frame, "Reply to Richard Muller and David Wells," *idem*: 311-18. The title of John Frame's contribution to this discussion betrays a false dilemma which pits *sola Scriptura* against a robust Reformed confessionalism. However, not only is *sola Scriptura* itself a Reformed confessional affirmation, but it also shapes the Reformed understanding of the confessions: they find their source and authoritative norm in the Scriptures. Only an anti-historical and individualistic evangelicalism could find a proper respect for the historic confessions to be inimical to the principle of Scripture alone.

These confessions, which were written during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, constitute the official, subordinate standards of these churches. They articulate, in the form of authoritative testimony, what these churches believe and teach. I will be treating these confessions in the historical sequence in which they were produced and adopted by the Reformed churches, beginning with *The French Confession of 1559* and concluding with *The Westminster Confession* and *Larger Catechism* of 1647-48. My primary interest will not be the historical occasion for the writing of these confessions, though, where this is critical to the interpretation of the confessions' statements, it will be noted. Students who are interested in these historical questions are encouraged to pursue them further by consulting the extensive literature available, some of which will be cited in the footnotes.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, though it would be possible to treat the doctrine of the sacraments and baptism set forth in these confessions in a *synthetic* or *topical manner*, I am utilizing a more *analytical* or *diachronic* method. My approach will be to provide a kind of commentary on these confessions, summarizing their teaching and highlighting any distinctive features of the particular confession under review.<sup>6</sup>

At the conclusion of this review of the confessions' teaching regarding the sacraments, I will summarize their teaching in a

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<sup>5</sup>For brief descriptions of the historical occasion for the writing of these confessions, see Cornelis P. Venema, "The Doctrine of Preaching According to the Reformed Confessions," *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 10 (1999): 135-83. I will not repeat these descriptions in what follows. This article should be read as a sequel and companion to my article on preaching in the Reformed confessions. For another recent exposition of the doctrine of baptism in the Reformed confessions, see Geoffrey W. Bromiley, "Baptism in the Reformed Confessions and Catechisms," *Baptism, the New Testament and the Church*, Stanley E. Porter and Anthony R. Cross, eds., *Journal for the Study of the New Testament, Supplement Series 171* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999): 402-18.

<sup>6</sup>I am tempted to apologize for the length of some of the following selections from the confessions. However, my primary purpose in this article is to acquaint readers with the confessional doctrine of the sacraments and baptism. Such acquaintance may best be achieved by reading the confessions, not my commentary on them.

more synthetic manner by identifying the chief and characteristic features of the historic Reformed view of the sacraments. In conjunction with this summary, the article will also address several issues relating to the sacramental practice of the Reformed churches today.

## The French (Gallican) Confession of 1559<sup>7</sup>

XXVIII. *In this belief we declare that, properly speaking, there can be no Church where the Word of God is not received, nor profession made of subjection to it, nor use of the sacraments. Therefore we condemn the papal assemblies, as the pure Word*

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<sup>7</sup>The English translation of the Gallican Confession, cited here and in what follows, is taken from Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom. Vol. III: The Evangelical Protestant Creeds With Translations* (Harper & Row, 1931; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985), 356-82. The French quotations are taken from a standard collection of the Reformed confessions: Wilhelm Niesel, *Bekennnisschriften und Kirchenordnungen der nach Gottes Wort reformierten Kirche* (A. G. Zollikon-Zürich, 1938), 65-79. Quotations from Niesel's collection throughout this article are referenced by page number and line number (e.g., 65.17 refers to page 65, line 17). In addition to these sources, important collections of the Reformed confessions, either in the original languages or in English translation, include: E.F.K. Müller, *Die Bekennnisschriften der reformierten Kirche* (Leipzig, 1903); Paul Jacobs, *Reformierte Bekennnisschriften und Kirchenordnungen in deutscher Übersetzung* (Neukirchen, 1949); Arthur C. Cochrane, *Reformed Confessions of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966); John H. Leith, ed., *Creeds of the Churches* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1963); Mark A. Noll, *Confessions and Catechisms of the Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991); *The Book of Confessions*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Office of the General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, 1966, 1967); Thomas F. Torrance, *The School of Faith: The Catechisms of the Reformed Church* (London: James Clarke, 1959); J.K.S. Reid, ed., *Calvin: Theological Treatises* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954); I. John Hesselink, ed., *Calvin's First Catechism* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997); and Joel R. Beeke & Sinclair B. Ferguson, *Reformed Confessions Harmonized. With an Annotated Bibliography of Reformed Doctrinal Works* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), a recent helpful harmony of the confessions. I should also mention a collection of the Reformed confessions in English or English translation that has been produced by Mid-America Reformed Seminary: *Ecumenical and Reformed Creeds and Confessions* (Classroom Edition; Orange City, IA: Mid-America Reformed Seminary, 1991). In the following, I will indicate which source and translation I am using for each respective confession.

*of God is banished from them, their sacraments are corrupted, or falsified, or destroyed, and all superstitions and idolatries are in them. We hold, then, that all who take part in these acts, and commune in that Church, separate and cut themselves off from the body of Christ. Nevertheless, as some trace of the Church is left in the papacy, and the virtue and substance of baptism remain, and as the efficacy of baptism does not depend upon the person who administers it, we confess that those baptized in it do not need a second baptism. But, on account of its corruptions, we can not present children to be baptized in it without incurring pollution.*

XXXIV. *We believe that the sacraments are added to the Word for more ample confirmation, that they may be to us pledges and seals of the grace of God, and by this means aid and comfort our faith, because of the infirmity which is in us, and that they are outward signs through which God operates by his Spirit, so that he may not signify any thing to us in vain. Yet we hold that their substance and truth is in Jesus Christ, and that of themselves they are only smoke and shadow.*

XXXV. *We confess only two sacraments common to the whole Church, of which the first, baptism, is given as a pledge of our adoption; for by it we are grafted into the body of Christ, so as to be washed and cleansed by his blood, and then renewed in purity of life by his Holy Spirit. We hold, also, that although we are baptized only once, yet the gain that it symbolizes to us reaches over our whole lives and to our death, so that we have a lasting witness that Jesus Christ will always be our justification and sanctification. Nevertheless, although it is a sacrament of faith and penitence, yet as God receives little children into the Church with their fathers, we say, upon the authority of Jesus Christ, that the children of believing parents should be baptized.*

XXXVII. *We believe, as has been said, that in the Lord's Supper, as well as in baptism, God gives us really and in fact that which he there sets forth to us; and that consequently with these signs is given the true possession and enjoyment of that which they present to us. And thus all who bring a pure faith, like a vessel, to the sacred table of Christ, receive truly that of which it is a sign; for the body and the blood of Jesus Christ give food and drink to the soul, no less than bread and wine nourish the body.*

XXXVIII. *Thus we hold that water, being a feeble element, still testifies to us in truth the inward cleansing of our souls in the blood of Jesus Christ by the efficacy of his Spirit, and that the bread and wine given to us in the sacrament serve to our spiritual nourishment, inasmuch as they show, as to our sight, that the body of Christ is our meat, and his blood our drink. And we reject the Entbusiasts and*

*Sacramentarians who will not receive such signs and marks, although our Savior said: 'This is my body, and this cup is my blood.'*

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One of the earliest statements of the faith of the Reformed churches in the sixteenth century is offered in the Gallican (French) Confession of 1559. This confession, which in its original draft was authored by Calvin, only to be revised by Calvin's student, De Chandieu, and the Synod of Paris of 1559, became the standard for the French Reformed Church and served as a model for the Belgic Confession of 1563, authored by Guido de Brès.

Written as a testimony to the French king and his fellow countrymen, the Gallican Confession sets forth in a comprehensive way the biblical teachings of the French Reformed churches. In its outline of the faith, this Confession follows a traditional order of topics: Article I confesses who God is; Articles II-VI deal with the subjects of revelation and Scripture; Articles VII-VIII speak of God's works of creation and providence, respectively; Articles IX-XI articulate the doctrine of sin; Articles XII-XVII treat God's purpose of election and provision for the redemption of his people through Christ; Articles XVIII-XXIV consider the application of this redemption by the Spirit through the gospel; Articles XXV-XXXVIII set forth the doctrine of the church, its ministry and sacraments; and Articles XXXIX-XL conclude with a brief statement regarding the ordinance of and limits upon the authority of the state.<sup>8</sup>

The subject of the sacraments is addressed in this Confession within the setting of its consideration of the ministry of the church. The redemption which has been accomplished for us by the Mediator, Jesus Christ, only benefits us when we become partakers of Christ through the ministry and communion of the church. Believers come to enjoy fellowship with Christ, not apart

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<sup>8</sup>Unless otherwise indicated, in what follows references to a Reformed confession's use of the "traditional" order of topics will assume that the order of the Gallican Confession is representative.



from the ministry of the church, but by means of the ministry of the Word and sacraments that Christ has entrusted to it. Though the Gallican Confession does not expressly affirm that “outside the church there is no salvation,” it clearly teaches that “no one ought to seclude himself and be contented to be alone; but that all jointly should keep and maintain the union of the Church, and submit to the public teaching, and to the yoke of Jesus Christ” (Art. XXVI). Christ is pleased to dwell among his people and to communicate the benefits of his saving work through the church’s ministry. Thus, to become a member of Christ is tantamount to becoming a member of the church.

The first explicit reference to the sacraments in the Gallican Confession occurs in the article dealing with the “true church” and the marks which distinguish it from the false church. Consistent with John Calvin’s identification of two distinguishing marks by which the true church is authenticated, this Confession maintains that “there can be no Church where the Word of God is not received, nor profession made of subjection to it, nor use of the sacraments.”<sup>9</sup> Measured by the standard of these authenticating marks, the Roman Catholic Church does not rightly bear the title of church of Jesus Christ. This does not mean, however, that no traces or vestiges of the true church remain within the Roman Catholic communion. Among these traces is the sacrament of baptism. Though the corruptions attending the Roman Catholic Church’s administration of the

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<sup>9</sup>French: “où la parole de Dieu n’est reçue, et on ne fait nulle profession de s’assuettir à elle, et où il n’y a nul usage des Sacremens, à parler proprement, on ne peut iuger qu’il y ait aucune Eglise” (72.40-43). For a summary of the identification of the “marks of the church” (*notae ecclesiae*) in the Reformed confessions, see Jan Rohls, *Reformed Confessions: Theology from Zurich to Barmen* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 174-177. The Gallican Confession reflects Calvin’s treatment of the marks of the true church in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John T. McNeill, ed. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960) where he designates only two marks: “where the preaching of the gospel is reverently heard (*ubi reverenter auditur Evangelii praedicatione*) and the sacraments are not neglected, there for the time being no deceitful or ambiguous form of the church is seen” (IV.i.8). As we shall see, several of the Reformed confessions follow the position of Bucer who spoke of discipline as a third mark of the true church.

sacrament of baptism make its use inadvisable, those who have been baptized in the Roman communion do not need a “second baptism” (*n’avoir besoin d’un second Baptême*, 73.7-8). The baptism of the Roman Catholic Church, however irregular, retains its validity since the “virtue and substance remain” (*et mesme que la substance du Baptême y est demeuree*, 73.4-5) and the “efficacy of baptism does not depend upon the person who administers it” (*l’efficace du Baptême ne depend de celui qui l’administre*, 73.5-6).<sup>10</sup> Though this conviction was common among the Reformers in the sixteenth century, the Gallican Confession is unique among the major confessions in expressly affirming the validity of baptisms administered within the Roman Catholic Church.

When taking up directly the subject of the sacraments, the Confession begins with an article that speaks of the sacraments in general,<sup>11</sup> and then treats in a series of articles the two sacraments of the New Testament church in particular, baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

So far as the general understanding of the sacraments is concerned, the Gallican Confession speaks of them as divinely ordained “pledges” (*gages*) or “seals” (*marreaux*) of the grace of God. Due to the weakness and infirmity of our faith, God has been pleased to “add” to the Word of the Gospel the sacraments as a “more ample confirmation” (*plus ample confirmation*) by which our faith is strengthened and aided. These sacraments are “outward signs through which God operates by his Spirit, so that

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<sup>10</sup>In rejecting the view that the sacrament’s efficacy depends upon the character of the ministrant, the Gallican Confession illustrates the Reformed churches’ concurrence with the ancient consensus of the church against Donatism. Donatism taught that the integrity of the minister was essential to the validity of the sacramental administration, whereas Augustine and the ancient catholic church argued that the minister’s role was strictly instrumental. For a brief treatment of this issue, s.v. “Donatism,” in the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Walter A. Elwell, ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 329-30.

<sup>11</sup>Sometimes this distinction between a general and particular doctrine of the sacraments is criticized as speculative, since the Scriptures only speak of particular rites and not generally of the sacraments. For a defense of the distinction and its Scriptural propriety, see G. C. Berkouwer, *The Sacraments*, trans. Hugo Bekker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 9-11.

he may not signify any thing to us in vain” (*qu’ils sont tellement signes exterieurs, que Dieu besongne par iceux en la vertu de son Esprit, afin de ne nous y rien signifier en vain*, 74.11-12). Though we ought not to confuse the outward sign with “their substance and truth” which is in Jesus Christ—indeed “of themselves they are only smoke and shadow” (*n’est rien qu’ombrage et fumee*, 74.15)—God has so conjoined the sacramental sign with the grace of Jesus Christ that they are instrumental to the communication of that grace. In this first article, summarizing the doctrine of the sacraments in general, the Gallican Confession emphasizes their divine authorship and use as effective instruments to communicate to believers the grace of God in Jesus Christ. Since they have been “added to the Word,” they are a subordinate and ancillary means of grace; the Word is the primary and preeminent means of communicating the gospel of Christ. Nevertheless, due to God’s having appointed them to this end, and due to the weakness of our faith, they are an indispensable instrument to convey the saving grace of God in Christ to the believer.

After this initial statement of the doctrine of the sacraments, the Gallican Confession takes up the particular sacraments of the new covenant and identifies their peculiar features. In the church of the new covenant, there are only two “common” sacraments, baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Baptism is given as a “pledge of our adoption” (*tesmoignage d’adoption*) and is the means by which we are “grafted into the body of Christ, so as to be washed and cleansed by his blood, and then renewed in purity of life by his Holy Spirit” (Art. XXXV). There is, therefore, a twofold washing that the water of baptism signifies and pledges to us: the washing away of the guilt of sin and the washing away of the pollution or corruption of sin. Though, as a sacrament of incorporation into Christ, baptism is received only once, its use and power “reaches over our whole lives and to our death, so that we have a lasting witness that Jesus Christ will always be our justification and sanctification.” Without elaborating upon the biblical argument for the baptism of children of believing parents, the Confession simply affirms that, “as God receives little children into the

Church with their fathers,” the children of believing parents should be baptized.

The last three articles dealing with the sacraments provide a defense of the efficacy of the sacraments as visible signs of God’s grace in Christ. Both in the Lord’s Supper and in baptism God “gives us really and in fact that which he there sets forth for us” (*Dieu nous donne réellement et par effect ce qu’il y figure*, 74.46). The “true possession and enjoyment” of God’s grace is given “with” (*avec*) the sacramental sign. Even though the water of baptism is a “feeble element,” nonetheless it “still testifies to us in truth the inward cleansing of our souls in the blood of Jesus Christ by the efficacy of his Spirit” (*nous testifier en vérité le lavement intérieur de notre ame au sang de Jesus Christ, par l’efficace de son Esprit*, 75.6-7). The sacramental signs are not to be identified with the grace which they signify; the blood of Christ washes away sin, not the water of baptism. However, because God has been pleased to appoint the sacrament of baptism as a pledge and sign of this washing, the sacrament is a genuine and effective instrument in communicating that grace to the believer. Through the sacrament, Christ is pleased to give himself to those who “bring a pure faith.”<sup>12</sup>

### The Scots Confession of 1560<sup>13</sup>

CHAPTER XVIII. THE NOTES BY WHICH THE TRUE KIRK SHALL BE DETERMINED FROM THE FALSE, AND WHO SHALL BE JUDGE OF DOCTRINE. ...*The notes of the true Kirk, therefore, we believe, confess, and*

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<sup>12</sup>The Gallican Confession insists upon the necessity of faith to a proper receiving of the grace communicated through the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. This is not, however, made explicit in the case of the sacrament of baptism. The obligation of faith is implicit nonetheless because the grace of the sacrament is the same as that communicated through the preaching of the Word and invariably demands faith on the part of the one who receives it. The efficacy of the sacrament does not reside in the mere performance of the sacrament (*ex opere operato*), but requires that the grace of Christ be appropriated through faith.

<sup>13</sup>The following text of the Scots Confession of 1560 is taken from *The Book of Confessions*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Office of the General Assembly of the UPC in the USA, 1967), 3.18.

*avow to be: first, the true preaching of the Word of God, in which God has revealed himself to us, as the writings of the prophets and apostles declare; secondly, the right administration of the sacraments of Christ Jesus, with which must be associated the Word and promise of God to seal and confirm them in our hearts; and lastly, ecclesiastical discipline uprightly ministered, as God's Word prescribes, whereby vice is repressed and virtue nourished. Then wherever these notes are seen and continue for any time, be the number complete or not, there, beyond any doubt, is the true Kirk of Christ, who, according to his promise, is in its midst....*

CHAPTER XXI. THE SACRAMENTS. *As the fathers under the Law, besides the reality of the sacrifices, had two chief sacraments, that is, circumcision and the passover, and those who rejected these were not reckoned among God's people; so do we acknowledge and confess that now in the time of the gospel we have two chief sacraments, which alone were instituted by the Lord Jesus and commanded to be used by all who will be counted members of his body, that is, Baptism and the Supper or Table of the Lord Jesus, also called the Communion of His Body and Blood. These sacraments, both of the Old Testament and of the New, were instituted by God not only to make a visible distinction between his people and those who were without the Covenant, but also to exercise the faith of his children and, by participation of these sacraments, to seal in their hearts the assurance of his promise, and of that most blessed conjunction, union, and society, which the chosen have with their Head, Christ Jesus. And so we utterly condemn the vanity of those who affirm the sacraments to be nothing else than naked and bare signs. No, we assuredly believe that by Baptism we are engrafted into Christ Jesus, to be made partakers of his righteousness, by which our sins are covered and remitted, and also that in the Supper rightly used, Christ Jesus is so joined with us that he becomes the very nourishment and food of our souls.... Therefore, if anyone slanders us by saying that we affirm or believe the sacraments to be symbols and nothing more, they are libelous and speak against the plain facts. On the other hand we readily admit that we make a distinction between Christ Jesus in his eternal substance and the elements of the sacramental signs. So we neither worship the elements, in place of that which they signify, nor yet do we despise them or undervalue them, but we use them with great reverence, examining ourselves diligently before we participate, since we are assured by the mouth of the apostle that "whosoever shall eat this bread, and drink this cup of the Lord, unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord."*

CHAPTER XXII. THE RIGHT ADMINISTRATION OF THE SACRAMENTS. *Two things are necessary for the right administration of the sacraments. The first is that they should be ministered by lawful ministers, and we declare that these are men appointed to preach the Word, unto whom God has given*

*the power to preach the gospel, and who are lawfully called by some Kirk. The second is that they should be ministered in the elements and manner which God has appointed. Otherwise they cease to be the sacraments of Christ Jesus. This is why we abandon the teaching of the Roman Church and withdraw from its sacraments; firstly, because their ministers are not true ministers of Christ Jesus (indeed they even allow women, whom the Holy Ghost will not permit to preach in the congregation to baptize) and, secondly, because they have so adulterated both the sacraments with their own additions that no part of Christ's original act remains in its original simplicity. The addition of oil, salt, spittle, and such like in baptism, are merely human additions....*

CHAPTER XXIII. TO WHOM THE SACRAMENTS APPERTAIN. *We hold that baptism supplies as much to the children of the faithful as to those who are of age and discretion, and so we condemn the error of the Anabaptists, who deny that children should be baptized before they have faith and understanding. But we hold that the Supper of the Lord is only for those who are of the household of faith and can try and examine themselves both in their faith and their duty to their neighbors. Those who eat and drink at that holy table without faith, or without peace and goodwill to their brethren, eat unworthily. This is the reason why ministers in our Kirk make public and individual examination of those who are to be admitted to the table of the Lord Jesus.*

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Unlike the other confessions that we are considering in this survey, the Scots Confession of 1560 is not one of the official standards of the Reformed churches. Originally written by John Knox, this Confession served for a period as a standard for the Scottish Presbyterian churches, having been adopted by an act of Parliament in 1560. Destined to be replaced by the Westminster Confession and Catechisms, it served in the earliest period of the reformation on the English isles as an important statement of faith and provided a benchmark for the later standards of the Presbyterian churches throughout the world. Though the order of doctrines bears some resemblance to the Gallican Confession of Faith and the Belgic Confession, some doctrines receive scant or little consideration, including the doctrines of revelation and Scripture, the Trinity, creation and providence. Though there are some resemblances to the treatment of the doctrine of the sacraments in the Gallican Confession, this Confession adds

certain emphases, including a vigorous polemic against the doctrine and administration of the sacraments in the Roman Catholic Church.

As in the Gallican Confession, the first reference to the sacraments in the Scots Confession occurs in connection with a designation of the “notes” by which the true church is distinguished from the false. According to the Scots Confession, there are three authenticating notes of the true church of Jesus Christ: “the true preaching of the Word of God”; “the right administration of the sacraments of Christ Jesus, with which must be associated the Word and promise of God to seal and confirm them in our hearts”; and “ecclesiastical discipline uprightly ministered” (Chap. XVIII). The true church is distinguished by the proper use of the sacraments which Christ has appointed for the benefit of his people. These sacraments accompany the preaching of the gospel promise, sealing and confirming that promise to their recipients.

In its treatment of the general doctrine of the sacraments, the Scots Confession affirms that, just as the fathers under the law were given two sacraments, circumcision and the passover, so God’s people in the new covenant have been given just two sacraments, baptism and the Lord’s Supper. These sacraments are not merely provided “to make a visible distinction” between those who are and those who are not numbered among the people of God. They are not simply badges of a Christian profession. Rather, they have been divinely ordained “to exercise the faith” of God’s people and “to seal in their hearts the assurance of his promise, and of that most blessed conjunction, union, and society, which the chosen have with their Head, Christ Jesus” (Chap. XXI). We are not, accordingly, to imagine that the sacraments are “nothing else than naked and bare signs,” as though they did not actually communicate the gracious promise of saving fellowship with Christ the Mediator. The sacrament of baptism genuinely serves to “engraft” the believer into Christ, so that we are made partakers of his righteousness and the recipients of the forgiveness of sins. This communication of God’s grace in Christ occurs only where the sacrament is

received by true faith. Where true faith apprehends Christ Jesus as he is attested in the sacramental sign and seal, we may be confident that the sacrament is no mere “symbol” of God’s grace but an effective means of its communication. This does not mean, of course, that the sacramental sign should be confused or identified with Christ Jesus himself “in his eternal substance.” But it does mean that God has been pleased to join the sign and the grace signified in the sacrament, so that the believer who receives the sign may be assured that he is also the recipient of Christ himself.

Perhaps the most striking feature of the Scots Confession’s handling of the doctrine of the sacraments is its extended polemic against the improper administration of the sacraments within the Roman Catholic Church. Unlike the Gallican Confession, which singles out baptism as a “trace” of the true church remaining within the Catholic communion, the Scots Confession roundly condemns the use of the sacraments in the Catholic church. Two things, it insists, are necessary to a “right” administration of the sacraments: first, “that they should be ministered by lawful ministers”; and second, “that they should be ministered in the elements and manner which God has appointed” (Chap. XXII). Because both of these are absent from the Roman church, its sacraments must be rejected altogether. With respect to the sacrament of baptism particularly, the Roman Catholic Church permits women, in cases of necessity, to administer the sacrament. Moreover, to the sacramental sign of water the Roman communion has joined “their own additions [so] that no part of Christ’s original act remains in its original simplicity.”<sup>14</sup> Though the Scots Confession does not directly address what is to be done in the instance of someone baptized in the Roman Catholic Church, the inference suggested by its

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<sup>14</sup>For a fine exposition of the form of the Latin baptismal rite in the period prior to the Reformation, see Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Shaping of the Reformed Baptismal Rite in the Sixteenth Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 1-32. Olds’ volume is an excellent treatment of the historical and theological aspects of the Reformed understanding of the sacrament of baptism in the sixteenth century.



teaching would seem to be that such a person still needs to be baptized, since the baptism of the Roman church constitutes no sacrament at all.

After its extended criticism of the administration of the sacraments in the Roman Catholic Church, the Scots Confession concludes its treatment of the sacraments by noting to whom the sacraments belong. Against the “error of the Anabaptists,” the Confession insists that baptism belongs not only to believers, but also to their children, even though the children do not yet have “faith and understanding” (Chap. XXIII). The Lord’s Supper, however, requires faith on the part of its recipients, since those who receive this sacrament must do so only after having tried and examined themselves.

### The Belgic Confession of 1561 <sup>15</sup>

ARTICLE XV. ORIGINAL SIN. *We believe that through the disobedience of Adam original sin is extended to all mankind; which is a corruption of the whole nature and a hereditary disease, wherewith even infants in their mother’s womb are infected, and which produces in man all sorts of sins, being in him as a root thereof, and therefore is so vile and abominable in the sight of God that it is sufficient to condemn all mankind. Nor is it altogether abolished or wholly eradicated even by baptism; since sin always issues forth from this woeful source, as water from a fountain; notwithstanding it is not imputed to the children of God unto condemnation, but by His grace and mercy is forgiven them....*

ARTICLE XXIX. THE MARKS OF THE TRUE CHURCH, AND WHEREIN IT DIFFERS FROM THE FALSE CHURCH. ...*The marks by*

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<sup>15</sup>The following English translation is taken from *Ecumenical and Reformed Creeds and Confessions*, 317-36. The citations from the French are taken from Schaff, *The Evangelical Protestant Creeds*, 383-436. The English translations of the Belgic Confession have historically been based upon a Latin translation which was commissioned by the Synod of Dort, 1618-1619. This Latin text is found in Niesel, *Bekentnisschriften*, pp. 119-36. In a break with this tradition, the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church in North America adopted a translation based upon the French text of 1619. For a comprehensive survey of the doctrine of baptism in the three confessional standards (Belgic Confession, Heidelberg Catechism, and Canons of Dort) of the Dutch Reformed churches, see H. Kakes, *De Doop in de Nederlandse Belijdenisgeschriften* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1953).

*which the true Church is known are these: If the pure doctrine of the gospel is preached therein; if it maintains the pure administration of the sacraments as instituted by Christ; if church discipline is exercised in punishing of sin; in short, if all things are managed according to the pure Word of God, all things contrary thereto rejected, and Jesus Christ acknowledged as the only Head of the Church. Hereby the true Church may certainly be known, from which no man has a right to separate himself. ...*

ARTICLE XXXIII. THE SACRAMENTS. *We believe that our gracious God, taking account of our weakness and infirmities, has ordained the sacraments for us, thereby to seal unto us His promises, and to be pledges of the good will and grace of God towards us, and also to nourish and strengthen our faith; which He has joined to the Word of the gospel, the better to present to our senses both that which he declares to us by His Word and that which He works inwardly in our hearts, thereby confirming in us the salvation which He imparts to us. For they are visible signs and seals of an inward and invisible thing, by means whereof God works in us by the power of the Holy Spirit. Therefore the signs are not empty or meaningless, so as to deceive us. For Jesus Christ is the true object presented by them, without whom they would be of no moment.*

*Moreover, we are satisfied with the number of sacraments which Christ our Lord has instituted, which are two only, namely, the sacrament of baptism and the holy supper of the Lord Jesus Christ.*

ARTICLE XXXIV. HOLY BAPTISM. *We believe and confess that Jesus Christ, who is the end of the law, has made an end, by the shedding of His blood, of all other sheddings of blood which men could or would make as a propitiation or satisfaction for sin; and that He, having abolished circumcision, which was done with blood, has instituted the sacrament of baptism instead thereof; 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 mark and ensign we bear; and which serves as a testimony to us that He will forever be our gracious God and Father.*

*Therefore He commanded all those who are His to be baptized with pure water, into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, thereby signifying to us, that as water washes away the filth of the body when poured upon it, and is seen on the body of the baptized when sprinkled upon him, so does the blood of Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit 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; who is our Red Sea, through which we must pass to escape the*

*tyranny of Pharaoh, that is, the devil, and to enter into the spiritual land of Canaan.*

*The ministers, therefore, on their part administer the sacrament and that which is visible, but our Lord gives that which is signified by the sacrament, namely, the gifts and invisible grace; washing, cleansing, and purging our souls of all filth and unrighteousness; renewing our hearts and filling them with all comfort; giving unto us a true assurance of His fatherly goodness; putting on us the new man, and putting off the old man with all his deeds.*

*We believe, therefore, that every man who is earnestly studious of obtaining life eternal ought to be baptized but once with this only baptism, without ever repeating the same, since we cannot be born twice. Neither does this baptism avail us only at the time when the water is poured upon us and received by us, but also through the whole course of our life.*

*Therefore we detest the error of the Anabaptists, who are not content with the one only baptism they have once received, and moreover condemn the baptism of the infants of believers, who we believe ought to be baptized and sealed with the sign of the covenant, as the children in Israel formerly were circumcised upon the same promises which are made unto our children. And indeed Christ shed His blood no less for the washing of the children of believers than for adult persons; and therefore they ought to receive the sign and sacrament of that which Christ has done for them; as the Lord commanded in the law that they should be made partakers of the sacrament of Christ's suffering and death shortly after they were born, by offering for them a lamb, which was a sacrament of Jesus Christ. Moreover, what circumcision was to the Jews, baptism is to our children. And for this reason St. Paul calls baptism the circumcision of Christ.*

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The Belgic Confession was originally authored by Guido de Brès, a French Reformer and student of John Calvin who patterned his statement of the Reformed faith after that presented in the Gallican Confession of 1560. De Brès offered the Confession as an apology or defense of the faith of the Reformed churches to Philip II of Spain. Though de Brès was martyred for his testimony, his Confession continued to live and was subsequently embraced by the Reformed churches of the Netherlands as an official statement of their faith. It remains to this day one of the preeminent statements of the faith among the Reformed churches throughout the world.

The doctrine of the sacraments, particularly the sacrament of baptism, receives more elaborate treatment in the Belgic Confession than in the two confessions we have treated thus far. This elaboration reflects in part the ongoing debates and conflicts regarding the sacraments in the sixteenth century. Not only were the Reformed churches opposed to the sacramental teaching and practice of the medieval church, but they were also increasingly at odds with the emphases of the radical reformation, especially the Anabaptist rejection of the practice of infant baptism. The testimony of the Belgic Confession reflects these ongoing debates.

The first reference to the sacrament of baptism in the Belgic Confession occurs incidentally in the context of a statement regarding the doctrine of original sin. In this reference, the Roman Catholic teaching that baptism wholly removes or abolishes the corruption of original sin is rejected.<sup>16</sup> Though the article dealing with original sin (XV) implies that baptism is efficacious to remove some of the guilt and corruption of original sin, its explicit purpose is to oppose the exaggerated view in the Roman Catholic Church of the sacrament's efficacy to expunge original sin.

The next reference to the sacraments in the Belgic Confession occurs in the traditional context of the doctrine of the church (Art. XXVIII). The catholic Christian church, according to the Belgic Confession, is "an assembly of those who are saved, and outside of it there is no salvation" (*l'assemblée des*

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<sup>16</sup>The classic Roman Catholic understanding of baptism's removal of the guilt and pollution of original sin is set forth in "The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent," Fifth Session, Decree Concerning Original Sin, 5 (quoted from Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom. Vol. II: The Greek and Latin Creeds* [Harper & Row, 1931; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985], 87): "If any one denies, that, by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, which is conferred in baptism, the guilt of original sin is remitted; or even asserts that the whole of that which has the true and proper nature of sin is not taken away; but says that is only rased [sic], or not imputed; let him be anathema. For, in those who are *born again*, there is nothing that God hates."

*sauvés, et qu'il n'y a point de salut hors d'elle*).<sup>17</sup> The redemptive work of Christ only benefits believers through the ministry and communion of the church, so that no one ought to separate himself from the true church. This true church may be distinguished from the false church by the presence of three marks: the preaching of the “pure doctrine of the gospel”; “the pure administration of the sacraments as instituted by Christ”; and the exercise of Christian discipline (Art. XXIX). Where these marks are evident, there Christ is present dwelling among his people and communicating his benefits to them.

In its ordering of the marks of the church, and in its treatment of the sacraments, it is clear that the Belgic Confession regards the sacraments as divinely ordained means, added to the Word in preaching, which are indispensable to the communication and confirmation of the gospel. Due to “our weakness and infirmities” (*notre rudesse et infirmité*), God has graciously ordained the sacraments for our benefit, “thereby to seal unto us His promises, and to be pledges of the good will and grace of God towards us, and also to nourish and strengthen our faith” (Art. XXXIII).<sup>18</sup> Thus, the sacraments do not stand alone, nor do they have any meaning apart from the preaching of the gospel. However, they have been “joined to the Word of gospel, the better to present to our senses both that which He [God] declares to us by His Word and that which He works inwardly in our hearts, thereby confirming us in the salvation which He imparts to us.”<sup>19</sup> Utilizing the traditional language of Augustine in his treatment of the sacraments, this Confession defines the sacraments as “visible signs and seals of an inward and invisible thing, by means whereof God works in us by the power of the

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<sup>17</sup>This expression and teaching echo the ancient faith of the Christian church. The language of the Belgic Confession at this point undoubtedly reflects a deliberate embracing of the ancient dictum of the church Father, Cyprian: *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*.

<sup>18</sup>French: “... pour sceller en nous ses promesses, et nous être gages de la bonne volonté et grace de Dieu envers nous, et aussi pour nourrir et soutenir notre foi.”

<sup>19</sup>French: “... il a ajoutés à la parole de l'Évangile, pour mieux représenter à nos sens extérieurs, tant ce qu'il nous donne à entendre par sa Parole, que ce qu'il fait intérieurement en nos coeurs, en ratifiant en nous le salut qu'il nous communique.”

Holy Spirit.”<sup>20</sup> The sacraments, accordingly, are not “empty or meaningless” but effective instruments in presenting and communicating Jesus Christ to his church.<sup>21</sup>

After treating the general doctrine of the sacraments, the Belgic Confession devotes one article to the sacrament of holy baptism and one to the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. These are the only two sacraments which “Christ our Lord has instituted,” and therefore we should be satisfied with these alone.

In its consideration of the sacrament of baptism, the Belgic Confession begins by describing its divine institution and meaning. With Christ’s sacrificial death upon the cross, God has made an end of “all other sheddings of blood which men could or would make as a propitiation or satisfaction for sin.” Circumcision, which involves a shedding of blood, has been abolished, and the ordinance of baptism has been instituted as its new covenant counterpart. By means of Christian baptism, believers are “received into the Church of God” and are separated from all others. Baptism is a “sign and ensign” that believers belong to God and that “He will forever be our gracious God and Father.”<sup>22</sup>

In the sign appointed for the sacrament of baptism, “pure water,” and in the words of institution—“*into the name of the Father*

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<sup>20</sup>French: “... *signes et sceaux visibles de la chose intérieurement et invisible, moyennant lesquels Dieu opère en nous par la vertu du Saint-Esprit.*”

<sup>21</sup>In this emphasis, the Belgic Confession follows Calvin who insisted that the sacraments not only “exhibit” but also “confer” the grace of Christ upon believers. There is some debate whether Heinrich Bullinger, Zwingli’s successor as chief pastor of the church in Zurich, embraced this instrumental view or continued the emphasis of Zwingli upon the sacraments as only “testimonies” to God’s grace. Cf. Berkouwer, *The Sacraments*, 75, who quotes the following statement of Bullinger against Calvin’s instrumental view: “*Sacramenta illa (dona) non exhibent aut conferunt, ceu exhibendi et conferendi instrumenta, sed significat, testificantur, et obsignantur.*” When we consider the Second Helvetic Confession, authored by Bullinger, we will have occasion to see whether Bullinger moved in the direction of or even embraced this stronger, instrumental view. I will also return to this issue in the conclusion of this article.

<sup>22</sup>French: “... *portant sa marque et son enseigne: et nous sert de témoignage qu’il nous sera Dieu à jamais, nous étant Père propice.*”

*and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*”—God intends to teach us that, “as water washes away the filth of the body when poured upon it,” “so does the blood of Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit internally sprinkle the soul, cleanse it from its sins, and regenerate us from children of wrath unto children of God.” Baptism is, therefore, a sacrament of incorporation into Christ and his people, signifying and pledging the washing away of sins through the blood of Christ and the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit. By means of the sacrament, the gospel promise is visibly represented and attested to the believer. This does not mean, however, that the water of baptism has an inherent power to remove sin; it remains a sign and seal of the invisible grace which is the sprinkling with the blood of Christ. In understanding the power and significance of the sacrament, it is necessary to *distinguish without separating* between the “visible sign” and the “invisible grace” to which it points: “The ministers ... on their part administer the sacrament and that which is visible, but our Lord gives that which is signified by the sacrament, namely, the gifts and invisible grace.”<sup>23</sup>

In the concluding portion of its article on holy baptism, the Belgic Confession condemns the errors of the Anabaptists. Baptism, as a sacrament of incorporation into Christ and his people, the church, must be administered but once. For no more than a person can be born twice can the sacrament of the new birth be received a second time. Moreover, baptism, though it is administered only once, has a power and significance that encompasses the entire life of the Christian. Throughout the whole course of the Christian life, baptism stands as a constant reminder and pledge of our fellowship with Christ and saving participation in his atoning death. The Anabaptists’ denial or repudiation of “the one only baptism they have once received” seriously compromises this truth.

The most serious error, however, in Anabaptist teaching and practice is its rejection of the baptism of the children of believing

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<sup>23</sup>French: “... *les Ministres nous donnent de leur part le Sacrement et ce qui est visible; mais notre Seigneur donne ce qui est signifié par le Sacrement, savior les dons et grâce invisibles ....*”

parents. Because the children of believers are the recipients of the “same promises” as were made to the “children of Israel formerly,” and because baptism has come in the place of circumcision as the sign and seal of the new covenant in Christ, the children “ought to be baptized and sealed with the sign of the covenant.”<sup>24</sup> Failure to baptize such children denies the truth that “Christ shed His blood no less for the washing of the children of believers than for adult persons.”<sup>25</sup> At this juncture, the Belgic Confession cites the Old Testament practice of sacrificing a lamb for the children of the covenant shortly after their birth.<sup>26</sup> This offering of a lamb was “a sacrament of Jesus Christ,” typifying the inclusion of children under the provisions of Christ’s sacrifice for them. Therefore, in the church of Jesus Christ children of believing parents should receive the sacrament of baptism, just as children in the old covenant received the sign and seal of the covenant promises in circumcision.

### The Heidelberg Catechism of 1563 <sup>27</sup>

65. Q: Since then, we are made partakers of Christ and all His benefits by faith only, whence comes this faith?

*A: From the Holy Spirit, who works it in our hearts by the preaching of the holy gospel, and confirms it by the use of the holy sacraments.*

66. Q: What are the sacraments?

*A: The sacraments are holy, visible signs and seals, appointed of God for this end, that by the use thereof He may the more fully declare and seal to us the promise of the gospel; namely, that He of grace grants us the remission of sins and life eternal, for the sake of the one sacrifice of Christ accomplished on the cross.*

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<sup>24</sup>French: “... lesquels ... devoir être baptisés et scellés du signe de l’alliance.”

<sup>25</sup>French: “... Christ n’a pas moins répandu son sang pour laver les petits enfants des fidèles, qu’il a fait pour les grands.”

<sup>26</sup>The practice referred to here is described in Leviticus 12:3. This particular Scriptural support for the practice of the baptism of infants is unique to the Belgic Confession among the Reformed confessions.

<sup>27</sup>The English translation in what follows is taken from *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions*, 37-58. The German text cited is taken from Niesel, *Bekennnisschriften*, 149-181.



67. Q: Are, then, both the Word and the sacraments designed to direct our faith to the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross as the only ground of our salvation?

A. *Yes, indeed; for the Holy Spirit teaches us in the gospel and assures us by the sacraments that the whole of our salvation stands in the one sacrifice of Christ made for us on the cross.*

68. Q: How many sacraments has Christ instituted in the new covenant or testament?

A. *Two: holy baptism and the holy supper.*

69. Q: How is it signified and sealed unto you in holy baptism that you have part in the one sacrifice of Christ on the cross?

A. *Thus, that Christ has appointed this outward washing with water and added the promise that I am washed with His blood and Spirit from the pollution of my soul, that is, from all my sins, as certainly as I am washed outwardly with water, by which the filthiness of the body is commonly washed away.*

70. Q: What is it to be washed with the blood and Spirit of Christ?

A. *It is to have the forgiveness of sins from God, through grace, for the sake of Christ's blood, which He shed for us in His sacrifice on the cross; and also to be renewed by the Holy Spirit, and sanctified to be members of Christ, that so we may more and more die unto sin and lead holy and unblamable lives.*

71. Q: Where has Christ assured us that we are washed with His blood and Spirit as certainly as we are washed with the water of baptism?

A. *In the institution of baptism, which reads thus: Go ye therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Matt. 28:19. And: He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that disbelieveth shall be condemned, Mark 16:16. This promise is also repeated where the Scripture calls baptism the washing of regeneration and the washing away of sins, Tit. 3:5; Acts 22:16.*

72. Q: Is then, the outward washing with water itself the washing away of sin?

A. *No, for only the blood of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit cleanse us from all sins.*

73. Q. Why, then, does the Holy Spirit call baptism *the washing of regeneration* and *the washing away of sins*?

A. *God speaks thus not without great cause: to wit, not only to teach us thereby that as the filthiness of the body is taken away by water, so our sins are removed by the blood and Spirit of Jesus Christ; but especially to assure us by this divine pledge and sign that we are spiritually cleansed from our sins as really as we are outwardly washed with water.*

74. Q. Are infants also to be baptized?

A. *Yes; for since they, as well as adults, are included in the covenant and Church of God, and since both redemption from sin and the Holy Spirit, the Author of faith, are through the blood of Christ promised to them no less than to adults, they must also by baptism, as a sign of the covenant, be ingrafted into the Christian Church, and distinguished from the children of unbelievers, as was done in the old covenant or testament by circumcision, instead of which baptism was instituted in the new covenant.*

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The confessional standards of the Reformed churches include not only general statements of faith but also catechisms written in question and answer form. Following the ancient catechetical tradition of the Christian church, these catechisms were prepared for the purpose of providing a systematic instruction of the church membership in the Christian faith.<sup>28</sup> Among the important traditional components of these catechisms were treatments of the articles of the Apostles' Creed, the Ten Commandments, and the Lord's Prayer. One of the most influential of the Reformed catechisms produced during the sixteenth century is the Heidelberg Catechism. Written by Zacharius Ursinus, professor at the Heidelberg University, and by Caspar Olevianus, the court preacher, at the commission of Elector Frederick III of the Palatinate,<sup>29</sup> this Catechism was to

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<sup>28</sup>For an introduction to and collation of a number of the more important catechisms of the Reformed churches, see Thomas F. Torrance, *The School of Faith*, and I. John Hesselink, *Calvin's First Catechism*.

<sup>29</sup>I am simply representing the traditional view of the authorship of the Heidelberg Catechism. There has been a considerable debate in more recent literature regarding the respective role of Ursinus, Olevianus, Elector

become a standard confession of the German and Dutch Reformed churches throughout Europe. Because it was written during a period of considerable controversy regarding the sacraments, including disputes within the emerging Lutheran and Reformed traditions, this Catechism gives considerable attention to the doctrine of the sacraments.

So far as the structure of the Catechism is concerned, it is divided into three major divisions. The first division deals with the subject of human sin and misery, the second deals with the redemption provided through the work of Jesus Christ, and the third addresses the subject of the Christian life of gratitude. The doctrine of the sacraments is addressed in the second major division of the Catechism, in connection with the redemptive work of Christ and the communication of Christ's saving benefits through the mediation of the church. Within the context of an elaboration upon the Person and work of the Holy Spirit and the third article of the Apostles' Creed, the Heidelberg Catechism defines the holy catholic church as a "community chosen unto everlasting life" which Christ is gathering by his Spirit and Word (Q. & A. 54). The Holy Spirit, who has been given to the believer in order to make him by true faith a partaker of Christ and all his benefits, dwells within and works through the ministry and fellowship of the church. Thus, faith is authored and nourished by the Holy Spirit through the instrumentality of the church.

This is the immediate setting for the Heidelberg Catechism's treatment of the "means of grace," those appointed instruments which Christ is pleased to use by the working of the Spirit to gather and build up his church in the unity of the true faith. In

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Frederick, and others in the authorship of the Catechism. For an introduction to this debate, see Lyle Bierma, "Olevianus and the Authorship of the Heidelberg Catechism: Another Look," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 13/4 (1982): 17-27; Lyle Bierma, "Vester Grundt and the Origins of the Heidelberg Catechism," Chapter 15 of *Later Calvinism, International Perspectives*, W. Fred Graham, ed. (Kirksville, MO: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, Inc., 1994): 289-309; and Fred H. Klooster, "The Priority of Ursinus in the Composition of the Heidelberg Catechism," *Controversy and Conciliation: The Reformation and the Palatinate, 1559-1583*, Kidran Y. Hadidian, ed. (Allison Park, PA: Pickwick Publications, 1986), 73-100.

answer to the question, “Since, then, we are made partakers of Christ and all His benefits by faith only, whence comes this faith?” the Catechism maintains that the Holy Spirit “works it in our hearts by the preaching of the holy gospel, and confirms it by the use of the holy sacraments” (Q. & A. 65).<sup>30</sup> By using different verbs to describe the Spirit’s work through the instruments of preaching and sacraments—preaching “produces” (*würcket*) faith, the sacraments “confirm” (*bestätiget*) faith—the Catechism clearly subordinates the sacraments to preaching. The sacraments are added to the Word, not in order to supplement what the Word promises, but in order to attest and confirm the truth of the Word. Without adding anything to the Word, the sacraments have been instituted by Christ as a help to confirm and nourish faith.

According to the Heidelberg Catechism, the sacraments are divinely ordained “visible signs and seals, appointed of God for this end, that by the use thereof He may the more fully declare and seal to us the promise of the gospel” (Q. & A. 65).<sup>31</sup> The sacraments visibly represent the truth and substance of the gospel, namely, the one sacrifice of Christ accomplished on the cross by which believers are graciously granted the forgiveness of sins and life eternal. What the Word promises in preaching is sacramentally presented and communicated to believers, when the Holy Spirit, using the sacrament, “assures us” that our salvation rests upon the work of Christ alone. For this purpose, Christ has instituted two sacraments in the new covenant, baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

In its elaboration upon the distinctive significance of Christian baptism, the Heidelberg Catechism speaks first of the relation or connection between the sacramental sign and seal and what it signifies. Then it addresses the issue whether the children of believers ought to be baptized.

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<sup>30</sup>German: “...würcket denselben in unsern hertzen durch die predig des heiligen Euangelions und bestätiget den durch den brauch der heiligen Sacramenten” (164.25-27).

<sup>31</sup>German: “...sichtbare heilige warzeichen vnnnd Sigill von Gott darzu eingesetzt das er uns durch den brauch derselben die veribeissung des Euangelions desto besser zumerstehen geb vnnnd versigele” (164.32-34).

The sacramental sign of water is a sign of the washing away of sins through the blood of Christ and the sanctification of the Holy Spirit. Christ's appointment of the baptismal sign of water was added to "the promise that I am washed with His blood and Spirit from the pollution of my soul" (Q. & A. 69) in order to attest or assure to us the truth of this promise. This does not mean that the water of baptism, by itself, washes away the filthiness of sin; only the blood of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit can accomplish this spiritual washing. However, Christ is pleased to join the sacramental sign with the grace signified, so that those who are baptized may be as assured of God's promise in Christ by means of the water of baptism. So intimate is the connection between the sign and the thing signified that the one baptized may as be assured of the washing away of his sins by the blood of Christ as he is of the receiving of the outward sign of washing in baptism. This conjunction of sign and reality is attested by the Scriptural language which calls baptism "the washing of regeneration" and "the washing away of sins" (Q. & A. 71). Though the sign is not to be identified with the thing signified—no more than a seal adds something to the pledge that it confirms or authenticates—we may still speak of the sacrament as a divinely appointed instrument whereby God assures us "that we are spiritually cleansed from our sins as really as we are outwardly washed with water" (Q. & A. 73).<sup>32</sup>

On the subject whether children of believers ought to be baptized, the Heidelberg Catechism, though not as elaborate in its exposition as the Belgic Confession, is equally emphatic. The children of believing parents *must be* baptized for the same reason that adult believers are to be baptized: they are included in the covenant and church of God (Q. & A. 74). The promises of the gospel are for these children as well as their parents.<sup>33</sup> They,

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<sup>32</sup>German: "...dass wir so warhafftig von vnsern sünden geistlich gewaschen sind als wir mit dem leiblichen wasser gewaschen werden" (166.19-21).

<sup>33</sup>For this reason, it is not technically correct to speak of "infant baptism" and "believer's baptism," as though these were two distinct kinds of baptisms, based upon different grounds. Christian baptism, whether of adult believers or the children of believing parents, always has the same ground or basis: God's covenant promise.

through the blood of Christ, are recipients of the promise of the redemption of sin and the Holy Spirit. Accordingly, they must be distinguished through baptism from the children of unbelievers, as heirs of the gospel promise. Just as circumcision was formerly the sacramental sign of covenant membership in the old covenant, so now baptism has come in its place as the sacramental sign of the new covenant.

## The Second Helvetic Confession of 1566 <sup>34</sup>

### CHAPTER XIX. OF THE SACRAMENTS OF THE CHURCH OF CHRIST.

THE SACRAMENTS [ARE] ADDED TO THE WORD AND WHAT THEY ARE. *From the beginning, God added to the preaching of his Word in his Church Sacraments or sacramental signs. For thus does all Holy Scripture clearly testify. Sacraments are mystical symbols, or holy rites, or sacred actions, instituted by God himself, consisting of his Word, of signs and of things signified, whereby in the Church he keeps in mind and from time to time recalls the great benefits he has shown to men; whereby also he seals his promises, and outwardly represents, and, as it were, offers unto our sight those things which inwardly he performs for us, and so strengthens and increases our faith through the working of God's Spirit in our hearts. Lastly, he thereby distinguishes us from all other people and religions, and consecrates and binds us wholly to himself, and signifies what he requires of us.*

SOME SACRAMENTS OF THE OLD, OTHERS OF THE NEW TESTAMENTS. *Some Sacraments are of the old, others of the new, people. The Sacraments of the ancient people were circumcision, and the Paschal Lamb, which was offered up; for that reason it is referred to the sacrifices which were practiced from the beginning of the world.*

THE NUMBER OF SACRAMENTS OF THE NEW PEOPLE. *The Sacraments of the new people are Baptism and the Lord's Supper. There are some who count seven Sacraments of the new people. Of these we acknowledge that repentance, the ordination of ministers (not indeed the papal but apostolic ordination), and matrimony are profitable ordinances of God, but not Sacraments. Confirmation and extreme unction are human inventions which the Church can dispense with without any loss, and indeed, we do not have them in our churches.*

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<sup>34</sup>The English translation of the Second Helvetic Confession in what follows is taken from *The Book of Confessions*, 5.001-5.260. The Latin text is found in Niesel, *Bekennnisschriften*, 219-275.

*For they contain some things of which we can by no means approve. Above all we detest all the trafficking in which the Papists engage in dispensing the Sacraments.*

THE AUTHOR OF THE SACRAMENTS. *The author of all Sacraments is not any man, but God alone. Men cannot institute Sacraments. For they pertain to the worship of God, and it is not for man to appoint and prescribe a worship of God, but to accept and preserve the one he has received from God. Besides, the symbols have God's promises annexed to them, which require faith. Now faith rests only upon the Word of God; and the Word of God is like papers or letters, and the Sacraments are like seals which only God appends to the letters.*

CHRIST STILL WORKS IN SACRAMENTS. *And as God is the author of the Sacraments, so he continually works in the Church in which they are rightly carried out; so that the faithful, when they receive them from the ministers, know that God works in his own ordinance, and therefore they receive them as from the hand of God; and the minister's faults (even if they be very great) cannot affect them, since they acknowledge the integrity of the Sacraments to depend upon the institution of the Lord.*

THE AUTHOR AND THE MINISTERS OF THE SACRAMENTS TO BE DISTINGUISHED. *Hence in the administration of the Sacraments they also clearly distinguish between the Lord himself and the ministers of the Lord, confessing that the substance of the Sacraments is given them by the Lord, and the outward signs by the ministers of the Lord.*

THE SUBSTANCE OR CHIEF THING IN THE SACRAMENTS. *But the principal thing which God promises in all Sacraments and to which all the godly in all ages direct their attention (some call it the substance and matter of the Sacraments) is Christ the Savior—that only sacrifice, and the Lamb of God slain from the foundation of the world; that rock, also, from which all our fathers drank, by whom all the elect are circumcised without hands through the Holy Spirit, and are washed from all their sins, and are nourished with the very body and blood of Christ unto eternal life.*

THE SIMILARITY AND DIFFERENCE IN THE SACRAMENTS OF OLD AND NEW PEOPLES. *Now, in respect of that which is the principal thing and the matter itself in the Sacraments, the Sacraments of both peoples are equal. For Christ, the only Mediator and Savior of the faithful, is the chief thing and very substance of the Sacraments in both; for the one God is the author of them both. They were given to both peoples as signs and seals of the grace and promises of God, which should call to mind and renew the memory of God's great benefits, and should distinguish the faithful from all the religions in the world; lastly, which*

*should be received spiritually by faith, and should bind the receivers to the Church, and admonish them of their duty. In these and similar respects, I say, the Sacraments of both people are not dissimilar, although in the outward signs they are different. And, indeed, with respect to the signs we make a great difference. For ours are more firm and lasting, inasmuch as they will never be changed to the end of the world. Moreover, ours testify that both the substance and the promise have been fulfilled or perfected in Christ; the former signified what was to be fulfilled. Ours are also more simple and less laborious, less sumptuous and involved with ceremonies. Moreover, they belong to a more numerous people, one that is dispersed throughout the whole earth. And since they are more excellent, and by the Holy Spirit kindle greater faith, a greater abundance of the Spirit also ensues.*

OUR SACRAMENTS SUCCEED THE OLD WHICH ARE ABROGATED. *But now since Christ the true Messiah is exhibited unto us, and the abundance of grace is poured forth upon the people of The New Testament, the Sacraments of the old people are surely abrogated and have ceased; and in their stead the symbols of the New Testament are placed—Baptism in the place of circumcision, the Lord's Supper in place of the Paschal Lamb and sacrifices.*

IN WHAT THE SACRAMENTS CONSIST. *And as formerly the Sacraments consisted of the word, the sign, and the thing signified; so even now they are composed, as it were, of the same parts. For the Word of God makes them Sacraments, which before they were not.*

THE CONSECRATION OF THE SACRAMENTS. *For they are consecrated by the Word and shown to be sanctified by him who instituted them. To sanctify or consecrate anything to God is to dedicate it to holy uses; that is, to take it from the common and ordinary use, and to appoint it to a holy use. For the signs in the Sacraments are drawn from common use, things external and visible. For in baptism the sign is the element of water, and that visible washing which is done by the minister; but the thing signified is regeneration and the cleansing from sins. Likewise, in the Lord's Supper, the outward sign is bread and wine, taken from things commonly used for meat and drink; but the thing signified is the body of Christ which was given, and his blood which was shed for us, or the communion of the body and blood of the Lord. Wherefore, the water, bread, and wine, according to their nature and apart from the divine institution and sacred use, are only that which they are called and we experience. But when the Word of God is added to them, together with invocation of the divine name, and the renewing of their first institution and sanctification, then these signs are consecrated, and shown to be sanctified by Christ. For Christ's first institution and consecration of the Sacraments remains always effectual in the Church of God, so that those who do not celebrate the Sacraments in any other way than the Lord himself instituted from the*



*beginning still today enjoy that first and all-surpassing consecration. And hence in the celebration of the Sacraments the very words of Christ are repeated.*

**SIGNS TAKE NAME OF THINGS SIGNIFIED.** *And as we learn out of the Word of God that these signs were instituted for another purpose than the usual use, therefore we teach that they now, in their holy use, take upon them the names of things signified, and are no longer called mere water, bread or wine, but also regeneration or the washing of water, and the body and blood of the Lord or symbols and Sacraments of the Lord's body and blood. Not that the symbols are changed into the things signified, or cease to be what they are in their own nature. For otherwise they would not be Sacraments. If they were only the thing signified, they would not be signs.*

**THE SACRAMENTAL UNION.** *Therefore the signs acquire the names of things because they are mystical signs of sacred things, and because the signs and the things signified are sacramentally joined together; joined together, I say, or united by a mystical signification, and by the purpose or will of him who instituted the Sacraments. For the water, bread, and wine are not common, but holy signs. And he that instituted water in baptism and did not institute it with the will and intention that the faithful should only be sprinkled by the water of baptism; and he who commanded the bread to be eaten and the wine to be drunk in the supper did not want the faithful to receive only bread and wine without any mystery as they eat bread in their homes; but that they should spiritually partake of the things signified, and by faith be truly cleansed from their sins and partake of Christ.*

**THE SECTS.** *And, therefore, we do not at all approve of those who attribute the sanctification of the Sacraments to I know not what properties and formula or to the power of words pronounced by one who is consecrated and who has the intention of consecrating, and to other accidental things which neither Christ or the apostles delivered to us by word or example. Neither do we approve of the doctrine of those who speak of the Sacraments just as common signs, not sanctified and effectual. Nor do we approve of those who despise the visible aspect of the Sacraments because of the invisible, and so believe the signs to be superfluous because they think they already enjoy the thing themselves, as the Messalians are said to have held.*

**THE THING SIGNIFIED IS NEITHER INCLUDED IN OR BOUND TO THE SACRAMENTS.** *We do not approve of the doctrine of those who teach that grace and the things signified are so bound to and included in the signs that whoever participate outwardly in the signs, no matter what sort of persons they be, also inwardly participate in the grace and things signified.*

*However, as we do not estimate the value of the Sacraments by the worthiness or unworthiness of the ministers, so we do not estimate it by the condition of those*

*who receive them. For we know that the value of the Sacraments depends upon faith and upon the truthfulness and pure goodness of God. For as the Word of God remains the true Word of God, in which, when it is preached, not only bare words are repeated, but at the same time the things signified or announced in words are offered by God, even if the ungodly and unbelievers hear and understand the words yet do not enjoy the things signified, because they do not receive them by true faith; so the Sacraments, which by the Word consist of signs and the things signified, remain true and inviolate Sacraments, signifying not only sacred things, but, by God offering, the things signified, even if unbelievers do not receive the things offered. This is not the fault of God who gives and offers them, but the fault of men who receive them without faith and illegitimately; but whose unbelief does not invalidate the faithfulness of God (Rom. 3:3f.).*

#### THE PURPOSE FOR WHICH SACRAMENTS WERE INSTITUTED.

*Since the purpose for which Sacraments were instituted was also explained in passing when right at the beginning of our exposition it was shown what Sacraments are, there is no need to be tedious by repeating what once has been said. Logically, therefore, we now speak severally of the Sacraments of the new people.*

#### CHAPTER XX. OF HOLY BAPTISM.

THE INSTITUTION OF BAPTISM. *Baptism was instituted and consecrated by God. First John baptized, who dipped Christ in the water in Jordan. From him it came to the apostles, who also baptized with water. The Lord expressly commanded them to preach the Gospel and to baptize “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:19). And in The Acts, Peter said to the Jews who inquired what they ought to do: “Be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:37f.). Hence by some baptism is called a sign of initiation for God’s people, since by it the elect of God are consecrated to God.*

ONE BAPTISM. *There is but one baptism in the Church of God; and it is sufficient to be once baptized or consecrated unto God. For baptism once received continues for all of life, and is a perpetual sealing of our adoption.*

WHAT IT MEANS TO BE BAPTIZED. *Now to be baptized in the name of Christ is to be enrolled, entered, and received into the covenant and family, and so into the inheritance of the sons of God; yes, and in this life to be called after the name of God; that is to say, to be called a son of God; to be cleansed also from the filthiness of sins, and to be granted the manifold grace of God, in order to lead a new and innocent life. Baptism, therefore, calls to mind and renews the great favor God has shown to the race of mortal men. For we are all born in the pollution of sin and*

*are the children of wrath. But God, who is rich in mercy, freely cleanses us from our sins by the blood of his Son, and in him adopts us to be his sons, and by a holy covenant joins us to himself, and enriches us with various gifts, that we might live a new life. All these things are assured by baptism. For inwardly we are regenerated, purified, and renewed by God through the Holy Spirit; and outwardly we receive the assurance of the greatest gifts in the water, by which also those great benefits are represented, and, as it were, set before our eyes to be beheld.*

**WE ARE BAPTIZED WITH WATER.** *And therefore we are baptized, that is, washed or sprinkled with visible water. For the water washes dirt away, and cools and refreshes hot and tired bodies. And the grace of God performs these things for souls, and does so invisibly or spiritually.*

**THE OBLIGATION OF BAPTISM.** *Moreover, God also separates us from all strange religions and peoples by the symbol of baptism, and consecrates us to himself as his property. We, therefore, confess our faith when we are baptized, and obligate ourselves to God for obedience, mortification of the flesh, and newness of life. Hence, we are enlisted in the holy military service of Christ that all our life long we should fight against the world, Satan, and our own flesh. Moreover, we are baptized into one body of the Church, that with all members of the Church we might beautifully concur in the one religion and in mutual services.*

**THE FORM OF BAPTISM.** *We believe that the most perfect form of baptism is that by which Christ was baptized, and by which the apostles baptized. Those things, therefore, which by man's device were added afterwards and used in the Church we do not consider necessary to the perfection of baptism. Of this kind is exorcism, the use of burning lights, oil, salt, spittle, and such other things as that baptism is to be celebrated twice every year with a multitude of ceremonies. For we believe that one baptism of the Church has been sanctified in God's first institution, and that it is consecrated by the Word and is also effectual today in virtue of God's first blessing.*

**THE MINISTER OF BAPTISM.** *We teach that baptism should not be administered in the Church by women or midwives. For Paul deprived woman of ecclesiastical duties, and baptism has to do with these.*

**ANABAPTISTS.** *We condemn the Anabaptists, who deny that newborn infants of the faithful are to be baptized. For according to evangelical teaching, of such is the Kingdom of God, and they are in the covenant of God. Why, then, should the sign of God's covenant not be given to them? Why should those who belong to God and are in his Church not be initiated by holy baptism? We condemn also the Anabaptists in the rest of their peculiar doctrines which they hold contrary*

to the Word of God. We therefore are not Anabaptists and have nothing in common with them.

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One of the most widely used and influential confessions of the Reformed churches, the Second Helvetic Confession was originally written by Zwingli's successor, Heinrich Bullinger, as a confession of his own faith. However, from the beginning this Confession was more than a private statement or testimony.<sup>35</sup> It represents the mature expression of Bullinger's reformatory labor and constitutes the standard confessional position of the Swiss and Hungarian Reformed churches. Unlike the confessions we have considered thus far, the Second Helvetic Confession tends to be more expansive in its statement of the faith, displaying a more theological and polemical character than earlier statements.<sup>36</sup> This is immediately evident in the chapters devoted to the subject of the sacraments, where many of the reformation

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<sup>35</sup>For a defense of the view that Bullinger intended this confession to be a statement not only of his personal faith but of the "catholic" faith of the Reformed church, see Edward A. Dowey, "Heinrich Bullinger's Theology: Thematic, Comprehensive, Schematic," in *Calvin Studies V: Presented at a Colloquium on Calvin Studies at Davidson College and Davidson College Presbyterian Church*, John H. Leith, ed. (Jan. 19-20, 1990), 56.

<sup>36</sup>Cf. Schaff, *The Evangelical Protestant Creeds*, 233, who notes that the Second Helvetic Confession is "rather a theological treatise than a popular creed." Benno Gassmann, *Ecclesia Reformata: Die Kirche in den reformierten Bekenntnisschriften* (Freiburg: Herder, 1968), divides the history of the Reformed confessions into five distinct periods: the period of first reflection and consolidation (e.g., Zwingli's Sixty-Seven Articles of 1523); the period of new orientation (e.g., Calvin's Geneva Confession of 1536); the period of the national confessions of Reformed churches "under the cross" (e.g., the Gallican Confession of 1559); the period of the second reformation (e.g., the Heidelberg Catechism of 1563); and the period of the confessions of Reformed "posterity" (e.g., the Canons of Dort and the Westminster standards). The Second Helvetic Confession falls somewhere between these last two periods and exhibits the tendency toward more elaborate and precise expression of thought, a tendency evident also in the development of the Reformed theological tradition.

disputes and debates regarding the sacraments are reflected and carefully addressed.

The structure of the Second Helvetic Confession is similar to that of the Gallican and the Belgic confessions. God the Father, who in his electing grace has purposed in Christ to save his people, has provided for our redemption through the work of the Lord Jesus Christ. The redemptive work of Christ only benefits us, however, when we are brought into communion with Christ by the working of the Holy Spirit. This is accomplished by means of the ministry and communion of the church of Jesus Christ, outside of which there is no salvation (Chap. XVII).<sup>37</sup> Just as “there was no salvation outside Noah’s ark when the world perished in the flood,” so “there is no certain salvation outside Christ, who offers himself to be enjoyed by the elect in the Church.”<sup>38</sup> The one holy catholic and apostolic church is the singular means whereby the saving benefits of Christ’s work are communicated to his people. This church is known by its peculiar “notes or signs” (*notis vel signis*, 251.11), which, according to the Second Helvetic Confession, are “the lawful and sincere preaching of the Word of God,” the true worship of God alone in spirit and in truth,<sup>39</sup> and participation in the sacraments instituted by Christ.

The church communicates the grace of God in Christ to believers through the preaching of the gospel and the use of the sacraments. The sacraments are “mystical symbols, or holy rites, or sacred actions, instituted by God himself, consisting of his Word, of signs, and of things signified.” These have been added to the Word in order to serve several functions. By means of these sacraments, God reminds his people of the benefits of his

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<sup>37</sup>The heading of one section of Chapter XVII on the church bears the title: “*Extra ecclesiam Dei nulla salus*” (251.41).

<sup>38</sup>Latin: “... *extra arcam Noé, non erat ulla salus, pereunte mundo in diluvio ... extra Christum, qui se electis in ecclesia fruendum praebet, nullam esse salutem certam*” (251.44-46).

<sup>39</sup>The inclusion of this “note” reflects one of the distinctives of the Swiss reformation, particularly the emphasis of Zwingli upon the “spiritual” nature of true worship. Christian discipline is not expressly cited as a note of the true church.

grace toward them, “seals his promises” (*promissiones suas obsignat*, 259.4-5), “outwardly represents” (*exterius repraesentat*, 259.5) and offers to our sight those things “which he inwardly performs for us,”<sup>40</sup> and “distinguishes” believers from all other peoples.

There are several features of the sacraments that require special emphasis. First, because the author of the sacraments is God himself, the church has no authority to institute sacraments other than those which are of divine appointment. In the church of Jesus Christ, there are only two such sacraments, baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Among the so-called sacraments of the Roman Catholic Church, therefore, some may be “profitable ordinances” (*instituta utilia*, 259.17-18) but they do not have the sanction of Christ’s having appointed them as sacraments for the church. Second, the sacraments, though they are administered by ministers of the Lord, work to communicate the grace of God only as the Lord works in them. Thus, in the administration of the sacrament, a clear distinction must be made “between the Lord himself and the ministers of the Lord, confessing that the substance of the sacraments is given them by the Lord, and the outward signs by the ministers of the Lord.”<sup>41</sup> Third, a proper understanding of the sacraments requires that a careful distinction be made between their “substance” (*substantia*), that which is signified in the sacrament, and their “signs” (*signa*). So far as the substance of the sacraments is concerned, they visibly represent to us the reality of “Christ the Savior,” whose sacrifice is the only source of life and salvation for God’s people. What is peculiar to the sacraments is that the “sign” takes on the name of the “thing signified,” though we are not to think that “the symbols are changed into the things signified, or cease to be what they are in their very nature.”<sup>42</sup> There is, by the Lord’s choosing, a union by “mystical signification” (*significationem mystica*, 261.10) between the sacramental sign and the grace to which it refers.

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<sup>40</sup>Latin: “... quae ipse nobis interius praestat” (259.5).

<sup>41</sup>Latin: “... inter dominum ipsum, et domini ministrum, confitentes sacramentorum res dari ab ipso domino, symbola autem a domini ministris” (259.39-41).

<sup>42</sup>Latin: “Non quod symbola mutantur in res significatas, et desinant esse id quod sunt sua natura” (261.4-5).

And fourth, for those who receive the sacrament to benefit from their use, faith or a believing appropriation of the grace signified must be present. The sacrament requires a “spiritual participation” (*spiritualiter communicent*, 261.17) in the things signified, so that the participant may be “spiritually cleansed” by faith from his sins and truly partake of Christ. For this reason, we may not say that the thing signified in the sacrament is “so bound to and included in the signs that whoever participate outwardly in the signs, no matter what sort of persons they be, also inwardly participate in the grace and the things signified.”<sup>43</sup>

By comparison to its elaborate treatment of the general doctrine of the sacraments and its subsequent detailed handling of the doctrine of the Lord’s Supper, the Second Helvetic Confession’s chapter on holy baptism is relatively brief. It begins by noting the institution of Christian baptism in Matthew 28:19 and the practice of the early church. Though nothing is said explicitly about the validity of baptism administered in other communions, especially the Roman Catholic Church, baptism is, as a ‘sign of initiation for God’s people,’<sup>44</sup> to be administered only “once” and “continues for all of life” as a “perpetual sealing of adoption” (*perpetua obsignatio adoptionis nostrae*, 262.22-23). The “meaning” of baptism includes not only the privileges and confirmation of God’s grace toward his people in Christ, but it also carries with it a corresponding obligation. To be baptized means that one is “enrolled, entered, and received into the covenant and family, and so into the inheritance of the sons of God.” Baptism also, by means of the sign of water, assures us of the washing away of sins through the blood of Christ and the Spirit of regeneration. The outward sign of water testifies to and assures us of the inward washing of regeneration, purification and renewal through the Holy Spirit.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, those who

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<sup>43</sup>Latin: “... gratiam et res significatas, signis ita alligari et includi, ut quicumque signis exterius participant, etiam interius gratiae rebusque significatis, participes sint, quales quales sint” (261.30-33).

<sup>44</sup>Latin: “signum initiale populi Dei, utpote quo initiantur Deo, electi Dei” (262.18-19).

<sup>45</sup>Latin: “Obsignantur haec omnia baptismo” (262.33).

have been baptized are reminded that they now belong to God, and that, as his property, they are obligated to “obedience, mortification of the flesh, and newness of life.” They have been “enlisted in the holy military service of Christ” so that all their life long they may fight against the world, Satan and their own flesh. As members of the church, moreover, they have obligated by ties of mutual love and service to those who, with them, belong to God.

The concluding sections of the Second Helvetic Confession’s statement of the doctrine of baptism rejects aberrant doctrines and practices of the sacrament. The “most perfect form of baptism” conforms to the simplicity of Christ’s institution, using the sacramental sign of his appointment without the addition of such elements as “exorcism, the use of burning lights, oil, salt, spittle” and the like. Since Christ has not authorized women to administer the sacrament, this practice should be rejected. Lastly, in a brief notation regarding the baptism of children of believing parents, it is asserted that, since they belong to the covenant people of God, the “sign of God’s covenant” should also be given to them.

## The Canons of Dort of 1618-19 <sup>46</sup>

THE FIRST MAIN POINT OF DOCTRINE: Divine Election and Reprobation

Article 17. The Salvation of the Infants of Believers.

*Since we must make judgments about God’s will from his Word, which testifies that the children of believers are holy, not by nature but by virtue of the gracious covenant in which they together with their parents are included, godly parents ought not to doubt the election and salvation of their children whom God calls out of this life in infancy.*

THE FIFTH MAIN POINT OF DOCTRINE: The Perseverance of the Saints

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<sup>46</sup>The English translation of the Canons of Dort is one that was adopted by the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church in 1986 and is included in the volume, *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions*, 59-82. The Latin text is found in Schaff, *The Evangelical Protestant Creeds*, 550-79.



Article 14. God's Use of Means in Perseverance.

*And, just as it has pleased God to begin this work of grace in us by the proclamation of the gospel, so he preserves, continues, and completes his work by the hearing and reading of the gospel, by meditation on it, by its exhortations, threats, and promises, and also by the use of the sacraments.*

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The Canons of Dort of 1618-19 were written in the period of the consolidation and elaboration of the Reformed faith, particularly in the face of a growing series of theological controversies that emerged after the early and middle sixteenth century. Whereas the confessions we have previously considered present comprehensive summaries of the Reformed faith, the Canons of Dort were written to resolve a particular dispute regarding the proper understanding of the doctrine of election, as it is summarized in Article XVI of the Belgic Confession. Authored by a genuinely ecumenical synod with delegates from the Reformed churches throughout Europe, the Canons were formulated as an answer to the five points of the Arminian party, the *Remonstrance of 1610*.<sup>47</sup> Due to the particular focus and interest of this confession, it says very little about the sacraments and baptism. However, there are two articles that address these subjects which are of sufficient importance to merit our brief attention in this article.

The first article that is of significance to our purpose is Article 17 in the first main head of doctrine on divine election and reprobation. This article addresses the subject of the salvation of the infants of believers, especially the confidence that believers may have regarding their salvation.

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<sup>47</sup>For brief accounts of this history, see Louis Praamsma, "The Background of the Arminian Controversy (1586-1618)," *Crisis in the Reformed Churches: Essays in commemoration of the great Synod of Dort, 1618-19* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Fellowship, Inc., 1968), 22-38; and Cornelis P. Venema, *But for the Grace of God. An Exposition of the Canons of Dort* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Fellowship, Inc., 1994), 9-18.

To appreciate the context and occasion for this article, it is important to notice what is said about the subject of the salvation of the children of believers in the concluding portion of the Canons of Dort, the “Rejection of False Accusations.” In this “Rejection,” the authors of the Canons refer to those who falsely accuse the Reformed churches of teaching, by their doctrine of unconditional election, “that many infant children of believers are snatched in their innocence from their mother’s breasts and cruelly cast into hell so that neither the blood of Christ nor their baptism nor the prayers of the church at their baptism can be of any use to them.”<sup>48</sup> As this statement indicates, it was a common complaint of the Arminians against the Reformed doctrine of election that it implied that many infant children of believing parents were lost because they were not the objects of God’s electing purpose. This complaint was especially powerful at a time when many believers experienced the loss of their children in infancy due to disease and other causes. What is especially pertinent to our purpose is that, though Article 17 of the first main point of doctrine does not expressly mention the sacrament of baptism, the reference in the “Rejection of False Accusations” includes baptism as a confirmatory sign and seal of the promise of God to believing parents.

There is some debate regarding the meaning of Article 17. Does the Article merely suggest that believing parents, subjectively considered, ought not to doubt the election and salvation of their children? Because the language of this Article encourages parents not to doubt, some maintain that it falls short of affirming, objectively considered, the actual salvation of such children who die in infancy. The Article, then, only addresses the kind of confidence that parents should cultivate upon the

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<sup>48</sup>For a more extensive consideration of this article, including a discussion of its historical occasion, see H. Kake, *De Doop in de Nederlandse Belijdenisgeschriften*, 162-68; M. Meijering, *De Dordtsche Leerregels* (Groningen: Jan Haan, 1924), 79-82; J. G. Feenstra, *De Dordtsche Leerregels* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Kampen: Kok, 1950); D. W. Sinnema, *The Issue of Reprobation at the Synod of Dort in Light of the History of this Doctrine* (diss.; University of St. Michael’s College, 1985), 413-15; and N. H. Gootjes, “Can Parents Be Sure? Background and Meaning of Canons of Dort I, 17,” *Lux Mundi* 15/4 (Dec., 1996): 2-6.

occasion of the death of their infant children. Others insist that this inappropriately weakens, even undermines, the force of the language in this Article. The confidence which believing parents are encouraged to have can only be based upon a knowledge made from the testimony of God's reliable Word. Furthermore, the Article speaks directly about the children of such parents, that they are "holy, not by nature but by virtue of the gracious covenant in which they together with their parents are included."<sup>49</sup> Since this is adduced as the reason for the obligation parents have not to doubt the salvation of their children, it seems apparent that this Article means to teach not only that parents should be confident of their children's salvation but also that such children are indeed elect of God.<sup>50</sup>

The principle undergirding the Canons' teaching in this Article is that "we must make judgments about God's will from his Word" (*de voluntate Dei ex verbo ipsius nobis est judicandum*). Believers, including believing parents of children whom God calls out of this life in infancy, are obligated to believe the promises of the gospel that address them and their children. These promises are communicated through the preaching of the Word of God and also through the sacrament of baptism, which God has been pleased to join to the Word as a visible sign and seal in confirmation of the gospel promise. Accordingly, if the question is rephrased—what do such parents have to go on, when the question concerns the salvation of these children?—then the only legitimate answer must be: the promise of God's Word, as it also is attested and confirmed to them and their children in baptism. Far from encouraging any kind of speculative inquiry regarding the salvation of such children, this Article directs us to the only means available to us by which to determine God's will toward us—the gospel word and the accompanying sacrament.<sup>51</sup> These

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<sup>49</sup>Latin: "...sanctos, non quidem natura, sed beneficio foederis gratuiti, in quo illi cum parentibus comprehenduntur."

<sup>50</sup>It should be carefully observed that the Canons are speaking only of the infant children of believing and godly parents. They are not addressing in any way the different issue of the salvation of infants generally.

<sup>51</sup>Herman Hoeksema, in his *Believers and Their Seed* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Assoc., 1971), 146-59, criticizes this Article for

are reliable bases upon which to be confident regarding our salvation and the salvation of our children. What this Article affirms, then, is that the promise of God's grace which addresses believers and their children, on the basis of which they are to be baptized, constitutes a sufficient basis for the assurance of salvation, particularly in the case of children who die in infancy.

The only other article in the Canons of Dort that bears upon the doctrine of the sacraments occurs in the context of the fifth main head of doctrine on the perseverance of the saints. In Article 14, in the context of an elaboration of the means God uses in communicating his grace to the elect, it is affirmed that the sacraments are added to the preaching of the Word as a means of preserving believers in the way of faith. The perseverance of the saints, far from being an occasion for complacency or carelessness, is effected through the faithful and proper use of the preaching of the Word of God and the sacraments. These means of grace have been given by God for the purpose not only of creating faith but also of nourishing, strengthening, and preserving faith. This is true for both the sacrament of baptism which, though administered only once, continues to constitute a definitive sign and seal of God's grace in Christ for believers throughout the whole course of the Christian life, and the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, which is a continuing source of nourishment for faith.

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being speculative by going beyond the testimony of Scripture. He argues that it only affirms the "subjective certainty" that parents may have under these circumstances, not the "objective certainty" of their children's salvation (158). Though this is not the place to evaluate Hoeksema's theology of election, it is apparent that his own speculative approach to the doctrine of the covenant (viewed from the standpoint of the divine decree) makes it impossible for him to affirm the principle enunciated in this Article: that we are to make judgments about the salvation of believers and their children from the Word of God (and the sacraments which signify and seal the Word's promises). The argument of the Canons is that, if our knowledge of God's grace toward us in Christ is based upon the Word and sacraments, and not upon some impossible insight into the particulars of the divine decree, then we have an adequate basis for confidence regarding the salvation of the children of believing parents.

## The Westminster Confession of 1647 <sup>52</sup>

### CHAPTER XXVII. OF THE SACRAMENTS

I. *Sacraments are holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace, immediately instituted by God, to represent Christ, and his benefits; and to confirm our interest in him: as also, to put a visible difference between those that belong unto the church, and the rest of the world; and solemnly to engage them to the service of God in Christ, according to his Word.*

II. *There is, in every sacrament, a spiritual relation, or sacramental union, between the sign and the thing signified: whence it comes to pass, that the names and effects of the one are attributed to the other.*

III. *The grace which is exhibited in or by the sacraments rightly used, is not conferred by any power in them; neither doth the efficacy of a sacrament depend upon the piety or intention of him that doth administer it: but upon the work of the Spirit, and the word of institution, which contains, together with a precept authorizing the use thereof, a promise of benefit to worthy receivers.*

IV. *There be only two sacraments ordained by Christ our Lord in the gospel; that is to say, Baptism, and the Supper of the Lord: neither of which may be dispensed by any, but by a minister of the Word lawfully ordained.*

V. *The sacraments of the old testament, in regard of the spiritual thing thereby signified and exhibited, were, for substance, the same with those of the new.*

### CHAPTER XXVIII. OF BAPTISM

I. *Baptism is a sacrament of the new testament, ordained by Jesus Christ not only for the solemn admission of the party baptized into the visible church; but also, to be unto him a sign and seal of the covenant of grace, of his ingrafting into Christ, or regeneration, of remission of sins, and of his giving up unto God, through Jesus Christ, to walk in newness of life. Which sacrament is, by Christ's own appointment, to be continued in his church until the end of the world.*

II. *The outward element to be used in this sacrament is water, wherewith the party is to be baptized, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, by a minister of the gospel, lawfully called thereunto.*

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

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

V. *Although it be a great sin to contemn or neglect this ordinance, yet grace and salvation are not so inseparably annexed unto it, as that no person can be*

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<sup>52</sup>The text of the Westminster Confession and Catechisms that I am using is found in *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions*, 87-168.

*regenerated, or saved, without it; or, that all that are baptized are undoubtedly regenerated.*

VI. *The efficacy of Baptism is not tied to that moment of time wherein it is administered; 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.*

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

## The Westminster Larger Catechism of 1648

162. Q. How do the sacraments become effectual means of salvation?

*A. The sacraments become effectual means of salvation, not by any power in themselves, or any virtue derived from the piety or intention of him by whom they are administered, but only by the working of the Holy Ghost and the blessing of Christ, by whom they are instituted.*

162. Q. What is a sacrament?

*A. A sacrament is a holy ordinance instituted by Christ in his church, to signify, seal, and exhibit unto those that are within the covenant of grace, the benefits of his mediation; to strengthen and increase their faith, and all other graces; to oblige them to obedience; to testify and cherish their love and communion one with another; and to distinguish them from those that are without.*

163. Q. What are the parts of a sacrament?

*A. The parts of a sacrament are two; the one an outward and sensible sign, used according to Christ's own appointment; the other an inward and spiritual grace thereby signified.*

164. Q. How many sacraments hath Christ instituted in his church under the New Testament?

*A. Under the New Testament Christ hath instituted in his church only two sacraments, Baptism and the Lord's Supper.*

165. Q. What is Baptism?

*A. Baptism is a sacrament of the New Testament, wherein Christ hath ordained the washing with water in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, to be a sign and seal of ingrafting into himself, of remission of sins by his blood, and regeneration by his Spirit; of adoption, and resurrection unto everlasting life; and whereby the parties*

*baptized are solemnly admitted into the visible church, and enter into an open and professed engagement to be wholly and only the Lord's.*

166. Q. Unto whom is Baptism to be administered?

*A. Baptism is not to be administered to any that are out of the visible church, and so strangers from the covenant of promise, till they profess their faith in Christ, and obedience to him, but infants descending from parents, either both, or but one of them, professing faith in Christ, and obedience to him, are in that respect within the covenant, and to be baptized.*

167. Q. How is our Baptism to be improved by us?

*A. The needful but much neglected duty of improving our Baptism, is to be performed by us all our life long, especially in the time of temptation, and when we are present at the administration of it to others; by serious and thankful consideration of the nature of it, and of the ends for which Christ instituted it, the privileges and benefits conferred and sealed thereby, and our solemn vow made therein; by being humbled for our sinful defilement, our falling short of, and walking contrary to, the grace of baptism, and our engagements; by growing up to assurance of pardon of sin, and of all other blessings sealed to us in that sacrament; by drawing strength from the death and resurrection of Christ, into whom we are baptized, for the mortifying of sin, and quickening of grace; and by endeavoring to live by faith, to have our conversation in holiness and righteousness, as those that have therein given up their names to Christ; and to walk in brotherly love, as being baptized by the same Spirit into one body.*

176. Q. Wherein do the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper agree?

*A. The sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper agree, in that the author of both is God; the spiritual part of both is Christ and his benefits; both are seals of the same covenant, are to be dispensed by ministers of the gospel, and by none other; and to be continued in the church of Christ until his second coming.*

77. Q. Wherein do the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper differ?

*A. The sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper differ, in that Baptism is to be administered but once, with water, to be a sign and seal of our regeneration and ingrafting into Christ, and that even to infants; whereas the Lord's Supper is to be administered often, in the elements of bread and wine, to represent and exhibit Christ as spiritual nourishment to the soul,*

*and to confirm our continuance and growth in him, and that only to such as are of years and ability to examine themselves.*

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The pattern of elaboration and more precise statement of the Reformed faith which we have witnessed in the Second Helvetic Confession is also in evidence in the Westminster standards. The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms represent the definitive expression of the reformation of the church in Scotland and England. To this day, they constitute the standard of Reformed teaching among the Presbyterian churches worldwide. Convened by an act of Parliament, the representatives of the Scottish and English churches who met together at the Westminster Assembly inherited the rich fruit of Reformed theological and confessional development at the close of the great period of reformation that traversed the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Written after the preparation of the Canons of Dort and within the context of developments within Reformed theology at the school of Saumur in France, the Westminster standards truly represent a consensus statement of the Reformed faith at the end of the reformation period.<sup>53</sup>

The Westminster standards follow the ancient tradition of the Christian church, a tradition that is echoed as well in the earlier confessions we have considered, by insisting that the visible church of Jesus Christ is the communion through which Christ's salvation is mediated or communicated to his people. Outside of the Christian church there is no "ordinary possibility of salvation" (Chap. XXV). To this church Christ has been pleased to give "the ministry, oracles, and ordinances of God, for the

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<sup>53</sup>For a general treatment of the Westminster Assembly and its work, see W. Beveridge, *A Short History of The Westminster Assembly* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1904); A. A. Hodge, *The Confession of Faith. A Handbook of Christian Doctrine Expounding The Westminster Confession* (1869; reprint, London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1958); Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Westminster Assembly And Its Work* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1931); and John H. Leith, *Assembly at Westminster. Reformed Theology in the Making* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1973).



gathering and perfecting of the saints ... and doth, by his own presence and Spirit, according to his promise, make them effectual thereto." Those who would enjoy the benefits of Christ's saving work must become partakers of him by the working of his Spirit through the ministry and ordinances of the church. The church is, accordingly, the place or the medium of Christ's saving presence in the world. Through the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the holy sacraments, the preeminent ordinances of the church, Christ savingly communicates himself to his people.

Following the pattern of the other Reformed confessions, the Westminster standards first address the general doctrine of the sacraments and then address, respectively, the two sacraments of the new covenant, baptism and the Lord's Supper.

Several aspects of the doctrine of the sacraments receive special emphasis in the Westminster standards. Because the sacraments are "immediately instituted by God," their efficacy and power depend upon the use Christ's Spirit makes of them in conferring God's grace upon the believer. What distinguishes the sacraments from the preaching of the Word is that they use visible signs which God has appointed to "represent Christ, and his benefits." Thus, the sacraments are "holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace" that are intended to "signify, seal, and exhibit unto those that are within the covenant of grace, the benefits of his [Christ's] mediation; to strengthen and increase their faith, and all other graces; to oblige them to obedience; to testify and cherish their love and communion one with another; and to distinguish them from those that are without" (Larger Catechism, Q. & A. 161). The relation between the sign and the thing signified is a "spiritual" one, where there is a kind of "sacramental union" between the visible representation of Christ and the invisible grace to which the sign points. The sign is an outward exhibition of the "inward" grace which only becomes effective through "the working of the Holy Ghost and the blessing of Christ" (Q. & A. 162). Furthermore, because their signs represents the truth and promise of the gospel, the sacraments require a believing reception on the part of those to

whom they are administered.<sup>54</sup> The same faith which is required as a response to the gospel Word is required by way of response to the gospel sacrament.

Christian baptism is one of the two divinely appointed sacraments of the new covenant. By means of this sacrament, God admits believers and their children into the visible church (Chap. XXVIII). The baptismal sign of water, together with the words of institution, serve to signify and seal to God's people their engrafting into Christ, regeneration, the forgiveness of sins, as well as their obligation to live for God. The sacrament is to be administered according to Christ's ordinance by a lawful minister of the Word. The mode of baptism, whether by immersion, affusion or sprinkling, is not a necessary or essential aspect of its administration, so long as the sign of water and the baptismal formula of Matthew 28:19 are used. Those to whom the sacrament is to be administered include believers and their children, since the promise of the covenant embraces the children of believing parents.

One of the distinctive features of the Westminster standards' handling of the sacrament of baptism is its elaboration upon the efficacy and continual use of the sacrament. In the Confession of Faith, for example, it is expressly noted that the "efficacy of Baptism is not tied to that moment of time wherein it is administered" (Chap. XXVIII). Though baptism is to be distinguished from the Lord's Supper as a singular rite, not capable of repetition, its efficacy and power are not restricted to the moment of its administration. For the Holy Spirit will not fail to offer, exhibit and confer the grace which the sacrament

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<sup>54</sup>It is interesting to observe that the Shorter Catechism's answer (Q. & A. 91) to the question, "How do the sacraments become effectual means of salvation?" is virtually identical to the Larger Catechism's (Q. & A. 161) with one exception. The Shorter Catechism adds the phrase, "in them that *by faith* receive them" (emphasis mine). Though it is clearly the teaching of the Westminster standards generally that the sacraments confer grace only where they are believingly received—they do not work, in other words, *ex opere operato*, by their being performed whether the recipient believes or not—it is odd that this phrase is not part of the language of the Larger Catechism's answer, as it is in the Shorter Catechism.

signifies and seals to all such “as that grace belongeth unto according to the counsel of God’s own will, in his appointed time.”<sup>55</sup> Moreover, though only administered once, the sacrament of baptism must be “improved” or used throughout the whole course of the life of the believer.<sup>56</sup> The use of baptism, albeit often sadly neglected among believers, requires that in a variety of circumstances—whether in times of temptation or the occasion of witnessing the baptism of others, etc.—believers call to mind the privileges and responsibilities conferred and sealed in baptism. These privileges and responsibilities include: remembering our baptismal vow; humility in the awareness of our sinfulness in failing to live up to the “grace of baptism”; a greater assurance of the forgiveness of sins through the blood of Christ; living out of the power of Christ’s death and resurrection; and seeking to walk in that brotherly love that answers to our incorporation into the one body of Christ. By this kind of use of our baptism, the grace of God communicated to us in the sacrament will continue to nourish and strengthen us in the faith, preserving us in fellowship with Christ and his people.

### Summary Observations and Conclusion

Undoubtedly, there are a great number of historical factors and theological debates that underlie the kind of doctrine of the sacraments set forth in the Reformed confessions. In my preceding exposition and commentary on the primary confessional standards of the Reformed churches, I have largely bypassed questions regarding the development of doctrine, including the doctrine of the sacraments, during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. To address these questions would require further exploration of the historical development and

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<sup>55</sup>There is the danger in this kind of formulation of separating between the administration of the sacrament and the conferral of grace so that the sacrament itself is no longer instrumental to that conferral. I will return to this issue in my conclusion (see footnote 61).

<sup>56</sup>The language of the Larger Catechism (Q. & A. 167) regarding the “improving” of our baptism reflects the common usage of the day where to “improve” is synonymous with to “use.”

theological refinement of the doctrine of the sacraments during this period. As noted previously, the sheer extensiveness of these confessions' articulation of the doctrine of the sacraments, particularly in the instance of the later confessions, bears witness to the doctrinal ferment and vigorous polemics of this period. On no matter of Christian doctrine and practice were the debates among Roman Catholic, Reformed, Lutheran, and Anabaptist, more sustained and acute than in this area.

My purpose in writing this article, however, is not to investigate the history and development of the Reformed confessions. Rather, I am interested in these confessions as subordinate standards, authoritative testimony regarding the doctrine of Scripture which serves to norm the ministry and life of the Reformed churches. Therefore, now that we have surveyed the Reformed confessions on the doctrine of the sacraments and baptism, I shall conclude with a series of summary observations regarding the chief points of doctrine that represent a consensus of teaching among the Reformed churches throughout the world. In some instances, I will have occasion to note where there may not be a full uniformity of teaching on a particular point. Furthermore, as I indicated in the introduction, I will endeavor to point out some of the implications of the doctrine of the confessions for the contemporary practice of the Reformed churches in their administration and use of the sacraments. Following the traditional distinction between the general doctrine of the sacraments and the particular doctrine of the sacrament of baptism, I will begin with observations of a general nature regarding the sacraments, and then consider the sacrament of baptism particularly.

### *Observations regarding the Doctrine of the Sacraments in General*

First, the doctrine of the sacraments belongs, in the structure of the Reformed confessions, to the doctrine of the church and her ministry. Those whom God the Father elects to save in Jesus Christ become beneficiaries of his saving work in no other way than through communion with the church. Though the ancient dictum of Cyprian (*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*) is not explicitly

echoed in all of the Reformed confessions, they share the conviction that saving fellowship with Christ does not ordinarily occur apart from the use of the church's official ministry of Word and sacrament. Christ's saving presence in the world is mediated through the church and her means of grace. Where the true church of Jesus Christ is manifest, there Christ is present gathering, defending, and preserving for himself a people chosen unto everlasting life. Christ is pleased to communicate himself by the working of his Spirit through the administration of the Word of God in preaching and sacrament. Where the Word of God is faithfully preached and the sacraments rightly administered—the two marks of the true church uniformly stipulated in the confessions—there we may be sure Christ is present by his Spirit imparting his saving benefits to his people. The location of the doctrine of the sacraments in the confessions, accordingly, attests to their importance as necessary marks of the presence of the true church of Christ and to their indispensable function in the communication of God's grace in Christ to his people.

Second, Christ has appointed the sacraments for the use of the church in close conjunction with the preaching of the Word. The sacraments do not communicate anything other than the grace of God in Christ, the same grace and promise that are communicated through the preaching of the gospel. Apart from the Word of the gospel, which the sacrament communicates in its own peculiar manner, the visible word of the sacrament would be empty and lifeless. There is, therefore, a clear ordering of Word and sacrament, such that the sacrament follows upon or is "added" to the Word as a kind of ancillary or auxiliary means of grace. If the sacrament is to be administered properly, it must be preceded by an exposition of the biblical Word and promise which the sacrament signifies and seals. Failure to administer the sacrament in this kind of conjunction with the Word, represents a misunderstanding of the nature of the sacraments as "appendices" to the Word.<sup>57</sup> For this reason, it is permissible to

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<sup>57</sup>The language of the sacrament as an "appendix" to the Word belongs to Calvin: "Now, from the definition that I have set forth we understand that a sacrament is never without a preceding promise but is joined to it as a sort of

speak of the preaching of the Word as the “first” or “preeminent” means of grace, and of the sacrament as the “second” and “subordinate” means of grace.

This raises a question that has been disputed in the history of the Reformed tradition. Are the sacraments necessary and indispensable to the communication of God’s grace in Christ? Or is the preaching of the Word of God a sufficient means of grace, apart from the sacraments? The best answer to this question, and the one which most faithfully represents the doctrine of the Reformed confessions, must be that ordinarily the sacraments are necessary and indispensable. This necessity and indispensability, however, are not absolute, but consequent upon the Lord’s appointment of the sacraments for the believer’s benefit. Because the Lord has appointed the sacraments for the church’s use and added them to the preaching of the Word, it would be disobedience to his will to neglect their use. Furthermore, because they have been added to the Word, in view of the believer’s weakness and proneness to doubt the gospel promise in Christ, neglecting the sacraments would betray an ingratitude and false sense of security on the part of the church. Though it may be necessary to posit (by way of exception in extraordinary circumstances)<sup>58</sup> the possibility of the grace of Christ being

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appendix, with the purpose of confirming and sealing the promise itself, and of making it more evident to us and in a sense ratifying it” (*Institutes* IV.xiv.3). When the Reformed confessions insist that the ministrant of the sacrament be a lawfully ordained minister, they are setting forth one of the implications of the intimate and necessary conjunction of the ministry of the Word and the sacraments.

<sup>58</sup>For example, the Westminster Confession of Faith, Chap. X.iii, speaks of infants and others who may be elect and regenerated without the ordinary use of the means of grace, particularly the preaching of the Word. It is possible to imagine other circumstances where the sacraments could not be administered to believers or their children. For example, one reason the Reformed confessions were able to reject the practice of baptism by midwives was their assumption that the sacrament of baptism is not necessary to the infant’s salvation. The Roman Catholic permission of baptism of infants by midwives reflects the teaching of the necessity of baptism for salvation. For a statement of this view, see Schaff, *The Greek and Latin Creeds*, “The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent,” Seventh Session, On Baptism, Canon V (121).

communicated apart from the sacraments, the ordinary means Christ uses require the sacraments. To neglect the use of the sacraments represents a failure to appreciate the intimate conjunction of Word and sacraments in the divine economy of grace. For, just as the sacraments require the preceding Word, so the Word requires, by virtue of Christ's appointment, the accompanying sacrament.

Third, the typical definition of the sacraments in the Reformed churches speaks of them as "visible signs and seals" of an "invisible grace." What is peculiar to the sacramental communication of God's grace in Christ is the appointment or consecration of visible elements which represent to the eye of faith the truth of the believer's saving fellowship with Christ. The water of baptism, for example, is a visible representation of the washing away of sins through the blood of Christ and the regeneration of the Holy Spirit. There is a divinely-appointed correspondence between the visible sign and the grace to which it points. Moreover, the sacraments are given by God to confirm and attest the promise of the gospel. Not only are they signs that visibly represent, but they are also seals that authenticate and assure the believer of the truth of the gospel promise. The Reformed confessions are fond of insisting that the believer is assured by the visible sign and seal of the sacrament that the grace of God in Christ is for the one who receives it by faith. Though the sign and seal do not add anything to the promise, they do constitute a more "full" or "open" confirmation of the gospel so that the believer's faith is nourished and fortified.<sup>59</sup>

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Though this teaching is also expressed in the Augsburg Confession (Art. IX), it has always been rejected by the Reformed churches. See Calvin, *Institutes* IV.xv.20-22. Sometimes Reformed theologians have distinguished, so far as the necessity of the sacraments is concerned, between a "necessity of means" and a "necessity of precept." See Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941), 618-19.

<sup>59</sup>To say the sacraments do not "add" anything to the Word is only to say that their "substance" is the grace of God in Jesus Christ, the same grace communicated through preaching. However, they do "add" something, namely, a visible sign and seal of this grace. If I may use an analogy, a birth certificate does not "add" anything to the evident fact of one's birth and

Fourth, all of the Reformed confessions grope for words to express simultaneously the most *intimate conjunction* between the sacramental sign and the grace signified, as well as the *necessary distinction* between them. Consistent with the nature of sacraments, the Lord has appointed the sign as a visible representation and confirmation of the gospel. However, the visible representation and confirmation are not to be confused with the spiritual reality to which they point. The water of baptism is not to be confused with the blood of Christ or the washing of the Holy Spirit. The bread and wine of the Lord's Supper, likewise, are not to be confused with the body and blood of Christ. In sacramental language, we may speak of the sign as though it were the reality, so intimate is the divinely appointed connection between them. But lest we fall prey to idolatry, worshipping the sacramental element rather than the mediator, Jesus Christ, to whom the element refers, we may not neglect to distinguish between them. The "substance" to which the sacramental sign points can only be Jesus Christ himself in all of his saving presence and power.

Fifth, the power and efficacy of the sacraments require that they be received by faith. Since the sacraments do not add anything new to the grace of Christ promised in the gospel, and since the sacramental elements are not to be confused with the spiritual reality to which they refer, the sacraments require the same response as the Word. No more than the preaching of the gospel does the administration of the sacrament savingly communicate the grace of Christ, unless the gospel promise is believed or appropriated by an active faith. The Holy Spirit who authors faith through the preaching of the Word, also uses the sacraments to confirm and nourish faith. The sacraments function instrumentally to communicate the grace of God in Christ, but only when the Holy Spirit works through them to strengthen the believer in faith. Consistent with this emphasis upon the believing reception of the sacraments, the Reformed confessions unitedly oppose any doctrine of *sacramental regeneration*

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subsequent life; but it does authenticate this fact in ways that are publicly credible and important.



apart from the Spirit's working faith through the Word. The sacraments do not work simply by virtue of their administration (*ex opere operato*), so long as the recipient does not interpose any obstacle (*obex*) to the reception of the grace they confer.<sup>60</sup> Though they do genuinely serve, as means of grace, to *confer* and to *communicate* the grace of God in Christ, they do so only as the Spirit is working in them and as they confirm the faith required on the part of their recipients.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup>The teaching that the sacraments effectively confer grace upon their recipients by virtue of their administration (*ex opere operato*) was affirmed by the Council of Trent, and continues to be the official teaching of the Roman Catholic Church. Cf. "The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent," Seventh Session, On The Sacraments in General, Canon VIII: "If any one saith, that by the said sacraments of the New Law grace is not conferred through the act performed (*ex opere operato*), but that faith alone in the divine promise suffices for the obtaining of grace: let him be anathema" (quoted from Schaff, *The Greek and Latin Creeds*, 121). Though Catholic teaching does acknowledge the necessity of certain "minimum conditions" (the absence of which constitutes an "obstacle" to the reception of grace) in the adult recipient of the sacraments to the realization of their "fruits," in the particular case of the baptism of infants, baptism confers grace by the simple performance of the act. For a contemporary statement of the Catholic view, see *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America, 1967), XII: 806-816 (esp. 813); and *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Liguori, MO: United States Catholic Conference, Inc., 1994), 292.

<sup>61</sup>Rohls, *Reformed Confessions*, 181-85, argues that there is a subtle difference of emphasis regarding the efficacy of the sacraments in the Reformed confessions. Some of the confessions (e.g., Gallican, Belgic) affirm a fully "instrumental" view of the sacraments as means of grace. In this view the sacraments confer grace at the time of their administration and through the means of the sacramental sign and seal itself. However, some of the confessions (e.g., the Second Helvetic Confession, the Westminster Confession of Faith) only affirm that grace is conferred "in parallel" or alongside of the administration of the outward sign and seal. In this second view, there is a sharper disjunction between the "external reception of the sign" and the "internal reception of the signified substance." I am not persuaded that this difference of emphasis is as significant as Rohls maintains. Though it is true that some of the confessions use stronger language in linking the sign with the thing signified, while others are more anxious to keep a distance between them, these differing emphases answer to different concerns. The former are anxious to stress the efficacy of the sacraments as God-appointed instruments for the communication of the grace of Christ to his

And sixth, the sacraments are, in the nature of the case, visible signs and seals which the Lord alone can appoint for the use and benefit of the church. Because they require divine authorization, the church may not appoint as sacraments any church rite or practice, however useful, that she pleases. Just as in the old covenant, so also in the new, the Lord has appointed only two sacraments for the use of his people, holy baptism and the Lord's Supper. Thus, the Roman Catholic doctrine which speaks of seven sacraments represents an abuse of church authority and undermines its claim to be the true church of Jesus Christ.

*Observations regarding the Doctrine of Baptism*

First, the first sacrament which Christ has appointed for the church is holy baptism. By the Lord's ordinance and appointment, the sacramental sign of baptism is pure water. Only a lawfully ordained minister of the Word is authorized to administer this sacrament, and he must do so using the words of institution given by Christ in Matthew 28:19. Though the mode of baptism may differ from place to place—whether through immersion, affusion, or sprinkling<sup>62</sup>—the validity of baptism requires the use of the Christ-appointed sign of water and the

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people. The latter are anxious to stress that this efficacy requires a believing reception of the sacrament, and that this believing reception finds the "substance" of the sacrament in Christ himself, not the sacramental sign. However, all of the Reformed confessions, though they distinguish between the sign and the thing signified, affirm the power of the sacraments as genuine instruments or means of grace. When they are administered in conjunction with the preaching of the Word, the Holy Spirit works in and through the sacrament to confirm and nourish faith. This working of the Spirit in and through the sacrament is a spiritual reality, not merely a "sign" or "testimony" to that reality.

<sup>62</sup>For a thorough discussion of the Reformer's views on the mode of baptism, including a review of the history of the question in the Christian church, see Olds, *The Shaping of the Reformed Baptismal Rite in the Sixteenth Century*, 264-82. Though some of the Reformers attempted to reintroduce the practice of immersion (e.g., Zwingli), the general consensus was that the mode was an *adiaphoron* and that sprinkling was, practically, the most expedient mode.

gospel Word regarding the baptized member of Christ's communion with the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.<sup>63</sup>

Second, the sacrament of baptism, which by its nature may be administered only once, serves to signify and seal to believers their adoption into the household of God and incorporation into Christ. The water of baptism especially represents the washing away of sin through the blood of Christ and the Spirit of regeneration. By baptism believers are not only visibly distinguished from those who remain "strangers" to God and Christ's church, and are incorporated into the body of Christ; but believers are also by baptism assured and confirmed in the grace of reconciliation with God and purification from the pollution and guilt of sin. Moreover, as those who are distinguished as members of Christ and the household of God, believers are also by baptism enlisted into the service of Christ, engaged to him as those who are his cherished possession, and called to live in love with all others who enjoy communion with Christ. Though the emphasis in the Reformed confessions falls upon the privileges of grace which are signified and sealed to believers in baptism, the Second Helvetic Confession and the Westminster Confession of Faith especially emphasize these accompanying obligations of baptism. Just as the required response to the Word of the gospel includes repentance and faith, so the required response to the visible Word of the sacrament includes corresponding responsibilities and privileges. These purposes of baptism are not restricted to the occasion of its administration. Rather,

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<sup>63</sup>The validity of Christian baptism depends upon the presence of its essential components, the sign of water and the words of institution. I am reminded, in this connection, of an anecdote told by my father regarding a minister in his community who, upon discovering no water in the baptismal font, proceeded with the sacrament by pretending that water was present. Though the elders of the congregation did not interrupt the service, they insisted upon the administration of baptism with water to the child at a later service. The elders were correct in this insistence since, without water or the sign of the sacrament, you do not have an "irregular" sacrament but "no valid" sacrament at all. The only error of the elders was their failure to intervene immediately during the service and to insist that the minister go no further until water be obtained!

throughout the entire course of the believer's life, the sacrament of baptism serves powerfully and effectively to confirm faith and stimulate obedience. To use the language of the Westminster Confession of Faith, believers must be vigilant in the constant "improvement" of their baptism, being reminded by this sacrament of their engagement to Christ and enrollment in the company of his people.

Third, though the Reformed confessions do not teach baptismal regeneration, they do ascribe a real power and efficacy to the sacrament of baptism in conferring the grace of God in Christ upon believers. A cursory reading of the descriptions of the function and effect of baptism in these confessions must impress any fair reader with the strength of the connection drawn between the sacramental sign and the spiritual reality signified. Again and again, the sacrament of baptism is described as that which effects, or brings about, what is visibly represented and pledged. As a divinely appointed instrument for the confirmation of faith, it could not be otherwise. For, if the sacrament were of little or no effect as a means of grace—merely a visible testimony to the believer's subjective state and disposition toward God, and not a divinely given sacramental Word signifying and sealing divine grace in Christ—then it would not have been added to the Word as a more full confirmation of God's grace. Because God has been willing to join the spiritual grace communicated with its sacramental sign, the church must not weaken its understanding of the sacrament's power and efficacy by "breaking asunder" what God has joined together.

Fourth, in their handling of the question, who should be baptized?, the Reformed confessions consistently affirm that baptism should be administered to believers and their children. The affirmation of the baptism of children of believing parents is treated more expansively in the later confessions of the Reformation era, reflecting the continuing and intensifying polemic against the Anabaptist repudiation of infant baptism.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>64</sup>It is well known that Karl Barth severely criticized the Reformed confessions' affirmation of the baptism of children of believing parents. See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1969), IV, 4, 264-94.

According to the confessions, the children of believing parents must be baptized for the same reason as their believing parents: God is pleased to extend the gospel promise to them. The ground for the baptism of children of believers is their divinely promised inclusion in the church and covenant of Jesus Christ. Therefore, as members of Christ and recipients of the gospel promise, their baptism has the same meaning as the baptism of adult believers. Consistent with the Reformed understanding of the divine initiative in election and the communication of God's grace in Christ to his people, the baptism of children of believing parents signifies and attests to their adoption into the household of God, and the washing away of their sins through the blood of Christ and the Spirit of regeneration.

Several biblical considerations are adduced in the confessions to support the practice of the baptism of children of believing parents: God's gracious promise to them; their inclusion within the covenant people of God; the fact that the kingdom of God belongs to them; the Old Testament precedent of the sacrament of circumcision, which in the New Testament has been replaced by baptism; and the Old Testament practice of offering a lamb of purification at the birth of a child, which was a sacrament of Jesus Christ. No more than in the case of believers are children

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According to Barth, the Reformers failed at this point to carry through consistently their insistence upon faith as necessary to the reception of the sacrament. The Reformers simply adopted a common social practice of the day and then invented ("necessity is the mother of invention") a theological justification for it. In this criticism, Barth fails to appreciate the Reformed view of the sacrament as essentially *God's sacramental signifying and sealing of his grace* to believers and their children. Though it is true that faith receives the grace which the sacrament confers, it does so as a "receptive" rather than "constitutive" act. The children of believing parents who are baptized must believe, to be sure, but their believing is a response to the gracious promise previously signified and sealed to them in the sacrament of baptism. The argument of the Reformed confessions, which is a biblical argument based upon the doctrine of the covenant and God's sovereign initiatives in salvation, underscores the sheer graciousness of God's grace in the promise he makes to the children of believing parents. For a discussion of Barth's critique and a defense of the Reformed view, see G. C. Berkouwer, *Karl Barth en de Kinderdoop* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1947).

baptized on the basis of a presumed regeneration or any other subjective condition (such as an “infant faith” or the faith of the parents in lieu of their own). Since the power and efficacy of the sacrament of baptism, as is the case with the sacraments generally, depend upon a believing reception of the sacramentally communicated Word of grace, the baptized children of believers are under the obligations to believe and repent that accompany the privileges of their baptism. Moreover, because the sacramental sign and seal are to be distinguished from the spiritual grace which they confirm, the efficacy of baptism may not be tied to the moment of its administration.<sup>65</sup> This does not diminish the efficacy of baptism, but this only acknowledges that its power may not be immediately exhibited.

And fifth, the only Reformed confession that expressly addresses the issue of the validity of baptism in the Roman Catholic Church is the Gallican Confession.<sup>66</sup> Whereas the Scots

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<sup>65</sup>This point is one we have considered previously, particularly in connection with the necessity of the sacraments. Children of believing parents who die in infancy without having been baptized may be regenerated by the Spirit without the ordinary use of the means of grace. Furthermore, since baptism is a sign and seal of regeneration, it is not to be confused with the reality of regeneration, which may, in God’s sovereign grace and the working of the Spirit, precede or follow baptism. See the Westminster Confession of Faith, Chap. XXVIII.vi.

<sup>66</sup>Though it has been the general practice of the Reformed churches to acknowledge the validity of baptism in the Roman Catholic Church, there have been exceptions to this practice, particularly in the Presbyterian tradition. Some encouragement to the practice of regarding Roman Catholic baptism as invalid undoubtedly stems from the kind of emphases found in the Scots Confession and later Puritanism. In this tradition, much is made of the unlawful manner in which baptism is administered in the Roman Catholic church. An interesting debate within Presbyterianism occurred on this issue in the mid-nineteenth century. After the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. (old school) in 1845 declared Roman Catholic baptism invalid, Charles Hodge contested this decision and argued for the traditional Reformed view. Hodge maintained that, by virtue of the presence of the essential components of the sacrament in the Roman Catholic Church, its baptism was to be regarded as valid. See Charles Hodge, “Romish Baptism,” in *The Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review for the Year 1845*, XVII: 444-471. James Henley Thornwell, one of the advocates of the General Assembly’s position, responded to Hodge with an extensive article (“The Validity of the

Confession seems to warrant the inference that Roman Catholic baptism is invalid, the Gallican Confession expressly affirms its validity as a “trace” of the true church remaining within that communion. This affirmation of the Gallican Confession represents, however, the predominant view of the Reformed churches at the time of the Reformation and subsequently. Since the sacrament is comprised of two components—the Christ-appointed sign of water and the words of institution in Matthew 28:19—which are present in the administration of baptism within the Roman Catholic Church, its baptism should be recognized as valid. Whatever irregularities may attend its administration, these are not so grave as to compromise the validity of the sacrament altogether. Moreover, in view of the nature of the sacrament of baptism as a singular rite, administered but once as an initiation into the fellowship of Christ’s church, the practice of (re)baptizing those who were formerly baptized in the Roman Catholic church should ordinarily be avoided. The validity and efficacy of the sacrament does not depend upon the ministrant, but upon the presence of the gospel promise of communion with the Triune God and its accompanying sacramental sign and seal.

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Baptism of Rome,” *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell* [1875; reprint, Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1986], III: 283-412). Thornwell argued that four requirements must be fulfilled for the sacrament to be valid: one, a washing with water; two, the Trinitarian name of God is used; three, a professed intention to comply with the command of Christ; and four, the sacrament is administered by a lawful minister of Christ. According to Thornwell, none of these requirements is met by the Roman Catholic sacrament of baptism. In my judgment, it ought to be the practice of all Reformed churches to acknowledge the validity (however irregular) of Roman Catholic baptism, so long as the essential elements of water and the Trinitarian words of institution are present. This practice not only acknowledges the presence in the Roman Catholic church of “traces” of the true church, but it also helps to preserve the principle that baptism is an initiatory rite to be performed only once. It is also consistent with a common affirmation in the Reformed confessions, that the validity of the sacrament does not depend upon the integrity of the minister. If, however, a Reformed church chooses not to acknowledge the validity of Roman Catholic baptism, it should do in such a way as to preserve the principle that baptism is never repeated. As a practical matter, this would require the decision that the person baptized had not, in any sense of the term, previously been baptized.

*A Closing Appeal for Reformation in the Practice  
of the Reformed Churches*

There is much that could be remarked regarding the practice of the Reformed churches, when it comes to the sacraments in general and the sacrament of baptism in particular. Some of the implications of the doctrine espoused in the Reformed confessions have been addressed in the preceding, either by way of implication or notation in the footnotes. However, I would like to close this treatment of the Reformed confessions on the subject of the sacraments with an appeal for reformation in the practice of the Reformed churches. This reformation needs to occur in several areas.

First of all, the doctrine of the sacraments and of baptism in the Reformed confessions needs to be given far greater emphasis in the teaching and preaching ministry of the church. If there is to be genuine renewal in the Reformed churches, so far as the administration and use of the sacraments are concerned, the pastors and teachers must give themselves self-consciously to the instruction of their congregations in the doctrine of the sacraments set forth in the confessions. How many pastors have thoroughly studied the confessions on the doctrine of the sacraments and of baptism? And how many have taught courses whose primary subject was the sacraments as means of grace? If the confession of the churches is to be a living confession, one which gives birth to a corresponding practice, then it must be a confession that is known and owned by those who are members of the church.

But such instruction of the congregation is by itself inadequate. Much greater attention also needs to be given to the visibility of the sacraments in the life of the congregation. By the visibility of the sacrament, I mean to refer to such things as the architecture and furnishing of the sanctuaries or places of worship, the location of the baptismal font (and the communion table), the carefulness with which the sacrament is administered, and the seriousness with which the sacraments are viewed. It is not uncommon today, to find Reformed churches where the



baptismal font or communion table are barely visible to the congregation. Nor is it uncommon to find pastors and elders who do not provide careful instruction for believers on the occasion of their baptism or the baptism of their children. Particularly distressing is the practice of delaying the baptism of children of believing parents for considerations which have little to do with, and often diminish the importance of, the sacrament itself.<sup>67</sup> Seldom are congregants reminded of their baptism, for example, as a defining reality so far as their Christian life and communion with the Triune God is concerned. The privileges and responsibilities that accompany Christian baptism do not figure prominently in the preaching and teaching ministry of the church. In each of these areas, the Reformed churches need to restore a practice that corresponds to their confession that the sacraments are an indispensable means of grace, accompanying the preaching of the Word, and appointed of Christ for the nourishing and strengthening of faith.

Perhaps most importantly, however, Christian believers need to be encouraged to use their baptism throughout the whole course of their Christian life. This use is twofold. On the one hand, baptism ought to be a great basis and source of assurance in the Christian life. And on the other hand, baptism ought to be a stimulation to a responsible life of Christian obedience.

It is a strange irony that, in many Reformed churches, the use of baptism as a means or basis for assurance is commonly disparaged. Out of a concern to resist complacency and presumptuousness, the assurance of God's grace toward us in Christ, which the sacrament is given to nourish and strengthen, is diminished. How often it is remarked, "baptism is no guarantee of your salvation." Perhaps no other word is spoken more frequently respecting the baptism of believers and their children.

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<sup>67</sup>In the practice of the Reformed churches historically, baptism of the children of believing parents was usually administered as soon as feasible. Some church orders of Reformed communions still stipulate this practice. Now admittedly, pastors need to be sensitive to considerations that might delay the administration of the sacrament. But they ought to resist unnecessary delay which only reinforces a diminished view of the sacrament's importance.

But this kind of language betrays a weakening, even a virtual denial, of the power and efficacy of baptism as a sure sign and seal of God's favor toward us in Christ. If baptism may not be used as a ground for assurance in the Christian life, then what becomes of its proper use? This disparagement and neglect of the use of baptism as a ground of assurance before God denies the truth respecting the sacrament as it is summarized in the confessions.

The concern that an appeal to baptism as a ground of assurance will encourage complacency and presumptuousness, fails to reckon with the Reformed confessions' insistence that the privileges of God's grace, which are communicated through the sacrament, undergird and accentuate the responsibilities of God's grace. If baptism is a confirmatory sign of God's grace, it is also a solemn reminder that believers belong to God and, as members of Christ's church, must live accordingly. Baptism engages the church as bride to Christ the bridegroom. Baptism, to use the language of the Second Helvetic Confession, enlists the believer "in the holy military service of Christ" and places the believer under obligations of love toward God and toward others who belong to the fellowship of the church. Thus, the proper and balanced use of the sacrament of baptism in the Christian life will simultaneously provide assurance of God's grace and encourage a responsible course of Christian obedience.