

# **Paedobaptism and Baptismal Efficacy: Historic Trends and Current Controversies**

By Rich Lusk

## **Historical Considerations**

### **The Decline of American Paedobaptist Practice**

In 1857, Charles Hodge wrote an essay in the *Princeton Review* lamenting the decline of the practice of infant baptism in America.<sup>1</sup> Using statistics provided by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, Hodge pointed out that from 1812 onward, the number of children being brought for baptism was radically declining in relation to the overall number of communicants. In 1811, there had been 20 paedobaptisms per hundred communicants; by 1856, the ratio was just over 5 per hundred. Hodge sounded the alarm: “[M]ore than two-thirds of the children of the Church have been ‘cut off’ from the people of God by their parents’ sinful neglect, and by the Church’s silent acquiescence therein.”

Hodge reported a similar downgrade was occurring in other ostensibly Reformed denominations. The Dutch Reformed ratio was only slightly better than the Presbyterian in 1856, at around 7 paedobaptisms per hundred communicants. Things were even worse in other bodies. The New School Presbyterians were leaving six out of seven children unbaptized. Paedobaptism was so rare among Congregationalists by the mid-1850s, Hodge could truthfully claim, “in the Congregational churches in New England, infant baptism is, beyond doubt, dying out.” Only the high church Episcopalians seemed relatively unaffected by the trend.

What caused this sharp decline in the maintenance of covenant baptism? Why did the church’s historic practice lose so much ground in America so quickly? It is far beyond the scope of this essay to enter into all the theological and social forces that factored into the decline of paedobaptism in our culture. One thing is certain: America became progressively “baptist” on a massive scale in the early-to-mid-nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup> Without going into detail, a few obvious connections can be made between two powerful cultural-theological movements and the loss of paedobaptism: namely, experiential revivalism and Enlightenment rationalism. Let us look at each of these in turn.

### *The Effects of Revivalism*

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<sup>1</sup> This article is entitled “The Neglect of Infant Baptism” and appeared in *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review*, 1857, 73-101. It is discussed in James Hastings Nichols, *Romanticism in American Theology: Nevin and Schaff at Mercersburg* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1961), 238ff and John Payne, “Nevin on Baptism” in *Reformed Confessionalism in Nineteenth Century America: Essays on the Thought of John Williamson Nevin*, ed. Sam Hamstra, Jr. and Arie J. Griffen (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1995), 125ff. The Hodge quotations and statistics come from these two sources.

<sup>2</sup> On this trend, see *The Failure of American Baptist Culture*, ed. James B. Jordan, Christianity and Civilization, no. 1 (Tyler, TX: Geneva Divinity School, 1982).

Note that the 50 year period of decline Hodge traced out coincides, more or less, with the institutionalization of Revivalism in American Christianity. While the First Great Awakening of the eighteenth century had been a mixed blessing, it remained basically Calvinistic in doctrinal orientation. Preachers such as Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, and Gilbert Tennant injected new life into decaying, dying churches. The Awakening did not always foster a high view of the church, particularly because of itinerancy, but it did cultivate a warm and deep love for classic Reformational orthodoxy.<sup>3</sup>

The Second Great Awakening of the early nineteenth century brought with it a significant shift away from the earlier pattern of Protestantism. This rapidly expanding movement was full of anti-doctrinal, anti-ecclesiastical tendencies, all of which fanned the flames of the anti-paedobaptist fire. Leaders such as Charles Finney, Lorenzo Dow, Francis Asbury, and Alexander Campbell all wielded enormous influence in remaking American Christianity. Low church Revivalism trumped high church Puritanism, pushing to the periphery of American society traditional Calvinistic and paedobaptistic bodies.

The revivals of the Second Great Awakening totally restructured American religious life in radical fashion. While there is some danger in characterizing broad historical movements, we can safely identify several features commonly attributed to the second wave of revivals.

First, these revivals undermined a traditional high view of ecclesiastical office and authority. The Protestant Reformation had insisted on an educated clergy, in contrast to the late medieval period, when priests were often ignorant and even illiterate. Because pastors were scholarly and articulate, they had become powerful leaders in society, influencing politics, economics, literature, art, and so forth. Church discipline was respected as the most powerful deterrent placed in the hands of mortal men. Pastors often wore special vestments to indicate their status as leaders of the community and representatives of Christ. Ministers were expected to be cultured, literate, and above the common man in intelligence and ability.

By contrast, in the Second Great Awakening, it was not uncommon for ministers to go on preaching tours with little or no formal training. As the need for churches on the ever expanding American frontier accelerated, older, more traditional church bodies could not supply enough ministers to keep pace. In the oft quoted words of Peter Cartwright “illiterate Methodist preachers set the world on fire while they [that is, preachers from ‘high church’ bodies] were lighting their matches.”<sup>4</sup> Young Princeton seminarians were busy learning Latin and the latest German theology; meanwhile, the revivalistic preachers were overrunning America. Cartwright estimated that “of the thousands of preachers that

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<sup>3</sup> On problems already inherent in the First Great Awakening, see Peter J. Leithart, “Revivalism and American Protestantism” in *The Reconstruction of the Church*, ed. James B. Jordan, Christianity and Civilization no. 4, (Tyler, TX: Geneva Divinity School, 1985), 46ff.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Noonday Press, 1977), 37.

the Methodists recruited in the early republic, not more than fifty had more than a common English education, and scores of preachers did not even have that much.”<sup>5</sup> Formal schooling was actually perceived as a distinct disadvantage for circuit riders. Preachers would strive to use informal, vulgar speech, suiting their style, message, and dress to their audiences. Francis Asbury insisted that scholarship not interfere with the more pressing task of saving souls: “I would throw by all the Libraries in the World rather than be guilty of the Loss of one Soul.”<sup>6</sup> Charles Finney charged young seminary graduates with having “hearts as heard as the college walls.”<sup>7</sup> In Ann Douglas’ trenchant survey of nineteenth American religion, she concludes “Over the course of the nineteenth century, the Protestant minister became the only professional other than the housewife who ceased to command, much less monopolize, any special body of knowledge.”<sup>8</sup> In this context, it is easy to see why Hodge attributed the decline of paedobaptism, at least in part, to the inability of ministers to explain its biblical grounding.<sup>9</sup> The clergy became a new class of “Know Nothings.”

Second, the revivals spawned a highly individualistic piety. Hatch has rightly referred to the period as the “democratization of American Christianity.” Theologically, this meant the right of private judgment trumped traditional creeds and confessions. Popular revivalist Alexander Campbell disdained any ecclesiastical heritage as a guide or norm in biblical studies: “I have endeavored to read the scriptures as though no one had read them before me, and I am as much on my guard against reading them to-day through the medium of my own views yesterday, or a week ago, as I am against being influenced by any foreign name, authority, or system whatever.”<sup>10</sup> Robert Marshall and J. Thompson wrote, “We are not personally acquainted with the writings of John Calvin, nor are we certain how nearly we agree with his views of divine truth; nor do we care.”<sup>11</sup> Free thinking, stripped of the confining straightjacket of tradition, became the order of the day. The doctrines of God’s sovereignty and predestination, perceived as threats to personal autonomy, were jettisoned in favor of semi-Pelagian views. Paedobaptism also fell into disfavor since it (very undemocratically) imposed a religious identity on an unwilling subject. Personal choice became everything. The traditional paedobaptist praxis of Christendom became nothing.

Third, the revivals focused on the immediacy of religious experience, to the exclusion of traditional means of grace.<sup>12</sup> Preaching, of course, was still emphasized as before, but now it aimed at stirring religious sentiment rather than communicating biblical truth. Emotional appeal in preaching, without doubt, is healthy since the whole person – head and heart – should be touched with God’s Word. But the revivalists’ methods sometimes

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<sup>5</sup> Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 89.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 89.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Leithart, “Revivalism and American Protestantism,” 67.

<sup>8</sup> Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture*, 165.

<sup>9</sup> Payne, “Nevin on Baptism,” 126.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 179.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., Hatch 174.

<sup>12</sup> On Revivalism’s shift to experientialism, see Philip J. Lee, *Against the Protestant Gnostics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 143f.

bordered on emotional manipulation. Newly created “sacraments” such as the altar call and anxious bench replaced baptism and the Lord’s Supper as God’s primary locus of activity. Sappy, sentimental hymns replaced the robust, masculine psalter used previously. Experientialism undermined the objectivity of the covenant. Again, it is easy to see that paedobaptism would fit very awkwardly into such a religious matrix. In such a context, if baptism is of any value at all, it is to stimulate religious feelings and emotions, which of course an infant cannot experience. Hodge noted that many who entered the church via a revivalistic conversion experience at a camp meeting failed to bring their children with them.<sup>13</sup> Instead of “growing up Christian” under continual covenant nurture, children were expected to undergo their own “conversion experience” at the appropriate age.<sup>14</sup>

Lewis Schenck explains:

It was unfortunate that the Great Awakening made an emotional experience, involving terror, misery, and depression, the only approach to God. A conscious conversion experience from enmity to friendship with God was looked upon as the only way of entrance into the kingdom. Sometimes it came suddenly, sometimes it was a prolonged and painful process. But it was believed to be a clearly discernible and emotional upheaval, necessarily “distinct to the consciousness of its subject and apparent to those around.” Preceding the experience of God’s love and peace, it was believed necessary to have an awful sense of one’s lost and terrifying position. Since these were not the experiences of infancy and early childhood, it was taken for granted children must, or in all ordinary cases would, grow up unconverted. Infants, it was thought, needed new birth, as well as adults. They could not be saved without it. But the only channel of the new birth which was recognized was a conscious experience of conviction and conversion. Anything else, according to Gilbert Tennent, was a fiction of the brain, a delusion of the Devil. In fact, he ridiculed the idea that one could be a Christian without knowing the time when he was otherwise.<sup>15</sup>

Obviously, revivalism was no friend of covenant children. The revivals only intensified the worst features of the earlier Puritanism. In New England theology, children had never been regarded as more than merely formal members of the church:

New England never held out a large measure of hope for the little ones on the basis of God’s covenant promises. These were constantly overshadowed by an emphasis on inherent sinfulness as the result of their relationship to Adam . . .

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<sup>13</sup> Nichols, *Romanticism in American Theology*, 239.

<sup>14</sup> Payne, “Nevin on Baptism,” 127ff compares the revivalistic method of crisis conversion to the more organic model of covenant nurture. More on this below.

<sup>15</sup> Lewis Bevens Schenck, *The Presbyterian Doctrine of Children in the Covenant: An Historical Study of the Significance of Infant Baptism in the Presbyterian Church in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1940), 70

Without the presence of something akin to adult experience and insight the child was hardly ever regarded as being in a hopeful way.<sup>16</sup>

The experiential rigor of Puritanism and revivalism may have seemed like a safeguard against merely “nominal” membership in the churches; in reality, skepticism of covenant children became a self-fulfilling prophecy. One generation after another grew up outside the church, for all practical purposes, never to return. As adult-like credentials for conversion and full membership were pressed more and more, infant baptism became an increasingly tenuous practice, until it finally gave out altogether.<sup>17</sup>

Surprisingly, the revivalists were actually aided in some ways by the theologians in driving children out of the church. Revivalism and scholasticism conspired together against paedobaptism. Revivalism demanded a narratable conversion experience, pushing baptized children to the margins of covenant community; scholasticism in turn created new categories of membership to account for the oddity of these church children. Distinctions were made between internal and external covenant membership, federal and experiential membership, legal and vital membership, and so forth. While the simple biblical promises to and for children were obscured, it became increasingly clear theologians and revivalists would go to great lengths to preserve their preconceived notions about the status of “covenant” children.

### *The Effects of Enlightenment Rationalism*

Revivalism was not the only factor in the growing nineteenth century neglect of paedobaptism. The era of decline Hodge identified also corresponds with the period during which the Enlightenment made deep inroads into American society. If Revivalism represents a drift into chaotic irrationalism, the Enlightenment, of course, meant a move towards unbridled rationalism. While the Enlightenment had already engulfed the continent of Europe in the previous century, by the nineteenth century, its effects were becoming increasingly noticeable on American soil.

The results of the Enlightenment were disastrous for traditional orthodoxy. The Enlightenment forced theology into one of two molds: either biblical truth had to be conformed to the dictates of a secular, supposedly neutral reason, resulting in a rationalistic, secularized dogmatics; or religion was taken out of the realm of scientific, public fact altogether and placed in the sphere of subjective, private experience, resulting in introspective pietism. Among conservatives, the Enlightenment ethos permeated in fairly subtle ways, and there was usually a blending of both molds together. Several complex developments should be noted here.

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<sup>16</sup> Peter De Jong *The Covenant Idea in New England Theology 1620-1847* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1945), 97. De Jong shows the experientialism of Puritanism (which was only exacerbated by revivalism) eventually overthrew the Calvinistic principle of the church membership of children.

<sup>17</sup> As baptism degenerated into a “mere ceremony” and baptized children were no longer regarded as occupying a special position in the covenant, New England Congregationalism continually lost members to newly formed Baptist churches. DeJong, *The Covenant Idea*, chronicles this slide into anti-paedobaptism. See especially 147, 157, 171.

First, in the wake of the Enlightenment, the Reformed scholastics developed an overly cognitive view of the faith. Christianity came to be defined as a rigidly dogmatic system – a kind of ideology or philosophy. Arid intellectualism in the churches and seminaries was the inevitable result. Systematic theology became more rigorously logical, and less doxological and practical than it had been in Calvin’s day. Systematic theology texts gave predestination an increasingly prominent place, all the while relegating sacramental theology to an awkward place at the tail end, since the sacraments didn’t fit into a neat and tidy dogmatic structure. The developing *ordo salutis*, soon to become a touchstone of Reformed scholastic orthodoxy, omitted the sacraments altogether, giving the impression they were insignificant appendages to the gospel, rather than crucial means of saving grace.<sup>18</sup> This rationalistic legacy of the Enlightenment is still very much with us in Reformed churches that feature hour long sermonic discourses on systematic theology as standard fare, but only celebrate the Eucharist once a quarter to keep it “special.” It is also seen in Reformed pastors who when performing a baptism spend more time telling their congregations what the sacrament does *not* do than what it does. Cognition is more important than ritual on such a model.

M. F. Sadler, a nineteenth century Reformed Anglican, was a voice crying in the wilderness against the Enlightenment’s truncation of the faith. He saw a close connection between the tendency to turn the Bible into a philosophical system and the loss of the sacraments as genuine means of salvific grace.

Nothing has done more to destroy the true life of Christianity than the attempt to make it into a sort of philosophical system.

The tendency of much modern popular Theology is to exhibit Christianity as a sort of science, having its causes and effects – moral and mental, of course, but still causes and effects – connected according to certain known laws. The causes are, the exhibition of certain influential motives – such as the love of God shown in the plan of redemption; the (natural) effects of these are the drawing of the heart and affections Godward, the implantation of a new principle, etc.

Now, all this is true; but being only part of the truth, when held *alone*, it is held wrongly, and therefore mischievously. For the doctrine of the Sacraments at once and for ever makes Christianity (humanly speaking) unphilosophical. It introduces a disturbing element, because a supernatural one; for it teaches us that there are in Christianity two ordinances which produce a religious effect not according to the laws of cause and effect with which *we* are acquainted. The Sacrament of Baptism grafts a person into Christ, not because there is anything in Baptism itself calculated to do so, but because of the will of God and the promise of Christ to be with His Church to the end of the world.

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<sup>18</sup> There are numerous helpful studies on the rise of Reformed scholasticism. See, for example, Bryan D. Spinks, *Two Faces of Elizabethan Anglican Theology: Sacraments and Salvation in the Thought of William Perkins and Richard Hooker* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1999).

When a man heartily accepts the doctrine of Baptism as it is laid down in Holy Scripture, he must hold *all* Christianity to be supernatural. He believes that he is, in some inscrutable way, partaker of the nature of One who is now at the right hand of God; he believes also that his fellow-Christians are not merely his fellow-Christians because they hold the same body of truth which he holds – as the members of a political party may be united by holding the same opinions – but he believes that both they and he have been grafted supernaturally into the Second Adam . . .

The teaching of the Church on Holy Baptism is also diametrically opposed to that spirit of rationalism which refuses to contemplate Christianity as in reality anything more than a human philosophy, or educational system, which, if it have not the same origin, at least has now the same mode of operation, in all respects as any other philosophical or educational system: any supernatural character which it may once have had having long since passed away, it must now work its work as any other system of opinions must do, by appealing to the reason, or imagination, or affections, of those brought within its influence.

Now the doctrine of Baptismal Grace is unquestionably opposed to any such limitation of the power of God in the matter of our salvation, for if we accept it we must, perforce, believe that each Christian, at the commencement of his discipleship – at his first entrance into the kingdom which Christ has established – receives some mysterious communication from Christ Himself, or is brought into a supernatural state of union with Him as the Second Adam.<sup>19</sup>

In other words, preservation of sacramental efficacy was part and parcel of the preservation of Calvinism, over against rationalism. The downgrading of the sacraments was part of the Enlightenment trend to question anything supernatural or unexplainable according to the principles of the newly emerging empirical science. Disbelief in the miracles of Jesus' earthly ministry was accompanied by disbelief in the miracles of his heavenly ministry wrought through the church's ordinances of baptism and the Eucharist. Faith in the efficacy of the sacraments in the post-Enlightenment world, so far from being a matter of sheer presumption, is only possible if one believes, against the grain of public opinion, that God is active in the world and reigns over it as sovereign King.

Due to Enlightenment rationalism, faith itself came to be conceived more as a mental act than a relational disposition. The Enlightenment revived the Hellenistic view of the “primacy of the intellect,” making faith a matter of assent to propositions rather than a posture of trust towards another person. Within such a view of faith, infant faith is considered an absurd notion.<sup>20</sup> Infants cannot reason, nor understand preaching, so

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<sup>19</sup> M. F. Sadler, *The Second Adam and the New Birth* (London: G Bell and Sons, 1892), 217-18, 285. A wonderfully contemporary anti-Enlightenment, anti-ideological exposition of biblical faith is found in Peter Leithart, *Against Christianity* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2003).

<sup>20</sup> There is ample biblical evidence for infant faith, e.g., Ps. 22:9-10 and Mt. 18:6. Calvin believed in infant faith as a real, though mysterious, possibility: “But how (they ask) are infants, unendowed with knowledge of good and evil, regenerated? We reply that God’s work, though beyond our understanding is still not annulled,” *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeil (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960),

therefore they cannot trust in God. Whatever effect the sacrament has for the child will not be realized until much later in life. Infants may still be baptized out of the inertia of tradition, but now with more than a touch of embarrassment. Adult baptism is made the norm, since understanding precedes belief.<sup>21</sup>

Second, the Enlightenment cast a heavy shadow of suspicion on public, communal rituals, most especially the sacraments.<sup>22</sup> Non-cognitive forms of communication, involving the body, gestures, and physical elements, were downplayed. Liturgy, replete with ceremony and symbolism, and sacraments, involving the “stuff” of water, bread, and wine, were marginalized in favor of a one-sided emphasis on doctrinal ideas and preaching. Worship was reduced to a sermon and the various features of communal living – “body life” – were lost as religious faith came to be seen more and more as an individual matter of private opinion. “Religion is what people do with their solitude,” (in the words of Alfred North Whitehead) became the typical view in the aftermath of the Enlightenment. Leading liberal Adolf von Harnack, lecturing on the “essence of Christianity,” said,

The kingdom of God comes by coming to individuals, making entrance into their souls, and being grasped by them . . . Everything externally dramatic, all public and historical meaning vanish here . . . It is not a matter of angels and devils, nor of principalities and powers, but of God and the soul, of the soul and its God.<sup>23</sup>

Externals such as sacraments were deemed alien to the true “genius” of Christianity, which was all “inward” and “spiritual.” Conversion was no longer publicly manifested in submission to baptism and incorporation into the church; it became a secret transaction between God and the soul. Communal and symbolic rituals were fine for the childish era of Old Testament religion but were obsolete in a more mature, rational, spiritual age. Not surprisingly, Enlightenment theologians disdained the sacraments and viewed any notion of baptismal efficacy as absurd and superstitious. Kant, the Enlightenment philosopher par excellence, called for a “pure religion” of universalizable rational truths and morality, devoid of particular historical claims and ritual practices. According to Kant, the enlightened man will not be defined by membership in a community or by a ritual imposed upon him in infancy; rather, he will create his own reality and give his life the meaning he chooses.

The tide of Enlightenment thought was seen in various realms, all impinging on the church in various ways and championing the autonomy of the individual over against the

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4.16.17. Calvin rejected the argument that claimed infants could not be regenerated because they cannot understand preaching (4.16.19) and cites as examples of spiritual life in infancy the cases of John the Baptist (4.16.17) and Jesus (4.16.18). More on this below.

<sup>21</sup> This reverses the paradigm of Jesus, who made little children the norm for adults. See Mt 18:3-4. In one sense, all baptisms, properly understood, are paedobaptisms since we all come into the kingdom as children. Biblically, faith is first and foremost the heart’s posture of trust, and only secondarily a matter of assent to intellectual propositions. While covenant children must manifest a growing, dynamic faith, in accord with their increasing mental abilities, there is no reason to doubt they have faith in some sense even from the womb.

<sup>22</sup> Of course, Reformed antipathy to the sacraments was not due solely to the Enlightenment. It also stems from an (over)reaction to Romanism. But Enlightenment rationalism had an undeniable influence.

<sup>23</sup> Adolf von Harnack, *What is Christianity?* (London: Ernest Benn, 1958), trans. Thomas Bailey Saunders, 49-50.

community. As Peter Leithart has pointed out, a ritualized religion can never be completely privatized.<sup>24</sup> But if the Enlightenment was anything, it was a full scale war on public religion. The Enlightenment's attack on the sacraments was part of its larger project of squeezing religion out of public life and exalting the autonomy of the individual.

For example, the Enlightenment popularized a social contract theory of the state. Originating primarily with Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, social contract theory paved the way for modern liberal democracies. According to the social contract view, society is the product of sovereign individuals voluntarily choosing to form a community. But social contract theory is flatly contrary to a biblical theology of the state, which grounds society in God's ordinance rather than man's invention (cf. Rom. 13:1ff).<sup>25</sup>

Social contract theory impacted the church in the rise of the Baptist movement, with its individualistic approach to the faith and its voluntaristic ecclesiology. The church came to be conceived along the lines of a "social contract." But in such a view, baptism is no longer a work of God's sovereign grace, which forms and enlarges the church; it is a human decision to enter a voluntary organization. Infant baptism is preposterous on such presuppositions. Membership in the church has to be by choice, not imposition. Combined with revivalistic experientialism, the social contract model of community was highly detrimental to the ongoing practice of paedobaptism in any meaningful way, for paedobaptism can never be based on a "social contract." The social contract theory served as a tool of the Enlightenment by pushing religion into the private sphere of the individual's conscience and making voluntary consent (e.g., baptistic principles of church membership) the essence of true religion.

And note it wasn't just liberals who went this rationalizing, privatizing direction. The Enlightenment's influence was pervasive. The great Princeton stalwart B. B. Warfield

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<sup>24</sup> *Against Christianity*, 81.

<sup>25</sup> The social contract theory tells a story that is so patently absurd it is hard to believe it ever gained credence in the first place. Social contractualists, in brief, assume that men, by nature, are isolated individuals existing in a state of war with one another. They then voluntarily enter into a social compact with each other, establishing the "state." They consent to give up some of their individual liberties to enter into common life. Biblically, however, the hostility that exists between men is not "natural" at all; rather, it comes in as a result of the fall. Moreover, the story as told by social contract theory makes human community peripheral to human life, as though we were by nature isolated atoms. The theory claims the individual precedes the society. It would be hard to imagine anything more obviously false. Human beings, from the very point of conception onwards, already exist in community! Community is not something added to human life as a tacked-on, optional extra; it is constitutive of human life. As John Zizoulas has so aptly put it, being *is* communion; that is, *to be is to be in communion*. God exists only in community as Father, Son, and Spirit, a unity in Trinity. Mankind is made in the communal image of God. Humans are the products of community from conception onwards. The inescapability of community is seen, furthermore, if we ask how these isolated individuals could enter into social compact with one another unless they *already* shared a common socialization so that they spoke the same language, employed the same customs or rituals, and so forth. In short, the theories of Hobbes and Locke, so integral to modern Western democracies, simply don't square with the way the world actually works. They require us to go against the grain of human life. Society always has (at least) temporal priority over the individual. There are certain "givens" in human life that are simply not a matter of individual consent. The stories Hobbes and Locke tell, as the mythical foundations of their theories, are non-sense.

viewed “immediacy” as a fundamental mark of Calvinism and labeled anything else “sacerdotalism.”<sup>26</sup> Warfield’s position seems eerily close to Fredrich Schleiermacher’s view. Schleiermacher was known as the father of liberalism and spoke of the soul’s “feeling of absolute dependence on God” as the essence of religion. The sacraments were treated with contempt at worst and suspicion at best. One easily gets the impression they could only “get in the way” of a truly personal relationship with the Deity. Certainly, the sacraments could not be viewed as powerful, saving actions of God.

William Willimon explains the shift:

For a long time, we Protestants have been in the grip of what James White has called an “Enlightenment view” of baptism. The eighteenth century European Enlightenment deprecated the role of mystery in life. It sought to make all religion rational, reasonable, and understandable. Human understanding was stressed over divine activity. From this point of view, the question is asked, “What does this mean to me, and what am I doing when this happens?” rather than, “What does this mean to God, and what is God doing when this happens?”<sup>27</sup>

Enlightenment thought put the sacraments under a rationalistic microscope and made the frame of reference the individual rather than the community. But such an approach already presupposes a worldview in which the role and function of the sacraments is greatly marginalized. The mystery of God’s activity through these physical instruments could not be allowed to stand. Any view of sacramental efficacy came to be regarded as “magic.” The sacraments were regarded, as best, as visual teaching aids.

Finally, the Enlightenment worldview aided and abetted the creation of a nature/grace dualism in Protestant theology. In some respects, this dualism was inherited from Medieval philosophy and thus predates the Enlightenment. Calvin’s attempt to integrate faith and reason in the first book of the *Institutes* almost overcame this Medieval dualism,

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<sup>26</sup> Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Plan of Salvation*, (Avinger, TX: Simpson Publishing, 1989).

<sup>27</sup> William Willimon, *Remember Who You Are* (Nashville: The Upper Room, 1980), 33. James White, *Introduction to Christian Worship: Revised Edition* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 182-4, explains further:

[T]he Enlightenment . . . found repugnant the very notion that God would intervene in present time or use physical objects and actions to accomplish the divine will. Slowly, for some Protestants, these views eroded the traditional Catholic and Reformation view that God acts to accomplish God’s purposes through sacraments. The desacralizing tendencies played down God’s role in the sacraments and magnified humanity’s . . . For a vast segment of Protestantism, the two sacraments became simply pious memory exercises . . . Today there is a real split in Protestantism between those who follow Luther, Calvin, and Wesley in the traditional view that God acts in the sacraments, using them as a means of grace for divine self giving, and those who follow the desacralizing tendencies of the Enlightenment which saw the sacraments as something humans do in order to stimulate memory of what God has already done. This split is at least as great as was that between the Reformers and their Roman Catholic contemporaries.

Douglas Wilson suggests the influence of the Enlightenment has reshaped the way some conservative Presbyterians read their pre-Enlightenment Reformed confessions: “It is our conviction that certain epistemological developments since the Enlightenment have caused many *modern* conservative Calvinists to read their confessions in a spirit alien to that which produced them.” *Reformed Is Not Enough: Recovering the Objectivity of the Covenant* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2002), 7-8.

but it crept back in with Reformed scholasticism, particularly through the covenant of works doctrine.<sup>28</sup> The covenant of works denied the presence of grace before the fall. But if grace is not present in the original creation, the creation as such loses its character as pure gift and takes on a measure of autonomy. Grace has to be added to the creation after Genesis 3. But if that is the case, there is a great deal of philosophical pressure to keep grace out of created structures altogether. As a result, God's work of salvation remains extrinsic to the created order. Once nature and grace have been pulled apart, it is very difficult to get them back together again. The sacraments, therefore, cannot be genuine means of grace because God's favor doesn't inhabit or employ ordinary, creaturely means such as water, bread, and wine. God's grace can never be "at home" in the created order because creation is something of a closed system. The nature/grace dualism has a "Gnosticizing" tendency on theology as a whole.

Obviously, no orthodox theological system can push the nature/grace dualism very hard, or it will lose the incarnation and everything else central to the faith. So the Reformed scholastics, like their Medieval forerunners, were never consistent with their philosophical principles here (thankfully). Nevertheless, the nature/grace schema, embedded in bi-covenantal federal theology after the 1590s, played a significant (and often overlooked) role in the deformation of Protestant sacramentology. As the meritorious covenant of works rose to prominence in Reformed scholasticism, the efficacy of the sacraments was inevitably diminished.

The early Reformers (as will be shown below) had insisted the sacraments were mighty actions of God through which he applied Christ's redemption to his people, forming them into a supernatural community. They were not efficacious in themselves of course, nor did they derive efficacy from the human officiant. But they were regarded as effective because God had promised in his Word to be active in them, making them genuine means of grace. There was nothing odd or impossible in suggesting that God used creaturely means to accomplish and apply his supernatural salvation. In the sacraments, God's role was to give and man's was to receive. In fact, it was precisely because the Reformers insisted on the gracious saving activity of God in the sacraments that they rejected the various other rituals regarded by Rome as sacraments. The Reformers had high views of marriage, but marriage could not be a sacrament because it was a human pledge, not a divine means of salvation. Penance could not be a sacrament because its three component parts – contrition, confession, and satisfaction – were all human acts. Confession certainly remained a human duty, but it could not be considered a sacrament since it was man's work, not God's. And so on. But the Enlightenment eviscerated the sacraments themselves of divine activity.

In short, then, in the post-Enlightenment view, the sacraments are basically treated as human acts of piety; they cannot be understood as divine acts of redemption. Their value is completely subjective – they help us remember divine truth, profess our faith, stir up

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<sup>28</sup> For details, see my "Reworking the Covenant of Works" essay (publication forthcoming). The doctrine of a meritorious covenant of works was a latecomer to Reformed theology, only crystallizing in the late sixteenth century after Calvin's death. The early Reformers were not averse to the idea of a pre-fall covenant, but did not posit a non-gracious, meritorious relationship between Adam and his heavenly Father.

emotions, and so forth. They are ways of expressing religious feeling and devotion. But as a result of this one sided view, they cannot be viewed as genuine means of saving grace, for God's grace is not actually found in the lowly natural elements of water, bread, and wine. In such a context, the sacraments obviously cannot belong to infants in any true sense since infants cannot perform the requisite acts or experience the proper emotions.

### **Paedobaptism in Crisis**

Given the push and pull of Revivalism and the Enlightenment, perhaps the wonder is not so much that paedobaptism declined in America (as Hodge grappled with), but that it survived at all. Both of these movements were unfriendly to sacramentally-shaped piety. Even Hodge, for all his distress over the loss of paedobaptism, proved to be part of the problem. When John Williamson Nevin published his path breaking work *The Mystical Presence*, recovering a truly Calvinian understanding of the real presence of the glorified Christ in the Eucharistic meal, Hodge was reluctant to review the work of his former student and good friend. When he finally did so, "he somewhat disingenuously confessed at the beginning of his review of *The Mystical Presence*, he had let the work lie on his desk for nearly two years because he always found it hard to apply himself to books on such themes."<sup>29</sup> Hodge simply did not find discussions of sacramental theology particularly important. In analyzing Hodge's view of baptismal efficacy, Nichols reaches the harsh assessment: "For Hodge, infant baptism was no sacrament."<sup>30</sup>

But Hodge was not alone in his lack of interest in sacramental theology. This became a distinctive feature of American religiosity. Some Southern Presbyterians had severely degraded the meaning of baptism, so that baptized infants were not even regarded as genuine church members, much less recipients of salvific blessings in union with Christ.<sup>31</sup> Presbyterian giant James Henley Thornwell regarded baptized covenant children as enemies of the cross of Christ and under church censure until they made a mature and experience based profession of faith:

But in heart and spirit they [that is, baptized covenant infants] are of the world. In this aspect, how is she to treat them? Precisely as she treats all other impenitent and unbelieving men – she is to exercise the power of the keys, and shut them out from the communion of the saints. She is to debar them from all the privileges of the inner sanctuary. She is to exclude them from their inheritance until they show themselves meet to possess it. . . . Is not their whole life a continued sin? Are not their very righteousnesses abominable before God? Repentance to them is not the abandonment of this or that vice; it is the renunciation of the carnal heart, which is enmity against God: and, until they are renewed in the spirit and temper of . . . As of the world they are included in the universal sentence of exclusion, which bars the communion of saints against the impenitent and profane. They are sharers in

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<sup>29</sup> Quoted in Nichols, *Romanticism in American Theology*, 95.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 255.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 253-4. See also Schenck, *The Presbyterian Doctrine of Children in the Covenant*, 85ff. Schenck clearly identifies revivalistic trends in Southern Presbyterianism.

its condemnation. They are put, as impenitent, upon the same footing with all others that are impenitent. As rejecters of Christ, they are kept aloof from the table of the Lord, and debarred from all the rights and privileges of the saints. Their impenitence determines the attitude of the Church towards them; for God has told her precisely what that attitude should be to all who obey not the Gospel. What more can be required? Are they not dealt with, in every respect, according to their quality? . . . Is it not equally clear that their condition, as slaves, determines their treatment in all other respects, until they are prepared to pass the test which changes their status? Is not this precisely the state of things with the Church and its baptized unbelievers? Are they not the slaves of sin and the Devil, existing in a free Commonwealth for the purpose of being educated to the liberty of the saints? . . . But, until they come to Him, it as distinctly teaches that they are to be dealt with as the Church deals with all the enemies of God.<sup>32</sup>

Even a traditionally high sacramental body such as the Lutherans struggled throughout the nineteenth century to maintain a strong sacramental identity.<sup>33</sup> American Christianity as a whole has been rather unsacramental in both conservative, evangelical circles, as well as in liberal, secular circles. As Philip Lee says, “It is significant that in the doctrinal tests so important to American fundamentalists for distinguishing between authentic Christianity and liberal heresy, the sacraments are never mentioned . . . American Protestantism has to a great degree become de-sacramentalized.”<sup>34</sup>

#### *The Decline of Paedobaptism: John Williamson Nevin’s Assessment*

Nevin provides an interesting counterpoint to Hodge. He was part of the Mercersburg movement, along with immigrant Phillip Schaff. These two Pennsylvanian German Reformed theologians had problems of their own, of course, and so they must be read with discernment. But in America they also stood virtually alone, and quite heroically, during the nineteenth century in seeking to maintain the traditional ecclesial and sacramental theology of classic Calvinism. Nevin, like Hodge, was deeply distressed by the decline of paedobaptism in America, but probed deeper than Hodge in looking for the real source of the problem, and pressed significantly harder than Hodge in trying to solve it:

If the sacraments are regarded as in themselves outward rites only, that can have no value or force except as the grace they represent is made to be present by the subjective exercises of the worshipper, it is hard to see on what ground infants, who are still without knowledge or faith, should be admitted to any privilege of the sort. If there be no objective reality in the life of the Church, as something more deep and comprehensive than the life of the individual believer separately taken, infant baptism becomes an unmeaning contradiction.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> James Henley Thornwell, *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell*, Vol. 4: Ecclesiastical, (Banner of Truth Trust, Carlisle, PA, 1986), 339-348.

<sup>33</sup> Nichols, *Romanticism in American Theology*, 92-3. For a survey of the anti-sacramental nature of American piety in general, see Lee, *Against the Protestant Gnostics*, 177ff.

<sup>34</sup> Lee, *Against the Protestant Gnostics*, 183. Lee’s whole book is a stunning exposé of North American “Gnosticism.”

<sup>35</sup> Quoted in Nichols, *Romanticism in American Theology*, 237-8.

Nevin analyzed the situation with piercing insight, pointing out that if the Reformed church had cast off the ancient view of baptismal efficacy, what was to keep it from casting off the ancient practice of paedobaptism? The loss of efficacy entailed the loss of its application to helpless infants, if consistency prevailed. A credobaptist victory was virtually inevitable unless strong views of baptismal grace were recovered:

Another . . . undervaluation of the outward sacrament, is exhibited in the ecclesiastical practice of the Baptists; who refuse to baptize infants, on the ground that they have no power to repent and believe in Christ, so as to be the subjects of that inward spiritual conversion of which baptism is the profession and sign, and without which it can have no meaning. What conclusion, indeed, can well be more logical, if we are to believe that there is no objective power, no supernatural grace, in the sacrament itself, and that the whole virtue of it resolves itself at last into what goes forward in the minds of its subjects themselves under a purely subjective form? With such a theory of the institution, it is perfectly certain that the practice of infant baptism could never have prevailed as it did in the ancient Church. It belongs to the old order of thinking on the subject, as we have it in St. Chrysostom and the Christian fathers generally, which made baptism to be the sacrament of a real regeneration by the power of the Holy Ghost into the family of God. Why then should it not be given up, along with this, as an obsolete superstition? It is becoming but too plain, that the Paedobaptist part of the so-called Evangelical Christianity of the present day is not able to hold its ground steadily, at this point, against the Baptist wing of the same interest. The Baptistic sentiment grows and spreads in every direction. It infects more and more, the secret thinking even of those sects which still retain, in a traditional way, the old practice. The question of infant baptism is sunk in many quarters, as by general consent, into the category of *adiaphora* -- things indifferent; as though it lay wholly on the outside of the proper sense and true actual substance of the Christian life. Some of our evangelical sects, it is easy to see, could at once part with the usage altogether, and not miss it in their scheme of practical religion. Hence, as a general thing, it appears to have fallen into very alarming neglect. Some of our more respectable denominations, or rather some thoughtful persons in these denominations, have in fact begun to take alarm from this cause, and are showing a disposition to lift the whole doctrine of Christian Baptism again, if possible, into a higher sphere, such as may correspond, in part at least, with the sacramental worth assigned to it in past ages. This, as far as it goes, is matter for congratulation. But it still remains to be seen, how far any such reactionary feeling shall be able to stay and turn the tide, which still threatens to sweep all before it in the opposite direction. And who can say, what perils, not merely for the doctrine of Christian Baptism, but for the whole idea of Christian Sacraments, for the very being of the Church, and in the end for the universal interest of Christianity itself, may not be involved in the full triumph of what claims to be the perfection of religion in such spiritualistic form.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> John Nevin, "The Old Doctrine of Baptism," *Mercersburg Review*, April 1860, 214-215. Other Reformed theologians also lamented the decline of paedobaptism and traced its neglect back to a faulty

He echoed the same warning in his defense of Mercersburg's proposed baptismal liturgy:

On this subject of baptismal grace, then, we will enter into no compromise with the anti-liturgical theology we have now in hand. In seeking to make the Liturgy wrong, it has only shown itself wrong; and the more its errors are probed, the more are they found to be indeed, "wounds, and bruises, and putrefying sores." Starting with Pelagianism on one side, it lands us swiftly in downright Rationalism on the other. "It is impossible," says the distinguished French Reformed divine, Pressense, in a late article, "to establish the necessity of infant baptism, except upon the ground that baptism imparts a special grace." We are most decidedly of the same opinion; and for this reason we denounce this theology as in reality, whatever it may be in profession, hostile to infant baptism, and unfriendly, therefore, to the whole idea of educational religion as it has been based upon it in the Reformed Church from the beginning. Without the conception of baptismal grace going along with the baptism of infants, there can be no room properly for confirmation; and the catechetical training which is employed to prepare the way for this, may easily come then to seem a hinderance rather than a help, to the true conversions of the young to God. Then it will be well, if baptism fall not into general contempt, and so be brought to sink finally more and more into neglect altogether. To what a pass things have already come in this respect throughout our country, by reason of the baptistic spirit which is among us, and the general theological tendency we are now considering, we will not now take time to decide. Those who have eyes to see, can see for themselves.<sup>37</sup>

For Nevin, the real issue underlying the loss of infant baptism was the loss of baptismal efficacy and the loss of a proper understanding of the church as the living body of Christ.

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understanding of the sacrament itself. See Schenck, *The Presbyterian Doctrine of Children in the Covenant*, 80ff. Schenck summarizes:

Uncertainty in regard to the status of children in the church was doubtless one great cause of inattention to the ordinance. Although people generally may not have reasoned it out logically, they came to feel, at least, that if the significance of baptism for the infant was a present uncertainty . . . the infant's baptism was not so important. If parents themselves looked upon their children as having no more relation to the covenant of God and the church of Christ than children born out of the covenant and never baptized, if this was their theory and practice, it is not surprising that there was a growing inattention to the sacrament. The question arose in many minds, to what purpose is baptism administered to children? Why bring children to an ordinance in the church of which the church herself makes nothing when it is over? If our children are in precisely the same position as others, why baptize them? Certainly parents would not long continue to practice an empty form upon their children, simply because they had been taught the observance of it. If the church had no assurance that the infant children of believers were truly the children of God, if it did not treat them as Christians under her special love and watchfulness, if it ignored practically their baptism, this was reason for the decline of the ordinance (81-2).

Apart from an efficacious view of baptism, the question "Why baptize infants?" became progressively more and more difficult to answer coherently. The credobaptists won the day by default.

<sup>37</sup> From John Williamson Nevin, "Vindication of the Revised Liturgy: Historical and Theological" found in *Catholic and Reformed: Selected Theological Writings of John Williamson Nevin* edited by Charles Yrigoyen, Jr. and George H. Bricker. (Pittsburgh, PA: Pickwick Press, ), 399-400.

Nevin argued infant baptism presupposes an objective force in the sacrament itself. It presupposes that Christ is at work by his Spirit in the ordinances entrusted to the church.<sup>38</sup>

According to Nevin, children of Christian parents were not conceived or born as Christians in the full sense; rather they were made Christians at the font:

What do good men mean when they tell us, that children of professing Christians are Christian likewise, members of the Church and heirs of all its grace by their mere natural birth? . . . Our birth relation to pious parents may give us a right to be taken into the Church; but it can never of itself make us to be in the Church as our *born* privilege.<sup>39</sup>

Prior to baptism, the children of believers were entitled to all the rights and privileges of the covenant promise, but those blessings did not actually become their true possession until baptism. Grace was bestowed not naturally, through conception by regenerate parents, but supernaturally and sacramentally, through the new birth of baptism.

Nevin could make a very good case that the Reformed church had traditionally held a substantially higher view of baptismal efficacy than nineteenth century American Presbyterians would tolerate. While an in-depth study would be needed to prove this claim, the *prima facie* evidence certainly points to its plausibility. Let's take a brief look.

#### *Baptismal Efficacy in the Reformed Tradition: The Lost Legacy*

Beginning with the prince of Reformed theologians, John Calvin, the Reformed church had strongly emphasized the sacraments as effectual means of salvation and assurance. In Calvin's Strasbourg catechism, he asks the student "How do you know yourself to be a son of God in fact as well as in name?" The answer is "Because I am baptized in the name of God the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost."<sup>40</sup> In his Geneva catechism, he asks, "Is baptism nothing more than a mere symbol [i.e., picture] of cleansing?" The answer: "I think it to be such a symbol that the reality is attached to it. For God does not disappoint us when he promises us his gifts. Hence, both pardon of sins and newness of life are certainly offered and received by us in baptism."<sup>41</sup>

In response to the Council of Trent – a context in which we may be sure Calvin was very sensitive about appearing to attribute more to baptism than he thought fitting – he wrote:

That this may be more clear, let my readers call to mind that there is a two-fold grace in baptism, for therein both remission of sins and regeneration are offered to us. We teach that full remission is made, but that regeneration is only begun, and goes on making progress during the whole of life.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> See Payne, "Nevin on Baptism," 134, 141, 144.

<sup>39</sup> Quoted in Nichols, *Romanticism in American Theology*, 244.

<sup>40</sup> A complete English version of this catechism, *Instruction in Christian Doctrine for Young Children*, has been made available by Joel Garver at <http://www.lasalle.edu/~garver/calcat.html>.

<sup>41</sup> John Calvin, *Catechism of the Church of Geneva, Being a Form of Instruction in the Doctrine of Christ*. My version has no publication information.

<sup>42</sup> Quoted in Schenck, *The Presbyterian Doctrine of Children in the Covenant*, 9. Note that Calvin used the term regeneration in a broader sense than it is usually used today. A significant amount of confusion over

For Calvin, regeneration began at the font. The Christian life took its source and shape from the baptismal rite. Of course, baptism was not a complete salvation in itself; the one baptized had to grow in faith and repentance, living out the grace received in baptism. But as the foundation and touchstone of the Christian life, baptism was of unparalleled importance.

Early on in his discussion of baptism in the *Institutes*, Calvin claims,

We must realize that at whatever time we are baptized, we are once for all washed and purged for our whole life. Therefore, as often as we fall away, we ought to recall the memory of our baptism and fortify our mind with it, that we may always be sure and confident of the forgiveness of sins.<sup>43</sup>

Further on in the *Institutes*, he explains that new life begins in baptism and is continued at the Table:

For as in baptism, God, regenerating us, engrafts us into the society of his church and makes us his own by adoption, so we have said, that he discharges the function of a provident householder in continually supplying to us food to sustain and preserve us in that life into which he has begotten us by his Word.<sup>44</sup>

Later, he wrote,

But as baptism is a solemn recognition by which God introduces his children into the possession of life, a true and effectual sealing of the promise, a pledge of sacred union with Christ, it is justly said to be the entrance and reception into the Church. And as the instruments of the Holy Spirit are not dead, God truly performs and effects by baptism what He figures.<sup>45</sup>

Calvin was very congenial to Luther's high view of baptismal efficacy. At one point, he subscribed to Melanchthon's Augsburg Confession, a Lutheran document. In debate with the feisty Lutheran Joachim Westphal, he defended himself saying, "Having distinctly asserted that men are regenerated by baptism, just as they are by the Word, I earlier obviated the impudence of the man, and left nothing for his invective to strike at but his own shadow."<sup>46</sup> Thus, the Lutheran critique that viewed Calvin as an extreme "spiritualist" was refuted.

Also in response to Westphal's criticisms, Calvin wrote,

[Westphal] says, that the effect of baptism is brought into doubt by me, because I suspend it on predestination, whereas Scripture directs us to the word and sacraments, and leads by this way to the certainty of predestination and salvation. But had he not here introduced a fiction of his own, which never came into my mind, there was no occasion for dispute. I have written much, and the Lord has

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issues such as "baptismal regeneration" could be removed if we understood the latitude certain key terms have had in theological discourse.

<sup>43</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.15.3.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 4.17.1

<sup>45</sup> John Calvin, "Second Defense of the Pious and Orthodox Faith Concerning the Sacraments, in Answer to the Calumnies of Joachim Westphal," in *Selected Works of John Calvin*, ed. Henry Beveridge and Jules Bonnet, trans. Henry Beveridge, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 2:222.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 2:342.

employed me in various kinds of discussion. If out of my lucubrations he can produce a syllable in which I teach that we ought to begin with predestination in seeking assurance of salvation, I am ready to remain dumb. The secret election was mentioned by me in passing, I admit. But to what end? Was it either to lead pious minds away from hearing the promise or looking at the signs? There was nothing of which I was more careful than to confine them entirely within the word. What? While I so often inculcate that grace is offered by the sacraments, do I not invite them there to seek the seal of their salvation?<sup>47</sup>

For Calvin, Christ is the mirror of election, and, of course, Christ is clearly seen in his ordinances. Assurance is not to be found by tracing out the eternal decrees (as though such a thing were possible); rather, Calvin would have us start with the covenantal administration of baptism and work back to the decree.

Towards the end of his life, in one of his last sermons, he told his congregation

So then we must ever come to this point, that the Sacraments are effectual and that they are not trifling signs that vanish away in the air, but that the truth is always matched with them, because God who is faithful shows that he has not ordained anything in vain. And that is the reason why in Baptism we truly receive the forgiveness of sins, we are washed and cleansed with the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, we are renewed by the operation of his Holy Spirit. And how so? Does a little water have such power when it is cast upon the head of a child? No. But because it is the will of our Lord Jesus Christ that the water should be a visible sign of his blood and of the Holy Spirit. Therefore baptism has that power and whatsoever is there set forth to the eye is forthwith accomplished in very deed.<sup>48</sup>

Martin Bucer, Calvin's close friend and mentor, is often regarded as the "most dedicated, and certainly the most prolific, champion of paedobaptism among the leading Reformers."<sup>49</sup> Bucer's views matured towards higher and higher conceptions of baptismal efficacy. By the late 1530s, he rejected any distinction between a "Spirit baptism" and a "ritual baptism," maintaining instead that the Spirit worked *through* the water ritual. He explained his view of instrumental efficacy: "Christ commended baptism as the means whereby participation in himself and heavenly regeneration should be imparted and presented through the church's ministry." Elsewhere he wrote, "By [baptism] we are first consecrated to and ingrafted into the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." "The sacraments of God are precisely what they are said to be since they really confer what they signify – the covenant of the Lord, the cleansing of sins, communion in Christ." In his much celebrated *Brief Summary of Christian Doctrine and Religion*

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> John Calvin, *Sermons on Deuteronomy: Facsimile of 1583 Edition*, (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), 1244, language modernized.

<sup>49</sup> David F. Wright, "Infant Baptism and the Christian Community in Bucer," *Martin Bucer: Reformation Church and Community*, ed. David F. Wright, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 96.

*Taught at Strasbourg*, a document which functioned as something of a personal theological testament, Bucer stated

We confess and teach that holy baptism, when given and received according to the Lord's command, is in the case of adults and of young children truly a baptism of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit, whereby those who are baptized have all their sins washed away, are buried into the death of our Lord Jesus Christ, are incorporated into him, and put on him for a new and godly life and the blessed resurrection, and through him become children and heirs of God.<sup>50</sup>

High views of baptismal efficacy were not limited to the Continental Reformers. John Knox's 1560 *Scots Confession* states, "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, to be made partakers of his righteousness, by which our sins are covered and remitted." In other words, the sacraments instrumentally and efficaciously applied the grace they signified.

Westminster divine Cornelius Burges wrote a dense, thoroughly argued treatise *The Baptismal Regeneration of Elect Infants* in 1629. Burges argued infant baptism was God's ordinary means of granting new life and forgiveness. Of course, the new life begun in baptism had to be cultivated through careful parental and pastoral nurture, or it could whither and die. Only the elect received new life in an indestructible sense. He wrote:

Elect infants do ordinarily receive the Spirit in baptism, as the first efficient principle of future actual regeneration . . . It is most agreeable to the institution of Christ, that all elect infants that are baptized . . . do, ordinarily receive, from Christ, the Spirit in baptism, for their first solemn initiation into Christ, and for their future actual renovation, in God's good time, if they live to years of discretion, and enjoy the other ordinary means of grace appointed of God to this end.<sup>51</sup>

Burges argues his whole case carefully from Scripture, but perhaps the most interesting part of his work is chapters 5-8, in which he demonstrates that his position on baptismal regeneration is found in the church fathers, the Reformed Confessions, the writings of the Continental divines, such as Calvin, Bucer, Musculus, and Zanchius, and the writings of several British theologians.

Reformed theologian Emanuel V. Gerhart, working alongside Nevin and Schaff, carefully surveyed fifteen Reformed Confessions in an 1868 article published in *The Mercersburg Review*. Gerhart marshaled weighty evidence in dealing with what he perceived to be the vital sacramental questions of the day:

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<sup>50</sup> All Bucer quotations from Wright, "Infant Baptism and the Christian Community in Bucer," 98ff. For more on the development of Bucer's baptismal theology, see John W. Riggs, *Baptism in the Reformed Tradition: An Historical and Practical Theology* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Westminster Press, 2002), 30ff.

<sup>51</sup> Cornelius Burges, *The Baptismal Regeneration of Elect Infants* (Oxford, 1629 ), 21.

The principal and most important aspect of the question now at issue in the Reformed Church of America, including the Episcopal, Presbyterian, Congregational, Reformed Dutch and German Reformed Churches is whether Holy Baptism is the Sacrament of Regeneration? Has Christ ordained this Sacrament for the remission of sins, and the communication of a new spiritual life by the Holy Ghost? Is it the act of God, in which he translates the subject from the state of nature into the state of grace, from the kingdom of the Devil into the kingdom of Christ? Does a person, who is a child of the Devil through the fall of Adam and the inheritance of original sin, become, by Baptism, a member of the mystical body of Christ and thereby a child of God? These several questions are but different forms of presenting one general question, namely: Does Baptism take away the guilt and pollution of sin and communicate the new life of the Spirit in Christ Jesus?

We answer in the affirmative; and maintain that the doctrine we hold concerning the objective, saving efficacy of this Sacrament is the true Protestant and Reformed doctrine. Our opponents, comprising four-fifths, if not nine-tenths, of the ministry and laity belonging to the Reformed family of Churches answer in the negative, and maintain that the doctrine of baptismal regeneration is neither Reformed nor Protestant, but Romish.<sup>52</sup>

Gerhart exegeted the Confessions, demonstrating that they affirm the notion that God ordinarily works through the duly constituted means of Word and sacrament to apply salvation and that they reject the idea of “abstract saving grace” conferred apart from the divinely ordained means:

Non-sacramental grace, or the notion that the Holy Ghost by an immediate operation regenerates and saves men, is not recognized by the Confessions . . . [S]aving efficacy is predicated of a *Sacrament* proper; not of the natural element itself, not of supernatural grace as such, neither of one which is a Sacrament; but of supernatural grace mystically conjoined with the natural element in the divine institution.<sup>53</sup>

It is the complete sacrament – the physical, ritual sign *plus* the working of Christ and the Holy Spirit – that is salvific. Again:

The Confessions teach accordingly that *we receive forgiveness of sins and are born again of the Spirit, through the Sacrament of Baptism* . . . Through all of them runs the same general idea, namely, that God forgives our sins, and communicates a new and spiritual life by the Holy Ghost through the Sacrament of Holy Baptism.<sup>54</sup>

In an earlier study of baptismal efficacy, Gerhart concluded the Westminster Confession taught “The baptismal transaction assures the person baptized . . . that . . . he is as certainly baptized into Christ, regenerated by His Spirit, and forgiven through his blood, as he is externally washed with water.”<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> E. V. Gerhart, “Holy Baptism: The Doctrine of the Reformed Church,” *Mercersburg Review*, April 1868, 181-2.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 198.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 216, 218.

<sup>55</sup> Quoted in Nichols, *Romanticism in American Theology*, 255.

Gerhart recognized that baptismal grace has a conditional aspect – it must be received and maintained in faith – and is therefore defectionable. While this does not negate the objective efficacy held forth in the sacrament, it does require us to guard against the danger of apostasy, lest we be found to have received the grace of God in vain (cf. 2 Cor. 6:1). According to Gerhart, this is what the Westminster Standards are driving at with their language of “improving” one’s baptism:

Baptism is and remains always the sign and seal of divine grace, just as the Word is the same power of God whether Paul proclaims it to Timothy or to Felix. Or just as natural birth makes the child a member of the family, and invests it with all the rights of a child, whether as it grows up it honors father and mother, or dishonors them . . .

Whether or not Baptism issue in a godly life and eternal salvation, depends also on the will and character of the subject. A baptized person must improve the grace conferred in baptism. This he may fail to do. Like the prodigal son, he may leave his Father’s house, and waste his inheritance in riotous living. Or like Esau, he may sell his birth-right for a mess of pottage . . . These being dead branches on the true Vine, are cut off and cast into the fire . . .

Baptism . . . puts the baptized person in a state of grace, a position from which he can watch and pray, worship God acceptably, be nourished by the body and blood of the Lord, grow in faith and knowledge, and fight against sin and Satan in the full armor of the Gospel. But it does not make salvation from sin certain unconditionally.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Gerhart, “Holy Baptism: The Doctrine of the Reformed Church,” 220-3. Gerhart further illustrates the possibility of a real apostasy from baptismal grace:

Baptism renders salvation possible . . . [But] it does not remove the danger of failure. It does not impose on the baptized person the necessity of becoming an earnest Christian and persevering in the Christian life. He is not forced to walk in the way of actual salvation . . .

[W]e may illustrate the same idea by an analogous fact in human life. A young man may be endowed with extraordinary powers of mind, qualifying him to become a profound scholar, an eminent statesman, or a great artist. Yet he may not become either one or the other. The real possibilities may never be realized. To become what he is potentially, he needs opportunity or occasion, education, and above all, the will to act. Wanting in these, particularly in will, he may live and die as though, for all practical purposes at least, he were not thus endowed.

Because endowed with extraordinary natural powers, it does not follow, necessarily, that he will become an eminent and influential man. The result is conditional. It depends upon himself . . . So is a man born into the kingdom of Heaven by the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, endowed with divine grace, which is new life in Christ Jesus. He is a babe in Christ. As such, there is in him the real possibility of a complete normal development of spiritual life, including the fruits of the Spirit, the resurrection from the dead, and glorification with Christ in Heaven . . . [H]e may fail to become, in fact, in the kingdom of Heaven what he is potentially, in virtue of his new birth of the Spirit; just as the design of God may never be realized when he endows a person, by natural birth, with the powers of genius.

Hence it does not follow that a person must be saved because he is born of the Spirit in Holy Baptism; just as a man must not rival the greatness of Napoleon or Washington, Homer or Shakespeare, because he is by nature a genius.

Nor does it follow that a person is not really born of the Spirit into the Kingdom of Heaven by Baptism, because he lives in sin, and is lost; just as we cannot infer that a man is not by nature a genius, merely because he accomplishes nothing that is great and good, and lives in obscurity and vice (223-4).

In Gerhart's view, the Reformed doctrine of baptism taught saving grace was really and truly conferred through the sacrament. And yet there was nothing magical about baptism. It did not guarantee one's eschatological salvation. Apostasy remained a live danger for the covenant people. The waters of baptism must be mixed with persevering faith in order to result in final redemption.

In a more recent study, focused on the Westminster Confession, David F. Wright, Senior Lecturer at the University of Edinburgh, concurs with Gerhart's assessment of the confessional teaching.

What then about the efficacy of baptism according to the Westminster Confession? Its central affirmation seems clear: 'the grace promised is not only offered, but really exhibited and conferred by the Holy Ghost' (28.6). It is true that a variety of qualifications to this assertion are entered . . . But these qualifications serve in fact only to highlight the clarity of the core declaration, which is set forth . . . in the preceding chapter on sacraments in general . . . The Westminster divines viewed baptism as the instrument and occasion of regeneration by the Spirit, of the remission of sins, of ingrafting into Christ (cf. 28.1). The Confession teaches baptismal regeneration.<sup>57</sup>

Wright acknowledges this strong position is qualified elsewhere in the Confession:

But if the Assembly unambiguously ascribes this instrumental efficacy to baptism, it is not automatically enjoyed by all recipients: it contains 'a promise of benefit to worthy receivers' (27:3), who from one point of view are 'those that do actually profess faith in and obedience unto Christ, but also the infants of one or both believing parents' (28:4), and from another angle, 'such (whether of age or infants) as that grace belongeth unto, according to the counsel of God's own will, in his appointed time' (28:6). But it would surely be a perverse interpretation of the Confession's chapter on baptism if we allowed this last allusion to the hidden counsel of God to emasculate its vigorous primary affirmation of faith.<sup>58</sup>

Most Presbyterians today focus on the qualifiers on baptismal efficacy in the Confession, rather than its central thrust. Indeed, the qualifiers are often treated as negating its plain statements. While it would be going too far to say the Confession necessitates belief in baptismal regeneration, there can be no question such a view of baptismal efficacy is included in its parameters, if determined by original authorial intent.

The Reformed church, in pristine condition, believed in grace that is both sovereign and mediated. Sacramental grace, in fact, was understood to be the great anti-Pelagian weapon, since it proved that salvation had to come from the outside, not from any resources latent within the human heart. Thus, sacramental efficacy was viewed not as a competitor with the great Reformation principle of *sola gratia*, but as its corollary. The

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<sup>57</sup> David F. Wight, "Baptism at the Westminster Assembly" in *The Westminster Confession in Current Thought: Calvin Studies No. 7* (Davidson College, NC, 1996) 80.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

Reformed emphasis on sacramental objectivity complemented and reinforced the Reformed commitment to the utter graciousness of the gospel.

This is just a sampling of available evidence that could be cited. Certainly each one of these theologians' and confessions' understanding of baptismal efficacy is deserving of a more careful and thorough inquiry.<sup>59</sup> There are various nuances and qualifications we have not entered into. These were not the only views put forward by the Calvinistic branch of the Protestant Reformation, though they were dominant early on in the movement. Many Reformed theologians believed, indisputably, that God worked efficaciously through the water of baptism to regenerate and justify believers. The details may be a mystery to us, but the fact of baptism's instrumental efficacy is clearly taught. It is also undeniable that we have drifted far from our Reformed heritage at this point.

Nevin, it seems, was correct, to link the decline of paedobaptism to a broader sacramental trend – the decline of baptismal efficacy. The paedobaptist question hangs, at least in part, on the question of baptismal efficacy. As the forces of Revivalism and the Enlightenment undermined higher, more traditional views of sacramental efficacy, paedobaptism was bound to decline. Without a robust understanding of what *God* does in baptism, the grounds on which paedobaptism rested became very tenuous. If baptism is about a human action or experience, infants are, almost by definition, excluded and the Baptist position must prevail. But if it is primarily about God's action, there is no bar to paedobaptism. So in what sense is baptism God's act and in what sense is it a human act? What does God do in baptism and what do we do? To a biblical discussion of these questions, we must now turn our attention.

### Biblical-Theological Considerations

Many in the American Reformed church today remain suspicious of high views of baptismal efficacy.<sup>60</sup> The basic biblical-theological issues can be boiled down to three

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<sup>59</sup> For more, see three of my essays: "Baptismal Efficacy and the Reformed Tradition: Past, Present and Future" available at [http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/rich\\_lusk/baptismal\\_efficacy\\_the\\_reformed\\_tradition\\_past\\_present\\_future.htm](http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/rich_lusk/baptismal_efficacy_the_reformed_tradition_past_present_future.htm); "Calvin on Baptism, Penance, and Absolution" available at [http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/rich\\_lusk/calvin\\_on\\_baptism\\_penance\\_absolution.htm](http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/rich_lusk/calvin_on_baptism_penance_absolution.htm); and "Baptismal Grace and Reformed Theology: Past Positions, Present Possibilities, and Future Prospects" (forthcoming).

<sup>60</sup> Consider, for example, the outcry following the Auburn Avenue Pastor's Conferences in 2002 and 2003, in which PCA Pastor Steve Wilkins espoused a high view of baptismal efficacy, including a qualified form of "baptismal regeneration." (Tapes from the conferences are available from Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church, Monroe, LA.) A micro Reformed denomination, the RPCUS, even officially concluded such a view was heretical, calling Wilkins and others to repentance. (See <http://www.rpcus.com/aapc.htm> for details.) Given the flexibility of the term "regeneration" within the Reformed tradition, as well as the number of theologians in the Reformed heritage that have been willing to use baptismal regeneration language, such a charge is shocking and ill founded. Debate among Reformed theologians over these matters is nothing new, as Brooks Holifield's remarkable study *The Covenant Sealed: The Development of Puritan Sacramental Theology in Old and New England 1570-1720* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974) reveals. At the very least, the whole matter deserves far more open discussion than has been allowed to this point. A primary purpose of this essay is to facilitate such discussion. While I will be presenting my own views (obviously), I understand that they may need to be substantially revised in the

areas of discussion. While we cannot give each question its full due, we can at least sketch out initial answers, suggest some tentative conclusions that will strengthen the case for paedobaptism, and offer profitable trajectories on which the debate may run in the future.

1. *What is the relationship between the sign and thing signified in the sacrament of baptism?*

God's promise assures us there is a basic, fundamental unity between the sign and the thing signified. The water and the Spirit cannot be divided. This was the view of the sixteenth century Reformers:

A . . . major principle of this reform was to make clear the unity of water and Spirit. The Reformers insisted that according to Scripture there was one baptism. To divide the sacrament into a baptism of water and a baptism of the Spirit . . . was misleading. The prayer for the Holy Spirit [in sixteenth century Reformed liturgies] was intentionally put before the baptismal washing to make clear the unity of water and Spirit. Baptism with water is a sign of both the washing away of sins and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit . . . Reformed Churches should not in their liturgical practice give ground to a separation of the baptism with water and the baptism of the Spirit.<sup>61</sup>

The Reformed Confessions clearly teach that a Sacrament includes *both* the sign *and* the thing signified. Sacraments are not merely signs; they are signs *conjoined* with the gracious work of Christ and the Spirit. Westminster Confession chapter 27 makes this clear:

2. 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.
3. 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 it contains, together with a precept authorizing the use thereof, a promise of benefit to worthy receivers.

The Shorter Catechism is even more to the point, defining a sacrament as a sign wherein “Christ, and the benefits of the new covenant, are represented, sealed, and applied to believers.” The sacrament is constituted by *both* the material sign *and* Christ with his New Covenant benefits. The two are so closely related that we may collapse them

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future. I am hopeful that a thorough dialogue over the issue of baptismal efficacy will develop in the Reformed world until we reach full agreement with one another.

<sup>61</sup> Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Shaping of the Reformed Baptismal Rite in the Sixteenth Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992) 284-5. Old's entire study is critical to understanding early Reformational baptismal theology and praxis.

together in our sacramental language. The claim “Baptism saves” really means “Christ saves *through* baptism.”

This view of sacramental causality is usually referred to as *instrumental efficacy*. The physical elements have no force in themselves; but Christ and the Spirit work *through* them to apply salvation. Just as a surgeon uses a scalpel, so the Lord uses his sacraments. And just as when the surgery is over, we don’t praise the scalpel, but the one wielded it skillfully, so in our salvation we give full credit to God, not to his means. But the real instrumental force of the means must not be denied. The sacraments are indeed efficacious means of salvation, but only because God has promised to make them so.

Thus, the Westminster standards teach that in baptism, the thing signified – which is nothing less than union with Christ, regeneration, and forgiveness – is truly sealed (WCF 28.1), conferred (WCF 28.5), applied (WSC 92) and communicated (WSC 88). Baptism is an “effectual means of salvation” (WSC 91). It is subconfessional, then, for Presbyterians to view baptism as a mere picture of something received in another way. It is also inadequate to suggest baptism is merely a strengthening and assuring ordinance, rather than a saving ordinance.

To state it yet another way, in Westminster’s theology there is no such thing as a baptism that does not confer grace, just as there is no such thing as a salvific “spiritual baptism” that takes place apart from the physical sign of water. This linkage of sign and thing signified is the standard view of the Reformed Confessions, as Gerhart explains:

If anything be certain beyond the shadow of a doubt, it is that Baptism, according to all the Confessions, is the mystical conjunction of the blood and Spirit of Christ with the outward washing of water, established and perpetuated through all time by the Word of God, which conjunction or union is so real that the sign takes the name of the thing signified, and so essential that either one part without the other, the sign without the thing signified, or the signified without the sign, would not be Baptism.<sup>62</sup>

In other words, baptism is a work of both water and the Spirit (cf. Jn. 3:5). Water alone is not a baptism; it is an empty symbol. Nor is the work of the Spirit apart from the means of water a baptism. The sacrament includes both. Baptism is more than just a sign; it is also the grace signified. In Augustinian terms, it is *both* the visible sign *and* the invisible grace. We distinguish the sign and thing signified in order to avoid ascribing any autonomy to the creaturely means, but we must never drive a wedge between them.

There is a long and venerable tradition in the Reformed church of modeling sacramental theology after Christology. The early church fathers insisted that in the incarnation there was a real, personal joining of humanity to the second person of the Trinity. To separate the natures is to lapse into Nestorianism; to mix them is to fall prey to Eutychianism. Similarly, in sacramental theology, there is a sacramental union of the creaturely element and the active presence of Christ. Christ has joined himself to these elements, even as

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<sup>62</sup> Gerhart, “Holy Baptism: The Doctrine of the Reformed Church,” 216; see also 188, 198, 212.

deity joined itself to humanity in the incarnation. To separate the sacrament from Christ's power and presence is to fall into a kind of sacramental Nestorianism; to not retain the physical integrity of the creaturely elements (e.g., transubstantiation) is to become a sacramental Eutychian.

Medieval Roman views may have attributed efficacy to the sign itself in a mechanical way rather than viewing the sign as the instrument through which the Spirit applied Christ's redemption. But modern Reformed views have generally allowed the pendulum to swing too far back the other way. We are very much children of Revivalism and the Enlightenment, as we have already seen. Thus, we often treat baptism as a picture or symbol of grace that is actually received in some other, non-sacramental fashion. For example, some have compared the sacrament to a street sign or billboard.<sup>63</sup> But such a definition is terribly incomplete. Baptism does more than picture the absent grace of Christ. Calvin repeatedly claimed the sacraments perform what they picture; that in them, God accomplishes what he signifies. The sign is not the thing signified, but neither can the thing signified (ordinarily, at least) be had apart from the sign. They are distinguishable, but inseparable, components of a sacrament. Moreover, if baptism is a kind of street sign, why give it to infants who would seem to be incapable of benefiting from it? The logic of infant baptism is tied to its efficacy.

Ever since the nineteenth century, Reformed theology has been increasingly plagued with a false "spiritualism" that borders on gnosticism. We have divorced what God has joined together, the sign and the grace signified. Nowhere is this more evident than in Southern Presbyterianism. Schenck records one rather striking illustration:

Dr. Latimer of Union Theological Seminary in Virginia further confused the issue of the significance of infant baptism. He made a distinction between ritual baptism and real baptism. Real baptism was related to the invisible church, ritual baptism to the visible church. "As the first removes an obstacle, otherwise insuperable, out of the way of spiritual fellowship with God, and introduces the subject of it as an actual member of the family of God, so the latter removes an obstacle which hinders outward fellowship with God, and introduces the subject of it to the privileges of that body of men who profess the true religion and separate themselves from the world as the people of God." The obstacle in the first instance was a "corrupt nature," in the second instance a "ceremonial defilement, symbolical of that real pollution."<sup>64</sup>

A more consistent departure from the teaching of Westminster would be hard to imagine. The sign and thing signified have been utterly pried apart, nullifying the "sacramental union" the Confession desired to uphold. A sign all by itself is no sacrament. A sacrament, by definition, includes the bestowal of the thing signified. Thus, there can be

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<sup>63</sup> See, e.g., G. I. Williamson, *The Shorter Catechism for Study Classes Vol. 2* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1970), 97f.

<sup>64</sup> Schenck, *The Presbyterian Doctrine of Children in the Covenant*, 87-88. Brooks Holifield's *The Gentlemen Theologians: American Theology in Southern Culture 1795-1860*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1978), 155ff, traces out the disintegration of sacramentalism in the antebellum South.

no such thing as an “inner” baptism that takes place apart from an outward sign, just as there can be no “outer” or “ritual” baptism that is a sign only, without any accompanying work of the Spirit. God does not (in Calvin’s words) “mock us”; the sign of baptism is the sure bearer of Christ’s salvation.

This has also been a problem in Dutch Reformed theology, particularly among the followers of Abraham Kuyper. While Kuyper was an eminently capable man, his theology was deficient at several points. Nowhere are his shortcomings more evident than in his bifurcation of baptism into “true baptism” and “pseudo baptism.” J. Kamphuis explains, using Kuyper’s own words:

Kuyper did not hesitate to speak about a – deceptive – appearance. For there are “true partakers of the Covenant” and “those who are partakers of the Covenant in appearance only.” This has some consequences whenever a sacrament is administered to the latter. “As often as this sacrament is distributed to non-elect people” the Lord God “retracts His grace from it, so that they do not receive the real sacrament as yet.” Kuyper formulates it in an even clearer and more frightening way when he says: “Sometimes there is a pseudo-baptism, just like when there can be a psuedo-birth among men, so that no baptism took place or no child is born.” For the Covenant of grace as the real covenant is ‘hidden’ “in the relationship with the external church.” But “the Covenant is not in it, but it is hidden beyond . . . that church.”<sup>65</sup>

In other words, sometimes God hands out counterfeit promises. Sometimes a child really gets baptized, other times he just gets water on the head. There is no way to know if a child has received “real baptism” until he grows up. There is no way to know if he is only in the external church or in the real, “hidden” church. Kuyper failed to come to grips with the immense and unsolvable pastoral problem his view caused: namely, if some baptisms are false, all baptisms are under suspicion. Just as when counterfeit bills are being circulated, no bill is trusted, so when some baptisms are true and others false, every baptism becomes the subject of doubt.

Kuyper sought to answer this difficulty with his doctrine of presumptive regeneration: we presume the regeneration of covenant children until they prove otherwise. Kuyper even offered presumptive regeneration as the basis of the practice of paedobaptism. But a presumption is not the same thing as a promise, and cannot provide a sturdy enough foundation for the comfort of the parents should the child die in infancy, or the duties of the parents with regard to covenant nurture should the child grow to maturity. Only if we can have confidence that *all* the baptized have received the favor of God can we have the assurance and gratitude we need to do what we’ve been called to do.

For Kuyper, some children receive the outward sign of baptism, while others receive the outward sign *and* the inner reality. But to split the sacrament in two this way is deeply problematic both philosophically and biblically.

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<sup>65</sup> J. Kamphuis, *An Everlasting Covenant* (Launceston, Australia: Publication Organization of the Free Reformed Churches of Australia, 1985).

A pressing need in Reformed sacramental theology right now is a rethinking of the whole notion of “sign.” For too long, we have assumed we know what a “sign” is without much biblical reflection. “Sign” certainly does not mean “picture”; it does not even mean “symbol” in any simple sense. Biblically, if we turn to Exodus and John we find that signs are powerful, transformative, saving actions of God. They have transcendent, symbolic value, but no cleavage between the sign and its effect can be maintained. The mighty acts performed by God in freeing the people of Israel from bondage in Egypt – including the Red Sea crossing, a typological baptism (1 Cor. 10:2ff) – are called “signs and wonders” (Ex. 7:3). Likewise, in John’s gospel, the miraculous acts of Jesus are called “signs.” Given the sacramental character of John’s gospel, it is not surprising many students of the fourth gospel believe John is deliberately associating some of these miracles with baptism.<sup>66</sup> A complete biblical-theological study of signs remains to be written.

Moreover, some scholars have drawn profitably from “speech act theory” in developing a theo-sociological account of signs. Just as speech acts are often performative (e.g., “I now pronounce you husband and wife”), not merely descriptive, so sacraments may be thought of as “performative ritual acts.” They change one’s standing, identity, privileges, and responsibilities, not only in the gaze of men, as it has been said, but also in the gaze of God. Given the traditional Augustinian and Reformed view of sacraments as “visible words,” this should prove a fruitful avenue for further study.<sup>67</sup>

## 2. *What is the relationship of baptismal efficacy to faith?*

Baptismal efficacy raises a red flag for many in the Reformed community. In part, this is due to the specter of *ex opera operato* from the medieval church and is very understandable. We must carefully guard against any view that would lead people to believe that simply because they have been baptized, all is well no matter how they live their lives. In this sense, baptism does not automatically guarantee salvation. We must combine the waters of baptism with a living faith.

What then is the relationship of baptism to faith? If faith is demanded, how does this requirement qualify our notions of baptismal efficacy? It is easy to draw caricatures here, so we must be careful. For example, I know of no theologian in history, Roman Catholic or otherwise, who has taught baptism *automatically guarantees* final salvation, come what may. By contrast, at the same time, the Reformed confessions do bind us to believe in a certain limited version of *ex opera operato*: Everyone baptized, no matter their subjective heart condition, is joined to the “visible church” at the time of their baptism – automatically and without exception, right then and there, you might say (cf. WCF 28.1). So baptismal efficacy, and its relation to faith, is something that deserves careful and nuanced consideration. We must avoid making hasty and sloganized judgments.

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<sup>66</sup> See, e.g., Oscar Cullman, *Early Christian Worship*, (Bristol, IN: Wyndham Hall Press, no date).

<sup>67</sup> See, e.g., Richard P. Flinn, “Baptism, Redemptive History, and Eschatology: The Parameters of Debate,” in *The Failure of American Baptist Culture*, ed. James B. Jordan, 129ff.

Perhaps it is best to consider baptism in analogy with preaching. Preaching, the Reformers taught us, is the very Word of God, albeit in a qualified sense.<sup>68</sup> It has been a staple of Reformed theology from the beginning to insist that God is at work whenever and wherever his Word is preached. That Word, considered objectively, is pure blessing. And it is always effectual (Isa. 55:11). But just what it effects is dependent on the varied responses of the listeners (2 Cor. 2:14ff). It brings salvation, if met with faith in the hearer. If not, it intensifies judgment.

Baptism is similar. Its efficacy is inherent and objective, yet conditional. It is always a blessing to receive God's heavenly rain (cf. Heb. 6:7-8). But if the one baptized rejects what God offers and gives baptism – namely, Christ himself – then those waters of life become waters of drowning and judgment. Baptism is what it is, even apart from our response, just as in the case of preaching. A sermon doesn't become false simply because it isn't believed. It does not stop being the Word of God. Similarly a baptism doesn't cease to be a means of real grace just because the one baptized doesn't exercise faith. The nature of the sacrament as such remains unaffected. This is Calvin's point, again and again: He insists that the “force and truth” of the sacrament do not hinge on the condition or choice of him who receives it. For what God has ordained remains firm and keeps its own nature, however men may vary. For since it is one thing to offer, and another to receive, nothing prevents the symbol consecrated by the Lord's Word from being actually what it is called, and from keeping its own force. Yet this does not benefit a wicked or impious man. But Augustine has well solved this question in a few words: “If you receive carnally, it does not cease to be spiritual, but it is not so for you.”<sup>69</sup>

Word and sacrament have an objective efficacy. They retain their integrity, completely apart from our subjective response. But what a sermon or baptism becomes *to you* does depend on your response. How will you receive your baptism? Will it be a means of rich, salvific blessing? Or will it only make hell that much hotter for you? Will you continue in the grace of baptism or fall from it? The choice is yours. But note that Scripture consistently attributes apostasy not to the withholding of grace on God's part (as though some baptisms didn't “take”), but the abuse of grace on man's part.<sup>70</sup>

Sadler is helpful in explicating the covenant efficacy and conditionality of the sacrament of baptism:

It may be well here to say a word or two respecting the unworthy reception of Baptism by an adult . . . Baptism, *no matter what the state of the heart of the recipient*, at once brings the baptized into contact (if I may use the expression)

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<sup>68</sup> See Ronald Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life*, (Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd, 1959), 206f.

<sup>69</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.14.16. Cf. Martin Luther's Larger Catechism: “For my faith does not constitute baptism but receives it.”

<sup>70</sup> This does not deny the sovereignty of God. Obviously, how humans respond to preaching and the sacraments is ultimately determined by God's all-ordering decree. But it has been a hallmark of the best Augustinian and Reformed theology to emphasize human responsibility as well (cf. WCF 9). It is at this level that preaching and the sacraments function.

with the highest powers of the unseen world. In some infinitely mysterious way the human graft there and then comes into contact with the new stock of humanity – the Second Adam.

If there be faith in the person baptized, he, at once, begins to partake of the root and fatness of the Divine olive-tree, which, *if he yields his will to it* (Rom. 11:22-24; Jn. 15:1-8), subdues to itself the whole inner man (1 Jn. 3:6-9). If he has not faith, the saving efficacy of the grace of Christ enters not into him; *nevertheless he is, all the same, brought into contact with the True Vine*, BUT TO HIS CONDEMNATION. His unbelief is the obstacle to the grace of the Savior flowing into him. Christ would, but cannot, heal him, because of his unbelief (Mk. 6:5-6). Till that is removed, the goodness of the Divine Olive cannot renew him. If God, after such sin, still vouchsafes to grant him repentance unto life, then the grafting takes beneficial effect. The grafting, I say, which he has already undergone, *for he has not to be grafted in anew*. He has not to be baptized over again, no matter what the circumstances of unbelief and impenitency which attended his original baptism; for that would imply that a thing done in the name and by the authority of the ever-blessed Trinity had been an empty form.<sup>71</sup>

Michael Horton explains the Word/sacrament analogy in fuller fashion, drawing out the two sided nature of the means of grace:

The Sacraments do not give us something different from the Word; rather, both conspire to give us Christ. We have no trouble when Scripture tells us that “the Word of God is living and powerful” (Heb. 4:12), or that the Gospel is “the power of God unto salvation” (Rom. 2:16). When we say that someone was converted by hearing a sermon, we are not attributing saving efficacy to language, or ink and paper in their own right. Rather, we are claiming (whether we realize it or not) that God has graciously taken up these human things and, by uniting them to the heavenly treasures, has made them effective himself. Precisely the same is true of the Sacraments. If one rejects the Gospel as it is given in the preaching of the Word and in the Sacraments, it remains the Gospel, still the power of God unto salvation, but “ . . . for everyone who believes, to the Jew first and to the Greek.” Apart from faith, one is no more saved by Baptism and the Lord’s Supper than he or she is by the preached Gospel . . . If anyone fails to believe, he has not made the Word and Sacrament ineffective; he has simply refused to accept that which was truly offered to him, objectively, by God.<sup>72</sup>

On the one hand, we do not suggest that baptism’s efficacy depends on our faith. Its efficacy depends on the goodness and trustworthiness of God who stands behind its administration and promises to work in and through it. On the other hand, we insist that the blessings delivered over to us in baptism can only be received with the open hand of

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<sup>71</sup> Sadler, *The Second Adam and the New Birth*, 174-5.

<sup>72</sup> Michael Horton, “Mysteries of God and Means of Grace” available at [http://www.christianity.com/partner/Article\\_Display\\_Page/0,,PTID307086|CHID560798|CIID1413562,00.html](http://www.christianity.com/partner/Article_Display_Page/0,,PTID307086|CHID560798|CIID1413562,00.html).

faith. Baptism is the way God gives us Christ; faith is the human instrument that receives Christ through the physical means. The Westminster Shorter Catechism (91) ties together both sides wonderfully: “The sacraments become effectual means of salvation . . . only by the blessing of Christ, and the working of his Spirit in them that by faith receive them.”

The deep resources of Reformed theology have not yet been fully tapped into in developing a complete model of sacramental efficacy. Our covenant theology opens the door to viewing various events and rituals of the Old Testament as types of the New Covenant sacraments.<sup>73</sup> For example, the flood and exodus events are interpreted in the New Testament in baptismal categories (1 Pt. 3:18ff ;1 Cor. 10:2ff). Note that these redemptive historical baptisms were clearly efficacious. In the case of the flood, the world is cleansed and regenerated. The covering of the earth with water once again recalls the primordial conditions of Gen. 1:2, from which dry land emerges. A dove fluttered above the flood waters, just as the Spirit hovered above the creation waters. Through the entire ordeal, Noah himself has become a New Adam, and thus receives a new Adamic commission when he steps off the ark (Gen. 9:1ff). But participation in this Noadic regeneration did not guarantee final salvation. True, eight lives were saved in all, as Peter says (1 Pt. 3:20); but apparently one, Ham, apostatized and came back under the curse (Gen. 9:18ff). True, baptism now saves, as Peter claimed (1 Pt. 3:21); but that salvation is not finished apart from persevering faith.

Baptismal typology is also present in the Red Sea crossing. The Israelites – including their babies! -- were rained on from the glory cloud as they passed through the sea bed (Ps. 77:17). This baptism formed Israel into God’s new creation (cf. Isa. 51:13ff) and defeated her Satanic oppressor Pharaoh (Isa. 51:9). Clearly, it was a baptism with salvific efficacy, though once again many of those redeemed in the Red Sea baptism failed to persevere in faithfulness and thus perished in the wilderness (Heb. 3-4).<sup>74</sup>

Likewise, the Levitical washings may be interpreted as typological forerunners of New Covenant baptism.<sup>75</sup> Baptisms formed part of the prescribed cleansing regimen for leprosy, corpse defilement, and other forms of uncleanness. Interestingly, under the Levitical system, babies were probably baptized shortly after birth since they contracted uncleanness from their mother (cf. Ezek. 16:4, 6). Paedobaptism was already practiced in

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<sup>73</sup> For those interested in pursuing Reformed typology, consult James B. Jordan *Through New Eyes: Developing a Biblical View of the World* (Brentwood, TN: Wolgemuth and Hyatt, 1988); Christopher J. H. Wright, *Knowing Jesus in the Old Testament*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992); and Edmund Clowney *The Unfolding Mystery: Discovering Christ in the Old Testament*, (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1988). Baptismal typology is vastly underdeveloped in Reformed theology. We have made so much of the baptism/circumcision link (cf. Col. 2:11f), we have overlooked other equally valid Old Covenant connections to baptism. Baptism should not be simplistically equated with circumcision. Baptism fulfills a host of Old Covenant rituals and events in addition to circumcision. The meaning of circumcision is rolled into baptism, but much else is as well. We have to do justice to this broader spectrum of Old Covenant types in order to have a well rounded biblical theology of baptism.

<sup>74</sup> N. T. Wright has suggested exodus typology also underlies Paul’s baptismal theology in Rom. 6. See his essay “New Exodus, New Inheritance: The Narrative Structure of Romans 3-8” in *Romans and the People of God*, ed. Sven Soderlund and N. T. Wright (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 26-35.

<sup>75</sup> These Old Covenant washings are categorized as baptisms in Heb. 9:10.

some form long before the New Covenant went into effect!<sup>76</sup> And of course, these baptisms were efficacious in an Old Covenant fashion, removing defilement and restoring access to the cultic system. Their efficacy pointed to the more powerful baptism of the New Covenant.

To take another example from the Levitical system, Peter Leithart has shown the priestly ordination service of Leviticus 8 is fulfilled in New Covenant baptism.<sup>77</sup> Much of the New Testament's imagery for baptism is drawn from this complex rite.<sup>78</sup> Again, this priestly baptism was efficacious, at the level of Old Covenant realities, pointing ahead to the greater power of New Covenant baptism. Aaron and his sons did not have priestly access to the tabernacle prior to their baptismal ordination; afterwards they did. So the ritual effectively accomplished a change in status, privilege, and responsibility.

This entire network of typological precursors to baptism needs to be explored in greater depth. Carefully studying these sacramental models will undoubtedly shed great light on baptismal efficacy and related questions. We have been far too simplistic about this matter in the past. A fully covenantal, typological hermeneutics has not been allowed to form and inform our sacramental theology.

### *3. What is the relationship of paedobaptism to conversion?*

What then of infants? What can a tiny, unreasoning child receive from God in the sacrament of baptism? We've already touched on this question above, including the much vexed issue of infant faith, but a few more things need to be said to round out the discussion and point to an important area of future research and further study.

It is standard in paedobaptist circles to argue for the baptism of infants out of the Old Covenant system. Because there is no explicit command in the New Testament, we are left to the broader principles and patterns of Scripture. In the Old Covenant, we continually find that the children of covenant members are themselves brought into the covenant on the basis of God's transgenerational promise, and therefore participate in the sacramental life of the people of God. Paedobaptists allow for an eschatological intensification in the power of the sacraments, but the basic structure of sacramental administration carries over from Old Covenant to New.

Paedobaptists are often quick to point out the benefits received by parents when their children are brought for baptism. They are assured that God loves their children and has adopted them into covenant relation with himself.<sup>79</sup> This much is usually not disputed. The more pressing question, of course, is what can infants themselves benefit from receiving covenant signs and seals?

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<sup>76</sup> A. Andrew Das, *Baptized into God's Family: The Doctrine of Infant Baptism for Today* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1991), 76f, 110.

<sup>77</sup> *The Priesthood of the Plebs* (publication forthcoming).

<sup>78</sup> For example, the Levitical ordination involved an investiture ceremony, so Paul says in Gal. 3:27 that baptism is a “clothing” event. In Heb. 10:19-22, washing is linked with drawing near to God’s presence; the same structural pattern of washing and then drawing near is found in Lev. 8-9.

<sup>79</sup> See, e.g., Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.16.9, 4.16.32.

Some have argued that the benefit of baptism is delayed altogether; that is, infants are baptized into *future* blessings they will probably receive later in life if and when they repent and believe.<sup>80</sup> Covenant children are regarded as outsiders, for the most part, until they can make a mature profession. Occasionally credobaptists and even some paedobaptists will argue infants are constitutionally incapable of being regenerated. This is simply not the traditional Reformed view.

Calvin's position reveals some of the complexities involved. At times, Calvin speaks as though covenant children already belong to God from the moment of conception; their baptism, then, simply ratifies their pre-existing membership in God's covenant.<sup>81</sup> At other times, as we have already seen, he ties regeneration and justification to the moment of baptism. Infants receive an age appropriate portion of that grace that will later be theirs in a fuller fashion.<sup>82</sup> In still other places, he speaks of baptizing infants into "future repentance and faith" (even though he acknowledges the seed of both is already present in the infant due to the Spirit's secret work).<sup>83</sup> In this context, Calvin puts the emphasis

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<sup>80</sup> See, e.g., R. C. Sproul's discussion of infant baptism in *Essential Truths of the Christian Faith*, (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1992), 227ff. Some interpret the Westminster Confession in this fashion since 28.6 states, "The efficacy of baptism is not tied to that moment of time wherein it is administered." Some argue this means one may be baptized as an infant, but not receive baptism's benefits until later in life. But such an interpretation, while possible, is unlikely given the historical background of the Confession's writing. In light of the Reformational debate over postbaptismal sin and penance, as well as the consistent teaching of earlier Reformed Confessions and theologians, it seems more likely the Confession is teaching baptism's efficacy is not limited to the moment of administration. The point, then, would not be that one's baptism may not take effect until long after the time of administration; rather, the sense would be that baptism's efficacy, beginning at the moment of administration, extends through the whole of one's life. The Reformers argued that the additional sacrament of penance was not necessary to deal with postbaptismal sin, since baptism already cleansed us once and for all. The Belgic Confession (34) states, "Neither does this Baptism only avail us at the time when the water is poured upon us and received by us, but also through the whole course of our life." Likewise, the Scots Confession (21) says, "For baptism once received continues for all of life, and is a perpetual sealing of our adoption." The French Confession (35) teaches the same: "[A]lthough 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." Finally, Cornelius Burges, in *The Baptismal Regeneration of Elect Infants*: "There is no ordinance set up by Christ in his church, more useful and comfortable unto a Christian, throughout the whole course of his militant condition, than sacred baptism, the laver of regeneration and of the renewing of the Holy Ghost . . . I deny not future actual efficacy of baptism after the act of administration, but I only plead for some efficacy when it is administered" (1, 112). Burges claimed Calvin for support of this view (cf. 159, 169). All emphases in above quotations mine.

<sup>81</sup> Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.15.20: "God pronounces that he adopts our infants as his children, before they are born, when he promises that he will be a God to us, and to our seed after us. This promise includes their salvation."

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 4.16.9, 4.16.19:

[T]he children receive some benefit from their baptism . . . I ask, what the danger is if infants be said to receive now some part of that grace which in a little while they shall enjoy to the full? For if fullness of life consists in the perfect knowledge of God, when some of them, whom death snatches away in their very first infancy, pass over into eternal life, they are surely received to the contemplation of God in his very presence. Therefore, if it please him, why may the Lord not shine with a tiny spark at the present time on those whom he will illumine in the future with the full splendor of his light?

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 4.16.20.

on baptism's prospective efficacy, looking ahead to the child's spiritual maturity. There is an element of truth in each of these positions, though Calvin never quite showed how his various statements fit together into a total package. Perhaps we can do so for him.

This seems to be the full picture: The covenant child from the moment of conception is not without a promise from God even though the covenantal blessings have not yet been bestowed upon him, properly speaking. We might say the unbaptized child of the covenant is *betrothed* to the Lord from conception onwards. But the *marriage* – that is, the actual covenant bonding – takes place at baptism. Or, to put it in more theological terms, God is already in the process of drawing the child to himself from the moment of conception. The examples of David (Ps. 22:9-10)<sup>84</sup> and John the Baptist (Lk.1:41) show God's *in utero*, pre-sacramental work. But this work isn't complete until the child receives the sign of initiation. The child remains in a liminal, transitional state until then. The threshold into union with Christ, new life in the Spirit, and covenant membership in the family of God is actually crossed when the child is baptized.<sup>85</sup> From baptism forwards, the child is expected to grow in faith and repentance unto maturity as he is nurtured in the church and in the home.

This organic model allows us to do full justice to biblical teaching on baptismal efficacy, but also keeps us from saying that baptism is *absolutely* necessary for salvation in each and every case. It is *ordinarily* necessary, but there are exceptions, such as when a child of the covenant dies before baptism was possible.<sup>86</sup>

If the position sketched out here is true to Scripture and the Reformed faith, we have plenty of work to do in the future. An entire area of practical theology remains relatively unexplored. We must come to grips with what the baptismal status of covenant children means practically, especially the way their standing should shape the ecclesial and familial nurture we give them.

In the mid-nineteenth century, Gerhart charged that Presbyterian ministers “do not know in what light to look upon the baptized children of the Church: do not know whether they belong to the Devil or to the Lord, whether they are in a state of condemnation or a state of grace, whether they are in the kingdom of light or in the kingdom of darkness.” Schenck explained the precariousness of this position:

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<sup>84</sup> Note that David's prenatal experience is embedded in Israel's hymnbook. Every Israelite would've sung these words in a corporate setting. David's experience of trust in God before birth was not unusual but normative for the covenant community.

<sup>85</sup> The status of pre-baptized and baptized children of the covenant was hotly debated from Calvin's day onwards. It continued to be a divisive issue in the Reformed churches of the Puritan era. The Westminster divines wisely left the issue ambiguous, affirming that children of the promise are in the covenant in one respect prior to baptism, and put in the covenant in another respect at baptism (WLC 166). In one sense, covenant children are “natural branches”; in another sense they must be “grafted in” (cf. Rom. 11).

<sup>86</sup> The *ordinary necessity* of baptism for salvation is simply the teaching of the Westminster standards. See Shorter Catechism 85: “diligent use of all the outward means” is necessary to “escape God's wrath and curse due to us for sin.” The Confession teaches that there is no ordinary possibility of salvation outside the visible church and baptism is the mode of entrance into the visible church (25.2, 28.1).

But, if the minister did not know what these children of Christian parents were, how could he have been able to treat them properly? Would he and his church have been able to perform the duties of their office toward the child clearly and efficiently? These questions Dr. Gerhart had in mind when he referred to the Presbyterian minister as a “workman in the garden of the Lord,” and then asked, “are these little ones,” that is, the children of believing parents, “living plants, or are they poisonous weeds? If he cannot answer that question, how shall he go to work? The question lies at the very threshold of the pastor’s office; and we ask, how can a man take that first step intelligently and consistently who does not know what a baptized child is?”<sup>87</sup>

Almost 150 years later, we still have not answered Gerhart’s question with one voice. In the meantime, countless covenant children baptized in infancy, but never taught about the blessings and responsibilities received therein, have walked away from the church. The pastoral and parental tasks elude us because we do not understand the nature and status of the child we are dealing with. It has been noted by many that the strongest argument against paedobaptism has been the failure of paedobaptist parents to raise their children in and for the Lord.

Unfortunately, most of the work done on covenant nurture has been done by liberal leaning theologians like Horace Bushnell.<sup>88</sup> One of the most pressing needs of the contemporary Reformed church is a well formulated account of the relationship of paedobaptism to Christian parenting. Is there such a thing as “growing up Christian”? What does it mean for our children to be of “the kingdom of heaven” (cf. Mt.19:14)? Can we call our children to live as those dead to sin and alive to God because they have been baptized (cf. Rom. 6:1ff)? Should we expect our baptized children to know the Lord from their earliest days? Can parents trust the Lord to work savingly in their child at the font? Or do we expect a datable, experiential conversion to occur sometime in the future when the child reaches years of maturity? Which paradigm – covenant nurture or revivalistic conversionism – do we apply to our children?

If baptized children are to be received as the children of God and treated accordingly, as John Murray says,<sup>89</sup> then our task is obvious. I want to address that task, as I see it, very practically and forthrightly, though I realize this is only an initial foray into a vast realm that needs to be charted out.

Within the circle of the covenant community, we must learn to parent out of faith, not fear. We must train our children to understand what God has done for them in making them a part of his covenant and kingdom even in their infancy. We must train our children in such a way that their whole lives will be a grand “Amen!” to their baptisms.

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<sup>87</sup> Gerhart and Schenck quotations from Schenck, *The Presbyterian Doctrine of Children in the Covenant*, 156; cf. 80ff.

<sup>88</sup> Horace Bushnell, *Discourses on Christian Nurture*, (New York: Scribner, 1861). But see also “Charles Hodge on Christian Nurture” available at <http://www.modernreformation.org/mr01/janfeb/mr0101hodgesb.html>.

<sup>89</sup> John Murray, *Christian Baptism*, (Philipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), 56; cf. 58ff.

Alfred North Whitehead once quipped the whole history of philosophy was simply a giant footnote to Plato; I doubt that's right, but I am sure that the whole Christian life may be seen simply as a footnote to one's baptism. The importance of baptism to one's identity and assurance can never be overestimated. Understanding infant baptism, therefore, is critical to faithful Christian parenting. This is not to say baptism in isolation guarantees salvation, and parents must guard themselves and their children against Pharisaical presumption (cf. Mt. 3: 7ff). But God never intended baptism to stand on its own. Rather, as we combine the waters of baptism with the obedience of faith, authentic life in the church, and godly family nurture, we find that God has already given us, including our children, every blessing in Christ.

Such an approach to parenting, of course, cuts against the grain of our modern Western individualistic sensibilities, shaped as they have been by Revivalism and the Enlightenment. Some have objected to paedobaptism because it imposes a religious identity on the child without his consent. It certainly does stamp a religious identity onto the child, but this is just what God requires of us in passages like Deuteronomy 6:1-25, Ephesians 6:4, and Proverbs 22:6. Nothing could be more gracious than enculturing our child into the life of God's kingdom. Besides, a religious identity will inescapably be imposed upon our child. The only question is, Will it be a Christian identity, as the Bible requires? Or some non-Christian identity?

We must reject the unscriptural notion that our children are neutral in relation to God until they reach some mythical age of accountability. We must teach our children what God has done for them in Christ's death and resurrection and what he applies to them through the means of grace in the life of the church. We are not to try to convert our baptized children, as though their spiritual experience had to fit the revivalistic paradigm; rather, we teach them to persevere in the faith and grace that they have *already* received in baptism. We are not to treat them as outsiders until they are old enough to make a profession of faith; rather, we enfold them into the life of the body of Christ from their earliest days. When they're young and a thunderstorm scares them at night, we comfort them with their baptism, reminding them that their heavenly Father will care for and protect them. When they're in junior high and lonely, we remind them they've been joined in their baptism to the worldwide family of God. When they reach the temptations of the teen years, we graciously help them recall the obligations impressed upon them in baptism. "Be true to your baptism! Remember who you are!" we exhort them as they leave the house on a Friday night. When confronted with the wiles of Satan they learn to fight back as Luther did: "Away! I am baptized!" In this way, baptism shapes their self-understanding at every step, providing a sense of worth and accountability. We teach them the answer to the question of Jesus, "Who do men say that I am?" (Mt. 16:13). But we also teach them the answer to the inverse question, "Who does Jesus say that I am?" We teach them that Jesus said, referring to covenant children, "of such is the kingdom of God" (Mt. 19:14). We train them in such a way that they cannot forget to whom they ultimately belong – that they are not their own, but have been bought with the precious blood of the Son of God. They have been graciously claimed by the Triune God and marked with his name.

It is totally incongruent to baptize a child on the basis of God's covenant promise and then doubt the reality of that promise until the child is older. This practice undercuts everything infant baptism means. It is an insult to our heavenly Father who wants our children to know that he loves them and it turns the means of grace into means of doubt and confusion. A baptized person is a Christian until and unless he apostatizes. Let us learn to treat our baptized children as the Christians that they are. This is what it means to receive little ones in Jesus' name (Lk. 18:16).

Counting and treating our baptized children as Christians is not a matter of pretending or presuming. It is more than a "judgment of charity." When we tell our children that God is their Father and that Jesus is their Savior, we are telling them something true and helping them internalize their covenant identity. We are speaking to them as Scripture speaks to them. True, baptized children can renounce their Father and become prodigals; they can reject Jesus as their husband and become adulterers. But having once passed through the waters of baptism, however unfaithful their actions are to that newly granted baptismal identity, they are still the actions of baptized persons. They have been sanctified by the blood of the covenant, even if they later choose to reject that blood and covenant (Heb. 10:29). Baptism is an act with eternal consequences for the faithful and the unfaithful. Covenant members who fall from grace can only expect God's harshest judgment. Just as the promises of salvation are for us and for our children, so the warnings of apostasy are for us and for our children as well.

But apostasy is not our expectation for our covenant seed. As we trust in God's promises concerning our children and as we nurture them through teaching, discipline, and prayer, we may be confident that God will preserve them. Christian parents must continually instruct and remind their children of the status, roles, privileges, and responsibilities that their baptisms have laid upon them. Our children must learn that the Christian story, lifestyle, rituals, and most importantly the Christian Savior, all belong to them. In baptism they were incorporated into Christ's body, inducted into the royal priesthood of the church, and initiated into the new creation. They must know that these things define who they are and how they are to live. By God's grace, they will grow up never knowing a day when they did not love their heavenly Father. When they do stray into sin, we must "grab them by their baptisms," as Philip Henry used to say, and gently bring them to repentance through loving discipline.

If this is the basic approach we should take, we have a lot to learn in the Reformed community. We obviously have not done these things well, as the current state of our churches reveals. We need to cultivate parents who are skilled in covenant nurture. May God give us grace to pursue this task of paedobaptism-based parenting, with the glorious goal of keeping our beloved covenant offspring in the Shepherd's fold all their days!<sup>90</sup>

### **Concluding Thoughts: Beginning the Reformed Discussion Anew**

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<sup>90</sup> Two books that make helpful inroads in developing this kind of plan for covenant nurture are Douglas Wilson, *Standing on the Promises* (Moscow, ID: Cannon Press, 1997) and Willimon, *Remember Who You Are*. See also Peter Leithart, "The Sociology of Infant Baptism" in *Christendom Essays*, edited by James B. Jordan (Niceville, FL: Transfiguration Press, 1997).

The Reformed tradition remains varied and vibrant, as the contemporary debates show. While we all agree infants born of Christian parentage ought to be baptized, we are not in full agreement about the nature and efficacy of baptism. It is important to understand this is an intramural discussion. A careful study of Reformed history shows a diversity of positions have been taken, and have even somewhat peacefully coexisted under the Reformed umbrella. As the issue of baptismal efficacy is discussed within the Reformed camp, we should be careful to display charity and humility at all times.

But it should also be noted that this debate is too important to ignore or put off. While we should be patient towards one another, it must be recognized that the stakes are rather high. Weighty theological, exegetical, and practical issues come into play. If the historical thesis of this essay is right – namely, if paedobaptism declined in America largely because of declining views of sacramental efficacy – then we have a great deal to gain by recovering and rearticulating in fresh ways a high view of sacramental grace, as taught by our fathers in the faith. If the biblical-theological considerations offered here are accurate, then today's Reformed church should have an openness and humility, compelling her to study the Scriptures and her own confessions to learn again things that have been forgotten, or perhaps to learn new things not yet discovered. Some have said the time for discussion of these matters is passed and the case is closed.<sup>91</sup> I say: Let the discussion begin!

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<sup>91</sup> See, e.g., these RPCUS documents: “Heresy Ad-Hominem” available at <http://www.rpcus.com/mcdade1.htm> and “Message from the Moderator Regarding the Auburn Avenue Controversy” available at <http://www.rpcus.com/otis1.htm>.