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Baptism Form Explained

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Introduction: Why Study this Form?

Tucked away in the concluding pages of the *Book of Praise*¹ are some twelve Liturgical Forms. Each of these forms function in some way, with greater or lesser frequency and profile, in the life of the congregation and her public worship. Perhaps the best known of the twelve is the Form for the Baptism of Infants – due, we may acknowledge with gratitude, to the relatively high number of births in the midst of the churches and the resulting request on the part of the parents that their newborn be publicly incorporated into the church of Jesus Christ through the sacrament of holy baptism. With each baptism the Form is read, sometimes week after week.

But familiarity breeds contempt. It is possible to hear a Form so often that one tunes out to its message, be it on account of drifting thoughts or on account of erroneous understandings that have embedded themselves in our minds over the years. These realities are in themselves sufficient justification for a study on the Form for the Baptism of Infants. Why is it, actually, that the church has carried this Form in its baggage for nearly 450 years? In what climate was this Form written, and why? How was it initially received, and why did the Church retain it over the years? How can this ancient Form assist the church today in fulfilling its ministry to its members and to its neighbours? What does this Form actually teach us about the identity of the children we assemble around the kitchen table and tuck into bed? Who actually are the little ones (and not so little) for whom we once bought that train set, that X-box and who now walk around with their own ipod? How does their identity affect our task as parents? In fact, what are parents actually?

There was a time when the home was somewhat of an island, separated from the world around it by its walls and doors. Godly parents set the home atmosphere and provided their children with a haven of safety protected from unspiritual forces outside. In today's time, the nature of the walls and doors has changed greatly. The click of a mouse and the push of a button instantly brings today's world into any room of the home. Furthermore, instead of the family congregated together around the fireplace (as only source of warmth and cosiness in the home) or around the kitchen table (as only source of light for reading or playing), the family can today scatter to any room of the house and each member can comfortably do his own thing – including clicking the mouse and pushing the buttons in the privacy of one's bedroom. This changed reality invariably brings new questions to parenting. Should the family breathe the same air, or is it advisable that each family member lives in his own room of the house? Is it beneficial that the world outside the home receive a place inside the home? How do the challenges offered by today's realities affect parenting?

Questions as these are not without importance. There are eight Canadian Reformed Churches in the Fraser Valley, with a total membership of some 3200 people. In the last dozen or so years, no less

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than 400 young people have withdrawn from the churches. Some of these have joined other churches throughout the Lower Mainland, while others have denied the faith altogether. Of course, there is a long list of influences and factors that have come together to bring about the departure of such a large group of Young People. Yet all will agree that what has happened in the home is definitely one of these multiple and complex factors. Are we parenting the way we should? Or have we, perhaps unwittingly, surrendered our homes and our children to the world? What should Christian parenting actually look like in our modern world?! What can we do to prevent another 400 youth from disappearing in the next dozen years? Questions like these need answers.

The answers we need must come from the Word of God. This Word, God has said, lightens the path upon which God in His providence has us walk. The path He has us walk includes parenting the children He has entrusted to our care. How would He have us look after them? What, by God's decree, is their identity?! How must their identity affect the atmosphere we allow in the home?

The Form for the Baptism of Infants has sought to summarize what God says about the identity of the children He entrusts to His people's care. As we seek to come to grips with the task of parenting, this Form can serve as reliable guide into Scripture's teaching on the subject. In the pages ahead, then, I intend to use this well-known Form as a springboard to unpack God's wisdom about parenting.

Beside the Form for the Baptism of Infants, the *Book of Praise* includes also a Form for the Baptism of Adults. Since both forms speak of baptism, it will be beneficial in this publication to pay attention also to this second Form, highlighting specifically what the differences might be between these two.

Before we proceed, I should be upfront about one thing. I shall work with the historic Christian understanding that the Holy Bible is the inerrant, inspired Word of God. This popular Book has its origin not with man but with God, and is God's revelation to man about His work among people and His will for people. It is authoritative to the point that its instruction, correctly understood, is the final word on the subject. The God of all ages and places says much in His Word about children and about parenting, and so His Word points the way even for modern parents and (post)modern children.

I thank the members of the Canadian Reformed Church of Yarrow for their participation in the Postconfession Class of the 2009/10 season, and so for their stimulation and encouragement in prompting study on this subject. May the Lord bless this work.

Chapter 1

The Form: its Development and Addressees

The Picture of the Bible

We see baptism occurring habitually. Parents bring their infant to the baptismal font in the front of the church building. After they have answered a series of questions, they (with the father functioning as head) hold out the child for baptism while the officiating minister addresses the infant: “I baptize you into the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit” and meanwhile sprinkles water on the baby’s forehead. Adult baptism gives change of pace only in so far as the candidate kneels before the font and tips his head back to receive the water on his forehead. That’s baptism in our churches, so simple and straightforward.

This picture agrees with what we read in Scripture. Matthew 3 relates the work of John the Baptist with these words, “Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River” (vs 6). In the eye of our mind we see John standing in the water of the river, the repentant coming down to him, being baptized, and departing. Though we may be curious as to whether John sprinkled or submerged the candidates, the picture remains clear and uncluttered; baptism was a simple procedure. This is the procedure Jesus instructed His disciples to apply to all who believed: “therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19). This is the ritual we think of when we read of baptism occurring in the early church, be it the baptism of the 3000 on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:41), Philip’s baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:38), Paul’s baptism on the day of his conversion (Acts 9:18), or the baptism of Lydia and the jailor in Philippi (Acts 16:15,33). Paul himself explains the significance of this picture in his letter to the Romans. “We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life” (Romans 6:4). As Christ died and was buried, so the sinner who belongs to Christ dies to sin and is buried, only to rise with Christ to a new life in Him. The picture is graphically and simply portrayed in baptism.

Deterioration in History

But in the course of the centuries, baptism gradually became a more cluttered and complex event. If we were to observe a baptism happening around the year 200, we’d see a ceremony vastly more elaborate than we’re used to. We’d notice first of all that most baptisms were of adults who had come to faith. This was due to the mission efforts of the time; the church was still growing faster through conversion of outsiders than from births within. Those who came to faith, however, were not baptized ‘immediately’ since office bearers had too often been disappointed to see baptized persons falling away again from the faith. So the convert was first catechized for a period ranging from eight to twenty four months – a period used, we understand, not just for instruction but also for testing.

Once the candidate was deemed ready for baptism, the ceremony itself occurred – yet not in the midst of the congregation, but privately at a river or a water source in a corner of the church known as a baptisarium. The candidate to be baptized was still considered to be unclean, and should receive a place with the ‘clean’ of the congregation only after the washing of baptism.

The ceremony itself was elaborate. To begin the ceremony, the attending bishop (in our language the minister) would pray for God’s blessing upon the water so that it would be sanctified for the service it was to do. He would pray for God’s blessing also upon a vial of oil standing nearby, that it too be sanctified for service. That done, the candidate would be asked to swear a solemn oath that he would from now on distance himself from the devil he used to serve. The point here is that with the fall into sin the entire human race broke its bond with God and established a bond with Satan. God in His grace has given His only Son to redeem particular people from Satan’s bondage and restore them to God. The baptismal candidate claims to believe in Jesus Christ and so through His blood to be restored to God. But if he belongs now to God, he may no longer have allegiance to the devil. Hence he was asked to swear an oath, before his baptism, to pledge defiance of Satan.¹

After the candidate had foresworn any further allegiance to Satan, an attendant elder would anoint the candidate with oil. This anointing was intended to drive out any demons from Satan’s camp that may have a remaining hold on the new believer. It was understood that it’s one thing for the candidate to pledge defiance to Satan’s authority, but it’s another for Satan to let him go. Hence this ceremony of exorcism.

Only at this point did the new believer descend, with the assistance of a deacon, into the water (be it a river or a baptisarium). Once he was standing in the water, the bishop asked him the critical question, “Do you believe in God the Father?” To which the candidate would (need to) reply, “I believe in God the Father almighty, Creator of heaven and earth.” After this confession, he was baptized into the name of the Father, and that’s to say that he was submerged under the water in which he was standing. Once he rose from under the water, the bishop asked a second question, “Do you believe in God the Son?” To which the candidate would answer, “I believe in God’s only begotten Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried, He descended into hell...” Thereafter he was again submerged under the water and so baptized into the name of God the Son. A third time the bishop asked a question, “Do you believe in God the Holy Spirit?” and a third time the new believer professed his faith, “I believe in the Holy Spirit, I believe a holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins...,” and a third time he was submerged, this time to be baptized in the name of the Holy Spirit. At this point a white robe was normally given to the baptized brother (or sister, as the case might be), as symbol of his

¹ This oath of defiance to Satan comes back in fifth question of our current Form for the Baptism of Adults, where the candidate is asked, “Fifth, do you firmly resolve, as is proper for a member of Christ and His Church, always to lead a Christian life and *not to love the world* and its evil desires?” This same question appears in our current Form for the Public Profession of Faith, “Third, do you declare that ... it is your heartfelt desire to ... *forsake the world...?*” An echo of it is found too in the Form for the Baptism of Infants, where the Form reads, “We are to cleave to this one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.... We must *not love the world...*”

righteousness before God in Jesus Christ. The elder now anointed the candidate again, this time to dedicate the young Christian to Jesus Christ and so engraft him into Christ's kingdom.

Only now would the party move into the presence of the assembled congregation. Here the bishop would lay his hand on the new believer and pour some (more) of the oil on his head, both symbols of his receiving the Holy Spirit. The bishop would then greet the new believer with the kiss of peace and lead in prayer for him. Thereafter the congregation, together with the new believer, would celebrate the Lord's Supper. For the new believer this celebration would come complete with drinking milk and honey as symbols of his having received the Promised Land as well as being a foretaste of the goodness to come in the New Jerusalem.

Even from our vantage point as 21st century Christians, it's clear to us that there was something powerful about the symbolism of this elaborate ceremony. An oath, an exorcism, submersion, multiple anointings, a white robe, a Lord's Supper with milk and honey: something is captured here, we sense, of the wealth and the responsibilities of the gospel of Jesus Christ. These were a people, obviously, that understood the language of symbolism.

Yet in the process much was lost. Even too much of a good thing can become clutter that buries what's best. And so it happened here. In the course of time, the ritual became to be understood as a magical event one needed to undergo in order to be saved; without baptism there was no salvation. So it happened that early Jesuit priests sent to America for mission work rounded up the (native) people they met and forthwith baptized them; *hocus pocus*, the natives were now Christians and their salvation sure – for they were baptized.

But we need to go back some years. A growing clutter in the ceremony for adult baptism not only buried the significance of baptism from public understanding, but affected in turn also how infant baptism occurred. Given that adult baptisms were more common than infant baptisms (as mission work advanced), adult baptism was seen to be the template to which infant baptism had to match up. But how shall an infant foreswear allegiance to Satan? How shall an infant profess faith in triune God? The practice developed that a Christian adult would *stand in for* the child, would answer the questions on the child's behalf. This stand-in was known as a god-father (or god-mother), and this person (or persons) would pledge to see to the training of the child so that in due time the baby would forsake the devil and would confess faith in God. It makes for an interesting enigma: how can any adult profess faith on behalf of the child?! It assumes there is faith in the child already (talk about 'presumptive regeneration')! More, the role of the parents is pushed aside in favour of the god-parents because 'being parents' is only 'nature' while being god-parents is 'spiritual', and the latter is far more holy and God-pleasing than the former. This, we realize, is part of Roman Catholicism's famous nature/grace dualism, as if God would not use things of this earth (like being parents) for heavenly purposes.

The long and short is that infant baptism, like adult baptism, became an elaborate, magical ritual. The magic of the ritual was enhanced by the use of the Latin language; the common people had no idea what was being said, let alone why. In a word, the sacrament's biblical significance was buried

and lost. In the years before the Great Reformation one knew little more than that one had to get 'done', otherwise you could not have forgiveness of sins and could not be saved.

The Reformation

If there's an official date to be attached to the beginning of the wave of Reformation that swept over Europe in the course of the sixteenth century, it would have to be 1517, the year Martin Luther fixed his 95 Theses to the door of that church in Wittenburg. Though Luther in his theses railed against many wrong practices in the Roman Catholic Church and set forth clearly that one is right with God only through the blood of Jesus Christ (and Christ's work is your through your faith in Him), Luther did not in these Theses correct wrong practices in relation to baptism. He himself continued to administer the sacrament of baptism in the Latin language for another six years. But in 1523 he published a little booklet on baptism in the German language. In this booklet he set forth a more Biblical exposition of baptism, and in so doing cut through some of the mystique surrounding the ceremony. Yet at this point Luther himself did not see a problem with the practice of exorcism in baptism, and left it for what it was.

A year later Martin Bucer in Strassburg published a more developed and more mature explanation of what baptism actually was according to the Scriptures. He removed all the clutter from the ceremony so as to retain only the baptism itself. According to him, a person (whether adult or infant) was to be baptized in the midst of the congregation, with no role granted to god-parents (other than, perhaps, as witnesses), and parents were distinctly to take upon themselves the responsibility to train up the child in the Lord's ways. The trigger that prompted Bucer to write his explanation of baptism was not simply to correct Roman Catholic thinking but also to counter Anabaptist reaction to Rome's wrongs. It is beyond a doubt that Bucer's work was a great step forward in returning to a Biblical understanding of baptism.

John Calvin in turn stood on the shoulders of Scriptural thinkers as Luther and Bucer. Already in the first edition of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin wrote:

“How much better it would be to omit from baptism all theatrical pomp, which dazzles the eyes of the simple and deadens their minds; whenever anyone is to be baptized, to present him to the assembly of believers and, with the whole church looking on as witness and praying over him, offer him to God; to recite the confession of faith with which the catechumen should be instructed; to recount the promises to be had in baptism; to baptize the catechumen in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit; lastly, to dismiss him with prayers and thanksgiving” (IV.15.19).

It's clear: Calvin has no use for the clutter that had buried the actual significance of the sacrament. In his *Institutes* (and *Commentaries* too) he set forth from Scripture what this sacrament was all about, and so what it ought to look like.

On the basis of Calvin's work, Casper Olevianus –the same person as co-authored the *Heidelberg Catechism* in 1563– put together a Baptism Form for use in the Palatinate. In 1566 Peter Dathenus took Olevianus' form to the Netherlands and, with minor revision, made it available to the people of Holland

in their own language. In fact, he had it printed in his 1566 Church service book. An (unofficial) meeting of the churches in the Convent of Wezel in 1568 stipulated that all the churches were to use this form whenever the sacrament of baptism was to be administered. The Synod of 1574, however, recognized that Dathenus' form was too long for repeated church usage, and so authorized a shortened form. A shortened form of Dathenus' work was prepared by Caspar vanderHeyden. This is the edition (in translation) that continues to serve the churches today, be it with minor modifications.²

As the history leading up to the formation of this Form illustrates, the Form for the Baptism of Infants simply seeks to be Scripturally faithful. It would have nothing detract from the straightforward and profound significance of the sacrament the Lord has given to His people. So the baptisms we see in church today, practical extrapolation as they are of the Form, are rich in their simplicity, with nothing taking away from the remarkable marvel that a sinner is baptized into the name of the Triune God – and so God confirms that this sinner is His child through Jesus' sacrifice.

Form for the Baptism of Infants

It will be beneficial to print at this point the Form for the Baptism of Infants as adopted by Synod Cloverdale, 1983, of the Canadian Reformed Churches and amended by Synod Smithers, 2007.

<p>Doctrine of Baptism</p> <p>Ephesians 2:3,5 John 3:3,5</p> <p>Matthew 28:19</p> <p>Romans 8:28</p> <p>Romans 6:5</p> <p>Romans 8:5</p> <p>Ephesians 5:27</p> <p>Matthew 22:37 1 John 2:15 Ephesians 4:22 Colossians 3:5</p>	<p>Beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ:</p> <p>The doctrine of holy baptism is summarized as follows:</p> <p>First, we and our children are conceived and born in sin and are therefore by nature children of wrath, so that we cannot enter the kingdom of God unless we are born again. This is what the immersion in or sprinkling with water teaches us. It signifies the impurity of our souls, so that we may detest ourselves, humble ourselves before God, and seek our cleansing and salvation outside of ourselves.</p> <p>Second, baptism signifies and seals to us the washing away of our sins through Jesus Christ. We are, therefore, baptized into the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.</p> <p>When we are baptized into the Name of the Father, God the Father testifies and seals to us that He establishes an eternal covenant of grace with us. He adopts us for His children and heirs, and promises to provide us with all good and avert all evil or turn it to our benefit.</p> <p>When we are baptized into the Name of the Son, God the Son promises us that He washes us in His blood from all our sins and unites us with Him in His death and resurrection. Thus we are freed from our sins and accounted righteous before God.</p> <p>When we are baptized into the Name of the Holy Spirit, God the Holy Spirit assures us by this sacrament that He will dwell in us and make us living members of Christ, imparting to us what we have in Christ, namely, the cleansing from our sins and the daily renewal of our lives, till we shall finally be presented without blemish among the assembly of God's elect in life eternal.</p> <p>Third, since every covenant contains two parts, a promise and an obligation, we are, through baptism, called and obliged by the Lord to a new obedience. We are to cleave to this one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, to trust Him, and to love Him with our whole heart, soul, and mind, and with all our strength. We must not love the world but put off our old nature and lead a God-fearing life. And if we sometimes through weakness fall in to sins, we must not despair of God's mercy nor continue in sin, for baptism is a seal and trustworthy testimony that we have an eternal covenant with God.</p> <p>Although our children do not understand all this, we may not therefore exclude them from</p>
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² The lengthier edition is available to the English reading public in G. vanRongen, *Our Reformed Church Service Book* (Neelandia: Inheritance Publications, 1995), pg 177-179.

<p>Rom 4:13 Col 2:11</p>	<p>baptism. Just as they share without their knowledge in the condemnation of Adam, so are they, without their knowledge, received into grace in Christ. For the LORD spoke to Abraham, the father of all believers, and thus also speaks to us and our children, saying, <i>I will establish My covenant as an everlasting covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you</i> (Gen 17:7). Peter also testifies to this when he says, <i>The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off — for all whom the Lord our God will call</i> (Acts 2:39). Therefore, in the old dispensation God commanded that infants be circumcised. This circumcision was a seal of the covenant and of the righteousness of faith. Christ also <i>took the children in His arms, put His hands on them and blessed them</i> (Mk 10:16). In the new dispensation baptism has replaced circumcision. Therefore, infants must be baptized as heirs of the kingdom of God and of His covenant; and as they grow up, their parents have the duty to instruct them in these things.</p>
<p>Prayer before Baptism</p>	<p>In order that we may now administer this holy sacrament of God to His glory, for our comfort, and to the upbuilding of the congregation, let us call upon His holy Name.</p> <p>Almighty, eternal God, in Your righteous judgment You punished the unbelieving and unrepentant world with the flood, but in Your great mercy saved and protected the believer Noah and his family. You drowned the obstinate Pharaoh and all his host in the Red Sea, but led Your people Israel through the midst of the sea on dry ground – by which baptism was signified.</p> <p>We therefore pray that You, in Your infinite mercy, will graciously look upon this Your child and incorporate him (her) by Your Holy Spirit into Your Son Jesus Christ, so that he (she) may be buried with Him by baptism into death and raised with Him to walk in newness of life.</p> <p>We pray that he (she), following Him day by day, may joyfully bear his (her) cross and cleave to Him in true faith, firm hope, and ardent love. Grant that he (she), comforted in You, may leave this life, which is no more than a constant death, and at the last day may appear without terror before the judgment seat of Christ Your Son.</p> <p>All this we ask through Him, our Lord Jesus Christ, Your Son, who with You and the Holy Spirit, one only God, lives and reigns forever. Amen.</p>
<p>Address to the Parents</p>	<p>Beloved in Christ the Lord:</p> <p>You have heard that baptism is an ordinance of the Lord our God to seal to us and our children His covenant; we must therefore use this sacrament for that purpose and not out of custom or superstition. That it may be clear, then, that you desire baptism for the right purpose, you are to answer sincerely the following questions:</p> <p>First, do you confess that our children, though conceived and born in sin, and therefore subject to all sorts of misery, even to condemnation, are sanctified in Christ and thus as members of His church ought to be baptized?</p> <p>Second, do you confess that the doctrine of the Old and New Testament, summarized in the confessions and taught here in this Christian church, is the true and complete doctrine of salvation?</p> <p>Third, do you promise as father and mother to instruct your child in this doctrine, as soon as he (she) is able to understand, and to have him (her) instructed therein to the utmost of your power?</p> <p>What is your answer?</p>
<p>Answer</p>	<p>I do (to be answered by each parent).</p>
<p>Baptism</p>	<p>_____, I baptize you into the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.</p>
<p>Prayer of Thanksgiving</p>	<p>Almighty, merciful God and Father, we thank and praise You that You have forgiven us and our children all our sins through the blood of Your beloved Son Jesus Christ. You received us through Your Holy Spirit as members of Your only-begotten Son, and so adopted us to be Your children.</p>

	<p>You sealed and confirmed this to us by holy baptism.</p> <p>We pray through Your beloved Son that You will always govern this child by Your Holy Spirit, that he (she) may be nurtured in the Christian faith and in godliness, and may grow and increase in the Lord Jesus Christ. Grant that he (she) thus may acknowledge Your fatherly goodness and mercy, which You have shown to him (her) and to us all. May he (she) live in all righteousness under our only Teacher, King, and High Priest, Jesus Christ, and valiantly fight against and overcome sin, the devil, and his whole dominion. May he (she) forever praise and magnify You and Your Son Jesus Christ, together with the Holy Spirit, the one only true God. Amen.</p>
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**Note: perhaps print the two forms as one, ie, where are differences print in parallel columns to highlight the differences....*

This Form breaks into two main parts, as follows:

1. Didactic
 - a. Explanation of baptism
 - i. Sin & Misery
 - ii. Deliverance
 1. Father
 2. Son
 3. Holy Spirit
 - iii. Thankfulness – what a fitting response looks like
 - b. Defence of Infant Baptism
2. Ritual
 - a. Prayer
 - b. Address to parents
 - i. Introduction
 - ii. Questions
 1. Confession re children’s identity
 2. Confession re own faith
 3. Promise to train up
 - iii. Answer
 1. Father
 2. Mother
 - c. Administration of baptism
 - d. Prayer

One might conclude that section 1a is structured along the same lines as the *Heidelberg Catechism*, with its well-known three parts on Sin & Misery, Deliverance and Gratitude – the three aspects one needs to know in order to live and die in the joy of the comfort of belonging to Jesus Christ. While those three aspects most certainly appear in the Baptism Form, we do well to recognize that there is another framework present here as well, and that’s the reality of the covenant. What the Form says in its section on Sin & Misery describes the circumstances in which God comes to us with His

covenant. The section on Deliverance describes the promises Triune God extends to people lost in their sins. The section on Thankfulness notates the response God seeks to the promises He gives in the covenant.

The correctness of this second template is evident from the way the third section of our Form beings. For we read: “Third, since every covenant contains two parts....” I mention this because we need to see the Form for Baptism essentially as a covenant document.

Form for the Baptism of Adults

Since most Europeans were baptized as children, the Great Reformation of the 16th century did not produce a Form for the Baptism of Adults. In the relatively rare event that adult baptism was required in the young Reformed Churches of the Netherlands, administration occurred after a suitably altered edition of the Infant Baptism Form was read. Since making the changes was left in the freedom of the churches, however, adult baptisms occurred with a less than satisfactory understanding of what (adult) baptism actually was and how it ought to be administered. So the great Synod of Dort of 1618/19 compiled and adopted a Form for the Baptism of Adults, with the decision that this Form be used in all the churches whenever an adult sought baptism. This Form is identical to the Form for the Baptism of Infants, with the exception that the Biblical explanation for child baptism is replaced with a paragraph explaining why converts need to be baptized (Point 1b in the Outline above). Of course, the questions originally directed to the parents are now directed to the new believer, with the questions accordingly adapted (2bii above). This is the Form (in modern translation) we today find in *Book of Praise*. To the extent that this Form differs from the Infant Baptism Form, it reads as follows:

<p>Doctrine of Baptism</p> <p>Matthew 22:37 1 John 2:15 Ephesians 4:22 Colossians 3:5</p> <p>Mark 1:4,5</p> <p>Matthew 28:19 Mark 16:16</p> <p>Acts 2:38 Acts 8:36,37 Acts 10:47,48 Acts 16:14,15 Acts 16:31,33</p> <p>Prayer</p>	<p>Third, since every covenant contains two parts, a promise and an obligation, we are, through baptism, called and obliged by the Lord to a new obedience. We are to cleave to this one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, to trust in Him, and to love Him with our whole heart, soul, and mind, and with all our strength. We must not love the world but put off our old nature and lead a God-fearing life. And if we sometimes through weakness fall into sins, we must not despair of God’s mercy nor continue in sin, for baptism is a seal and trustworthy testimony that we have an eternal covenant with God.</p> <p>Although the children of believers are not able to understand these things, they must be baptized by virtue of the covenant. Adults, however, may not be baptized unless they, conscious of their sins, repent and profess their faith in Christ. For this reason John the Baptist, following the command of God, preached a <i>baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins</i>, and only those who confessed their sins were baptized. Our Lord Jesus Christ also commanded His apostles to <i>go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit</i> (Mt 28:19), adding the promise, <i>whoever believes and is baptized will be saved</i> (Mk 16:16).</p> <p>According to this rule the apostles baptized only those adults who had repented and professed their faith. Therefore also today no other adults should be baptized than those who have learned to understand, by the preaching and instruction of the Gospel, the glorious contents of holy baptism, and are thus able to give account of their faith by personal profession.</p> <p>In order that we may now administer this holy sacrament of God to His glory, for our comfort, and to the upbuilding of the congregation, let us call upon His holy Name.</p> <p>....</p>
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<p>Public Profession of Faith</p>	<p>Beloved brother (sister) _____, you desire to receive holy baptism as a seal of your incorporation into the church of God. You have been instructed by us in the Christian religion and have made profession of it before the overseers. It must become clear to all that you not only accept the Christian doctrine, but also intend, by the grace of God, to live according to it. Therefore, we ask you to answer sincerely the following questions before God and His church:</p> <p>First, do you believe in the one and only true God, distinct in three Persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who has created of nothing heaven and earth, with all that is in them, and still upholds and governs them, so that nothing happens without His divine will?</p> <p>Second, do you believe that you were conceived and born in sin and are therefore by nature a child of wrath, totally unable to do any good and inclined to all evil? Do you confess that you have often transgressed the commandments of the Lord in thought, word, and deed, and do you sincerely repent of these your sins?</p> <p>Third, do you believe that Jesus Christ, who is both true and eternal God and true man, who assumed His human nature from the virgin Mary, is given by God as your Saviour? Believing in Him, do you confess that you receive the remission of sins in His blood and that by the power of the Holy Spirit you have become a member of Jesus Christ and His church?</p> <p>Fourth, do you wholeheartedly agree with the doctrine of the Word of God, summarized in the confessions and taught here in this Christian church? Do you promise to continue steadfastly in this doctrine to the end of your life, and do you reject all heresies and errors conflicting with this doctrine? Do you promise to persevere in the fellowship of this Christian church and be diligent in the hearing of the Word of God and in the use of the holy sacraments?</p> <p>Fifth, do you firmly resolve, as is proper for a member of Christ and His church, always to lead a Christian life and not to love the world and its evil desires? Do you promise to submit willingly to the Christian admonition and discipline of the church, if it should happen, and may God graciously prevent it, that you become delinquent either in doctrine or in conduct? -10-</p>
<p>Answer</p>	<p>_____, what is your answer?</p> <p>I do.</p> <p>Our merciful God grant you His grace and blessing to fulfil this your holy intention through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.</p>
<p>Baptism</p>	<p>_____, I baptize you into the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.</p>
<p>Prayer of Thanksgiving</p>	<p>....</p>

The Addressees of the Forms

Who, finally, are addressed in these two Baptismal Forms? It turns out that there are multiple layers of addressees.

First layer

Both the Form for the Baptism of Infants as well as the Form for the Baptism of Adults begin with this opening line, “Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ.” That’s striking. One would

imagine that the Form would address first of all the person being baptized, or the parents of the infant being presented for baptism. Why, then, would the Forms address first the congregation?

The congregation is the church of Jesus Christ, the body of those “who expect their entire salvation in Jesus Christ, are washed by His blood, and are sanctified and sealed by the Holy Spirit” (Article 27, *Belgic Confession*). Through the baptism now about to occur, this church will grow – for through baptism the Lord God is adding a new member to their number. After all (as will become evident in subsequent pages), baptism depicts the washing away of sins and the renewal of the Holy Spirit – and it’s precisely that cleansing from sin and the sanctification by the Holy Spirit that characterises the church. As the *Belgic Confession* puts it elsewhere, “By baptism we are received into the Church of God” (Article 34; see also *Heidelberg Catechism*, Lord's Day 27.74). But if the Lord would add a member to His body, the other members cannot ignore what is happening. For the church is a communion of saints, with each member responsible for and interested in each other (1 Corinthians 12). The congregation shall then need to take note of what God is doing in their midst, receive this new member warmly, and take the heart the privileges and responsibilities that come with receiving a new member in their midst.

Baptism, then, is not a private affair. The congregation witnesses what happens, and prays with and for the person being baptized. That is also why the churches have agreed in the Church Order that “sacraments” (and we think now specifically of baptism) “shall be administered only ... in a public worship service” (Church Order, Article 56).

There is a second reason why both Forms address the congregation first of all. The members of the church have themselves also once been baptized. Yet in the brokenness of this life, the fight against sin remains a struggle, and in the midst of countless failings it is no surprise that one begins to doubt whether one in fact belongs to God, is forgiven of sin, and is an heir to life eternal. The Lord God has instituted sacraments so that through their use His people might be encouraged in the struggles of faith and reassured to His promises (see further Article 33, *Belgic Confession*). Yet how is the congregation to “use” the sacrament of baptism? They are to do that by internalizing again and again the promises and obligations extended to them in the baptism they received so many years ago – and it’s the Forms for Baptism that impress these promises and responsibilities upon God’s people so clearly. When the Lord God, then, gives His church a new member in the person being baptized, He at the same time reminds His people of their own heritage, and so encourages His own in the struggles and doubts of this broken life. That the Forms then are addressed to the congregation as a whole reflects the pastoral care the Lord has for His entire congregation.

Second Layer

Part way through the Form for Infant Baptism the body specifically addressed in the Form narrows from the congregation as a whole to the parents of the newborn. They had been addressed earlier already together with the entire congregation, but now the Form singles them out for particular instruction and commitment.

We understand the reason for the narrowing. Since the Lord has entrusted a child to the care specifically of these parents, it follows that they have a greater responsibility to the child than the members of the congregation have to its new member. That these parents, then, would receive added instruction about what they are getting into, and added instruction too about what the Lord requires of them, simply makes sense.

Address to the Parents:

You have heard that baptism is an ordinance of the Lord our God to seal to us and our children His covenant....

In the Form for Adult Baptism it is the baptismal candidate himself who is now singled out. And this again makes sense. The person to be baptized has already been addressed together with the congregation, but now commitment is required of him. So he is asked to answer specific questions before he, through baptism, can be incorporated into the church of Jesus Christ.

Again, as the candidate is baptized, he is once more very personally addressed. With mention of his name, he is now officially baptized “into the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” There can be now doubt about the ultimate addressee of the rich content of the Form for Baptism!

Public Profession of Faith:

Beloved brother (sister)
_____, you desire to
receive holy baptism as a seal
of your incorporation into the
Church of God....

Third Layer

In the Form for Infant Baptism a third layer may be detected. As the child is brought to the baptismal font, the minister pronounces these words, “_____, I baptize you into the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” Here the child is specifically addressed by name – be it that this is done in hearing of the parents and the congregation as a whole.

There may be no doubt as to why the child is specifically addressed. It is certainly true that the newborn does not understand what is said, let alone understand the significance of the event. But the fact of the matter is that the child does belong to the congregation of Jesus Christ. Moses in the desert repeatedly addressed the congregation of the people of Israel, and that distinctly included the children. The command that “each of you must respect his mother and father,” located as it is in the midst of so much other instruction about tabernacle ritual and congregational ethics allows for no other understanding. Similarly, Paul addressed his letter “to the saints in Ephesus,” and then addressed also the children, “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right” (Ephesians 1:1; 6:1), and the inference is that the children are part of the congregation. That they should be addressed specifically is then no surprise. This will become clearer when we examine the Biblical data about the necessity of infant baptism.

Baptism:

“_____, I baptize you into the
Name of the Father and of the
Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

The fact that the child does not understand what is being said to it simply underlines the task the Lord gives to the parents. In the course of the years that follow the parents “have the duty to instruct your child in this doctrine,” and that includes first of all the wealth of the sacrament of baptism.

Chapter 2

Unclean, yet Cleansed

Both baptismal forms, for infants as well as for adults, introduce the doctrine of holy baptism with the following depiction:

First, we and our children are conceived and born in sin and are therefore by nature children of wrath, so that we cannot enter the kingdom of God unless we are born again. This is what the immersion in or sprinkling with water teaches us. It signifies the impurity of our souls, so that we may detest ourselves, humble ourselves before God, and seek our cleansing and salvation outside of ourselves.

This quote sets before us the two connected realities of uncleanness and washing. These two topics form the subject material of this chapter.

Unclean

A newborn engenders in our minds terms like *angelic* and *innocent*. To say that our newborn is a “child of wrath” seems somehow over the top. Our experience is that the infant does not sin.... We’re confirmed in our understanding of our children’s innocence by the child psychologists of our time. Countless books, radio and TV shows tell us that our children are born good, and only learn evil through what they are taught. A healthy, positive environment and education, then, will produce a healthy, positive adult.

The Creator of life is also the Judge of the life He created. How does He describe the young, and the not so young?

Bible Data

After their fall into sin the Lord God drove Adam and Eve out of Paradise (Genesis 3:23). We understand the reason why. God is too holy to stand sin in His presence, and Adam and Eve through their disobedience had become sinful. Hence the cherubim God placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden, with “a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life” (Genesis 3:24).

Why was it, now, that after Cain was born the Lord did not bring him back into Paradise? It is not that the Lord could not nurture and raise Cain without his mother. If Cain were innocent and angelic, God could begin a new human race within the Garden through him. The fact that God left the cherubim at the gate of the Garden to guard the way also from a Cain already shows us that this child was not innocent before God.

Unclean, yet Cleansed

In the flood of Noah all people perished except the eight in the ark. That includes not just the adults but also the children, including the newborn. Again, God was mighty to save the infants without their parents. Did God kill them with the flood because He is callous and cold-hearted? That, obviously, is not the answer. Nor is the answer that these children could one day learn to repeat the sins of their parents, though for now they were still innocent. Rather, to God's eyes these newborn children were already worthy of His judgment.

The same message comes out in the instruction God gave to Abraham in relation to circumcision. The Lord told Abraham that He established His covenant not just between Himself and Abraham, but at the same time also with Abraham's children (Genesis 17:7). The Lord added that the sign of this covenant would be circumcision, and therefore stipulated that "for the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised" (Genesis 17:12). Circumcision involves the drawing of blood. Blood denotes life (Leviticus 17:11), and so the drawing of blood denotes death. That blood must be drawn from the infant of Abraham's tent, then, spelled out that in God's judgment this child was worthy of death. That's in turn to say that this child was already a sinner before God (see Genesis 2:17; Romans 6:23). Abraham's offspring were not innocent in God's eyes but sinful from the start.

At Mt Sinai the Lord drove this teaching home to His people through the instruction He gave about the woman who had born a child. We read in Leviticus 12 the following:

The LORD said to Moses, "Say to the Israelites: 'A woman who becomes pregnant and gives birth to a son will be ceremonially unclean for seven days, just as she is unclean during her monthly period. On the eighth day the boy is to be circumcised. Then the woman must wait thirty-three days to be purified from her bleeding. She must not touch anything sacred or go to the sanctuary until the days of her purification are over. If she gives birth to a daughter, for two weeks the woman will be unclean, as during her period. Then she must wait sixty-six days to be purified from her bleeding.

When the days of her purification for a son or daughter are over, she is to bring to the priest at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting a year-old lamb for a burnt offering and a young pigeon or a dove for a sin offering. He shall offer them before the LORD to make atonement for her, and then she will be ceremonially clean from her flow of blood.

These are the regulations for the woman who gives birth to a boy or a girl. If she cannot afford a lamb, she is to bring two doves or two young pigeons, one for a burnt offering and the other for a sin offering. In this way the priest will make atonement for her, and she will be clean.'"

Why was the mother in Israel unclean after childbirth? Why, for that matter, was she to present a sin offering after childbirth? It needs to be clear in our minds that bearing children was in itself not a negative thing; on the contrary, God had commanded the human race to "be fruitful and increase in number" (Genesis 1:28; 9:1). More, the psalmist is insistent that "sons are a heritage from the LORD,

children a reward from Him.... Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them” (Psalm 127:3,5).¹ But why then the uncleanness and the sin offering?!

Through this ritual prescribed for every mother (and therefore father), the Lord God taught His people that the innocent looking child they brought into the world was in fact not innocent at all. They had brought another sinner into God’s world, and for that deed they had to make atonement. Here is the doctrine that sinful parents bring forth sinful children. It is as Job put it: “Who can bring what is pure from the impure?” (Job 14:4; see also 15:14-16; 25:4-6). David captures the same point in his heart-wrenching confession: “Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me” (Psalm 51:5).

On the authority of revelation as this, the apostle Paul can make the comprehensive statement that “Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin” (Romans 3:9). Notice the word ‘all’. Paul does not limit his damning statement to adults only, or to adults plus teenagers, or perhaps to adults plus teenagers plus toddlers. He’s inclusive: “there is no one righteous, not even one” (Romans 3:10) – not even the newborn infant. So every person born on earth is an “object of wrath” (Ephesians 2:3), worthy of the judgment of God. To put it in different words: the little ones too have fallen into sin and so joined Satan’s camp in opposition to God. They are depraved and inclined to all evil.

I strive to understand how it’s possible. The best we can say is that the sin of Paradise was not the sin of two individuals named Adam and Eve, but was the sin of the whole human race as represented in Adam and Eve. What they did, everyone of their descendents did in them. So Paul can say, when he writes about the sin of the “one man” Adam, that “all sinned” (Romans 5:12). I admit that I have difficulty grasping this. Yet I need not grasp all that my God tells me, for He is God and I am but a creature. It is enough that I embrace His revelation as true. So with the words of the Form I humbly echo what I hear God say in Scripture, “We and our children are conceived and born in sin and are therefore by nature children of wrath.” It’s a reality I wish were not so, but one I know I must accept on grounds that God has said so.

Consequence

The instruction of Scripture as caught in the baptismal forms has a consequence, one that comes out distinctly in relation to how we view ourselves and our children. Though we prefer to be comfortable with ourselves, and would have our children also feel content with their makeup, the data of Scripture listed above urges us into another direction. Our identity as “children of wrath” means that we desperately need washing. The Forms for Baptism mentions the necessary consequence with these words: “that we may detest ourselves, humble ourselves before God, and seek our cleansing and salvation outside of ourselves.”

¹ On the matter of children being a blessing the reader is referred to my *A Vow to Love* (Winnipeg: Premier Printing, 2008), pg 141-158.

Unclean, yet Cleansed

The phrase 'detest ourselves' is strong language. The term reflects something of Isaiah's reaction to seeing God in the temple vision of Isaiah 6. The God He saw was majestic and awe-inspiring; such was His holiness that angels covered their faces in His presence and covered their feet also, even while they kept singing their "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty." Meanwhile, the doorposts and thresholds responded to their unending singing with ceaseless shaking and the whole temple was filled with smoke. What glorious majesty! But when Isaiah saw how awesomely holy God was, he realized for the first time how sinful he himself was. His reaction was instant: "'Woe to me!' I cried. 'I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty'" (Isaiah 6:5). Notice what Isaiah actually thinks of himself. Here's no satisfaction with his own identity, let alone pride in his strengths. Here's only humility, and deep self-detestation on grounds of his sinfulness.

The apostle Paul expressed the same thought as he looked at himself. He'd been renewed by the Holy Spirit so that he could "desire to do what is good" (Romans 7:18; cf vs 22). But such is his abiding uncleanness before God and his enduring inclination to sin that –says Paul– "what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do – this I keep on doing" (vs 19). As a result Paul groans out his self-evaluation: "what a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" (vs 24).

This is the self-detesting mentioned in the Baptism Form. Anyone who takes God seriously knows not only that he must one day stand empty-handed before the Judgment seat of God, but knows too that he daily already has to do with a God who is too pure to tolerate any sin (Habakkuk 1:13). This uncleanness on our part must produce an attitude of humility that determines in turn how one carries oneself in the midst of life's struggles. As one is hurt by another it is tempting to be judgmental and condemning, and even demand one's rights to compensate for the hurt experienced. But the person who knows his own uncleanness (and hence need for baptism) will not quickly condemn or demand compensation because he keenly aware that he is himself no better. In fact, he cannot be full of himself, or even busy with himself. Detesting oneself gives place in the heart for serving the other, in denial of self.

It's a frame of mind Christian parents will also instil in their children, through personal example as well as through instruction. The newborn is not an innocent little angel, but is sinful from the start. So we shall not cultivate their sense of self-importance, as if their wants must be satisfied (think of demand feeding), but we shall impress on them the need to learn to look away from themselves and their wants as the road to happiness. Selfishness is a characteristic of a sinful creature, and given that infants are inherently sinful we can expect them to act selfishly – even when they are too young to realise what selfishness actually is. Here is where God-fearing parents will need to analyse why their child is crying the way it is, and recognize that even for a baby there are wrong reasons to cry. Early in the piece already the child needs to learn self-denial. Though I hope to come back to this material in more detail later on, it should be clear already now that how one views a child's nature affects one's

method of parenting. The Form for the Baptism of Infants gives parents essential principles for their task as fathers and mothers!

Of course, a second consequence flowing from the reality of depravity is the need to be washed. It is to this topic that we now turn.

Cleansed

The notion of washing has a long history in God's holy revelation, beginning with the tabernacle God commanded Israel to build for Him at Mt Sinai.

The Tabernacle

God's tabernacle was intended to be a dwelling place for God in the midst of His covenant people. By His ordinance the work that was to be done in His presence in the tabernacle had to be done by priests. Yet before the priests could begin their work they needed to be ordained to office, and part of the ordination ceremony included that Moses "bring Aaron and his sons to the entrance to the Tent of Meeting and wash them with water" (Exodus 29:4; see Leviticus 8:6). Levites were appointed to help the priests in the service of God's dwelling place, but before they could carry out their function they needed to be made "ceremonially clean". God added: "to purify them, do this: Sprinkle the water of cleansing on them" (Numbers 8:6,7). God also told the people to come from time to time to the tabernacle for worship, yet they could not come if they were "unclean". To become clean the people had to "bathe with water" (see Leviticus 15:5,6,7,8,10,etc). The purpose of the washing is illustrated in this passage: "You must keep the Israelites separate from things that make them unclean, so they will not die in their uncleanness for defiling my dwelling place, which is among them" (Leviticus 15:31).

As with all God's commands to Israel, the Lord did not wish His people simply to comply to an outward ritual, as there was some magic to washing. Rather, through this ritual the Lord taught His people about the good news of sinners being cleansed in God's sight. Through washing with water not just the dirt of the body is washed away, but through washing the child of God is assured that the dirt of the soul –sin!– can be washed away. The bathing (or sprinkling) with water depicted the blessed effect of the sacrifices made in the tabernacle, sacrifices that in turn pointed forward to the coming sacrifice of the Lamb of God (John 1:29).

The apostle Paul understood the powerful message of the washings of Old Testament law. After he expressed his frustration with his abiding sinfulness ("What I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do – this I keep on doing"), he describes his filth with these words: "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" (Romans 7:19,24). Yet he immediately supplies the answer as taught in such passages of Old Testament Scripture as the washing passages mentioned above, and shouts out His relief: "Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Romans 7:25).

John the Baptist

At the time of John the Baptist, the people of Israel were certainly familiar with washing. The disciple John reports that at the wedding in Cana “stood six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing” (John 2:6). Mark relates that “the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing” (Mark 7:3). So when John appeared at the Jordan, the people immediately knew what his washing was about. He preached “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Mark 1:4; cf Matthew 3:6), and the people responded with confession of sins and then being baptized in the river.

John was known as ‘the Baptist’, and that’s to say that John was ‘baptizing’. The term ‘baptizing’ appears in the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the so-called ‘Septuagint’) in relation to Naaman the leper. In answer to Elisha’s instruction to “wash yourself seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will be restored and you will be cleansed,” Naaman “went down and dipped himself in the Jordan seven times ..., and his flesh was restored and became clean...” (2 Kings 5:10,14). Where our translation has the word ‘dipped’, the Greek uses the word ‘baptized’.

Though used in the story of Naaman to catch the notion of washing-with-a-view-to-cleansing, the term itself actually catches the notion of total ‘immersion’ or ‘submersion’. A ship that sunk was considered ‘baptized’, for it became totally immersed in the water, to the point of becoming united with the water. Similarly, a drunk man was considered baptized with his alcohol, and the point was that he was so totally sloshed as to be one with the drink. Jesus once ‘dipped’ (Greek: ‘baptized’) a piece of bread in a dish (John 13:26), and the point of the term is that the bread becomes so submerged in the sauce of the dish as to become one with it in taste, in colour, and in texture.

This is the term used in relation to John as he took unclean people –unclean not from leprosy but from sin– and submerged them in the Jordan so that they might be clean. Yet since their cleansing was not a cleansing of body but a cleansing of soul, it was fitting that these sinners would first confess their sins in repentance. Through the washing with water John portrayed what the prophet Jeremiah had announced, “I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more” (Jeremiah 31:34).

New Testament Baptism

After Jesus’ triumph on the cross of Calvary, there was no longer any need for the shedding of blood to forgive sins. This in turn meant that the Old Testament sacrament of circumcision (with its bloodshed) needed to be replaced with a new sign. Sovereign as He is, the Lord could have commanded that the new sign be that one wear a gold chain around one’s neck (perhaps with a cross...) or a purple dot on one’s chin. He chose instead the picture of baptism. That was His command just before His ascension; He instructed the eleven to “make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19). We shall in another chapter explore further the link between baptism and the circumcision of the Old Testament. For now we need to note that with His choice of sacrament, Jesus deliberately (for He did nothing by accident) lifts out the Old Testament doctrine of cleansing (and hence of needing to be cleansed) for His New Testament picture.

Unclean, yet Cleansed

So the New Testament church is ever confronted with the sinner's foulness before God (recall Paul's "wretched man that I am" in Romans 7:24), as well as the Lord's abundant mercy in cleansing sinners through Jesus' blood (recall Paul's "thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord" in Romans 7:25).

In fact, the same Paul draws out the gospel of redemption in Jesus Christ by specific reference to baptism. He writes, "Don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? We were therefore buried with Him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life" (Romans 6:3,4). Recall that the term 'baptism' contains the notion of submersion. Paul would tell his readers that they were submerged into Christ so totally as to be one with Him in His death and burial. Christ, then, was not the only one who died on Good Friday, but somehow we died with Him. Similarly, Christ was not the only one who was buried on that same Good Friday, but somehow we were buried with Him; so fully are we united with Him. But that's to say too that when Christ arose from the dead on Easter He was not the only one to arise from the dead; we arose with Him so that we too may live a new life. That union with Christ, being so submerged in Him as to be one with Him, gives the reason why the Christian can no longer keep on sinning (Romans 6:1). He's a new creature, now radically changed. He was unclean, but now he's cleansed; he was dead in sin, but now he's alive to God; he was hostile to God, but now he's God's servant. Baptism, then, symbolizes one's entry into the kingdom of God, and so into the church as the gathering of the obedient citizens of the kingdom of God.

When Paul, therefore, was arrested by the ascended Lord Jesus Christ on his road to Damascus and forcibly converted to the Christian faith, he was immediately baptized (Acts 9:18). Yet this outward action was not a hollow ritual, but it symbolized a much deeper reality, namely, that Paul was now so submerged into Christ as to be one with Him in His death and resurrection – and so his sins were washed away. This unclean man was cleansed, and so was also changed to be a new man. Instead persecuting the church of Jesus Christ (Acts 9:1), Paul became a preacher of the gospel of grace (Acts 9:15).

Similarly, heathens from Corinth came to faith in Jesus Christ and so were baptized (Acts 18:8; 1 Corinthians 1:13). By their faith they were united to Jesus Christ, and that union with Christ was signified through their baptism when they –by nature unclean– were submerged in the water as a confession of their need for cleansing and a promise that they received cleansing. So totally were they immersed into Jesus Christ that "you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Corinthians 6:11). No longer were these Christians the idolators and adulterers and prostitutes and homosexuals and thieves and drunkards they used to be. Through baptism they were grafted into the Christian church, and that baptism was powerful because it signified their union with Christ, a union that changes a sinner radically from being unclean before God to be clean in His holy eyes.

Here, of course, is the depth of Jesus' words to Nicodemus. "I tell you the truth," Jesus said, "no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit" (John 3:5). The phrase

“born of water” describes the mighty renewing work of God through the Holy Spirit as is signified in baptism. To be submerged into Jesus Christ and made one with Him: talk about being “born again”!

Form for Adult Baptism

This is the aspect of baptism that comes through so loudly in that part of the Form for Adult Baptism where the Form focuses specifically on adults. Says this Form:

Adults ... may not be baptized unless they, conscious of their sins, repent and profess their faith in Christ. For this reason John the Baptist, following the command of God, preached a *baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins*, and only those who confessed their sins were baptized. Our Lord Jesus Christ also commanded His apostles to *go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit* (Mt 28:19), adding the promise, *whoever believes and is baptized will be saved* (Mk 16:16).

According to this rule the apostles baptized only those adults who had repented and professed their faith. Therefore also today no other adults should be baptized than those who have learned to understand, by the preaching and instruction of the Gospel, the glorious contents of holy baptism, and are thus able to give account of their faith by personal profession

Chapter 3

Into the Name of....

By the grace of sovereign God, people unclean by nature can be cleansed before God through the saving work of Jesus Christ. Baptism depicts this cleansing. A consequence follows, which the Form for Baptism words like this:

Second, baptism signifies and seals to us the washing away of our sins through Jesus Christ. We are, therefore, baptized into the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

It is particularly the last sentence of this quote that requires our attention in this chapter. Understanding it rightly will open the way to understanding why the Baptism Form explains the promises extended through baptism by the three Persons of the holy Trinity as printed on page 584 of the *Book of Praise*:

When we are baptized into the Name of the Father, God the Father testifies and seals to us that He establishes an eternal covenant of grace with us. He adopts us for His children and heirs, and promises to provide us with all good and avert all evil or turn it to our benefit.

When we are baptized into the Name of the Son, God the Son promises us that He washes us in His blood from all our sins and unites us with Him in His death and resurrection. Thus we are freed from our sins and accounted righteous before God.

When we are baptized into the Name of the Holy Spirit, God the Holy Spirit assures us by this sacrament that He will dwell in us and make us living members of Christ, imparting to us what we have in Christ, namely, the cleansing from our sins and the daily renewal of our lives, till we shall finally be presented without blemish among the assembly of God's elect in life eternal.

Institution of Baptism

After His triumphant work on the cross of Calvary, Jesus Christ was to ascend into heaven to receive the throne at the Father's right hand. With this throne the Father would crown Him as Lord of lords and King of kings. Christ knew of His coming inheritance, and so told His disciples, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me" (Matthew 28:18).

On the basis of the authority God had given to His Son, Christ in turn gave instructions to His servants on earth. He did so with words that included the institution of baptism, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19,20). This is not the time and place to unpack the significance of the Mission Mandate as caught in these verses, other than to note that the Saviour would have His disciples climax their teaching with the administration of baptism. And baptism, we learned in the previous chapter, vividly portrays the gospel of the cleansing of the unclean.

Jesus adds that this cleansing is to occur “in the name of” Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We tend to understand the phrase “in the name of” as equivalent to “on the authority of.” This has in fact been the interpretation given to this phrase for many centuries of church history. In fact, the official Latin translation of the Bible (known as the *Vulgate*) rendered this verse to mean unambiguously “on the authority of”. This understanding contributed to baptism being seen in Roman Catholic circles as a magical ritual – for this translation closed off access to the rich and deep meaning Jesus intended in His instruction to His disciples.

At the time of the Great Reformation in the sixteenth century, however, attention was drawn to the way the original Greek of Matthew 28 was put together. For the Greek uses a preposition that describes movement such that one is relocated from one owner to another. When one purchases a house, a series of signatures results in the property being transferred into your name. So it is here; baptism is the ‘signature’ whereby one’s ownership is officially transferred from one to another. One was (on account of the fall into sin) the property of the devil, and now, by the deed of baptism, one has officially become (sign and seal) the property of a new Owner. The preposition in question in Matthew 28:19 is commonly rendered in English with the word ‘into’, but strikingly enough all major translations translate Matthew 28:19 with the English word ‘in’ (“*in* the Name of”) – be it that the NIV and the ESV mention in a footnote the possibility that in this verse the term could be rendered as ‘into’. Yet when the Baptism Form quotes Jesus’ instruction from Matthew 28:19, it deliberately departs from the major translations and supplies its own (accurate) translation of Jesus’ words: “into the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” With that departure from the common translations, our *Book of Praise* offers a subtle and well-placed criticism on contemporary renderings of Matthew 28:19, and directs the reader to the deeper significance of what Jesus intended with His command to baptize “into the Name of” Triune God. For it turns out that Jesus was catching here something of the wealth of God’s Old Testament revelation concerning the covenant.

Covenant in Paradise

In the space of six days the Lord God created the world. For each stage of creation He spoke a command, and the thing He called forth came into being (see Genesis 1:3-25; Psalm 33:9; 148:5). With the last of His creation, however, the Lord God did it differently. He lets us hear first His divine thoughts, “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and their birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground” (Genesis 1:26). God then turned His thought into action; “so God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them” (Genesis 1:27). The detail of how He created the male is recorded in Genesis 2:7: holy God came to His new earth to gather “dust from the ground” into the form of a man, “and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life.” He later “took one of the man’s ribs” and from it “made a woman” (Genesis 2:21,22). “God blessed” these two living creatures, and instructed them to “be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it,” and added that they were to “rule over” all the creatures He had made (Genesis 1:28). What is clear is that the human race is unique amongst all the creatures of God.

Of significance to our subject material is the concept of “image of God”. The term does *not* mean that man looks (or must look) like God, in the sense that we have arms where He has arms, we have ears where He has ears, etc. God is “spirit” (John 4:24); we simply do not know what God actually looks like (which makes drawing a picture of Him impossible). The mandate to be “image of God” captures instead the duty of reflecting what God is like, and that’s to say that people are to act as God would act. As God is faithful, so people are to be faithful; as God is loving, so people are to be loving; as God is hateful of all evil, so people are to be hateful of all evil, etc. It’s clear: the characteristics God wished people to “image” are *relational*, are features that come to expression in the way the Lord God relates with another. Who are we to think of here? Were Adam and Eve to image the way the three Persons of the Holy Trinity relate to each other? Are we to speak here of a Council of Peace where Father, Son and Holy Spirit interact in faithfulness, truthfulness, love, peace, kindness, etc, with each other? Are Adam and Eve to reflect on earth the way the Three planned together what the history of the world would be (and their respective roles in it)? In the course of church history there have been those who have said so. The difficulty, though, is that we are here totally in the realm of speculation. I would not know where to search in Scripture for instruction on the dynamics and chemistry within the Holy Trinity such that people on earth can image it. And without explicit instruction on the point, it is haughty to assume that people-made-of-dust would know what reflecting the Trinity ought to look like.

Instead of thinking here of the Trinity, we need to recognize that the sovereign Creator was pleased to relate to people on earth. Not for nothing did He go about creating man in a different manner than He created stones, trees and dogs. Man is of a higher order altogether, fashioned with an ability to act responsibly and so able to be accountable for his conduct – something stones and trees and dogs need never do. With this creature the Creator established a bond of love, a relation in which He supplied mankind with all his needs, and in turn set before him specific mandates. He gave the man and the woman food in abundance; “every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it ... will be yours for food” (Genesis 1:29). He gave them a home to live in, a Garden with abundant trees, water, and even gold (Genesis 2:9-11). He gave them things to do to be productively busy in God’s wonderful world, for they could work in and take care of the Garden in which God placed them (Genesis 2:15). He even came to them regularly after the day’s work was completed, so much so that Adam and Eve were familiar with the sound of the Lord’s coming after the fall in sin (Genesis 3:8). How rich it all was!

With the privilege, of course, came an awesome responsibility, something God had equipped the creature man to carry. God fashioned him to have the wherewithal to “rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground” (Genesis 1:28), and in so doing image what God was like as His characteristics received expression in His relation with man. The responsibility came not only with a mandate to rule, but also with a prohibition to stay away from yonder tree on pain of death (Genesis 2:17). The long and short of it was that man received an exalted place in God’s world. As David put it: “O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is Your name in all the earth! ... When I consider your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him? You made him a little lower than” *God* (as the NASB correctly translates; Psalm 8:5). On a scale of 1 to 10, with God at 10

and the creatures of earth at 1, God has given to man a position of 9! To rule over God's world in such a way as to image what God is like: what a privilege! It speaks so richly of the warm and tender relation God had decreed between Himself and this creature; to be children of such a God, to know oneself safe in His almighty hands, to be allowed to speak to Him and care for His world is so delightfully, incomprehensibly glorious! This is the covenant of the beginning, a covenant that was *grace* from beginning to end. Even in a sinless world this covenant was never deserved and never rooted in works – lest any man should boast.

The Covenant Broken

In this relation of love between God and mankind, man was responsible –and made able– to act in a way that reflected what God was actually like. Despite mandate and ability, however, man failed in this task. How mankind could fail, though he was so richly endowed with gifts to resist temptation, is a riddle we shall not comprehend in this life.

In the guise of a serpent the devil came to the woman one day and challenged her about the instruction of God in relation to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. His insinuation was that God was less than truthful with His covenant partner. Eve bought his suggestion, and ate from the forbidden tree, and Adam did too (Genesis 3:6). In so doing both the man and his wife failed to image accurately God's truthfulness. This disobedience constituted their breaking the covenant God had established with them.

How much the covenant was broken is illustrated by their conversation with God after the fall. The man and his wife were meant to image God in their relation together. But when the Lord confronted Adam with his sin, he replied, "The woman You put here with me – she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it" (Genesis 3:12). Notice Adam's accusation against his wife. Instead of reflecting in his words about her something of the love he had experienced from God (and taking responsibility for his own sins), he acted in a fashion that contradicted God's identity – for he coldly passed the blame to her. More, he even dared to accuse God of wrong-doing, for he pointed the finger at "the woman You put here with me," and therein implicitly faulted God for what had happened. How far had Adam fallen from imaging God!

From His side, though, the Lord God did not respond with renegeing *His* obligations in the covenant. On the day He created them, when He put them in the Garden, He stressed the penalty that would follow on disobedience. If they would fail to image Him accurately they would, He said, "surely die" (Genesis 2:17). The death they would die would not first of all be a physical death (that would come in due time), but would be primarily a spiritual death. That is: they could no longer enjoy a living relation with their covenant God, could no longer commune with Him, could no longer live in peace under His care and blessing. Instead, they'd be excommunicated from His presence and His favour, and would need to live in a cursed world in which life would slowly but inevitably dribble into death. It had to be so because God remained faithful to His promises; "He will remain faithful, for He cannot disown himself" (2 Timothy 2:13).

So it was that the Lord, unfailingly faithful to His word of promise in His relation with mankind, exiled disobedient man from His presence and from the Garden (Genesis 3:23), and caused the human race to taste death even while they lived. Instead of peace between people as God had established peace between Himself and man-of-dust, there would from now on be “enmity” between people on earth (Genesis 3:15). Whereas man and wife were to reflect the kindness and love and grace of God with them in their relation together, from now on the woman’s desire¹ would be to dominate her husband (as she’d done in the fall) but her husband was not to permit it (Genesis 3:16) – and we realize that this state of affairs would not at all reflect accurately what God’s covenant with mankind was like.

Similarly, outside the Garden the ground would be cursed so that the human race would need to sweat and toil in order to survive. There would also be thorns and thistles, as well as sickness and decay and ultimately death (and grief for survivors), and all of these curses would put man in a context so different than the Garden of Eden had been that struggle and anxiety and frustration would dominate his selfish soul and characterize his words and his behaviour. In a word: because he broke his relation of love with God, man’s ability to image God in his relation with his neighbour was broken also. But all the while, even as mankind was daily failing to image the God who had established a bond of love with him, God continued to show kindness to man. Year in, year out, “He cause[d] His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and [sent] rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (Matthew 5:45; cf Genesis 8:22). More, He promised to restore His covenant partner to the favoured position of the beginning, for He vowed that the seed of the woman would crush the head of the serpent (Genesis 3:15). That promise was ultimately a reference to the work of redemption God would accomplish in Jesus Christ.

The Covenant Maintained

As the Lord God continued after the fall to uphold the world He had made, He faithfully set in motion the plan He had prepared for man’s redemption. After scattering sinful people through a confusion of language (Genesis 11:1-9), God set the one man Abram aside as a distinctive instrument through whom He would bring blessing to the world (Genesis 12:1-3). With this one man the Lord God established a relationship unique from any other relationship He had with other people. Yet the substance of the relation God formed with Abraham was essentially the same as the relation God had established with the human race in Paradise.

Substance of the Covenant

The Lord God told Abraham, “I will establish My covenant as an everlasting covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you” (Genesis 17:7). The phrase “to be your God” is telling. The Speaker here is the same almighty God who fashioned the earth out of nothing in the beginning, and then fashioned mankind from dust to be His covenant partner with the mandate to image Him. This sovereign God had not changed over the centuries since the beginning, and now set up a relation with Abraham as He did

¹ I refer the interested reader to my *A Vow to Love: a Biblical Explanation of the Form for the Solemnization of Marriage* (Winnipeg: Premier Printing, 2008), pg 78f.

with Adam. The addressee of God's pronouncement is a man-created-of-dust, and so by definition unworthy of a bond with the almighty. That Abraham was a sinner infinitely compounds his unworthiness. Yet none of that hindered God from launching a distinctive relation with Abraham. He, the superior, laid a claim on Abraham the inferior, with the pledge to be "your God". With that phrase the Lord pledged to little Abraham that he could lean on God for his needs. Whatever a god is expected to supply, the Lord would provide for Abraham. This was a reference not just to food and home and purpose, but also to *how* the Lord would supply it; He would deal faithfully with Abraham, kindly, patiently, truthfully, without malice, etc. How marvellous: what a privilege for finite, sinful Abraham to be taken into such a relation with sovereign, holy God! The arrangement, of course, was valid not simply for the individual Abraham, but also for the wife this God in His almighty providence had given to Abraham – for he is her head. Similarly, the children this God would one day entrust to the care of this couple would –said God– be included in this covenant of grace; He pledged to be "the God of your descendants after you."

In the developments that followed God establishing this relation with Abraham, we pick up a more complete sense of what this covenant was actually about. It pleased the Lord to grant to Abraham offspring as abundant as the stars of the sky. Such were His feelings for this people as they groaned in their slavery in Egypt that He called Moses at the burning bush and told him to "go; I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring *My people* the Israelites out of Egypt" (Exodus 3:10). Stronger, He tells Moses to "say to Pharaoh, 'This is what the LORD says: Israel is *My firstborn son*...'" (Exodus 4:22). The intimacy of God's relation with His people receives further colour when Moses teaches Israel that their covenant God is their "Father" (Deuteronomy 32:6). Terms as 'My people', 'My son', and 'Father' catch something of the warmth of God's feelings for this people, and hence of the nature of His care for His own. In perfect wisdom He leads the life of His people so that they learn to rely more and more on Him. For Abraham's growth the Lord withheld children till he and Sarai were too old to have children – and then He mightily gave a child to people too old to bear children. He permitted Joseph's brothers to sell him to Egypt so that he and his brothers –and so all the people of Israel– might learn that what people intend for harm "God intended ... for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (Genesis 50:20). It is material as this upon which Jesus Christ built when He instructed the disciples to call God their "Father" as they addressed Him in prayer (Matthew 6:9) and reassured them that they were safe in His hands. "Look at the birds of the air," Jesus instructed them. "They do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?" (Matthew 6:26). Similarly, Paul can assure the Roman saints that He whom they call "*Abba, Father*" works "in all things ... for the good of those who love Him" – to the point that "neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God." This is the depth of the covenant relation as God established it with Adam in the beginning, with Abraham in the time of the patriarchs, with David and with Jeremiah and with Paul years later, and with us today. For the nature of the relation of almighty God with man-made-of-dust has not essentially changed over the years and centuries since God first created man to image Him.

Jesus, now, instructed His disciples to make disciples of all nations and baptize them “into the Name of the Father....” The sacrament of baptism constitutes the moment when one officially becomes the property of God the Father; in the sacrament He makes public and formal His claim on the baptized person. On the strength of that baptism the person concerned can know himself in the honourable company of Adam and Abraham, of David and Jeremiah and Paul and the saints of all ages and places; he is God’s possession inasmuch as God has placed a bond of love between Himself and that person. What the content of that delightful bond of love is? The Form for Baptism words it so aptly:

When we are baptized into the Name of the Father, God the Father testifies and seals to us that He establishes an eternal covenant of grace with us. He adopts us for His children and heirs, and promises to provide us with all good and avert all evil or turn it to our benefit.

How rich, how wonderfully rich indeed! To be child of such a God, and therefore safe with Him eternally: what security and comfort this gives in a life of sorrow and tears! Here, in essence, is the bond of Paradise restored for our encouragement. And it’s a foretaste of what’s to come in the New Paradise. “How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! ...When He appears, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is” (2 John 3:1,2) – and then image Him perfectly.

Foundation of the Covenant

Perhaps you will protest that nothing has been said of sin, and does the fall into sin not render a covenant between God and man impossible? And: does our sinfulness not dictate that any relation God establishes between Himself and us must be essentially different from the relation He had with Adam?

After the fall of our first parents in Paradise, almighty God responded with the penalty He had earlier attached to His covenant; mankind immediately died spiritually, and physical death followed in due time (Genesis 2:17; Genesis 5:5). Yet God’s faithfulness to His covenant was not limited to His sentence of death, for the Creator retained a heart for the creature He had fashioned in His image. Already in Genesis 3:15 He announced His determination to grant a blessing on the seed of the woman such that this seed would crush the head of the serpent. A hint as to how this would happen is given in the fact that God clothed Adam and Eve with the skins of an animal. Though He was mighty to clothe them with leaves or show Adam how to make cloth, He had an animal give up its life for the benefit of His fallen covenant partner (Genesis 3:21). When God later established His bond of love with Abraham, He dictated that the sign of His relation with the man Abraham be circumcision – an incision in human flesh that invariably drew blood (Genesis 17:10). The life of a creature is in its blood; by drawing blood the Lord taught Abraham that He required Abraham’s death – and yet he’d be spared because another would die in His place. This point was driven home to Abraham’s descendents in the instruction God gave Israel at Mt Sinai with His command to construct a tabernacle. For in this tabernacle animals were continually to be sacrificed in place of the people, and so Israel was taught the doctrine of substitution, taught that Another would die in their place so that they might have life. In the fullness of time the sins of all God’s people were laid upon Jesus Christ (see Isaiah 53:4-6), and as sin personified He was crucified and killed in place of sinners of every dispensation. As a result of His sacrifice, Paul wrote, God “reconciled us to Himself” so that “in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians

5:18,21). In a manner we can't comprehend, we died with Christ on the cross and rose with Him on the third day to newness of life (Romans 6:5). In union with Him we receive from God forgiveness of our sins so that God sees us as righteous before Him, innocent of sin. This is the amazing and delightful message of the gospel: on account of Christ's death-in-our-place, we are righteous in the sight of God! And in making us righteous through Christ's sacrifice, the Lord shows what kind of a covenant partner He is; always does He remain faithful to His promise-to-be-Father – and this is the sinner's salvation!

This, says the Baptism Form, is what it means to be "baptized into the Name of ... the Son":

When we are baptized into the Name of the Son, God the Son promises us that He washes us in His blood from all our sins and unites us with Him in His death and resurrection. Thus we are freed from our sins and accounted righteous before God.

This is the wealth of the gospel true for Abraham of long ago as much as it is for the saints of today. Sins of Old and New Testament saints alike were piled onto Jesus Christ, so that sinners of all ages could become children of God – and He become their Father through Jesus Christ. This is the glorious gospel true for the people of God throughout the ages – for the foundation of God's covenant love with sinners after the fall is ever the same: Jesus Christ crucified for us.

Application of the Covenant

Again, you will reply that Abraham –as indeed all who have fallen into sin through Adam– could never respond to any relation God sought to establish with him; he, after all, was dead in sin as a result of the fall (Ephesians 2:1), and the dead can never respond.

Here again is the grace of the God who sought a relation of love with Abraham-the-sinner. Dead in sin he indeed was, and so triune God sent to Abraham the same Holy Spirit through whom He created the world in the beginning. The effective working of the Holy Spirit is evident from the second verse of the Bible, for the passage tells us that the earth God created "was formless and empty" and that "the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters" (Genesis 1:2). The next verse tells us that God commanded the light to be, "and there was light", and that's to say that the Spirit of God hovering over the chaos caused the command of God to come into effect. The psalmist adds that this same Spirit of creation is at work in recreation; "when you send your Spirit, they are created and You renew the face of the earth" (Psalm 104:30; cf Isaiah 32:15). Through this same mighty Spirit of God, a man dead in sin could be raised to new life so that he could respond (did God not create man to be responsible?) to the gracious relationship God decreed between Himself and Abraham. Though we do not read much of the Spirit's work in the Old Testament, He was as active behind the scenes in the Old dispensation as He is open in the New – for no sinner can believe in God without the renewing work of the Spirit.

His mighty work at Pentecost, then, is an open and public extension of His more behind-the-scenes style of the Old Testament. Paul could elaborate on the consequences of Spirit's labour: "those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires" (Romans 6:5). The focus of the regenerated sinner is the God who made him His. This is "the Spirit of sonship," and "by Him we cry, 'Abba, Father'" (Romans 6:15). It is He who prompts sinners to respond to God's covenant so that we confess that Yes, we truly are children of God, and He is our eternal Father.

That is what it means, says the Form for Baptism, to be “baptized into the Name of ... the Holy Spirit.” The Form words it wonderfully:

When we are baptized into the Name of the Holy Spirit, God the Holy Spirit assures us by this sacrament that He will dwell in us and make us living members of Christ, imparting to us what we have in Christ, namely, the cleansing from our sins and the daily renewal of our lives, till we shall finally be presented without blemish among the assembly of God’s elect in life eternal.

How rich the promise of the covenant, true for Abraham of long ago as much as for us today: through His Holy Spirit sovereign God makes His home in us and causes us to embrace the atoning work of Jesus Christ – and as a result we’re clean before God and rendered fitting to appear before the eternal Bridegroom (Ephesians 5:27). Who would have thought that fallen sinners would be granted such a privilege!!

Conclusion

One hears arguments to the effect that the covenant God established with mankind in Paradise is somehow different from the covenant He set up with Abraham, and the covenant signified in baptism is somehow different again. Though it is true that the bond of love in Paradise was not founded on Jesus Christ (for there was yet no sin), and it’s true that God’s claim on Abraham was founded on a Christ who was still to come (for Abraham lived before Christ’s sacrifice on the cross), and it’s equally true that God’s relation of love with us today is built on Christ’s accomplished work on Calvary, the bond of love itself is essentially identical all along. That holy God would befriend man-made-of-dust and privilege him to image God, is a marvel most profound. There is certainly variation in the foundation and progress of the covenant, but its essence is unchanging throughout the ages.

This is the wealth signified and sealed in holy baptism: I really, officially, belong to God the Father, on account of the redemptive sacrifice of God the Son, through the recreating work of God the Spirit! We’ll need an eternity to fathom the privilege of belonging to this God.

Chapter 4

Obligation - the Link between Promise and Enjoying

The section of the Form for Baptism requiring our attention in this chapter is the following paragraph:

“Third, since every covenant contains two parts, a promise and an obligation, we are, through baptism, called and obliged by the Lord to a new obedience. We are to cleave to this one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, to trust Him, and to love Him with our whole heart, soul, and mind, and with all our strength. We must not love the world but put off our old nature and lead a God-fearing life. And if we sometimes through weakness fall into sins, we must not despair of God’s mercy nor continue in sin, for baptism is a seal and trustworthy testimony that we have an eternal covenant with God.”

The term ‘third’ at the head of this quote gives the place of this paragraph within the Form. The paragraph follows on from the “first” aspect of baptism reflected in the Form, namely, the reality of our depravity and our subsequent desperate need for cleansing. The “second” aspect listed in the Form described the rich promises God extends in baptism, promises relating to the three Persons of the God-head, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

How, though, shall a sinner inherit the rich promises extended to him by the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit? Is it automatically so that the sinner enjoys what God has promised? The Biblical answer caught in the paragraph quoted above indicates that No, the baptized person does not automatically enjoy what’s promised. The Lord God has sovereignly placed an obligation between His promises and our benefiting from the goods He promised.

Confusion

According to the witness of church history, the topic broached in this paragraph is easily open to confusion. It’s at this point in the discussion about the covenant that God’s revelation about election has muddled understanding about the covenant.

Election, of course, is the gracious decree of God whereby He has determined to rescue specific persons from Satan’s bondage through the blood of Jesus Christ. Whereas God at creation had established a relation of love between Himself and the human race, man at the prodding of the devil soon disowned God in favour of Satan. In His great compassion, however, the Lord determined to send His only Son to earth to rescue specific persons from their slavery to the devil. In the fullness of time He did so, and through the successful work

of Jesus Christ on the cross of Calvary God's chosen ones are restored to God's side. These chosen persons, then, are the ones who actually receive the goods promised in the covenant. Those not chosen for salvation are left on Satan's side, in the misery into which they have plunged themselves. The non-elect can include covenant persons – and there's the question in all its force: how can persons with whom God established His covenant not be elect? Was God not sincere in extending His promises to such a covenant child? Is there somehow an internal and an external covenant, a real and an unreal covenant? How are we to understand all this?

God has certainly told us about both election and the covenant. In no way, then, may we belittle or ignore either subject. Conversely, though, the two are to be distinguished, and not confused with each other. When the Lord pressed upon Israel how His covenant with His people actually works, He was emphatic that certain aspects of how God works with His people were not their business. He told His Israel, "The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law" (Deuteronomy 29:29). Covenant and election are two separate topics as much as apples and oranges are two separate fruits. As confusing and wrong as it is to think and talk in terms of oranges when the topic is apples, so confusing and wrong it is to think and speak in terms of election when the topic is covenant. Yet this confusion has repeatedly happened in the course of church history, with all the bewilderment that follows.

To be specific: the circle of those with whom God has established His covenant does not overlap exactly the circle of those whom God has chosen to salvation. To be a covenant child does not automatically imply election or salvation. The size of the circle of the elect and the identity of those within that circle is God's secret business, not directly revealed to mankind. The size of the circle of God's covenant people and the identity of those within that circle is man's business because God has revealed it. The degree to which those two circles overlap hinges on the subject of obligation. Equally, one learns about one's election through how one responds to God's covenant.

Responsibility

From the material discussed in the previous chapter, it is clear that in the covenant Triune God extends delightful riches to undeserving man. To recap briefly: God the Father promises to adopt a sinner to be His child, and protect the sinner from evil or turn that evil into good.

God the Son promises to wash away the sinner's transgressions so that the sinner is freed from the just judgment of God on sin. God the Holy Spirit promises to renew the sinner and make His home within the sinner, until that sinner enters into life eternal. Wonderfully rich promises indeed!

We know from Scripture, however, that not every covenant child ends up receiving the wealth God has promised. Jacob's twin brother Esau, for example, did not ultimately end up enjoying the riches of forgiveness of sins and life everlasting (see Malachi 1:3; Romans 9:13). Esau did not receive what God had promised in His covenant with him because God has placed an obligation between His promises and sinners' ability to enjoy those promises.

We'll come in a moment to the precise nature of this obligation. We need first to convince ourselves of the reason for this obligation.

The Lord God in the beginning created the human race to be different from the rest of His handiwork. Rocks and rats, lakes and loons, were all created to glorify God – as was also mankind. But man alone of all God’s creatures was fashioned for the specific purpose of having a living relationship with God, and so having the wherewithal to maintain a relationship. Here was a creature fashioned with the ability to respond to God, and so fashioned too with the responsibility to respond. He was created to image God, and that’s to say that man was consciously to reflect in his conduct and his words what God was like; this was his responsibility. When the Lord, then, put man in the Garden with the instruction to work it and take care of it, and in the process gave him every tree for food except that one tree in the middle, man had both the ability and the responsibility to do as God had commanded. God was explicit on the penalty that would follow on failure to act responsibly; “when you eat of [that tree] you will surely die” (Genesis 2:16,17). In other words, man’s ability to enjoy the Garden depended on his continued obedient response to God’s instructions. This is the nature of the relationship God established in the beginning, and it is foundational to God’s relation with man ever since. Though God’s relation with man is one-sided in its origin (how could it be different since God is the almighty Creator and man but a creature), this relation is two-sided in its existence. The latter reality is distinctly a marvel of God’s wisdom, for He certainly did not need to establish a relation of love with any creature, let alone one with humanly responsibility built into it. Yet such was His good pleasure. One can only adore Him because of it!

As it turned out, the human race in Adam and Eve chose not to respond obediently to the Creator’s instruction. At Satan’s prompting Eve took fruit from the forbidden tree and shared it with her husband. The result, as God had announced, was death. Instantly Adam and Eve died spiritually, as is evident from the loss of peace in their hearts and the sense of guilt that washed over them – so that they, who were to reflect what God was like, took fig leaves to hide themselves from nature’s eyes and fled to hide from God when He came (as per custom) to speak with them (Genesis 3:7,8). In the years that followed they steadily aged and physically withered until one day they died (cf Genesis 5:5). Their death was in accordance with the promise the Lord had ordained in His covenant relation with them, a promise to which He remained faithful.

Since God remained God, He stood by the relation He had established with man despite man’s breaking the covenant. In the hearing of man-in-his-death God spoke these words to Satan, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel” (Genesis 3:15). We understand this word to be a promise from God’s side to send His Son into the world to defeat Satan and so deliver God’s people from the devil’s power. In other words: God was pleased to continue His relation with the human race, on grounds that the Seed of the woman would satisfy God’s justice.

Yet never does the Lord in His relation with mankind treat the fallen human race as so many sticks and stones, free of responsibility. Instead, He always holds every person accountable for his own actions. That is why the Lord drowned the entire ungodly human race in the flood and destroyed too the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah. Though some in their midst may no longer have known of God, they were all responsible before their covenant Creator.

Israel

The nature of God's relation with people comes into sharper focus in the bond God established with Israel at Mt Sinai. From out of the cloud on the top of the mountain God addressed the people at its foot, and told them the details of the relation He imposed on them. "I am the LORD your God," He said, "who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery" (Exodus 20:2). The phrase "I am the LORD your God" is distinctly relational, and catches the thought that the Lord wishes to "be God" to Israel. We discussed in the previous chapter what that means in relation to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Hard on the heels of God's glorious statement to Israel that He is their God, the Lord issued a series of Ten Commandments. Never was Israel to have any other God beside the LORD, never was Israel to worship the LORD by means of an image, never was Israel to abuse the LORD's name, always was Israel to remember the Sabbath Day, etcetera. We well understand that there's a link between the claim sovereign God laid on Israel to be their God (and they His people) and the conduct He expected of them. Exactly because God associated Himself so strongly with this people and they with Him were they to act distinctly different from the nations who had no such bond with God. This is the nature of covenants, of God's relation with the people of His choice: His being their God demands that their attention be focused fully on Him.

When God made His covenant with the people of Israel at Mt Sinai (old and young, male and female), He did not spell out explicitly what consequence would follow if the people failed to serve God alone, if they opted to serve Him through an image, chose to abuse His name, etc.

But the outcome of such behaviour is surely implicit in God's pairing His promises with His commands. If they shall defy His commands, they shall surely not taste the goodness caught in His promise to be their God – and so protect them from harm, forgive their sins and live among them.

In the weeks that followed God's establishing His covenant with Israel at Mt Sinai, He made explicit what was implicit in His covenant. For He made very plain to Israel that disobedience to His covenant would have profound consequences. Specifically, disobedience would lead to Israel not tasting the goodness caught in the promise of being "My people".

Consider Leviticus 26, a chapter revealed a few short months after the Lord spoke to Israel from the mountain: "If you follow My decrees and are careful to obey My commands, I will send you rain in its season, and the ground will yield its crops and the trees of the field their fruit.... I will grant peace in the land, and you will lie down and no one will make you afraid.... I will look on you with favour and make you fruitful and increase your numbers, and I will keep My covenant with you.... I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be My people. I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt..." (vss 3,4,6,9,12,13). Conversely, "But if you will not listen to Me and carry out all these commands, and if you reject and abhor My laws and fail to carry out all My commands and so violate My covenant, then I will do this to you: I will bring upon you sudden terror, wasting diseases and fever.... I will set My face against you so that you will be defeated by your enemies.... If after all this you will not listen to Me, I will punish you for your sins seven times over. I will break down your stubborn pride and make the sky above you like iron and the ground beneath you like bronze.... If in spite of these things you do not accept My correction but continue to be hostile toward Me, I Myself will be hostile toward you and will afflict you for your sins seven times over. And I will bring the sword upon you to avenge the breaking of the covenant..." (vss 14,15,16,17,18,19,23,24,25). Once more, "But

if they will confess their sins and the sins of their fathers... then when their uncircumcised hearts are humbled and they pay for their sin, I will remember My covenant with Jacob and My covenant with Isaac and My covenant with Abraham.... But for their sake I will remember the covenant with their ancestors whom I brought out of Egypt in the sight of the nations to be their God. I am the LORD” (vss 40,41,42,45). The Lord is explicitly clear: the people’s behaviour plays a role in their actually getting the goodness promised in the covenant. Conversely, the people’s disobedient behaviour brings upon themselves the displeasure of the God who made them His, and that displeasure is profoundly painful.

Just how important Israel’s responsibility is in the interplay between the promises of the covenant and tasting the goodness caught in those promises is demonstrated repeatedly in Moses’ final words to Israel. After Israel has spent forty years in the desert getting to know their covenant partner, the Lord has Moses rub the people’s faces in this concept of responsibility. Consider the following from the book of Deuteronomy:

- “Hear now, O Israel, the decrees and laws I am about to teach you. Follow them so that you may live.... After you have had children and grandchildren and have lived in the land a long time – if you then become corrupt and make any kind of idol, doing evil in the eyes of the LORD your God and provoking Him to anger, I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you this day that you will quickly perish from the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess.... Keep His decrees and commands, which I am giving you today, so that it may go well with you and your children after you and that you may live long in the land the LORD your God gives you for all time” (4:1,25,26,40).
- “These are the commands, decrees and laws the LORD your God directed me to teach you to observe in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess, so that you, your children and their children after them may fear the LORD your God as long as you live by keeping all His decrees and commands that I give you, and so that you may enjoy long life. Hear, O Israel, and be careful to obey so that it may go well with you and that you may increase greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, just as the LORD, the God of your fathers, promised you” (6:1-3).
- “Be sure to keep the commands of the LORD your God and the stipulations and decrees He has given you. Do what is right and good in the LORD’s sight, so that it may go well with you...” (6:17,18).
- “Know therefore that the LORD your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commands. But those who hate him he will repay to their face by destruction; he will not be slow to repay to their face those who hate him. Therefore, take care to follow the commands, decrees and laws I give you today. If you pay attention to these laws and are careful to follow them, then the LORD your God will keep his covenant of love with you, as he swore to your forefathers. He will love you and bless you and increase your numbers...” (7:9-14).
- “If you ever forget the LORD your God and follow other gods and worship and bow down to them, I testify against you today that you will surely be destroyed. Like the nations the LORD destroyed before you, so you will be destroyed for not obeying the LORD your God” (8:19,20).
- “So if you faithfully obey the commands I am giving you today—to love the LORD your God and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul— then I will send rain on your land in its season, both autumn and spring rains, so that you may gather in your grain, new wine and oil. I will provide grass in the fields for your cattle, and you will eat and be satisfied. Be careful, or you will be enticed to turn away and worship other gods and bow down to them. Then the LORD’s anger will burn against you, and he will shut the heavens so

that it will not rain and the ground will yield no produce, and you will soon perish from the good land the LORD is giving you. Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds; tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Teach them to your children, talking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates, so that your days and the days of your children may be many in the land that the LORD swore to give your forefathers, as many as the days that the heavens are above the earth” (11:13-21).

- “See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse — the blessing if you obey the commands of the LORD your God that I am giving you today; the curse if you disobey the commands of the LORD your God and turn from the way that I command you today by following other gods, which you have not known” (11:26-28).

And that list represents just the first one third of the book! The people’s responsibility within the covenant was an emphasis Moses stressed after the people had gotten to know their God in the forty years of desert travel. This God who claimed this people for Himself took seriously His own creation ordinance, and so included their obligation to respond positively to God in His dealings with them.

As a result, the book of Judges relates repeatedly how the people failed to take seriously the consequences of the bond God had established with them. In turn, the book of Judges relates also how the people suffered the bitter fruits of their sins; though they were God’s people by covenant they did not consistently enjoy the goodness promised in the covenant because of their own failure to act responsibly before God. The books of Samuel and Kings tell of continued failure on the point. Indeed, it’s precisely this point that gives the prophets reason to keep describing Israel’s sins and so to keep demanding Israel’s repentance; the people are responsible! Disobedience to the God of the covenant leads to experiencing the curses of Leviticus 26, while obedience to their God leads to tasting the blessing of Leviticus 26.

Daniel sums it up in his unforgettable prayer:

“O Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with all who love him and obey His commands, we have sinned and done wrong. We have been wicked and have rebelled; we have turned away from Your commands and laws.... Therefore the curses and sworn judgments written in the Law of Moses, the servant of God, have been poured out on us, because we have sinned against You.... Just as it is written in the Law of Moses, all this disaster has come upon us...” (Daniel 9:4-19).

New Testament

If it be admitted that God in His relation with people takes seriously the responsibility with which He endowed mankind in the beginning (and one can scarcely deny that the Old Testament makes a point of stressing this responsibility), the temptation is there to say that this structure of things has surely been surpassed in the New Testament dispensation. That, however, is simply not true to the facts. Our Lord Jesus Christ came from heaven to show us most clearly the will of God. His instruction in the course of His earthly ministry came complete with countless imperatives; Israel was to repent of their sins and embrace the Son God sent on penalty of being cast away altogether (see Matthew 23:36-38).

The apostle Paul knows that the “church of God in Corinth” consists of those “sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy” (1 Corinthians 1:2). Though one could discuss at length what precisely is meant in this text by the phrase “sanctified in Christ Jesus”, at a minimum it certainly means that Paul’s addressees enjoy a relationship with triune God that the rest of the city’s population does not have. Yet God’s claim upon them does not mean that these Christians are guaranteed salvation, or even guaranteed the privilege of enjoying the goodness that comes with belonging to God. The congregation habitually gathered around the Table of the Lord, but failed to take seriously the obligations that come with that privilege. In Paul’s words, “A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment” (1 Corinthians 11:28-31). Here is the same principle as was so evident from the book of Deuteronomy.

The letter to the Hebrews makes the same point, and does so with the same earnestness as Moses did in Deuteronomy. Consider the following:

- “See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness. We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first” (3:12-14).
- “There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God’s rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his. Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience” (4:9-11).
- “It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace” (6:4-6).
- “If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God.... It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you stood your ground in a great contest in the face of suffering.... So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised” (10:26,27,31,35,36).
- “See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks. If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven? ...Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our ‘God is a consuming fire’” (12:25,28,29).

Indeed, this essential ingredient to the structure of God’s covenantal relation with His people is the key to the book of Revelation. The plagues listed so abundantly in that last book of the Bible are nothing less than the New Testament extension of the calamities God mentioned to Israel in passages as Leviticus 26. The curses of Revelation are triggered primarily by the

failure of God's covenant people to respond positively to the goodness He promises in His relation with them.

What we have? We have ample evidence that human responsibility plays a critical role in how the Lord God deals with His people. In the words of the Baptism Form, "since every covenant contains two parts, a promise and an obligation, we are, through baptism, called and obliged by the Lord to a new obedience."

This reality, however, raises a number of questions. If human responsibility is somehow intrinsic to receiving the goodness God promises in the covenant, are we not admitting that we're closet Arminians, that is, that our salvation depends on our works? Further, if human responsibility is such a big thing in receiving the goodness pledged in the covenant, are we not downplaying God's sovereignty? In an attempt to answer these two questions, we need to nail down more precisely what the exact nature of our responsibility is.

Jesus Christ

The lengthy row of texts quoted above from both the Old and New Testament describe an extensive list of activities the Christian is to do. Failure to do them will result in experiencing God's displeasure, be it in this life or in the life to come. Conversely, doing them will result in tasting the goodness God has promised in His covenant.

Yet every person on earth fails to fulfil the obligations of the covenant, and that includes every covenant child. "There is no one righteous, not even one" (Romans 3:10). God meanwhile, has eyes "too pure to look on evil"; He "cannot tolerate wrong" (Habakkuk 1:13). His curses as announced in Leviticus 26 and repeated so frequently in Scripture must fall upon every sinner.

Yet God in infinite compassion has sent His only Son to take on Himself the curse sinners attract through their disobedience. Never in the course of His life did He ever fall short of God's standards, but always faithfully obeyed every word of His God. Even when our sin was transferred onto Him on the cross (see Leviticus 4:4; Isaiah 53:5,6) and the weight of God's judgment pressed upon Him, He did not transgress God's commands. Instead, through His perfect obedience He satisfied God's justice. So "He bore the sin of many" (Isaiah 53:12); indeed, "He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification" (Romans 4:25). Christ Jesus, then, took on Himself the covenant punishments we deserve. And inasmuch as God does not punish sin twice, the sinner is free from the curse of God; the sinner instead has peace with God and becomes an heir to life eternal. This is the glorious gospel of redemption; "it is by grace you have been saved... not by works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8,9).

So we are back to the question with which this chapter began. Not every sinner in fact escapes Satan's bondage through Jesus' blood, but only some. More, in the covenant God pledges salvation to His covenant partners, but not every covenant child receives salvation. Given that Christ has fulfilled the requirement of our responsibility in the covenant—for He obeyed God's commands perfectly—what is our responsibility today?? It is this: we are to

accept God's promises as given to us in His covenant with us. This 'accepting' is caught in the Scriptural concept of faith.

Faith

Allow me an illustration to clarify the point. Suppose Tom in his kind-heartedness wants to give me a box of chocolates. He's come to my door, is holding out this box of chocolates, has even written my name on the box, and tells me that he's purchased this gift for me and wants me to enjoy it. How am I to respond? What am I to do before I can sink my teeth into one of those chocolates? Given the scenario as I've presented it, it's clear that I don't have to do anything to earn those chocolates; there's no contribution that I need to provide here. Yet it's equally clear that I shall not enjoy the taste of the chocolates if I just stand there. I need to accept the box, and I do that by taking my hand out of my pocket, stretching it forward and receiving the box Tom is holding out.

Faith is the hand of the soul, says Calvin. In the covenant God has established with sinners He promises delightful goodness in Jesus Christ. Yet God does not treat us as sticks and stones so as to force feed the content of the promises upon us. He expects us to extend the hand of the soul to receive what He gives us. Accepting God's promises, embracing His goodness, is faith. 'Faith' in Scripture is not colourless, a vague something that you can set on the shelf to admire. Faith is always action, a dynamic activity embracing again and again, in the ups and downs of daily life, the rich promises God gives in His covenant with us. To say it in Paul's words, "it is by grace you have been saved, through faith ... not by works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8,9). Faith is the instrument by which we make God's promises in the covenant our own, is the hand of the soul by which we accept the chocolates of God's covenant. Yet let no one say that stressing our responsibility in the covenant makes us Arminian.

God's sovereignty vs my responsibility

Does this mean that somehow I get to cheer myself for having stretched out the hand of the soul? Most certainly not. We definitely are responsible for all we do, and failure to accept what God gives in the covenant invariably brings upon ourselves the just and eternal judgment of God. Yet given the fact that God is sovereign over every part of (human) life, it simply cannot be that we end up praising ourselves for responding positively to the obligations God sets before us.

The concept is beyond human comprehension. If God is sovereign, I am –according to my measure of logic– a puppet on God's string and therefore not responsible for my actions. It is indeed true that no creature can so much as move without the direction of almighty God (see, for example, Genesis 45:5; Isaiah 10:5,6). But, as we discussed earlier in this chapter, people remain 100% responsible for all they do (see also Isaiah 10:12), and can never blame God for how their lives turn out. With the limitations of our human minds we are not able to

harmonize our responsibility with God's sovereignty. And that's OK, for this inability recognizes that God is infinitely greater than we are, our God-by-covenant ever beyond our comprehension. That reality gives immeasurable comfort in the face of life's questions, for it means that I need not have answers to all the whys and wherefores that fly at me; it's instead enough that such an infinite God has made me His. So then, even while I recognize my obligation to respond positively to God's covenant promises –and that's to say that I need to stretch out the hand of the soul to accept His 'box of chocolates'– I at the same time confess that it is He who works this action in my heart. To complete the quote from Paul, "it is by grace you have been saved, through faith –and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God– not by works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8,9).

The Colour of Faith

Might it be, then, that faith –that's the hand (of the soul) accepting God's promises– stands by itself as a naked receiving-and-nothing-more? No, faith is never simply-accepting-and-nothing-more. To return to the example of the chocolates: if I were to stretch out my hand to receive Tom's gift, and then deliberately drop it on the floor, what would that action say about the colour of my embrace of Tom's kindness? Similarly, if after Tom's departure I would put his gift in the garbage, I would again be giving colour to my receiving his gift – and demonstrated through my actions that I haven't truly accepted his gift. Truly accepting his gift is to open it and savour the taste – and appreciation will be written on my face. Genuine accepting looks like something.

So it is too with the action of the hand-of-the-soul known as faith. Within the covenant relation He established with sinners, God gives rich promises to be our Father, forgive our sins, and grant us life eternal. It is hypocrisy to embrace God's gifts only to drop them on the floor and garbage them. That's a hollow accepting and definitely not the colour of true faith. Genuine faith looks like something, and displays its true colour in conduct. A hearty embrace of the chocolates brings about predictable action, and a hearty embrace of God's promises in the covenant equally brings about predictable action. The action characterizing faith is willing and ready obedience to God's instructions. The apostle to the Hebrews lists a long row of the believers of the Old Testament dispensation, and says of each of that "by faith" he (be it Noah or Abraham or Moses, etc) "built" (Hebrews 11:7), "went" (vs 8), "offered" (vs 17), "refused" (vs 24), etc. Always their faith looked like something, always it was action in obedience to God's command. It could not be different, for these men embraced God's promises and so trusted God – and that's to say that they accepted that God's care for them as it expressed itself through His commands and prohibitions was good for them. That is why James can insist that "faith without deeds is dead" (James 2:26).

That's why in turn the Baptism Form describes the colour of faith in terms of "a new obedience." "We are," the Form explains, "to cleave to this one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, to trust Him, and to love Him with our whole heart, soul, and mind, and with all our strength. We must not love the world but put off our old nature and lead a God-fearing life." The faith that embraces God's goodness is never a hollow accepting-without-follow-up, never a stand-alone thing, but is always action that looks like obedience. It is the obedience described so elaborately in the passages quoted earlier from Deuteronomy – and that's to say

that Israelites of old had to respond by faith to God's covenant as much as we do today. Faith always looks like something!

Covenant Breaking

Those persons, then, with whom God established His covenant but who in turn decline – contrary to the responsibility God has given them– to extend the hand of soul to accept God's promises cannot sink their teeth into His chocolates and so shall not taste the goodness of the Lord. That's to say: they do not get to experience what it is to have the almighty as their Father and what it means to be His child, they do not get to enjoy the freedom that comes with the forgiveness of their sins and being reconciled to the God they offended, and they do not get to marvel at the Spirit's renewing work in their lives as they await the bliss of the New Jerusalem. Through their own wilful unbelief they hinder God's blessing upon them and attract instead His covenant curses – both in this life and the life to come.

Yet their refusal today to accept God's goodness, their insistence on keeping their spiritual hands in their pockets today, does not close the door to a different response tomorrow. For that reason godly parents, family and friends may (and must) continue to urge the disobedient covenant child to repent of his disobedience and embrace by faith the promises God has given – promises that remain valid since God does not break His covenant with sinners.

Equally, God's covenant promises form the ground why parents, family and friends may (and must) continue to plead with the God who made His covenant with their straying loved one in the first place, still to soften his hard heart and grant the faith that embraces the promises. God, after all, is mighty to work that repentance in the heart of the covenant breaker, and He remains faithful to His covenant promises.

One More Thing....

The Form for Baptism as used in the Canadian Reformed Churches (and hence in this publication) goes back to the Form used in the churches of the Netherlands for many centuries. Other North American churches descending from the same Dutch heritage today use the same Form. Yet in the paragraph above there's a difference in wording unique to the Canadian Reformed Churches. Specifically, the words "a promise and an obligation" were added by decision of Synod 1983.

The reason for doing so amounts to a clarification. For what are the "two parts" contained in every covenant? The "two parts" could be a reference to the two parties in the covenant, God and man. It could also be a reference to the two components making up every relationship, the mutual promises and obligations. There have been those who maintained that it is a reference to the two aspects that make up the human response to God's promises, namely, receiving the promise and then living it out. By adding the words "a promise and an obligation" no room is left for ambiguity. This clarification is very much in line with the Form as Dathenus originally worded it.

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